Co-piloting a new teaching strategy

Would your students benefit if you invited one, or more, of your colleagues to teach them alongside you? Wolff-Michael Roth, a leading authority on co-teaching, argues that they would, and so would your professional development as a teacher. **Peter Rook** reports

"Co-teaching should be like two pilots being responsible for the plane," says Professor Wolff-Michael Roth. It is a fitting analogy since Roth reveals he has been working with airlines on the value of what he calls 'working at each other's elbows'.

He continues: "Co-teaching is different from 'team teaching', where one teacher is standing up and organising and the other teacher is more passive. In co-teaching, sitting on the periphery is not an option. They can both learn from each other and maximise teaching in the classroom."

Roth says co-teaching brings two or more teachers together to "improve what they can offer to the students they teach". He says it also provides opportunities for the teachers to learn more about their teaching practices.

Roth, who taught science in schools for many years, is Lansdowne Professor of Applied Cognitive Science at the University of Victoria in Canada and is the co-author, with Kenneth Tobin, of *At the Elbow of Another: Learning to teach by co-teaching*, in which he lays out the foundation of the approach.

His research, much of it focusing on mathematics and science teaching, has found that co-teaching helps induct new teachers, supervise new and practising teachers, and assists teachers in their own development. "We have even done it with up to six teachers at a time," says Roth.

Aside from the physical difficulties of accommodating so many teachers in one room, I suggest that the logistics of planning with so many practitioners and defining roles would be a huge challenge, but Roth is adamant that co-teaching does not require any more planning than a 'normal' lesson.

"It can work with small groups just as well as large ones. In this environment

we saw greater advances in questioning techniques by teachers involved in co-teaching," he says.

"We used it at the University of Philadelphia. Teachers had to teach one class per day in co-teaching, and the next day on their own. On the third day they had a choice whether to co-teach or teach on their own. The majority chose to co-teach."

Although not adopted enthusiastically in the UK, Roth says that Northern Ireland has followed up on the co-teaching idea.

Arguably, the biggest barrier to its implementation in FE and skills is cost: why have two or three teachers running a session when one is standard? Roth acknowledges it can be hard to sell to budget holders, but he suggests that this is short-sighted.

He says co-teaching can be applied in the form of staff development and he suggests colleges "could try it out for a year and try to assess it".
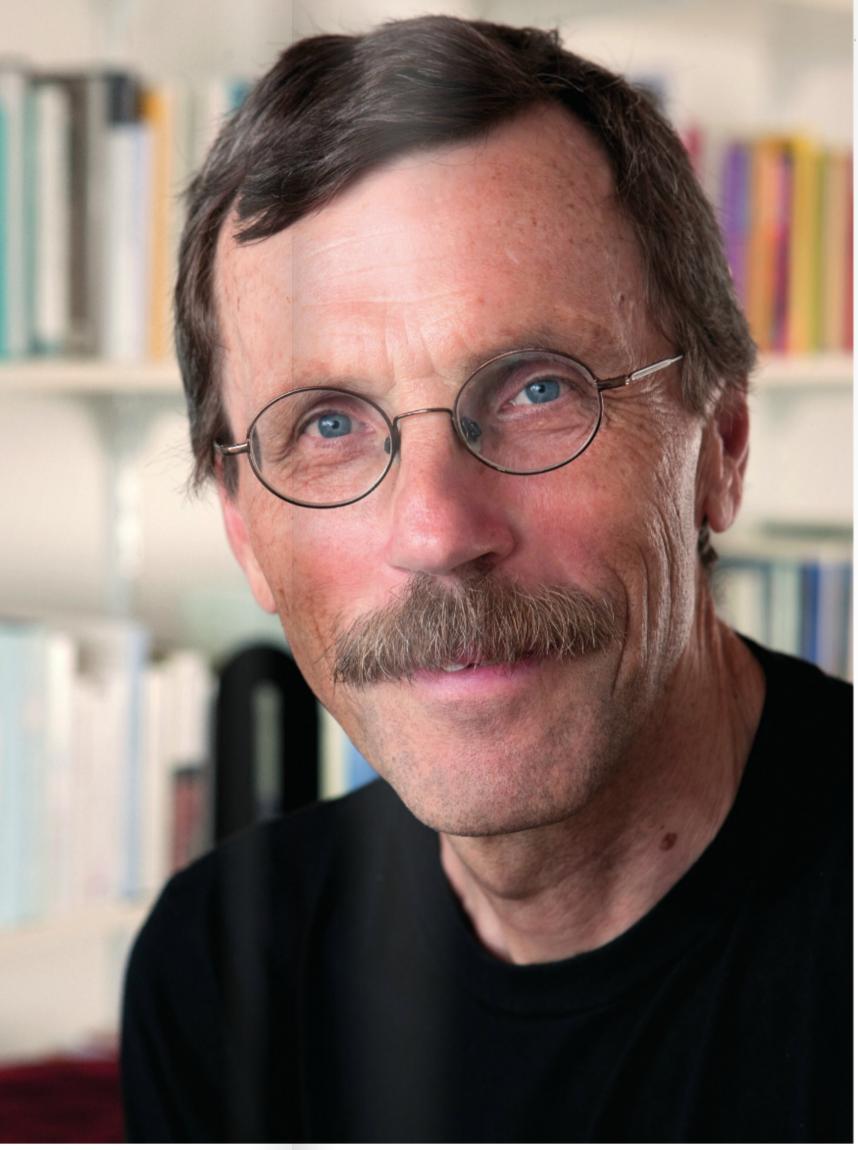
He adds: "Some northern European countries, such as Germany for example, have moved from a 40-hour working week for teachers to a 34-hour week and educational standards there are among the best in the world."

"They are more productive because they are less stressed. A lot of teachers suffer burn-out having to cope with students on their own all of the time.

"The cost of absenteeism in education is high and the cost of substitute teachers to cover absent teachers is also high. With co-teaching, absenteeism would go down and therefore less money would be spent on substitute teachers."

Roth argues that institutional unwillingness to embrace the practice may also be symptomatic of a tendency to marginalise the voice of teaching staff.

"In teaching we have one of the most

highly educated workforces but they are treated like technicians," he says.

The challenge is convincing the administrators that co-teaching is not a soft option for teachers and that it adds value to the learner experience.

"Students and teachers learn from each other, often without realising that this is happening," he says.

His research work has also examined the barriers to learning caused by the disconnection between many students and the, mainly, middle-class language and world views of their teachers.

Roth says he had a "very different trajectory into teaching from most teachers" having grown up "in extreme poverty". He grasped intuitively the importance of being able to develop a relationship with learners.

"You can't get them to move forward unless you figure out where they are," he says. "With co-teaching we found experienced teachers in particular reflected on how they interacted with their students."

But would experienced teachers be open to the idea of sharing their teaching sessions with, perhaps, a less experienced colleague? Roth recalls how he met up with an experienced teacher who had been introduced to co-teaching three years earlier.

"He told me that he had hated coming to my class. He was resistant to the idea at the time but he said he looked back on it and gained a lot from the experience.

"Young teachers are more open to co-teaching, but even those who initially resist can see the value in it."

Peter Rook is a freelance journalist and journalism lecturer at University Centre Peterborough, part of Peterborough Regional College.

For information on the Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers visit **goo.gl/EQMoL2**

Further reading

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- Tobin, K., & Roth, W.-M. (2006). Teaching to learn: A view from the field. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Beninghof, A. M. (2012) Co-teaching that works: Structures and strategies for maximizing student learning. Jossey-Bass.

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