



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Team Teaching, Another Way

Emily O. Gravett, *James Madison University*

Blog Series: Praxis: The Responsive & Expanding Classroom

November 23, 2022

Tags: student learning | group learning | team teaching

A while back I read an interesting, if not somewhat problematic, book called *Hunt, Gather, Parent*. The author, NPR science reporter Michaelaleen Doucleff, went all around the world, along with her young daughter, trying to learn how people parent. She noticed that, in many other places, children seem to be calm, motivated, flexible, responsible, helpful, confident, cooperative contributors, unlike the tantrum-prone toddler she had in tow. These families functioned more like teams, with both parents and kids playing important and integrated roles. Doucleff offers the apt acronym TEAM to convey what these parents do differently: Togetherness, Encouragement, Autonomy, and Minimal Interference. Dishes need to be washed? TEAM effort. Tortillas need to be made? TEAM effort. Other kids need corralling? TEAM effort.

I got to thinking, as I do, about teams (and even toddler-like behavior) in another context: the college classroom.

There is no shortage of information about group learning, cooperative learning, and team-based learning, such as *Team-Based Learning: A Transformative Use of Small Groups in College Teaching* (2004), available in the teaching literature. Fields like business and engineering have done a particularly good job of helping educators understand how to compose teams, how to create projects that actually require team effort (vs. a divide-and-conquer approach), how to grade group work, and how to teach students the skills needed to

collaborate, such as establishing norms or navigating conflict. Journals devoted to the teaching of these disciplines are well worth the read (e.g., *Journal of Education for Business* and *Journal of Engineering Education*), even for those of us in the humanities.

Such skills are, I believe, important for life, since working successfully as part of a team is something we'll all have to do at some point, no matter what type of job we end up in. Even religion professors, lone wolves many of us, still have to serve on committees or attend department meetings with... other humans. But this kind of team isn't what I'm talking about here—and not just because I always did hate group work.

When we talk about teams in the classroom, what we usually mean are teams of students. Teach *them* how to work well together, teach *them* how to take personal accountability, teach *them* how to resist “social loafing.” But what about us? Why is there always a distance, a separation, a distinction, between us and them? Could we, instead, think of our classes as opportunities for TEAMwork, similar to what Doucleff found in functional families across the world? Could we, instead, conceive of ourselves as being on the *same* team as our students?

Athletic analogies, like teachers as coaches, abound in educational writings, so this idea isn't exactly far-fetched, though there are a lot of people who don't love these metaphors. And, of course, there are some real differences between professors and students, including differences in power (which can go both ways: we can give them bad grades, sure, but students can also give us poor evaluations, for instance), that we must keep in mind when considering a team approach. But let's give it a try.

In a previous blog post, I wrote about how I spend time in class co-creating community norms with my students. I realized, after reading *Hunt, Gather, Parent*, that part of what I am doing in this activity is positioning all of us on the same team, responsible for one another and working toward common goals.

Another example, one focusing on the T-for-togetherness part of Doucleff's TEAM, is that we might start taking a closer look at our own role when students' performance goes awry. On a team, everyone is responsible for everyone else as well as the success of the team; nobody is exempt. When mistakes or failures happen, we support one another and we try to do better, next time, together.

So students bomb the midterm. Okay, well, maybe they studied poorly or not at all. Maybe they didn't take proper notes in class. Maybe they stayed up too late, cramming or partying, the night before. This happens. But could it also not be that the test was poorly designed, that it didn't align with what was taught in class? Could it also not be that we didn't teach students how to study, so the midterm was actually testing not what they had learned in the course so far, but rather their test-taking skills?

So students turn in sub-par final papers. Okay, well, maybe they came to college unprepared. Maybe they procrastinated and started writing too late. Maybe they have an overinflated sense of their own writing skills. Yes, of course. But could it also not be that we didn't provide them

proper instruction about how to write this kind of paper, in this class, in this discipline, in the first place, or didn't give them a rubric or set of criteria to lay bare our expectations? Could it also not be that we didn't scaffold the assignment into manageable chunks with ample opportunity for feedback and improvement?

So students cheat, lie. Okay, well, maybe they're just entitled, lazy, looking for any opportunity to cut corners. Sure. But could it also not be that our learning environments and assignments incentivize dishonesty? Could it also not be that there are too few and too high-of-stakes assignments that their entire grade is riding on? Could it also not be that we haven't conveyed why this subject is important for them to know? Could it also not be that we've made ourselves so intimidating and unapproachable that they can't come to us when they're struggling and simply tell the truth?

I'm not saying that we need to use the idea of a team to start blaming ourselves for every bad behavior on the students' parts. This would be a mistake. Students are adults and, ultimately, responsible for their own learning. (And this is an important life lesson they need to learn, too.) But thinking of ourselves as *on* or as *part of* their team, rather than something separate, opens up new ways of thinking about common and perennially frustrating teaching problems.

What are some possibilities that the idea of teaching as teamwork opens up for you?

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/11/team-teaching-another-way/>