

# 10 Tips for Using Co-Planning Time More Efficiently

Wendy W. Murawski

*Ms. Sheldon looked down at her notes from the co-teaching workshop she had just attended and sighed. Yes, she learned a lot about strategies for co-teaching and yes, she believed in the benefits. But was she the only one in the group who heard the presenter say in one breath that “co-planning is the most important component of co-teaching,” followed by “finding time for co-planning is one of the most common barriers to effective co-teaching”? Ms. Sheldon thought, that was definitely her problem! She knew some great general education teachers who were willing and able to co-teach with her; the issue was little time to meet and co-plan with them. Was it even worth the attempt?*

As Ms. Sheldon aptly noted, co-planning is both the most important and the most difficult component of co-teaching. Experts on co-teaching have repeatedly noted that without co-planning, teachers tend to teach without differentiation strategies and resort to a One Teach/One Support paradigm

(Magiera & Zigmond, 2005; Murawski, 2010; Weiss & Lloyd, 2003). The premise of co-teaching rests on the shared expertise that special educator and classroom teacher collaboration brings to the instruction, not merely on having two adults in the classroom. Combine a general educator’s knowledge of

teaching: **How is what we are doing together substantively different, and better for students, than what one of us would do alone?**

This article provides 10 tips for how teachers can efficiently plan together, even with limited time. The more time teachers spend together, the better les-

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standards, curriculum, and content with a special educator’s knowledge of differentiation strategies, a Title I teacher’s knowledge of research-based reading strategies, or an English language specialist’s knowledge, and the result can be impressive. Without time for sharing this expertise, teachers often teach a class the way they have always taught it and there is no “value added” by the second professional educator (Zigmond, 2006; Zigmond & Matta, 2004). Those teams are unable to answer the essential question of co-

teaching can be, but unfortunately the reality is that few get that kind of time (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). In addition to general tips for planning, using a WHAT/HOW/WHO planning approach can help teachers maximize their planning time and still create a universally designed and differentiated lesson for an inclusive classroom.

## **#1: Establish a Regular Time to Plan Collaboratively**

Teachers never have enough time to do everything they need to do, and this



includes planning for instruction. Having to meet with another teacher to plan is that much more complicated. For this reason, it is critical that co-teachers find a time that works for both of them and that they then hold that time sacrosanct for planning. Collaborating teachers must find at least a small amount of time (20 minutes minimum) once a week to meet. It's important that this planning time be held regularly; if it is scheduled as a

regular occurrence and viewed as important, teachers can respond to requests accounting for the time in their schedule.

### **#2: Select an Appropriate Environment Without Distractions**

Classrooms are the typical place for teachers to meet and plan, but they are full of distractions. If you are going to use a classroom for planning, be sure

to shut the door with a sign saying "Unavailable," turn off the phone, and sit together so you are not facing any other distracting elements. The school library, an open conference room, a testing office, the lunchroom or auditorium, or another teacher's empty classroom—these are all good alternative meeting spaces. For meetings before or after school or on weekends, coffee shops, restaurants, local libraries, parks, and each other's houses are all

possibilities. Again, though, be aware of outside distractions such as noise, traffic, and interruptions.

### **#3: Save Rapport Building for Another Time**

Co-teaching is frequently compared to a marriage (Kohler-Evans, 2006; Murawski, 2009, 2010), and it is definitely important for partners to get along and build rapport. However, too often planning sessions become gripe sessions or share sessions. Thirty minutes have passed and co-teachers have only discussed their personal anecdotes and stories. Planning sessions should be focused on planning. Keep rapport building and unrelated discussions for other times in order to maximize planning time.

### **#4: Have an Agenda and Snacks**

At the beginning of every planning session, do a quick recap to determine what needs to be accomplished in the session. Having a checklist related to what needs to be accomplished helps the collaborators feel that there is a plan, and helps both teachers be on the same page in terms of discussion and time. In addition, if time runs out, teachers know what they need to discuss at a later time (either in person or by e-mail or phone conference). It is equally important to make sure your agenda identifies how long you have for this planning session. If one of you needs to leave in half an hour, note that right away so time is not wasted. Whatever time you've scheduled for this session, try to keep it to the time planned. If you typically plan to meet from 3:00 to 3:30 on Tuesdays and never leave the building until 5:30, after awhile one of you will become frustrated and disenchanted with planning. Instead, determine what you both think is a reasonable amount of time to plan and stick to it. If you keep finding yourselves running out of time, analyze your sessions to see if you have been chatting a lot or wasting time in other ways (e.g., getting materials you forgot, answering phones, both working on material that could have been divided). If you keep to your

allotted time, you may find yourselves using time more efficiently and keeping to your agenda better.

The snacks suggestion is a practical one: Hungry teachers do not make the most agreeable or creative collaborators. Depending on when, where, and how long you are planning together, you may consider making sure there is food available, taking turns bringing snacks, or learning one another's coffee order.

### **#5: Determine Regular Roles and Responsibilities**

Obviously, time is at a premium. Teachers know their own strengths and preferences in teaching, just as they know the areas in which they are not as strong. Save time by discussing these educational and personal characteristics in the beginning of your co-teaching relationship. There are certain tasks that happen frequently that you and your partner can identify as your individual roles, thereby saving time because you will not have to discuss them each time you plan. For example, one of you might always be responsible for coming up with warm-ups, while the other will be responsible for updating the homework board and web site. The more you can identify early on, the fewer things there will be to discuss at each planning session.

### **#6: Divide and Conquer**

Parity, or equality, is very important for successful collaboration (Friend & Cook, 2009). Both teachers need to feel they have an equal share in the planning, teaching, and assessing (Bouck, 2007; Murawski, 2009). If they

having parity does not mean that co-teachers need to do everything together. Once tasks are determined, they should be divided and attacked separately. Here is where using the regrouping approach to instruction (i.e., Parallel, Station, and Alternative Teaching) is beneficial. Teachers who are unfamiliar with the common approaches to co-instruction can refer to Table 1 for a quick overview. When students are divided into groups for instruction, not only does it reduce the student:teacher ratio; provide students with chunked content, brain breaks, and kinesthetic movement; and allow for easier checking for understanding and differentiation, but it also reduces the amount of planning teachers may need to do. Each teacher can plan a separate lesson and then repeat the content twice or more to a smaller group of students. Teachers certainly need to coordinate and discuss the standards, goals, and big picture of their instruction, but they do not need to spend time together going over the intricacies of each part of the lesson: This is where trust in one another comes in.

### **#7: Keep a List of Individual Student Concerns**

Kids are why we teach. Kids are the most important part of our job. Co-teachers definitely need to keep a focus on students and their learning (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). However, you do not want to begin your planning session together by talking about individual students. This type of discussion will derail your planning; it is simply too easy to spend 45 minutes talking about






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don't, one may begin to feel like he or she is an overqualified aide, whereas the other feels the workload is not equitable and he or she is having to do most of the work (Bouck, 2007; Walther-Thomas, 1997). However,

how frustrating it is that Jake doesn't do anything in class, how amusing it is to watch Patrick's crush on Sandi, and how exciting it is that Quinn finally did his homework! Instead, keep a piece of paper handy to write down any indi-



**Table 1. Commonly Used Co-Teaching Approaches to Instruction**

Co-Teaching Approach	Class Setup	Definition
One Teach/One Support (OT/OS)	Whole class 	One teacher is in front of the class leading instruction. The other is providing substantive support (e.g., collection or dissemination of papers, setting up labs, classroom management). Both are actively engaged.
Team teaching	Whole class 	Both teachers are in front of the class, working together to provide instruction. This may take the form of debates, modeling information or note-taking, compare/contrast, or role-playing.
Parallel teaching	Regrouping 	Each teacher takes half of the class in order to reduce student:teacher ratio. Instruction can occur in the same or a different setting. Groups may be doing the same content in the same way, same content in a different way, or different content.
Station teaching	Regrouping 	Students are divided into three or more small, heterogeneous groups to go to stations or centers. Students rotate through multiple centers. Teachers can facilitate individual stations or circulate among all stations.
Alternative teaching	Regrouping 	One teacher works with a large group of students, while the other works with a smaller group providing reteaching, preteaching, or enrichment as needed. The large group is not receiving new instruction during this time so that the small group can rejoin when finished.

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vidual student discussions you want to have at the end of your planning session. You will always find time to talk about students, even if it ends up happening as you are walking out to your cars together. What you do not want to have happen is that you start talking about the individual students and end up with no plan for what or how you are teaching tomorrow.

**#8: Build in Regular Time for Assessment and Feedback**

It is important that co-teachers communicate with one another openly, not just about the students and the content but also about their own teaching and interactions. Dieker (2008) recommends that teachers discuss their co-teaching progress at least monthly. Her *Co-Teaching Lesson Plan Book* provides questions to help teachers share honestly about what they think is working—and not working—in their co-

teaching relationship. If you organize this type of check and dialogue early on by establishing it as something you will do as a matter of course, the conversation itself will be much less difficult because it will be expected.

**#9: Document Your Planning and Save It for Future Reference**

Teachers are always planning. They pick up paper rulers when shopping to use in a math activity at school; they go on a date and think about how to tie the movie's plot into the theme they are teaching about next week; they find materials on a nature hike to use for a craft activity. The issue is not that teachers do not plan; it is merely that they do not always formally plan and that they do not have a lot of time to plan collaboratively. A major problem with planning between co-teachers is that it often occurs in an unorganized

fashion. This results in a lesson that is either not well thought out, or one that ends up being great but cannot be duplicated because co-teachers are not really sure what they did. Because special educators often end up co-teaching with various partners in the same year, and general educators may very well have a different co-teaching partner next year than they have this year, much time would be saved if teachers did not keep recreating the wheel. When planning is done, be sure to keep a copy of the plan for future reference and improvement. In addition to regular planners and the *Co-Teaching Lesson Plan Book* (Dieker, 2008), the Co-Teaching Solutions System ([www.coteachsolutions.com](http://www.coteachsolutions.com)) software also provides ways for teachers to plan, e-mail their lessons to one another, add differentiation strategies, and spiral state standards.

**Table 2. Questions to Guide Lesson Planning**

<b>WHAT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What standard does the lesson address?</li> <li>• What objective does the lesson have?</li> <li>• What kind of timeframe do we have for instruction?</li> <li>• What are the “big ideas” and “essential questions” for this lesson?</li> </ul>
<b>How</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How comfortable do we both feel with the new content?</li> <li>• What co-teaching approach (i.e., Team, One Teach/One Support, Alternative, Station, or Parallel) will be most effective for the beginning of the lesson?</li> <li>• What co-teaching approach will be most effective for the middle of the lesson?</li> <li>• What co-teaching approach will be most effective for the end of the lesson?</li> <li>• Based on the co-teaching approaches selected, what are each teacher’s responsibilities for planning, bringing in materials, implementing, and assessing?</li> </ul>
<b>WHO</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who might struggle behaviorally, socially, or academically with aspects of the lesson?</li> <li>• Who needs accommodations or modifications or adapted materials?</li> <li>• What additional types of differentiation strategies would make the lesson more interesting, motivating, enriching, or accessible for all learners?</li> <li>• Who else may need to be included in helping make the lesson accessible (e.g., speech teacher, occupational therapist, parent, Braille teacher)?</li> </ul>

**#10: Use the WHAT/How/Who Approach**

Now to the crux of the planning. You have a set schedule, agenda, nice nondistracting environment, the right mindset, identified roles, and some yummy snacks. You are ready to plan! The WHAT/How/WHO approach (Murawski & Spencer, 2011) is a way to quickly ensure that the lesson is state-standards-based, addresses grade-level content in accordance with pacing plans, and yet provides a good use of both teachers and their areas of expertise. The use of a timer as teachers plan each stage of the lesson (WHAT/How/WHO) will help keep the lesson focused, efficient, and effective.

Here’s how it works: The first question discussed is “**WHAT** needs to be taught in this lesson?” The person who leads this conversation can be the teacher with the strongest background knowledge in the specific content. In

approximately 5 minutes, the teacher should be able to identify the standards, objectives, timeframe, and big ideas of the lesson.

The next item discussed is “**How** will we teach this lesson in order to make sure it is universally accessible for all students?” Both co-teachers can equally take part in this conversation. During this part of the planning session, co-teachers should be able to identify how comfortable they are with the content, what approaches they could use, and what each of them will be responsible for prepping and/or teaching. Try to answer the “How” question in 7 to 15 minutes (depending on complexity of lesson, level of content knowledge of both teachers, rapport between teachers, etc.). After teaching together a while, this time requirement may decrease. Keep in mind that once teachers determine who is going to do what, they don’t need to do all the specific in-depth

planning together. For example, when using parallel teaching, one teacher can take the lead in planning a writing activity while the other teacher takes the lead in planning the comprehension activity. Students will be able to participate in both parts of the lesson but teachers only have to prepare half as much work.

The third, and final, item discussed is “**WHO** may need additional consideration in order to access this lesson?” The person who typically leads this conversation is the special education teacher or other special service provider (Title I, English-language teacher, gifted coordinator, etc.). In about 5 to 10 minutes, this special service provider should be able to identify who might struggle with the lesson, who might need certain adaptations or enrichment, and who might need to be contacted to come up with additional strategies for improving this lesson and its impact on all students (i.e., other adults). Table 2 provides additional questions to guide each of the three parts of the WHAT/How/WHO approach.

When teachers have worked together for awhile and are familiar with each other and the content, it is more likely they will need the lower end of the time range (i.e., 15 minutes). Teachers who are co-teaching for the first time or who are new to the content may need the upper end (e.g., 30 minutes). Either way, having a structure for planning will streamline the time and make it more effective.

Figure 1 demonstrates how the WHAT/How/WHO approach (Murawski & Spencer, 2011) has been used by co-teachers in planning and Figure 2 demonstrates how teachers might use the WHAT/How/WHO approach to guide more formal lesson planning. A blank template of Figure 2’s co-planning form is available for free electronically at <http://www.2TeachLLC.com/lessons.html>. This format helps ensure documentation for future use.

**Final Thoughts**

Time is a definite issue for all teachers and this issue is compounded for those

**Figure 1. Example of What/How/Who Approach to Lesson Planning**

WHAT/HOW/WHO Co-Planning Form		
General educator: Rick G.		Special service provider: Marcia R.
Lesson date: October 3		Subject/grade: English 8th
<b>WHAT</b> (5 minutes)	Standard	LA.1.2.1. Understand the common features of a variety of literary forms.
	Objective	Students will be able to identify and create haiku & acrostic poems.
	Big idea (all need to know)	There are different types of poems.
	Essential question (all can answer)	Do poems have to rhyme?
	Timeframe for lesson	55-minute period; only 1 period available for this.
<b>How</b> (7-15 minutes)	Comfort Level with Content	Both comfortable, but Marcia prefers acrostics
	Beginning (approach & description)	OT/OS: R take roll as M reads two poems (1 acrostic; 1 haiku) as "hook"; students briefly discuss similarities and differences (10 minutes)
	Middle (approach & description)	Parallel: R take $\frac{1}{2}$ class and teach haiku; M take $\frac{1}{2}$ and teach acrostics; Switch & repeat after 15 minutes; total 32 minutes w/ 2-minute transition time
	End (approach & description)	Alternative: R has large group do Ticket Out the Door (TOTD) with poems using Cloze procedure; M keeps small group who needs more time to finish haiku/acrostic poems (10 minutes)
	Special ed responsibilities for preparation/instruction	Copy model poems; make accommodations to poems & TOTD; try to get poems in Spanish & Braille
	General ed responsibilities for preparation/instruction	Identify poems for beginning of class; Identify model poems for Marcia to copy; Create TOTD poem for end; consider higher level questions for Gifted students
<b>WHO</b> (5 minutes)	Needs behavioral adaptations?	Remind Javon & Tim about transition & group behavior; Sit Javon near teacher in both groups
	Needs social adaptations?	Remind Ryan how to ask for help & sit near a friend
	Needs physical adaptations?	Have large print version available for Brenda
	Needs instructional adaptations?	Have model poems & Cloze procedure poems available; let Kiernan write poems about Bionicles to keep interest; challenge Oliver by asking him to rhyme his acrostics & use multiple adjectives in haiku; provide Spanish version for Javier & Lupe
	Contact for additional input	Give poems to Ms. H for Braille translation; ask Mr. Valdez about SDAIE strategies/suggestions
	Implementing/ensuring adaptations	R - do reminders during beginning (OT/OS), come up with challenging questions, and have model problems ready for Marcia M - do large print copies, contact Mr. V for SDAIE and Ms. H for Braille

Note. OT/OS = One Teach/One Support. SDAIE = specially designed academic instruction.

**Figure 2. Sample Co-Planned Lesson**

General Educator: Rick G. Special Service Provider: Marcia R.

**Co-Teaching Lesson Plan**

Subject Area: Language Arts

Grade level: 8th

Content Standard: LA.1.2.1. The student understands the common features of a variety of literary forms

Lesson Objective: Students will be able to identify & create a haiku and acrostic poem.

Essential Questions: Do poems have to rhyme? Big Idea: There are different types of poems.

Key Vocabulary: Poem, haiku, acrostic, rhyme

Pre-Assessment: Day before - Do Know-Want to Know-Learned (KWL) about poems to see who already knows acrostics/haiku

Materials: Model poems of haiku & acrostics; Ticket out the door w/Cloze; large print poems for Brenda; Braille version of poems for Quinn; put poems & homework on web site; powerpoints & handouts; magnetic letters & magnetic cookie sheets; dry erase boards & markers

Lesson	Co-Teaching Approach (can select more than one)	Time	General Education Teacher	Special Service Provider	Considerations (may include adaptations, differentiation, accommodations, and student-specific needs)
<b>Beginning:</b> (may include: Opening; Warm Up; Review; Anticipatory Set)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> One Teach, One Support <input type="checkbox"/> Parallel <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative <input type="checkbox"/> Station <input type="checkbox"/> Team	10 minutes	Take roll Get materials prepared Pass out cards with "Haiku" or "Acrostic" so students know which group to go to first Talk to students who need proactive reminders	Read 2 poems (haiku, acrostic) Lead students in oral discussion of similarities & differences between poems	Remind Javon & Tim about transition & group behavior; Remind Ryan how to ask for help & sit near friend during group work; Have copies of poems available for students to look at (on overhead, Braille, large copy); Ask higher order questions of Oliver
<b>Middle:</b> (may include: Instruction; Checking for Understanding; Independent or Group Practice)	<input type="checkbox"/> One Teach, One Support <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parallel <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative <input type="checkbox"/> Station <input type="checkbox"/> Team	32 minutes (15 per group + 2 minute switch)	Take ½ class and teach haiku using powerpoint and examples (good for visual/auditory learners); students can use dry erase boards or paper as desired Switch after 15 minutes and repeat	Take ½ class and teach acrostics using magnetic letters & cookie sheets (good for kinesthetic learners) Switch after 15 min and repeat	Let Kiernan write poems about Bionicles to keep interest; Challenge Oliver by asking him to rhyme his acrostics & use multiple adjectives in haiku; Have example poems available for all students to see; Use mnemonics for remembering differences; have dry erase markers and boards available for students like Amy who prefer to write and erase multiple times before committing to paper
<b>End:</b> (may include: Closing, Assessments, Extension of the Lesson)	<input type="checkbox"/> One Teach, One Support <input type="checkbox"/> Parallel <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alternative <input type="checkbox"/> Station <input type="checkbox"/> Team	10 minutes	Have large group do "Ticket out the Door" by completing poems using Cloze procedure Remind students to write down homework from board into their planners	Work with small group of students who need more time or assistance in understanding Haiku & Acrostics Remind students to write down homework from board into their planners	During transition to large group, both teachers can decide who needs extra time in small group. Small group can meet at back table. Have multiple copies of Cloze versions of Ticket out the Door to ensure differentiation; Allow Oliver, Kiernan, Amy, and others who want to create poems from scratch if desired; Adapt level of homework based on individual need

**Step 1:**  
The first section is done during the WHAT part of the lesson (approximately 5 minutes)

**Step 2:**  
The middle section is done during the HOW part of the lesson (approximately 7 to 15 minutes)

**Step 3:**  
The considerations section is last and is done during the WHO part of the lesson (approximately 5 minutes)

Note. Adapted with permission from <http://www.2TeachLLC.com/lessons.html>. A free co-teaching lesson plan template is available at [www.2TeachLLC.com](http://www.2TeachLLC.com).





who are collaborating in support of children with special needs. The WHAT/HOW/WHO approach (Murawski & Spencer, 2011) helps structure lesson planning for co-teachers struggling with this issue. Dieker's research (2001) found that veteran co-teachers can effectively plan lessons in only 10 minutes. The key word here, however, is "veteran." Once a team has been together for awhile, they naturally require much less time as they only need to tweak lessons already crafted. Unfortunately, most co-teachers do not feel that they have sufficient time to co-plan in the first place. Using these 10 tips for co-planning will help make the most of the little time teachers have and will result in better, more individualized and differentiated lessons for the co-taught inclusive classroom.

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**Wendy W. Murawski** (California CEC), Eisner Endowed Chair, Center for Teaching and Learning, Michael D. Eisner College of Education, California State University, Northridge.

*Address correspondence concerning this article to Wendy Murawski, Center for Teaching and Learning, California State University, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8265 (e-mail: Wendy.murawski@csun.edu).*

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