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Challenges and Rewards of a Collaborative Teaching Environment

[Narelle Walton](#) and [Kieran Sly](#) reflect on the planning and implementation of a team teaching approach to a new learning space at Harbord Public School.

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Harbord Public School in conjunction with the NSW Department of Education had been in the process of planning, designing and constructing an extension to the school for several years, which comprised interconnected classrooms and practical activity spaces. These new learning spaces were open at the beginning of the 2017 school year and thus necessitated plans for teaching and learning in the ‘futuristic’ environment. Initially decisions were made about which grades should occupy the 18 classrooms in the new three-storey building, as the structure had been purpose built to facilitate cutting-edge teaching and learning styles. In addition, the school executive was required to select 18 of the 45 classroom teachers to fill the positions in the new building.

Prior to the opening of the building, we (Narelle Walton and Kieran Sly) discussed the possibility of teaching collaboratively in the new learning spaces. We understood that it would involve teaching year 3, 5 or 6 as they were to be the only three grades in the new building. Our next step was convincing the executive team that we were compatible and would be able to work in harmony with each other 6-10 hours a day for a year – the Principal (Craig Davis) and the executive agreed. Thus, we were both placed on year 3 and given two

adjoining classrooms with new furniture and new technology, along with the huge challenge of planning and reprogramming for a fresh approach to teaching and learning.

The other rooms in the block were allocated to teachers willing and able to experiment with the logistics of the modern classroom features. All of the teachers selected to work in these spaces were excited to see what the new building, new furniture and new styles of teaching would bring in 2017. Some decided to team teach on occasions, or to try other ways of adapting their current pedagogy to suit the new learning environments. However, we felt that what would work best for us was to team teach on a permanent basis, that is, to keep our classroom doors open and allow students from each of our class groups to interact and collaborate at all times. As the year progressed some teachers continued to pursue the flexible opportunities, afforded by the open spaces, while others returned to the style of teaching they knew best and were comfortable with.

Professional development is a vital component of any initiative and while teachers at Harbord Public School supported each other and frequently exchanged ideas on strategies that they discovered worked in the new environment, more focused professional development for the new environment was not part of our learning at that stage. Individual teachers, who elected to do so, were able to engage in professional development programs on pedagogical styles that could be adapted to teaching in the new environment.

The NSW Department of Education does not have expectations about how the new building is used and so it is flexible and specific to the school community as to how the learning environment is created and worked in. At the time of its design the school had no way of knowing what classrooms of the future would entail but thought if the building remained 'flexible' it could be adapted as changes occurred.



Figure 1. Children from 3W and 3S working on iPads in a quiet area.

Working in tandem

After agreeing to work together we had a meeting regarding our own expectations about the changes required in pedagogical practice. Kieran had already worked in a team teaching environment with another colleague at Harbord Public School in the previous year and had seen the benefits of this style of teaching, not only for the students, but also for the teachers involved. However, we needed to make sure that our teaching philosophies were compatible and consider whether we would remain open minded enough to work together over a year. We acknowledged that we were both bringing different types of experience to the table and were excited about learning new things from each other.

Over several informal meetings we spoke about what we expected from each other and during these discussions realised that teaching in this style would require an ongoing commitment. We established goals that we would need to achieve in order to make it work, including:

- being adaptable,
- showing each other respect as professionals,
- listening to one another's ideas as well as ideas from executive staff and other teachers,
- preparing for lessons separately and together, and
- continuing to value our individual differences as teachers.

We wanted this opportunity to be of benefit to our students and ourselves, both professionally and personally.

In terms of preparation of lesson material, we spent a good deal of time developing units that were interesting, educational, entertaining and enjoyable. Initially, we were perhaps a little too concerned about being judged by one another, but this uneasiness abated as we became aware that the focus of our preparation was quite obviously our students. We shared leadership in relation to programming and delivering aspects of all key learning areas throughout the year, so we both achieved a well-rounded knowledge of current and new programs. Our Deputy Principal (Lisa McKenzie) was also able to timetable our release from face to face so that we were off class at the same time for two 40 minute sessions per week. This enabled us to prepare and plan together and it also meant that both classes were nearly always in the classroom at the same time as each other. We have had a very supportive supervisor (Tanya Scicluna) and network of teachers around us, which has made achieving our goals easier than it may have been.

Despite changes that occurred during the year in other classrooms, we remained dedicated to our initial goal of maintaining a fully collaborative learning and team teaching environment. Throughout the year we altered aspects of the classroom layout, our own pedagogical practices, and our team teaching style as necessary, but we managed to be consistent with the way our students collaborated and experienced the learning environment as we had envisaged it at the beginning of the year.

Student reactions to the new learning environment

At the beginning of 2017, our classes came to us very excited about being in the new building. Most students had only experienced a traditional classroom setting. They were most surprised about not having assigned seating and not being told how they had to sit or how to use the furniture. One of the major strengths of the open plan learning environment is that it accommodated a wide range of pedagogical modes and learning styles.



Figure 2. Employing flexible learning spaces during NAPLAN testing.

In the first few weeks we saw that the new environment was not only a positive one, but that the students adapted readily to the style of the new classroom environment. They enjoyed the flexibility of a learning space where they were able to choose where to sit, how to sit and who to sit with. After each lesson we would reset the room 'back to base', meaning that each piece of equipment had to be returned to its place, so the room would be tidy. This did not take long for the students to become accustomed and we would often hear students telling one another, 'That doesn't belong there!' By resetting the room after each session, it enabled students to reconfigure their seating arrangement as they wanted it for the next session.

Taking into account the new curriculum and focus on independent learning through project-based tasks, the new environment was particularly accommodating as it allowed students to work in spaces that physically contributed to collaboration and teamwork. We completed many projects throughout the year with most incorporating the use of technology. Students worked in a variety of different collaborative teams that helped facilitate their learning. They also enjoyed having the opportunity to rearrange and place the furniture to best suit their

specific lesson requirements. Allowing students flexibility and giving them ownership of their learning spaces fostered open-minded, creative and independent learners.

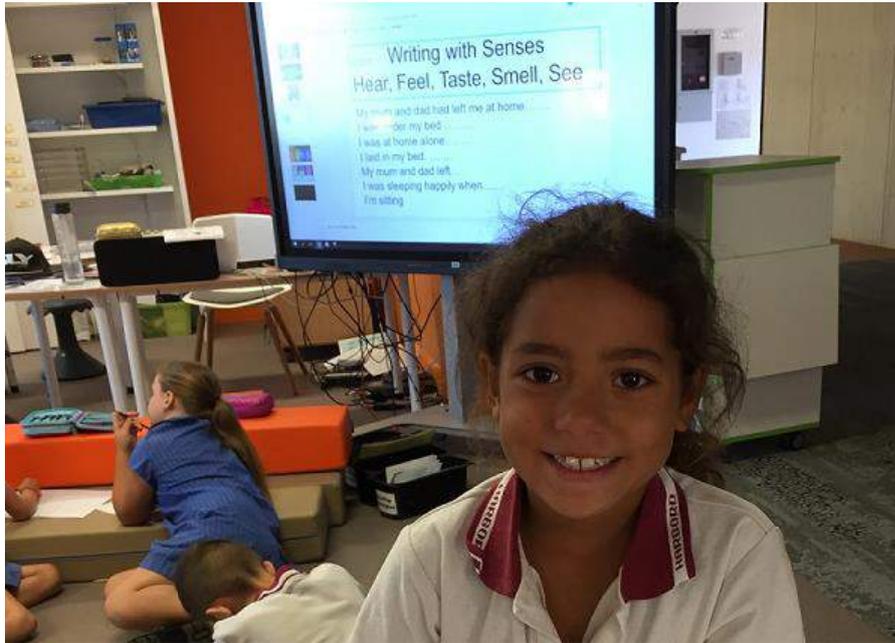


Figure 3. Student working at a height adjustable individual desk and in the background, students created their own workspace using 'Gen-ga Blocks'

Something that surprised both of us was the positive impact that having two teachers had on the students. We realised that students are drawn to particular teachers and teaching styles. As our styles, approaches and personalities are different, we had students from each other's class connecting with the other teacher. Narelle's expertise in and passion for learning support and Kieran's drive for extending students, we felt, complemented and supported the individual learning needs within our 'extended family' classroom. During particular lessons such as those in literacy and numeracy, students were able to choose

- whether they needed support,
- were happy working at grade level, or
- if they required a greater challenge.

It was interesting to observe students self monitoring and choosing to move between the three groups based on their understanding of a particular topic.

Parent reactions to the new learning environment

When we faced the parents at the parent information evening, early in the new year, some were a little nervous about the 'new set up'. They were excited about having a new building at the school, but they were not so sure about how their child would cope in an environment that appeared to have many distractions as well as having two teachers in the same space.

A few parents found it difficult to see how it could be a positive and productive learning space, especially when comparing their own school experiences to this new environment and its facilities. The classrooms were brightly coloured, had writable desks and walls, chairs that

revolved and were on wheels, portable desks and chairs, soft padded blocks to lie on, and learning pods that provided for individual or small group work. It presented a very significant difference to parents' experiences of schooling. Generally, they were enthusiastic, but some considered the space to be distracting and over stimulating.

Another concern for some parents was having two teachers and 50+ students in one shared learning space. They were not sure how their child was going to cope with having two teachers and were concerned how they would know whom to go to for assistance. Many were worried that their allocated teacher would not get to know their child's strengths and weaknesses. There was also a worry that having so many students in the one room was not going to be a positive experience. However, as the year progressed and on reflection at the end of the school year, all parents agreed that their child having two teachers and being in this new learning environment was a positive one. Parents acknowledged that having two teachers with different teaching styles and interests added to their child's educational experience. It was not uncommon for a parent to say to us, 'I was skeptical at first, but my child has had the most amazing year'.

Challenges and rewards for students and teachers

Reflecting on a year of team teaching in a contemporary learning environment, we believe the rewards far outweighed the challenges for students and teachers. We have mentioned a few of the challenges, which needed to be addressed before starting to work with a colleague on a permanent basis, but there are other issues to consider. For instance, each member of a teaching duo needs to be very well prepared for their own and their partner's benefit. You never have time to be off task because there are 50+ children waiting for you to give them something to do and another teacher relying on you to be well organised for the lesson. However, the reward was that you generally only prepare half the lessons because your colleague is preparing the other half. Sharing the load is something that we think is the most important part of team teaching, especially as demands on teacher time becomes even more overloaded. We had certainly not cut our conventional workload in half as we have been creating new lessons to suit the new programs and the new learning environment, but what we have created is definitely more comprehensive than we could have managed had we been doing it all on our own.

Having so many students in one environment usually means that sound levels will increase quickly in most circumstances. We needed to reevaluate what we deemed appropriate working noise levels. What we found was that if we prepared lessons with collaborative properties, then the students would spend their time talking about the task so the volume relating to interactivity became somewhat irrelevant as they all remained on track. The important thing was that a teacher needed to be flexible and allow students to discover and learn how to remain on task in a less restrictive environment. This took our students and ourselves a few weeks to get used to initially.

Some teachers may find it daunting having another professional present in the room the whole time, but we found having someone to constantly bounce ideas off was definitely rewarding. We both learned so much from each other during the year, including teaching techniques, different ways of managing students' behaviour, how to better interact with parents, how to use technology in different ways, how to support and mentor each other, and most importantly how to respect teaching styles different to your own. We also found it mentally beneficial. It is not uncommon for a teacher to feel overwhelmed at times and

having another colleague in the classroom allowed us to discuss the demands of the profession.

Another reward we discovered was getting to know all the students across two classes. Generally, this made assessing and reporting easier. We always graded and reported on our own class, but we had the input of the other teacher if we were deliberating over a student's capabilities. We found that with two teachers in the room there was a lot of time available for one teacher to be observing and informally assessing the students.

We both agreed that the positives far outweighed the negatives, but we were also mindful of the fact that this learning environment does not necessarily suit all students. We learned fairly quickly which students were struggling in this space and that it was our task to provide the best outcomes for each and every one of the students. For some students, we had to make sure there were independent tasks and quiet time available throughout the day as well as spaces that suited their more independent learning style.

Also, as mentioned earlier, at times the sound level was of concern to some students. It was important to be mindful of the way sound carried throughout the building. Clear expectations about the level of noise expected for particular lessons was needed on a regular basis. Occasionally we had to interrupt lessons to regroup and discuss the noise level and moderate the volume.

Being in a large class did not suit all students. There was frequent movement and a good deal going on at any point in time. There was less chance for student voices to be heard, particularly during direct instruction sessions when they wanted to share ideas and responses. Quieter students found it difficult initially, but over time they adapted to the new setting and style of learning.

We believe there are many rewards for the students being in an open space and having two teachers. It gave students a degree of choice about which teacher they felt more comfortable with or related to better in regard to personality. They understood that there were always two sets of eyes on them and they could never 'hide' within the classroom. Over time the students felt they were part of a very unique class. They had the opportunity to create larger friendship groups and were happy to mix within the class during project based learning and other core curriculum components.

The most rewarding part for the students was that they felt they had a say in how they wanted to learn. Giving them the freedom to sit where they wanted and how they wanted became a positive experience for the class. Students respected the classroom and its furniture. They had some control and learned that the teachers would respect and affirm sensible choices.

Watch the [video interview](#) of Narelle and Kieran from the channel 7 Sunrise program.

Evaluation of the experience

After reflecting on the year we decided that we would not change anything we did, but we will attempt to tweak and refine some aspects for this year. Fortunately, we will be working together again and on the same grade. This will give us the opportunity to consolidate everything we have worked so hard to establish last year. It will also give us an opportunity

to mentor other teachers and offer professional development relating to the experiences we encountered during the year.

Last year we worked extremely hard to establish a good grounding for what we plan to do in years to come. It has been a rewarding experience and we would highly recommend it to any teachers who are open to change. You do not need a new building or new furniture to achieve the results we have achieved. We just used it as an excuse to try something new and different. The students we had this year loved the teaching and learning environment that was created and we have received plenty of positive feedback from parents, teachers, executive staff, NSW Department of Education representatives and even the Premier and Minister for Education.

Tips, suggestions and ideas for other teachers who may find themselves in a similar position

Based on our positive experience, we would encourage any teachers who have the opportunity to accept the challenge. The most important factors to bear in mind are

- wanting to team teach and
- having a similar teaching philosophy to your colleague.

You do need to be mindful of each other's space and respect your colleague's teaching style even though it may be different to your own. It is also very important to keep the communication channels open and frequently confer with one another in a positive way. That is not to say that you cannot give constructive feedback when necessary. It is crucial to be flexible, cooperative and open minded and to let go of the reins and allow the students to guide you. It has been a wonderful experience to watch our classes thrive, collaborate and take charge of their own learning. This learning environment has created independent learners and happy teachers with a positive work-life balance.

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