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Power of polyphony: Co-teaching as a pedagogical praxis for liberatory education

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Abstract. *Objectives:* Despite its potential to enrich learning environments, co-teaching remains underutilized in higher education. This reflective inquiry, co-authored by two racialized women social work educators, explores co-teaching as a liberatory pedagogical praxis in virtual classrooms serving diverse learners—including students from rural and Indigenous communities, mature learners, first-generation college students, working professionals, and those with caregiving responsibilities. *Methods:* Through a recorded 180-minute reflexive dialogue, we critically examined our co-teaching experience in a Bachelor of Social Work program. Using dialogic methodology grounded in critical feminist, decolonial, trauma-informed, and anti-oppressive frameworks, we analyzed how our intersecting positionalities shaped our pedagogical choices and relational dynamics. This methodology enabled us to surface insights into the affordances and limitations of co-teaching in virtual learning contexts. *Results:* We identified three key components of co-teaching that foster collaborative and inclusive learning environments: (1) cultivating genuine, trust-based relationships with and between students; (2) modeling non-hierarchical collaboration and critical use of self to disrupt authoritative knowledge production; and (3) advocating for institutional recognition through equitable compensation, curricular autonomy, and structural support for co-teaching models. *Conclusion and Implications:* Positioning our analysis within the broader critique of neoliberalism and coloniality in higher education, we argue that co-teaching is not merely a pragmatic tool, but a transformative practice. It holds the potential to democratize classroom power dynamics, center relational pedagogy, and create more equitable, responsive, and care-informed educational spaces—particularly in virtual settings where isolation and over-responsibilization are prevalent.

Keywords: Co-teaching, Praxis, Neoliberalism, Education, Open Access.

Introduction

In recent decades, international scholarship has increasingly highlighted critical concerns regarding the pervasive influence of neoliberalism, individualism, consumerism, and market-oriented frameworks within post-secondary educational systems (Giroux, 2020; Wong, 2022). These dynamics not only perpetuate oppressive structures rooted in colonial and imperial legacies but also contribute to epistemic control and dehumanization (Dawson, 2020; Giroux, 2020a; Gyamera & Burke, 2018). This systemic setup confines educators to the role of mere transmitters of pre-determined content imposed by dominant power structures—disempowerment of education Paulo Freire critically described as the "banking model of education," where knowledge is deposited into passive learners without fostering critical consciousness (1970). Such an approach not only limits the transformative potential of education but also commodifies students, reducing them to objects of consumption within a neoliberal framework that prioritizes market values over humanistic and emancipatory learning.

Neoliberal reforms in education have restructured universities to operate under market logics, where efficiency, competitiveness, and profitability overshadow holistic learning (Giroux, 2014). This shift has normalized precarious teaching contracts (CAUT, 2016), pressured faculty into managerial accountability metrics (Shore & Wright, 2015), and reframed students as consumers of education rather than co-creators of knowledge (Brown, 2015). Such dynamics lay the groundwork for the analysis that follows on how co-teaching engages with, and resists, these neoliberal imperatives.

As a way of resisting these structural limitations and liberating education from these constraints, we propose co-teaching as an alternative pedagogical model for reimagining and navigating the post-secondary education classroom. We advocate that co-teaching pedagogy can be a vehicle for celebrating critical reflexivity, dismantling power hierarchy, nurturing diverse and collective knowledge production, and empowering every individual in the classroom as an active agent of change.

In this manuscript, we employ reflexive dialogue as an analytic tool (hooks, 1994; Gill, 2009; Ichikawa & Osanami Törngren, in press) to critically examine our co-teaching experiences. We use our experiences as tools for critical inquiry (Holman Jones, 2005), exploring how individual experiences are situated within larger systemic, historical, societal, and political contexts (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Critical reflection has been advocated as a core principle of education by Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and numerous other scholars (e.g., Brookfield, 2017; Larrivee, 2000; Mezirow, 1990). Through this reflexive process, we highlight key insights and takeaways that may inform educators and post-secondary institutions as they explore the potential of co-teaching as a transformative pedagogical practice. Our aspiration is that this ongoing

exploration will contribute to reimagining the possibilities of education beyond conventional frameworks.

We understand that some of key terms of this paper such as imperialism, critical reflexivity, and epistemic control may hold different meanings for different audiences. Moving forward, we define our understanding of these terms as below:

- *Imperialism*: Here, imperialism refers not only to historical colonization but also to ongoing structural domination that privileges Eurocentric epistemologies in education.
- *Critical reflexivity*: We use critical reflexivity to describe an iterative process of interrogating one's positionality, power, and assumptions within teaching practices.
- *Epistemic control*: Epistemic control is the regulation of what counts as legitimate knowledge, often maintained through institutional practices that silence subaltern perspectives.

Challenges of Teaching with Increasing Precarity

The rise in precarious academic employment, through contracts, part-time roles, and sessional appointments, has reshaped the landscape of post-secondary education (Allen, 2021; CAUT, 2016; Field & Jones, 2016). Simultaneously, the growing presence of non-traditional students from diverse class and racial backgrounds has revealed the systemic barriers these learners and their communities continue to face (Marshall et al., 2016; Lyu et al., 2025). Compounding these shifts, the rise of cancel culture has created a climate where pedagogical risk-taking is fraught for both students and educators (Ahmed, 2021; Ichikawa & Osanami, in press; Nelson, 2022). Together, these conditions challenge the illusion of the academy as an "Ivory Tower," disconnected from the everyday struggles of ordinary people.

Students are increasingly positioned as revenue streams, quantified through tuition, enrollment metrics, and performance outcomes (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). This commodification reduces learners to objects within neoliberal education systems (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2014). At the same time, pedagogical practices continue to construct students as subjects—expected to internalize the neoliberal ethos of self-responsibility and competitiveness (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Framing this dynamic within the subject/object duality reveals a paradox: students are simultaneously commodified as objects of institutional profit and shaped as neoliberal subjects. This duality risks perpetuating colonial oppression by reproducing hierarchies of power and epistemic control in the classroom (Bhambra et al., 2018; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016).

Co-teaching in Higher Education

The literature highlights varying definitions of co-teaching. The recurring definitions cited include Wenzlaff et al. (2002), described as “two or more individuals who come together in a collaborative relationship for

the purpose of shared work...the outcome of achieving what none could have done alone” (p.14). Another common description of co-teaching refers to “two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space” (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 2). A handful of authors draw attention to collaborative power dynamics from course design to assessment, as articulated by Lock and colleagues (2018), “involving two instructors who collaboratively design and simultaneously teach and assess student work within a semester” (p. 39).

Within the scholarship on co-teaching in higher education, most studies explore both the benefits and challenges of this pedagogical model (Bacharach et al., 2008; Baltrinic et al., 2016; Bryant et al., 2014; Chanmugam & Gerlach, 2013; Cordie et al., 2020; Crow & Smith, 2005; Ferguson & Wilson, 2011; Kelly, 2018; Lock et al., 2016, 2018; Morelock et al., 2017; Nápoles, 2025). Student feedback—both formal (e.g., course evaluations, research data) and informal (e.g., anecdotal comments, instructor reflections)—frequently highlights key advantages, such as exposure to diverse teaching styles, engagement with multiple perspectives and areas of expertise, and the modeling of professional collaboration.

Co-instructors similarly report benefits, including opportunities for reflective practice, pedagogical growth, and peer learning. For example, Lock et al. (2016, 2018) document the value of co-teaching in nursing education, while Bacharach et al. (2008) and Baltrinic et al. (2015) emphasize its application in teacher and counselor education. Crow and Smith (2005) view co-teaching as a mode of continuing professional development, and Chanmugam and Gerlach (2013) explore its use in undergraduate social work. In both hierarchical and peer-based models, co-teaching supports shared decision-making, mutual respect, and pedagogical exchange. A distinct strength of this approach is its dynamic, improvisational nature—facilitating organic collaboration that is difficult to achieve through solo teaching.

In terms of pedagogical models, the co-teaching literature in higher education frequently references the taxonomy developed by Cook and Friend (1995), which outlines six co-teaching styles. While we do not describe each in detail here, we refer readers to their original work, as many subsequent studies expand or adapt this framework. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the team teaching model—defined as a shared approach to planning and instruction that “requires a high level of mutual trust and commitment...in which some co-teachers might never be comfortable” (Cook & Friend, 1995, p. 7). This model best characterizes our own co-teaching experience and forms the basis for the reflective findings presented in this article.

Using Reflexive Dialogue as an Analytic Tool

This manuscript offers a critical, reflexive analysis of our co-teaching experience, using dialogue-based reflection as both method and

epistemological framework. Our approach is informed by scholars such as hooks (1994), Gill (2009), and Ichikawa and Osanami (in press), who center dialogue as a means of interrogating pedagogy, power, and positionality in academic spaces. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) emphasizes engaged pedagogy through her dialogic exchange with Ron Scapp, illustrating how critical conversations can inspire resistance to oppressive systems. Gill (2009) opens *Breaking the Silence* with a personal exchange that exposes the affective toll of neoliberal academia, highlighting how institutional pressures manifest as exhaustion, insecurity, and emotional strain. Similarly, Ichikawa and Osanami (in press) use reflexive dialogue and collaborative autoethnography to explore their experiences as racialized migrant women in academia, framing “love” and “calling-in” as transformative practices within anti-racist pedagogy.

Together, these works demonstrate how dialogic reflection can illuminate both the emotional realities and liberatory possibilities of teaching. Building on these examples, we draw from our co-teaching experience to engage in collective critical reflection as a form of conceptual and analytical inquiry into how co-teaching can foster resistance and liberation in post-secondary education. We situate this work within our broader social justice commitments in academia (Carbado et al., 2013), seeking to cultivate collective wisdom and practices that challenge systemic oppression impacting both students and educators.

Our co-teaching took place in Fall 2021 in an online Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program at a Canadian university. At the time, we were PhD students in the same social work program and had developed a friendship over the preceding year. In early 2025, we reconvened to reflect on this experience—revisiting our intentions, the challenges we faced, and the lessons we learned. This article is grounded in a 180-minute recorded Zoom conversation, which was transcribed and analyzed to form the foundation of our dialogue and reflection. Our goal is to offer insights that can support social work educators and faculty committed to critical, liberatory pedagogy.

Our Intersectionality and Positionality in Canadian Academia

We draw from our personal perspectives as educators and scholars, navigating academia through our intersectional positionalities. Viveka Ichikawa (VI hereafter) is a mixed-race Japanese woman with an able body, a PhD candidate at a public university in now known as Toronto Canada—covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the traditional territory of many nations. She has served as a course instructor at multiple universities in Canada and Japan, navigating Canadian academia as both a student and educator with a non-Western accent and the lived experience of being an adult migrant and first-generation university student.

Christa Sato (CS hereafter) is a racialized daughter of immigrants of mixed Filipina and Japanese ancestry currently living and working on the unceded traditional Ts'msyen territory of the Kitsumkalum and Kitselas

First Nations at a regional university campus in Northern Canada, where she holds a tenure-track (TT) lecturer position. She is also currently completing her doctoral studies at the same institution as VI. She has taught at three different university institutions as a co-instructor, sessional, and now TT faculty to diverse students. While she is a first-generation university student from a working-class background, she also holds privilege as being born and raised in Canada and speaking English as her primary language.

Our intersecting identities, rooted in Asian heritage and shaped by distinct yet overlapping experiences, deeply informed our co-teaching relationship and pedagogical approach. As racialized women navigating privilege, marginalization, and institutional pressures in Western academia, we approached teaching as both a political and relational practice. The following reflexive dialogues explore how co-teaching impacted our students and us.

Reflexive Dialogue 1: How Co-teaching Benefited Students

Mirroring and Modeling

CS: There was an Asian female student that had that asked the program to switch into our course section, because she really resonated with us, that we were two female Asian social workers co-teaching together and trying to implement critical feminist, decolonial, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed pedagogy. To me that just really solidified... there's a need for that with students and learning.

VI: It was so refreshing when it was okay to say, "Oh, that's a great question. I actually don't have the answer, CS, how about you?" I think we have to accept our limitations and that's part of role modeling.

CS: Be able to say that and have that support of another person in the classroom with us, right?

VI: This is not just about representation, but also about role modeling, right? I often invite students to be intentional and reflective about when to step up and when to step back to create space for others and actively listen. I find this can be very challenging when you are the only instructor.

CS: What you're sharing kind of reminds me of the power dynamics of being in a position where we're "the authority" in the classroom. But then, in the co-teaching environment, the role modeling of sharing power. We don't have to agree with each other all the time. And we didn't. I think that's embodied practice of values we talk about. We're showing how we approached power very intentionally. I mean from the student feedback, I think it was quite transformative.

Our co-teaching approach mirrored students' diverse identities while modeling collaborative, non-hierarchical engagement that challenged dominant pedagogical norms. Rooted in shared social justice commitments,

we practiced “stepping up” and “stepping back”—relational strategies central to social work competencies yet difficult to embody alone. This pedagogical modeling aligns with Freire’s (1970) praxis and hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy, centering mutuality, care, and shared responsibility. For our students, many of whom were mature, first-generation, caregiving, or from rural and Indigenous communities, these relational dynamics transformed the virtual classroom into a space of culturally relevant and reciprocal learning.

Beyond the Limit of “One expert”

VI: Students were also dealing with a lot of complexities in their own lives.

CS: Having two of us together was like a breadth of knowledge, experience, life experiences, intersectional identities. So, I think we were better equipped to deal with the complexities of the students. Now that I’m teaching on my own I continuously question how to respond to that right? There’s always that experience of co-teaching I’m almost longing for or missing that part.

VI: I think this also leads to questioning the myth that instructors and professors are supposed to know all, because nobody knows it all. I was more comfortable talking about the clinical social work practice and you were so amazingly well equipped with critical theories. I think that worked really well because we had students who are more into clinical practice and then students wanted to hear more about theories. Covering everything by one person...how realistic is that?

CS: These are part of broader issues in terms of the expectations of educators. Now, in the online context, we’re expected to be managing technology as well as dealing with these very complex issues.

A key insight from our co-teaching experience was recognizing that the traditional model of the instructor as sole “expert” is both unrealistic and counter to liberatory education. We embraced a pedagogy that decentered authority and celebrated the plurality of voices in the classroom, aligning with Freire’s (1970) critique of the “banking model” and affirming dialogical, relational approaches to co-constructing knowledge with students (hooks, 1994; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). Our co-teaching was informed by decolonial and anti-authoritarian traditions, including anarchist feminist pedagogies that emphasize mutual aid, non-hierarchical collaboration, and the redistribution of power (Kim, 2018). These frameworks call educators to reject possessive notions of expertise in favour of humility, plurality, and collective praxis. Together, our distinct positionalities, VI’s clinical grounding and CS’s strength in critical theory, expanded the epistemic and affective dimensions of the classroom. This plurality fostered a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning

environment, aligning with Paris and Alim's (2017) vision of culturally sustaining pedagogy. This diversity was especially impactful in our virtual classrooms, which included students from rural and Indigenous communities, mature learners, working professionals, and caregivers—individuals navigating complex life demands. Their experiences highlight the need to move beyond deficit-based models and cultivate relational pedagogies that affirm the burdens and wisdoms students carry (Love, 2019).

Co-teaching enabled us to model humility and interdependence—values that counter the individualistic, neoliberal norms often imposed on educators (Gill, 2009). Acknowledging the limits of our knowledge, we regularly deferred to one another, demonstrating respectful knowledge-sharing over epistemic dominance. These moments fostered pedagogical vulnerability and a classroom culture where imperfection, uncertainty, and collective problem-solving were welcomed. As hooks (1994) and Tronto (1993) argue, care and vulnerability are foundational to ethical pedagogy, particularly in emotionally demanding fields like social work.

As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reminds us, decolonizing pedagogies require educators to know when to step forward and when to step back—to make room for other ways of knowing and being. Our co-teaching practice embodied this principle by allowing for shared authority and co-authored learning. It became an active site for relational accountability, where the goal was not to “master” content individually, but to create a shared space where learning was emergent, collective, and justice-oriented (Wilson, 2008).

Our experience highlighted the structural challenges educators face in higher education—particularly in online environments where instructors are expected to juggle conflicting roles: expert, tech facilitator, emotional support, and performer. Co-teaching helped us navigate these demands more sustainably and relationally. As CS noted, returning to solo teaching underscored the emotional and pedagogical toll of “doing it all,” echoing Mountz et al.'s (2015) critique of the neoliberal university's fragmentation and overburdening of faculty, especially those who are racialized and gendered. While existing co-teaching literature often centres hierarchical mentorship models, our experience demonstrates the transformative potential of peer-based co-teaching within the same discipline. Rather than reinforcing hierarchies, our egalitarian partnership affirmed that expertise is co-constructed through dialogue, reflexivity, and shared responsibility. This practice not only democratized our classroom but also resisted the myth of the solitary expert—a notion rooted in colonial, masculinist, and Western pedagogical traditions (Lorde, 1984; Keating, 2013).

Reflexive Dialogue 2: How Co-teaching Benefited Us

Classroom Safety

- VI: I want to normalize the discussion around safety in the classroom, not only the safety among students, but also the safety for instructors. I definitely felt safer because I had you beside me.
- CS: Yes, me too. Teaching is scary. Especially when you are just a student. And being able to name that and be supported in that, because like some of the discussions we had earlier, despite your really really great English, people perceive your so-called accent, and then there's discrimination and barriers that result from that. For me being a racialized Asian female. But English is my first language. I think being able to validate what you were saying and saying like what "VI is saying is like excellent point," and just like reiterating and reemphasizing those points that maybe some students might dismiss because they read you as being a particular way. I think to me again. That's like how we challenge in the classroom.
- VI: Absolutely! These are conversations we can't shy away from. As you mentioned, there's literature showing that instructors who teach with non-Western accents in English-speaking North America often receive lower course evaluations. Student evaluations, while they are a crucial venue for us to humbly listen to, can also become powerful weapons that reinforce bias and discrimination. At the same time, we as instructors hold so much power in the classroom, and we need to remain critically aware of. It's a complex dynamic that requires constant reflexivity on both sides.

Our co-teaching experience highlighted that pedagogical safety is essential not only for students but also for instructors—particularly those in marginalized positions within academia. As two racialized women teaching in a predominantly white institution, the shared labour of co-facilitation offered a crucial buffer against the isolation and precarity often tied to our roles. Safety, for us, meant more than the absence of harm; it required the presence of mutual support, affirmation, and solidarity.

We define classroom safety as a relational and political process shaped by power and positionality (Kishimoto, 2016). For VI, navigating the academy as an adult migrant with a non-Western accent, co-teaching offered rare affirmation. In classrooms where linguistic difference is often treated as deficiency (Subtirelu, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012), CS' practice of reiterating and validating VI's contributions became both a pedagogical and political act. It demonstrated how co-teaching can actively intervene in moments of bias—moments that often remain unchallenged in solo teaching contexts.

This mutual reinforcement enabled us to challenge the dominant ideologies that often shape classroom interactions, including who is perceived as knowledgeable, authoritative, or articulate. In doing so, we disrupted the conditions under which instructors with marginalized

identities are rendered vulnerable to dismissal, particularly through the mechanism of student evaluations. While feedback from students is an important part of reflective pedagogy, such evaluations are also well-documented sites of bias, particularly against women, racialized faculty, and those with non-normative accents or teaching styles (Basow et al., 2013; Chávez & Mitchell, 2019).

Co-teaching helped mitigate structural pressures by sharing the affective and professional risks of teaching—especially during complex discussions around race, power, and privilege. Drawing on one another for support ensured that no single instructor carried the full weight of facilitation or accountability, fostering both pedagogical effectiveness and emotional safety. We argue that classroom safety must not be treated as a static or apolitical concept, nor should it exclude the well-being of instructors. We reject the binary that pits student and instructor safety against each other, emphasizing instead their interdependence as essential to building equitable, transformative learning environments.

Making possible to navigate professional and personal commitments

VI: Our co-teaching happened during the pandemic time. On top of that, you were pregnant and gave birth during the course. Both students and instructors were experiencing lots outside of the classroom. Remember how much outside of the classroom meetings we had to have with students, and some of that was very heavy... I think we needed a quite bit of debrief and emotional support.

CS: I wouldn't have been able to get through that class without you. I mean, do we want to talk about what were going on in our own lives? Or do we want to talk about the things that students were bringing to us that we then carried and had to take on right? That's emotional labour. I think it's because of who we are. Students felt a lot more comfortable opening up and sharing their experiences. And that's a huge responsibility. As students ourselves, I remember all the times that instructors let me down and also uplifted me. I carried that into my teaching. It was horrific. It was hard. I was teaching out of a closet in the student family housing. At the time my son was 3, and my partner was home constantly trying to keep him from entering. I had a dog and cat. I'd be present. Still wonder how we did it.

VI: I was wondering how you did it!

CS: We didn't have a choice, right? Like we're in a precarious position, we couldn't make ends meet. We were living from paycheck to paycheck, just trying to scrape by. Between research jobs, trying to get through the milestones of our PhD, and childcare. All those things. We did it under really difficult circumstances. The physical challenges of being pregnant and I didn't tell students I was pregnant. I remember that the day the lecture ended I went into labour.

VI: Oh, my gosh!

CS: It was just like, my body was like holding on, just get through. And then, as soon as that last class ended, I had contractions. It's like, okay, I'm going. We're holding on. We're just trying to get through the semester. You know, life happens.

VI: Yes! Life happens and while I have so much respect and you are a super mom. However, I think we shouldn't stop there and must reflect on the reasons you had to be a super mom. Because the full-time tenure faculties, are guaranteed to have a maternity leave. Meanwhile, as PhD student contract-based instructors, if you don't teach, that is often a lost income.

CS: It's about survival, right? We had very limited options. And like, I don't want to just disregard the privilege that I had too.

Our co-teaching unfolded during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—a time marked by global health, economic, and racial crises, as well as profound personal and professional strain. As racialized women, PhD students, caregivers, and precariously employed instructors, we navigated layered terrains of emotional labour, survival work, and educational commitment. This reflection foregrounds the neoliberal demands placed on contingent faculty and graduate student instructors, and the ways co-teaching can operate as a practice of mutual support and resistance within those conditions.

The circumstances were complex: one of us gave birth during the semester; the other balanced remote teaching with homeschooling of her child due to the lockdown. Like many, we taught from makeshift spaces, closets, kitchens, and shared rooms, amid childcare interruptions, unstable internet, and persistent fatigue. Beyond managing our own realities, we also held space for students navigating housing insecurity, caregiving burdens, mental health challenges, and economic precarity. The boundary between personal and professional life blurred—not by choice, but by necessity.

These experiences underscore how neoliberal academia demands unsustainable levels of flexibility, availability, and emotional resilience—expectations intensified by the pandemic (Mountz et al., 2015; Cantor et al., 2013). As contract instructors, our income depended on course delivery, with limited entitlement to parental leave or institutional support. CS taught until the moment she went into labour, her body literally bearing the weight of both the semester and new life. This strain was not unique to us but reflective of a system that individualizes structural failure and frames overextension as professional dedication.

In this context, co-teaching became a lifeline. It enabled us to share not only instructional duties but also the invisible labour of care, debriefing, and emotional support—for ourselves and our students (Hochschild, 2012; hooks, 1994). Grounded in trauma-informed and anti-oppressive values, our pedagogy fostered a classroom where students felt seen, heard, and safe. Yet this emotional labour, while central to our teaching, came at a cost.

While our shared roles helped us survive the semester, they also raised critical questions about what institutions choose to compensate or recognize. Tenure-track faculty often receive parental leave and job security, while graduate student instructors and sessionals are left without a safety net. The image of the “supermom” or “super-instructor” may seem admirable, but we resist romanticizing this survival. As VI reflects, we must question why such extremes of resilience are required—and who is most often expected to perform them, and who benefits. As racialized women navigating the academy, our experience reflected a broader pattern in which emotional labour and institutional precarity disproportionately affect women and racialized instructors (Ahmed, 2012, 2021; Gill, 2009).

Ultimately, our experience highlights the urgent need to reimagine academic labour structures that acknowledge precarity, equitably redistribute resources, and support the holistic well-being of educators and students alike. In this context, co-teaching was more than a pedagogical strategy—it was an act of care, resistance, and survival.

Reflexive Dialogue 3: Our Key Take Aways

Teaching and Grading Differences

VI: Because I honestly think we have a real rapport and trust here, I want to bring up something. I feel like there was a moment towards the end of that course, we were both frustrated and angry.

CS: I think I took on more of that role, and I apologize. Honestly, I'm ashamed like, oh, my gosh! I want to blame like the hormones, but like, me working through my own internal stuff, and I'm sorry that got directed toward you.

VI: Not at all!

CS: I am really happy that we're we have that relationship where we can bring that into the space to talk about, and I think we do need to talk about it.

VI: Right, and I was so scared to lose our friendship. It took a little while for us to repair after the course ended.

CS: Yes, absolutely. I think the conflict showed up in concrete things like grading. There were questions about rubrics. My teaching philosophy was that undergraduate students obviously want structure and rigidity in rubrics, and I was resistant to that because when you have a rubric, it forces people to complete assignments based on those criteria. But I know this about myself now, I do not like structure. We have to teach students to unlearn that, but at the same time, those are the conditions that we're operating under. And that can come into conflict. The reality of our education system.

VI: In retrospective, because we thought we were so similar, that one difference felt so devastating. For myself, there are teaching and grading I would love to do in a perfect world, and then there is a kind of teaching and grading I realistically can do. I think I tend to

go in the feasible way. I try to make people's lives, including my own, not more difficult.

CS: That is concept of like protecting or to borrow from Audre Lorde, self-preservation. That was something that I learned as a new teacher, too, I went the opposite way where I put unrealistic expectations on myself, like I have these ideas in my head of what I want to achieve, and when it doesn't happen in practice, I take that out on myself. And because we were in a co-teaching environment, I also took that out on you right. I was like, no, we have to be perfect. We have to give like a hundred percent in our feedback, and we have to take hours out of our day. I've taken that learning. What we can realistically do, what expectations are put on us and what expectations we put on ourselves. And I think it was maybe lateral violence. We're not supposed to direct violence toward each other like that. And that was what it was.

One of the most meaningful takeaways from our co-teaching experience emerged through tensions around our differing philosophies on grading. Though aligned in our social locations and political commitments, even subtle pedagogical differences, particularly regarding the use of rubrics, became points of rupture. For CS, rubrics represented neoliberal tendencies in education that prioritize standardization and compliance over creativity and critical thinking. VI, by contrast, emphasized feasibility and accessibility, aiming to minimize burdens on students and instructors navigating precarity and care and outside of academia responsibilities. Importantly, this divergence was not only ideological but also reflected the politics of survival. As Audre Lorde (1988) reminds us, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation... an act of political warfare." For VI, prioritizing feasible approaches to grading was a necessary act of boundary-setting and self-care within a system that too often extracts more than it supports. We reject the notion that care, for students, loved ones, or ourselves, is incompatible with critical, emancipatory teaching. Instead, we assert that care and boundary-setting are foundational to sustaining liberatory educational spaces.

Our initial lack of clarity around grading philosophies contributed to miscommunication—not only between us, but potentially for students navigating inconsistent expectations. This highlights the importance of co-teaching teams establishing shared approaches early and maintaining open communication throughout. The emotional intensity of teaching, particularly for racialized instructors in precarious roles, can sometimes manifest as lateral violence—redirected stress aimed at one another instead of the institutional structures producing it. Through vulnerability, accountability, and repair, we moved through conflict and deepened our working relationship. This required naming not just the disagreement itself, but the fears beneath it: fear of failure, of losing friendship, and of not meeting the impossible standards placed on us.

In our case, self-preservation included caring for the co-teaching relationship itself—as an ethical, political, and pedagogical commitment. Echoing bell hooks (2003), we understand teaching as an act of love, one rooted in honesty, care, and critical reflection, not only with students, but with one another. When engaged reflexively, tensions become opportunities for growth, deepening both our practice and the pedagogical relationships we co-create.

Rupture and repair

VI: I'm feeling so many mixed things right now. The fact that we're here talking about our co-teaching experience and being able to reflect on together, including our rupture, I'm so grateful. But often that could be it, right? We could lose each other. What made it possible for us to repair, you think? Do you remember how we came back to each other?

CS: Why are we giving ourselves to the institutions? Why are we willing to put our friendship on the line? Because you lose that integrity, right? The very thing that we wanted to do, the very thing that we envisioned for ourselves.

VI: “Rupture and repair” is a concept we often teach in social work, but we don't practice enough. I think nothing like teaching taught me how to do rupture and repair because there have been many times I had to take accountability and correct myself or apologize to the students and ask for repair.

CS: This was in a supposed shared power relationship between instructors. We're peers. And we're theoretically on equitable power dynamics. But how does that translate to the relationship with students? I'm teaching more, I see opportunities where I can use my power if I wanted to, but I'm like nope, and I'm not going to overuse my authority. I mean that experience between the two of us gives me pause every time that I interact with students, because I say, “Hey, is this another experience where I could be doing now? It's vertical violence, or like I don't know what the term is, but imposing that power for my own benefit, right out of my own insecurities and my own fears. Like, how do I truly align with the teaching pedagogy which is decolonizing classrooms. Actually, embodying the things that we say we teach with our students. Right?

One of the most transformative aspects of our co-teaching was not its seamlessness, but the rupture—and the repair—that followed. While “rupture and repair” is a familiar concept in social work, its pedagogical application remains underexplored. Our experience showed that rupture is not a failure, but a potential entry point for greater honesty, accountability, and pedagogical integrity—when approached with intention and care. The emotional labour of teaching, especially under precarious and racialized

conditions, can strain even the strongest professional bonds. The rupture we experienced disrupted not only our co-teaching flow but also the friendship that underpinned it. For a time, we feared losing that connection. Yet our ability to return, reflect, and rebuild trust affirmed that co-teaching is not just professional collaboration, but a political and relational practice rooted in care. Our experience aligns with relational pedagogy, which centers trust, presence, and mutual responsiveness in learning (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), and draws from feminist ethics of care, which frame interdependence and emotional labour as integral—not peripheral—to educational practice (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1993).

What made repair possible was our shared commitment to the values we teach: transparency, vulnerability, and mutual respect. As VI reflected, the classroom had already been a space for her to practice rupture and repair with students—holding conflict, modeling accountability, and viewing apology as pedagogical strength. This aligns with trauma-informed teaching frameworks, which emphasize emotional safety and the role of recovery in both healing and learning (Carello & Butler, 2015). In our case, it also required confronting the internalized pressures, rooted in gendered, racialized, and neoliberal norms that shaped our expectations of flawless performance. CS' reflection revealed another key tension: the gap between theoretical commitments to equity and their lived enactment. Even in a peer-based model, ruptures can arise from unconscious hierarchies, emotional reactivity, or unmet assumptions. That awareness now informs how CS approaches her solo teaching, attuned to how similar dynamics can surface with students. Our experience embodied Freire's (1970) notion of dialogue—not as abstract ideal but as a practice of humility, reciprocity, and humanization. Rupture and repair, when engaged consciously, became not a sign of failure but a generative site for pedagogical growth.

This process also reflects the deeper philosophical alignment we aim for in our pedagogy: a decolonial, anti-oppressive, trauma-informed model that shapes not only our syllabi but our daily conduct. In this context, repair becomes a radical act of relational accountability—rejecting the institutional norm of disposability, whether of colleagues, students, or mistakes. Instead, it affirms our shared humanity and enduring responsibility to one another. As Tronto (1993) reminds us, care is both a practice and a political ethic—demanding attentiveness, responsiveness, and accountability.

For us, repair was care—for ourselves, for each other, and for the vision of education we hold. Creating space for rupture and repair in real time resists the dehumanizing logic of neoliberal academia. It reclaims the classroom as a site of collective liberation—even in, and perhaps especially through, moments of difficulty.

Institutional Support to Make Co-teaching Possible and Ethical

CS: We discussed how we were compensated as if there were only one instructor, and the pay had to be shared between the two of us.

What are the conditions to really operationalize a decolonizing, anti-oppressive and trauma-informed site for co-teaching, especially in the online environment?

VI: With compensation arrangement. I don't know what is ethical and reasonable. Because can we ask 100% pay as single instructor for each of us? 70% for each would be enough? I don't know the number. However, I think we can start with an open conversation.

CS: Right. We talked about a lot of challenges with co-teaching and despite all of those difficulties we were able to manage. But if we could have had, what ideal to really foster a kind of environment where co-teaching is, valued. Compensated as it should be, and what kind of conditions or context would be ideal for that.

VI: I think how much freedom for instructors to draft or adjust the syllabus, and then assignment format also matters.

CS: You're right, I don't think we had much. We're taking risks and didn't have any directions and being paid 50/50 between the two of us. This was disadvantageous. We were technically paid less.

VI: Well said! And then, as long as the universities continue doing this kind of cookie cutter classrooms, there will be always a kind of dilemma and a contradiction when we say we want to do the anti-oppressive, decolonial and trauma-informed teaching.

CS: And fairly compensated for that. It's not just about fair compensation. It's also about having meaningful opportunities to shape the course and own it as part of our professional development. We built these courses and they belong to the university. This kind of work demands extensive critical thinking and research, yet it is rarely recognized or compensated as part of our formal workload. We did co-teaching that because we were committed to the values of our pedagogy, but it came at a cost.

VI: Definitely high cost. I think there is a bigger conversation about what is fair compensation, but also fair support and guidance and training for sessional instructors, because, from my experience, it definitely feels lonely.

CS: I absolutely agree, and that needs to be further developed and taken seriously, as a pedagogical approach that could be of value to social work. What co-teaching could potentially contribute to the profession of social work and to social work education.

Despite its potential as a decolonial, anti-oppressive, and trauma-informed pedagogy, our experience revealed how co-teaching is unsustainable and ethically fraught within current institutional structures. While it fostered collaboration, creativity, and mutual growth, it also required substantial emotional, intellectual, and pedagogical labour—work that was neither fully acknowledged nor fairly compensated. This reflects what Gill (2009) calls the “hidden injuries” of neoliberal academia, where

such labour is routinely invisibilized, particularly for precariously employed educators.

Central to this challenge is compensation. Unlike team-teaching models with distinct roles or funding, we operated under a shared contract, effectively splitting pay for the full workload. This raised key ethical concerns: How can institutions expect full engagement from co-instructors while offering only partial remuneration? While we don't offer a formula, we argue that any institutional adoption of co-teaching must begin with a commitment to equitable pay. This is especially urgent in an era of increasing academic precarity, where adjunct and contract faculty are often expected to deliver high-impact teaching with little institutional support or recognition (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Donoghue, 2021; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Ivancheva et al., 2019).

The issue extends beyond compensation. Our experience revealed a deep misalignment between the rigid structures of pre-designed course teaching and the values central to co-teaching as liberatory pedagogy. We encountered pre-designed syllabi and assignment that left little space for adaptation. Efforts to revise course materials in alignment with our pedagogical principles were hindered by unclear boundaries around academic freedom and curriculum ownership. Without institutional clarity or support, we were forced to take pedagogical risks with limited backing—reflecting broader trends in higher education that prioritize standardization and efficiency over creativity and responsiveness (Ball, 2003; Berg et al., 2016).

As sessional instructors, we also lacked access to professional development. The collaborative labour required, navigating grading tensions, integrating diverse theoretical lenses, and modeling non-hierarchical engagement, demands mentorship and institutional investment. Yet this relational, emotional, and intellectual work was rendered invisible. As CS noted, while our course design was absorbed into the institution, the care and thought we brought to it were not recognized as part of our workload. This echoes feminist and critical scholarship that critiques academia's tendency to devalue collective and care-centered labour in favour of individual output and performance (Mountz et al., 2015; Lynch, 2010).

The implications are clear: without institutional investment, co-teaching risks becoming yet another site of exploitation for precariously employed educators. When graduate students or sessional instructors engage in co-teaching without adequate pay, training, or curricular autonomy, their labour is undervalued—even as institutions benefit from its innovation, inclusivity, and pedagogical impact. The absence of structural support can also deepen isolation, especially for instructors with marginalized identities working within dominant academic cultures.

We call for a reimagining of co-teaching—not as a stopgap or informal arrangement, but as a legitimate and vital pedagogical model. Realizing this potential requires institutions to take it seriously: by

providing fair compensation, allowing curricular flexibility, and supporting ongoing professional development. Only then can co-teaching shift from being a labour of love and care to a sustainable, ethical, and institutionally valued practice.

Unlearning Comparison

VI: Another question I would love to explore with you is power dynamics. Because full disclosure, I definitely felt a little bit inferior. You were the students' favourite!

CS: What no, honestly can you...

VI: They loved you!

CS: I was thinking like, "Oh, my gosh! They all love VI!"

VI: No! Because we took turns, one week you were the main instructor and then next week I was. I was so worried, what if my main teaching week students don't show up? It's going to look so bad.

CS: It's so funny, we never talked about this. Because I just saw it differently, because I was thinking, oh, everyone's so excited for VI to share her clinical knowledge, She's the real deal. Here I am, you know, theorizing this and that.

VI: So funny and interesting, isn't it? And I think this should be discussed. It's only natural when there are two people, you kind of compare them with each other. So, how to be okay with that feeling of inferiority or how to not go there.

CS: To be upfront and in the process, right? In retrospect, it's easy but having these conversations in the midst of everything is really challenging was not possible. I also felt inferior. And I think that was part of the reason why there was that violence that I talked about earlier. I was afraid that students would compare. It's funny to hear you say that, too, because if we had these conversations, I think we could build each other up. You know, I'm seeing this theme of where we're so hard on ourselves. Let's put this into context; both of us at the time, being very new instructors in precarious positions, both wanting positions in academia. We were kind of exploring. So, we were performing. We're both co-performing together, and so at different times we spotlight.

VI: I think this is about unlearning what we've internalized from a neoliberal, individualistic, and performative culture that pressures us to constantly prove our value. How we truly liberate ourselves from these pressures. Someone else is shining, does not mean I'm pushed in the shadow. Because we are doing this together. Your win is our win.

CS: And vice versa. It doesn't have to be this competition for who is a better teacher. What brought us together in co-teaching was realizing the power of the two of us teaching together, and how that could translate into the classroom experience. That was sort of

what we had envisioned and hoped for, and I think we did that to a certain extent, but it wasn't without challenges.

VI: If we could have this conversation before the co-teaching, I think that could make a difference for sure.

CS: Couldn't agree more. Which is why we need more scholarship around co-teaching.

VI: My understanding of this complete lack of co-teaching in higher education is because professors are all experts and I don't think they picture having another expert to teach courses together. It's common to have guest speakers and lecturers in the classroom, but there is a clear "main and sub" dynamic.

CS: It also raises bigger questions about what we are protecting here as educators.

VI: I think our ego. That's what we are protecting, our ego.

CS: It brings into that conversation about unlearning these forms of, I would argue colonial education practices where one person is an expert, and they are protecting their knowledge and the dissemination of that knowledge.

One of the more subtle yet emotionally complex aspects of our co-teaching experience was the internalized comparison we each carried about our perceived value in the classroom. Though never discussed during the course, we later realized we had both silently struggled with feelings of inferiority—each assuming students preferred the other. Our alternating "lead" instructor model, rather than fostering mutual learning, became a site of self-doubt shaped by student responses. This dynamic reflects the individualism and performative pressures of neoliberal academia intensifies pressure to prove one's worth (Gill, 2009; Mountz et al., 2015). As CS noted, we were co-performing while navigating unspoken competition, exacerbated by a system that treats co-instructors as one unit rather than distinct professionals with complementary strengths.

Our emotional vulnerability in co-teaching was compounded by our positionality as early-career instructors navigating job insecurity and aspirations for future academic roles. In this context, collaboration could easily become performance—each of us striving to "shine," while fearing the other's strengths might eclipse our own. These dynamics were symptomatic of institutional cultures that reward individual achievement, productivity, and visibility over relational labour (Lynch, 2010). Through reflection, we came to see this not as a failure of our partnership but as an opportunity to unlearn internalized myths of scarcity and competition. We came to a conclusion: someone else's brilliance did not diminish our own. As VI put it, "Your win is our win." This shift required an intentional disinvestment from neoliberal ideals and a return to the liberatory possibilities of co-teaching—where multiple voices and shared authority create richer, more inclusive classrooms.

Our experience also raised questions about higher education's resistance to co-teaching. While guest lectures are normalized, sustained partnerships remain rare, often defaulting to "main and sub" hierarchies. This reflects a broader culture of expertise and course ownership that privileges the solo instructor—a dynamic aligned with Freire's (1970) critique of the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is deposited by a singular authority rather than co-created through dialogic exchange.

To truly embrace co-teaching as a liberatory practice, educators must confront difficult but necessary conversations around ego, power, and academic identity. These are not simply interpersonal dynamics—they are political acts. Embracing co-teaching demands a redistribution of authority, a willingness to be vulnerable in community, and a commitment to modeling humility and interdependence in front of students and peers alike. We argue that such reflective dialogue should be integrated early in any co-teaching relationship—not just to sort out logistics, but to lay the groundwork for trust, equity, and shared purpose. At its core, co-teaching asks us to unlearn the competitive, individualistic norms entrenched in academic culture and instead practice what Freire (1970) called a pedagogy of co-intentionality: a shared pursuit of learning, liberation, and transformation.

Concluding remarks

Our exploration of co-teaching as a liberatory pedagogical praxis reveals its strength not in simplicity or efficiency, but in its capacity to reimagine education as ethical, relational, and collective. Rooted in critical feminist, decolonial, and trauma-informed pedagogies, our reflexive dialogue illustrates how co-teaching can resist neoliberal isolation, disrupt hierarchical classroom norms, and treat difference as a pedagogical asset.

Rather than amplifying a singular voice, co-teaching embraces polyphony—honouring the diverse epistemologies and lived experiences of educators and students alike. As racialized women navigating academic precarity, our partnership was both a teaching method and a political act of mutual care. In our co-teaching, rupture and repair became essential practices of relational accountability, not signs of failure.

Yet, our experience also highlights the ethical tensions and institutional barriers that make co-teaching unsustainable without adequate support. Inadequate compensation, limited curricular flexibility, and lack of professional development risk relegating co-teaching to a well-meaning but undervalued endeavor. If higher education is to take equity and anti-oppression seriously, co-teaching must be institutionally resourced, recognized, and embedded.

Ultimately, we argue that co-teaching is not an exception or workaround—it is a transformative practice that can rehumanize the academy. By embracing co-teaching as a norm rather than a novelty, institutions can foster a more just, inclusive, and relational model of education—one in which no one learns or teaches standing alone.

Conflict of Interest

The authors, VI and CS , declare that there are no financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as potential conflicts of interest related to this work.

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