

Accommodating All Students: A Co-Teaching Approach to Creative Writing

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Abstract: Hamilton and Jorgensen explore best practices both for co-teaching and meeting the needs of all students, including those in special education programs, in a creative writing classroom.

Successfully Serving Students with Special Needs in Creative Writing

Jorgensen. Eighteen-year-old Noah paces the back of my creative writing classroom, refusing to let anyone behind him. “They can’t go there.” He points to the back wall, to which he’s pushed his desk. His tone, jagged and inappropriately loud, doesn’t startle his classmates.

Standing a few feet from Noah, his classmate Liam says, “I just need the bathroom pass.”

I try to calm Noah. “Noah, he will pass behind you for one second, grab the bathroom pass and then be out of your way.” The other students continue to work on a “get to know you” survey.

“But I just don’t want him.” He pauses. “Anyone.” He pauses again. “Behind me.”

Although his classmates grew accustomed to Noah’s behavior in elementary school, Noah’s needs are new to me. When class ends, I search his individualized education plan (IEP) for answers. It’s day three of the semester, and I have 180 names to learn, lessons to complete, emails to address, and parent night to plan. I hope Noah’s IEP will serve as a map to navigate his social and academic needs; in Noah’s survey, he tells me he just wants to talk (and write) about animated Disney films.

But there is no shortcut, no magic map, and no quick fixes. In the IEP, I read his diagnosis (autism), recommendations on late work (allow it), and verbal cue recommendations (remain calm, clear, and concise).

Almost 15 years ago, I graduated from Marquette University's College of Education feeling confident. I told myself I knew how to differentiate, to recognize and communicate with children with disabilities, and to connect students with resources. But more than a decade later, I face swirling, nagging questions and doubt: How much differentiation is too much? Should grades communicate ability or achievement or effort--or a combination? How do grades for students with disabilities differ from at-grade-level classmates? How do I know each student's need when it's day one or day 100 or the last day of the semester? How do I accurately judge when needs change?

For Noah, as with all of my students, I make a connection, learn about his interests, and attempt to assess his needs in order to provide him with the best education and motivate him to write creatively. But I continue to doubt myself. Am I--a creative writing teacher with limited knowledge about students with special needs--doing the right and best thing?

Hamilton. A special education teacher's knowledge and background differs from that of the content area teacher. A special education teacher is trained to create strategies that will help students grasp concepts when traditional methodology fails. If a content area teacher struggles to motivate or connect with students with special needs, a special education teacher can bridge the gap.

A special education teacher ensures that a student's IEP is followed. IEPs provide regular education teachers with the student's goals (academic, social and behavioral) as well as the student's strengths and weaknesses. They also include accommodations and modifications that will promote success: accommodations such as extending time on writing assignments, working in a quiet area (like in our school's Learning Center), and receiving class notes from teachers, and modifications such as creating alternate assignments to match the student's academic level. IEPs also outline personality types and which behavioral strategies or techniques work to calm them if they're upset.

The special education teacher aids both the content teacher (responsible for 180 students) and the special education students. Together, the regular and special education teacher address student needs with the fewest classroom interruptions.

Various strategies can help students who become frustrated, verbally inappropriate, or refuse to work in class. These include relocating from class to a resource room, employing one-on-one help until the student is calm, or providing an incentive. Grading students is another opportunity for the content and special education teacher to collaborate.

Special education teachers typically work with students in their own space, consulting with content area teachers when necessary. With Noah, a special education teacher assigned to the classroom could have calmed him or asked him to sit with his back to the wall (so other students could pass in front of him). If Noah refused this option, he could have been relocated to the Learning Center for independent work.

Solution: A Collaboration between Content and Special Education Teachers

Jorgensen. Five summers ago, at a morning-long meeting, special education and content area teachers learned about co-teaching models. This is where Heidi and I met. Although some schools believe in support staff or aides, Arrowhead's pilot program paired special education and content area teachers together in the classroom. Administrators said the classroom teacher would remain responsible for class content and learning targets, while the special education teacher would modify curriculum and materials and design IEP goals and objectives.

A school administrator said, "Co-teaching is when one classroom has two teachers: one general education teacher and one special education teacher. Both teachers are in a single classroom each day and both provide inclusive instruction to students of all needs."

First, Heidi and I learned why administrators wanted to implement co-teaching: students with disabilities have the same curriculum access to rigorous academic standards, and co-teaching

- provides support to navigate that curriculum
- promotes principles of inclusion
- increases parent satisfaction
- reduces the stigma associated with pulling a student out
- allows students with special needs to collaborate and learn alongside peers
- builds stronger peer relationships
- promotes students' self-esteem, and
- enhances academic performance

Benefits to teachers were also presented. Co-teachers

- share knowledge, skills and resources
- contribute to each other's learning, and
- collaborate in order to build a repertoire and an ability to adapt curriculum or modify the level of instruction to meet the needs of all students

Our administrators also addressed challenges and warned of what could hamper success: relationship factors, the continuous investment of time, our resistance to change, and poor communication or a fear of conflict. But they also assured teachers that through defined, specific roles and continued administrative support, we would experience success.

At the meeting, co-teachers were asked to discuss classroom goals. We read articles and learned tips for effective co-teaching, then started to make changes in our classroom. We also defined our purpose and classroom structure and reviewed our teaching styles by discussing the following questions: What do you hope to accomplish? How do you envision your partnership? How will you handle discipline? How will you manage paperwork, communication with parents, report cards?

Administrators told us to keep our discussion objective and to allow multiple issues “on the table for consideration.”

At this meeting, Heidi and I discussed our experiences and our students, then reviewed what we learned and created lesson plans and a strategy for our year together in creative writing. We were told that collaboration won't just happen--it needs to be deliberate, structured, systematic and ongoing. As co-teachers, we decided to ground our class in the idea that all students, of all abilities, can have success writing creatively. But how? Throughout the course of the next semester, we met weekly to discuss, plan, collaborate, and adapt.

Hamilton. Arrowhead decided to pilot the co-teaching model, according to Adam Boldt, the Student Services Director, because administrators

wanted more students with special education needs to see success within the regular education classroom. Special education teachers are the experts on knowing the [special education students'] needs, on accommodating these students, and [on providing] modifications for each student, while the regular education teachers know the curriculum and can focus on that. It's a partnership where both teachers work together to make this happen.

Boldt also said that Arrowhead wanted to increase the time students with special needs spent in regular education classrooms and decrease the time they spent self-contained. The aim was for full inclusion.

At Arrowhead, co-teaching allows teachers to blend their styles to support not only one another, but also students. Needless to say, I was apprehensive about piloting this new concept, but I kept an open mind. I love to write, but I had never taught a writing class. Immediately, though, I was treated as an equal in Liz's creative writing class. I was included in grading student work, teaching lessons and writing my own pieces to model for the students. This arrangement helped me become confident in teaching writing, as well as working with regular education students.

I was also assigned two other co-taught classes: American literature and science technology. At first, I felt overwhelmed learning material for three new classes. Although it took planning with three teachers, our students with special needs benefit and I witness increased confidence and success.

The next year, when Arrowhead fully embraced the co-teaching model, enrollment of special needs students in creative writing classes increased. Those with special needs registered, knowing they would receive support and encouragement.

Co-teaching is now in its fourth year. In that time, Boldt says he's seen increased success in special needs students who learn within regular education classes. He said rapport has also improved between special education teachers and content specialists.

As a special education teacher, much of my job depends on the relationships I build with teachers. Co-teaching allows me to facilitate both stronger relationships with them and working relationships with all students.

How It Works: Feedback, Reflection, Assessment

Jorgensen. In the classroom, Heidi and I support all students, regardless of their needs. Assessment and grades in creative writing reflect progress, improvement, and growth. For each assignment, students complete at least three drafts. After each draft, we provide feedback, suggestions, and corrections, and students receive points reflecting their ability to address our feedback and elevate language choices, the plot, or writing quality.

For a grade, we look for improvement, specifically assessing if today's draft is better than yesterday's. Grades in our creative writing class reflect the work students do to update their drafts and make intentional and purposeful choices.

Each assignment, task or draft is worth four points. We remind our students--through words, practice, and assessment--that *each* part of the writing process has equal importance. In our classroom, the brainstorm is worth as much as the first, second, third, and final drafts, and is worth as much as peer editing or submitting a piece to a writer's

market. Through this grading system, we encourage students to value each part of the writing process.

We expect each student to hand in something (anything!) each day. We remind them that writing is not about being perfect on the first try--and that if they put something (anything!) down on paper, they will receive not only feedback, but also points. This system allows for both differentiation and personalization, and also student success in developing writing skills and confidence.

In the classroom, we focus on building confidence through affirmation and skill development. Mini lessons encourage students to implement stylistic devices or action verbs or varied sentence structures. Heidi and I collaborate on mini lessons just like we do on daily lessons.

Peer editing provides an additional resource. Because our students are juniors and seniors, we encourage them to assume ownership of their writing, grade, and performance.

There are, of course, students who fail to complete daily work. In these instances, a conference is the first step. With two teachers providing support, often this initial contact propels the students into action. Losing four points day after day can also motivate (as students see how quickly not doing daily work can dig an academic grave). If the students remain resistant, a phone call or email home can be the impetus needed. If students continue to refuse, connecting with a previous teacher or guidance counselor can provide insight (what motivated them to work in a previous class can often continue to be a motivating factor for us in creative writing). Additionally, everything students do in creative writing is submitted to writers' markets. This authentic writing--with hard deadlines and strict requirements--works to motivate them through the allure of purpose, publication, and monetary awards.

Hamilton. Liz and I have a productive, enjoyable co-teaching relationship, and our students witness our passion for teaching. Together, we work with all students. Through this process, I find peer mentors to pair with students who have special needs. The

struggling students enjoy learning from their peers as well as socializing; peer mentors say they feel accomplished when they assist and help other students. Those with special education needs often struggle with both skills and confidence. Within our class, we match peer buddies (one regular education student with one student who has special needs) and encourage them to have lunch together, which turns into partnerships inside and outside the classroom and builds trust.

In one creative writing section, Hannah, a junior on Arrowhead's dance team, became a peer buddy to Jacob, who struggles with an intellectual disability. They enjoyed lunch together and began sitting together during in-class work time. Through this partnership, Jacob gained ideas for his poem. Together, they created an outline, and Hannah oversaw Jacob's progress before he submitted his piece to us for feedback. Both Hannah and Jacob benefited: Jacob's skills increased, and Hannah practiced empathy and patience. In conversations, I heard Hannah reference terminology and writing techniques, demonstrating her command over what she'd learned in class.

Through revisions, peer feedback, and teacher feedback, students learn to tackle the writing process, which increases confidence as they revise drafts based on teacher and peer feedback and learn from their mistakes. This process leads those with special needs to comment on how much they love to write. Many have also been selected for publication.

As a co-teacher, I engage in the same writing activities as the students and share my pieces with the class, just as Liz does. Throughout each assignment, Liz and I write alongside them. Students are amazed to learn about us through our writing. In one poem, I wrote about where I'm from. In this poem, students learn about my childhood, high school, and college experiences and what made me become an educator. Inquisitive students even ask if they can use my format for their poem.

When it comes time to enter grades, I use the same access to the gradebook as Liz. This gives me the opportunity to grade all students, especially the students who receive modifications. As all of our sections have more than 30 students, the special education support allows Liz and me additional time to connect with students, provide feedback, and concentrate on instruction.

Challenges: Adapting, Communicating, Including

Jorgensen. Being open to constructive criticism remained a common theme in our first co-teacher meeting. As Heidi and I continue to work, we consistently and continuously evaluate our strengths and areas needing improvement. We observe each other and offer and accept constructive criticism, and, in doing so, we interact directly (in a way that enables both teacher and student success) and refrain from communicating in a negative manner. By focusing on how the students learn, we examine and evaluate our model effectively and objectively.

During the early years of our partnership, grading concerns plagued my conscience. One day, Heidi presented me with a printed copy of a student's gradebook with highlighted lines notating a grade change. She wanted me to change a 2/4 to a 4/4. No discussion followed. Relinquishing control of my gradebook stung. What did this student do to earn the improved grade? How could I justify, in my own grading philosophy, changing a grade to something I didn't agree with? This is when I reminded myself of our co-teaching meeting.

In the early stages of co-teaching, often there are two separate lessons, one teacher helping one student, or one teacher working with a group of students, with a lead teacher designated as the behavior manager. As teachers grow in their ability to collaborate, co-teaching models evolve. Although a special education teacher may be used to clarify strategies, both teachers enhance instruction and begin to mutually develop rules and routines. The goal of collaborative co-teaching is often referred to as team teaching--both teachers share and plan the assessment, and both participate in the presentation of the lesson by providing instruction, structuring the activities, and assessing. Our

administrators want the “chalk to pass freely.” They also want students to address questions and discuss concerns with both teachers.

In light of this, I asked Heidi to explain the process of the student’s work and how the grade change reflected this. In these conversations, I learned to trust her special education expertise. Working with students, assessing their abilities, and making modifications and accommodations was not done with anything but earnest, sound educational philosophy.

Now, when Heidi brings a highlighted printout, there is nothing to question--I know she’s already worked with the student and that the updated grade reflects the student’s ability and growth.

Another challenge presented itself during our first semester of co-teaching: I was approached by the Sejong Cultural Society. Impressed with my students’ Korean poetry submissions in previous years to their sijo-writing competition, they sought to record my lessons and post them on their website for other educators to view. They wanted to feature my creative writing classes--and me.

This phone call left me with a choice: keep what had previously been my own project or include Heidi.

Throughout the first nine weeks of the semester, Heidi and I presented ourselves as a united duo, a team of equals. To vary from this would not only raise concern from students, but also from each other. I informed the Sejong Cultural Society of my new co-teaching position and then invited Heidi and my students to be part of the recording. Heidi expressed excitement to both share our co-teaching and to provide an example of support for all students within a creative writing class.

After weeks of planning, Heidi and I formulated a lesson for recording, and the students, accustomed to two teachers, responded naturally. Day 1 and Day 2 of the recording are now available as a teaching resource on the Sejong Cultural Society’s YouTube channel.

This experience allowed Heidi and me to bond over our outfits, our fears of the cameras, and inspiring our students to act naturally. In the end, it strengthened our relationship, as well as our collaboration and trust in each other.

Hamilton. In sharing the assessment and evaluation load, Liz provides feedback to all students. Often, her direct and specific comments can stall a student with special needs. In one particular instance, Ethan said, “I am not working with her.” I reminded him that Ms. Jorgensen is improving his writing and opening his mind to new ideas. Through this conversation, Ethan understood her comments and, by the end of the second assignment, he was able to accept feedback from both teachers and elevate his writing. Throughout each challenge, Liz and I support each other and keep student learning and growth at the core of what we do.

Near spring break, our school counselors begin developing student schedules for the following academic year. At this time, I meet with each school counselor to identify those with significant writing needs. We also work together to modify schedules in order to place students in the co-taught section, which takes significant planning for each student’s schedule, but the counselors are grateful as they get a jumpstart on creating the section before the new school year.

Once the school year begins, Liz identifies students in other sections who might benefit from the co-taught section. I take that information again to the guidance office and work with the counselors to transfer those students to the co-taught section. Students unable to move to the co-taught section receive additional assistance from their case manager or the Learning Center. Although this process is time-consuming and challenging, the long term benefits outweigh the inconvenience and challenge.

Outside my co-teaching responsibilities, I am a case manager for more than 20 students. I am also the transition coordinator for the special education department and host a resource fair for post-secondary options. When co-teaching was added to my responsibilities, I felt overwhelmed. I didn’t know where I would find time to coordinate

with teachers, plan lessons, and complete assessments. At the initial co-teaching orientation, being introduced to Liz and my other co-teachers provided the baseline. We discussed personalities, styles, and goals, which allowed me to feel comfortable and confident in my new position as co-teacher. Although I no longer felt this was an impossible task, I braced myself for the challenges.

Liz and I (like all of my co-teachers) continue to meet regularly to address challenges and solve problems. Although co-teaching requires more from me professionally, I have the opportunity to meet and work with more students. I am also able to connect regular education students with those with special needs. This allows students with special needs--and me--to feel more linked to Arrowhead's student body. Additionally, now our special education resource room welcomes all students, not just those with special needs.

The Conclusion: Evaluating and Reflecting

Jorgensen. Although one section of creative writing each semester warrants a co-teacher, a handful of special needs students remain in the other sections. Even without a co-teacher, all students are able to have success in creative writing through daily feedback, differentiation, IEPs, and case managers.

Differentiation most regularly comes in the form, frequency, and type of feedback. Focusing on process and improvement allows students to work at their own pace and produce quality work. Assessments and grades fall secondary to learning, growing, self-discovery, and enjoyment of the creative writing process. By identifying student strengths and providing encouragement, they gain confidence, which spurs both motivation and achievement.

At the end of the semester, Noah's case manager sent this e-mail to me:

Hi Liz,

I just wanted to confirm that Noah has finished the final exam. He says that you have looked at it and said that he was good. I just want to make

sure he is interpreting that correctly. Thank you for all you do to support Noah in class. He really enjoyed creative writing, which is a big deal for Noah.

If students leave my classroom enjoying writing, and if they have learned something about themselves and how to better write creatively, I deem the course and our time together a success.

Hamilton. At Arrowhead, at least one section each semester of creative writing is co-taught. Many students in co-taught sections struggle with writing or have behavioral needs which benefit from a co-teaching model. Being a co-teacher and knowing the curriculum, I frequently help students with special needs in other sections. When work time is given in these sections and students need individual attention, Liz sends them to the Learning Center, where I assist. If case managers have specific questions regarding creative writing, or if their student is not doing well in the class, I am the person they contact. This helps reduce the student's and content teacher's stress.

Once students are in the Learning Center, I can provide a menu of options. In one particular assignment, students were asked to write a 350-word essay about patriotism. Logan, a student with an intellectual disability, struggled to develop a paragraph. I gave him a choice: write a 100-word essay about what it means to be an American or create a poster with six pictures and words showing what it means to be an American. In this way, co-teaching provides an effective way to strengthen instruction and evaluate student learning.

Through co-teaching, I create and teach the writing curriculum, which allows me to help all students. Now, any absent students or those struggling or seeking additional support join me in the Learning Center. In turn, this lessens the stereotype of the Learning Center as a place for students only with special needs. Additionally, students with special needs see all of their peers in this space.

Although all schools do not provide co-teachers, any teacher of creative writing can implement our strategies to differentiate and reach all students of all abilities.

Practical Tips: Suggestions for Successful Co-Teaching

Hamilton and Jorgensen. Throughout the past five years, we have collaborated and instructed (and laughed and met for breakfast and attended athletic events together). Administrators have told us we are a model for successful co-teaching. But why? What do we do?

- **We cultivate a relationship with each other.** We talk about our significant others, our weekend plans, our goals for our students, and our successes and failures. We develop trust and rapport, which makes collaborating easier.
- **We communicate.** Once every two weeks, we spend an afternoon creating lesson plans. (Our administrators provide substitutes for this planning time!) We collaborate on activities, worksheets, assignments and assessments. We analyze previous assignments and activities and make modifications for future semesters. We also discuss our roles and our classroom timeline. And we share a Google spreadsheet that keeps us organized and on-task and allows for clear, consistent, and instant communication.
- **We provide support for all students.** We discuss particular students, their needs and potential solutions. We make plans for interventions and assistance, and we contact parents and provide accommodations and commendations. In the classroom, we support all students regardless of their needs.
- **We are equals.** We share duties instructing, assessing, and grading assignments. We don't want students to identify the "English teacher" or the "special education teacher." And we learn from each other.

We are not perfect, but we are open to discussing our mistakes and making improvements. We have fun and we aim to engage all students and to make our creative writing classroom better every day.

For scholarship and advice on co-teaching, refer to the following resources

Jorgensen, E. (2016, December 21). A co-teaching model [Blog post]. Retrieved from the Marquette Educator website: <https://marquetteeducator.wordpress.com/2016/12/21/a-co-teaching-model/>

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