

TEACHINGⁱⁿ Psychology & Law

Co-Teaching in 2020: What Worked and What Didn't

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We were ecstatic when we received our fall semester teaching assignments in early 2020: psychology and the law, finally. Even better, we were co-teaching. As researchers in the field and good friends outside of the lab, we spent weeks celebrating the news. Despite our excitement as first-time instructors of a psychology and law course, we faced a unique challenge when it came time to design our course: a global pandemic that had completely transformed university courses. This challenge was only exacerbated by the political upheaval simultaneously taking place in the United States. We were planning a course that covered many relevant topics including racial disparities in sentencing among other injustices present within the American legal system and we worried about triggering students.

In this article, we review some of the methods that helped us grow as graduate co-instructors in 2020. We also discuss some of the methods that (although well-intended) did not go so well. We hope this article will help instructors prepare to teach similar courses, and give new instructors, and those supervising new instructors, ideas to consider.

Using a flipped classroom model.

Perhaps our first realization of teaching in 2020: flexibility is a must. In the midst of course preparation, we received notice from our department chair that our class would be one of

three psychology courses offered in-person during the Fall 2020 semester. Around April 2020, we (naively) agreed to teach in-person because “surely this will be over by then.” Wrong.

Thirty-two students were enrolled in our course, but only 16 students were permitted in-class at once to ensure we adhered to social distancing guidelines. We were told that we could lecture in class, but have half of the students tune in online. Alternatively, we could randomly assign half of the students to attend class on Tuesdays and the other half to attend on Thursdays.

Our primary concern with lecturing twice per week was that it would give an unfair advantage to Thursday's class. By lecturing on Tuesday, we were essentially piloting our materials with those students. We would then have an extra day to revise and improve our lecture delivery for Thursday's course. We agreed it was unfair to use our Tuesday students as guinea pigs, but we also agreed alternating which students attended on Tuesdays would surely confuse all of us at some point in the semester.

To solve this issue, we decided to use a flipped classroom model. The flipped classroom model was first proposed by Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams (Bergmann & Sams, 2012), two high school chemistry teachers. In this model,

students learn the material outside of class and use class time to apply that material to various exercises. Our lectures were prerecorded and delivered online for students to watch before coming to class. This ensured that all students received the same quality lecture.

In-person class time was spent on myriad activities (largely thanks to *Activities For Teaching Psychology and the Law: A Guide for Instructors* by Zelechowski, Wolbransky & Riggs Romaine, 2018) and video demonstrations. As instructors, we recognized the value in having students apply each lesson's material to interactive activities and discussions. Our goal was to bolster student engagement and long-term retention via active learning (Shatto et al., 2017). Students were engaged and excited to come to class and discuss that week's topic. These activities and discussions were largely student-led in that we were open to veering from the planned material to cover any topics that were of heightened interest to the students. Furthermore, implementing this model allowed us to be flexible with attendance requirements. Students who were unable to attend class for any reason were able to keep up with lectures without missing any important material.

Sticking to what we know.

One major benefit of co-teaching this course was that we could each stick to covering topics within our respective research areas. While Christina's research interests are more child-focused and cognitive, Quincy's are adolescent- and adult-focused and social in nature. Our differences worked in our favor and we were able to structure the course so that we each primarily taught on topics within our areas of expertise. For example, Christina covered the eyewitness memory chapter while Quincy covered the juror decision-making chapter.

This strategy was beneficial for both us and our students. First, we increased our efficiency when preparing our lectures and in class activities because the material was generally familiar to us. Additionally, our students were

able to get much more thorough answers to their questions and understand the real-world implications on each topic.

Learning to teach.

Our second realization was the importance of learning from others' experiences. We are very fortunate to have amazing colleagues within the field of psychology and the law who were willing to share not only their advice, but also their course materials with us. We first contacted Dr. Lindsay Malloy, Christina's own undergraduate psychology and law professor from her time at Florida International University. We adapted Dr. Malloy's materials to suit our course. Additionally, we examined others' psychology and the law syllabi (available via the syllabus collection by American Psychology-Law Society <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-41/education/teaching?tab=1>). Using others' course materials bolstered our efficiency, creativity, and overall confidence.

Our colleagues, who had taught this course multiple times, provided us with excellent assignments, assessments, case examples, videos, and activities to use in our course. This strategy was immensely helpful as it allowed us to design our course from the top-down rather than the bottom-up. Moreover, we knew students had previously enjoyed the materials and (hopefully) our students would as well.

We also found Twitter an extraordinarily helpful tool for course design and overall words of wisdom from seasoned colleagues. Academic Twitter is a wonderful community comprised of academics regularly sharing various resources for teaching and research. Prior to the fall semester and throughout, we reached out to colleagues on Twitter for advice on navigating our first time teaching this course. By networking on Twitter, Quincy gained the opportunity to shadow psychology and law professor, Dr. Amanda Zelechowski at Valparaiso University. This experience proved invaluable as Quincy observed the open and inclusive

classroom skillfully cultivated by Dr. Zelechowski (via innovative technology platforms, creative formative and summative assessments, and structured discussions that bolstered students' engagement and ease of participation).

Well-intended ideas.

In light of the pandemic, we designed course attendance points to be earned via discussion board posts versus in-person attendance. In-person attendance started off strong, but steadily tapered off as the semester raged on. However, we cannot be certain how much of this was due to surges in COVID-19 cases in the Toledo area. As vaccination rates increase and COVID-19 cases continue to decline, introducing in-person attendance requirements in future semesters may be helpful to curb missed class attendance.

Additionally, we were very liberal with course deadlines. We determined that the benefits of accommodating students during this unprecedented time in history outweighed the risk of being perceived as "pushovers." We adapted the "Learning during a pandemic" policy from Dr. Andrew Heiss (Heiss, 2020). Throughout the semester, many students had to miss class due to exposure to COVID-19, increased family demands, and other unexpected circumstances. In adopting this laid-back approach, we were able to demonstrate compassion for students while still having them meet course requirements.

We also noticed tensions occasionally flared in the classroom as we discussed emotionally laden material, such as racial disparities in sentencing, historic allegations of child sexual abuse, and misinformation in the media. These tensions reflected the current state of American society during the contentious 2020 presidential election. As first-time instructors of a psychology and law course, we struggled to adequately (and confidently) respond to some of the hard-hitting questions posed by students. Since Quincy covered the majority of the chapters focusing on biases and prejudices within the legal system, she received the brunt of

these tensions. When voicing her concerns to a more senior colleague, Quincy was asked, "Have you ever considered that you may be unconsciously communicating your anxieties or biases during your lectures?" Quincy sat with this question for months, and ultimately concluded that, yes, this indeed was probable and may have contributed to students' reactions. For example, perhaps using the allegations of sexual misconduct against Brett Kavanaugh, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden as examples of delayed disclosure were not the best choices during a political upheaval. We found that using political examples of delayed disclosure not only divided the classroom but also distracted from the material. While some students were inclined to villainize or defend certain politicians, others uncomfortably shifted in their seats and were reluctant to participate. Since this misstep, we have learned that nonpolitical case examples are just as likely to resonate with students, but without distracting from the course material. Additionally, student participation increased with more obscure case examples, perhaps because students did not perceive a cost-benefit analysis in offering a perspective that varied from that of the instructor or other students. Moving forward, we recommend taking the current social and political climate into account when designing psychology and law courses, which do occasionally mirror topics receiving significant media attention.

Take away points.

With a deadly pandemic raging on and serious political unrest within the United States, we faced the struggle of teaching this course for the first time during a truly unprecedented time in history. For us, the four major lessons learned from our time as co-instructors of a course on psychology and the law were:

1. *Be flexible.* This may be easier said than done, but we quickly learned to become flexible in 2020.

2. *Consider using a flipped classroom model.* Such a model reaps a host of benefits for

teaching this course beyond the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. *Seek out help from seasoned colleagues.* We are only slightly exaggerating when we say we would not have survived the Fall 2020 semester without the guidance of our senior colleagues.

4. *Divide and conquer.* One of the most beneficial things we did was meeting (virtually, of course) over the summer to discuss some ground rules for how we would approach this course together. For example, we quickly discovered we have a similar teaching style and that the most important thing for us was to keep each other in the loop at all times with regards to any issues that came up in class or via e-mail.

References

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