Co-Teaching With Strategy Instruction

Greg Conderman, EdD1 and Laura R. Hedin, PhD1

Abstract
Despite the popularity of co-teaching and widespread professional literature describing exemplary co-teaching practices, this instructional approach has yet to realize its potential. One way to increase the effectiveness of co-teaching is for special educators to contribute meaningfully by assuming the role of strategy leader in the co-taught classroom. This article provides examples of how special educators can define their role in co-taught classrooms by contributing purposefully through evidence-based strategy instruction.

Keywords
learning strategies, academic, instruction, cognitive/cognition, and co-teaching, collaboration

As special education teacher Ms. Mae gathered materials for her first co-planning meeting with Mr. Benjamin, she wondered about her role in the middle school co-taught science classroom (see Note 1). Would she sit in the back and observe, circulate while he provided instruction, or

1Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Greg Conderman, Department of Special and Early Education, Northern Illinois University, Gabel 162D, DeKalb, IL 60115, USA.
Email: GConderman@niu.edu
Co-teaching is one approach for helping students with disabilities access a rigorous general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment while receiving support from two certified teachers.

Co-teachers share unique responsibilities through co-planning, co-instructing, and co-assessing to provide evidence-based and value-added instructional practices and to differentiate instruction (Conderman & Hedin, 2012; Friend & Cook, 2010; Murawski, 2008). Generally, during each lesson, co-teachers use one or more of the six co-teaching models shown in Table 1.

However, despite benefits that may arise from these collaborative activities, generally, co-teaching has yet to reach its potential. For example, Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) discovered that co-teachers rely predominantly on the one teach, one assist model, which does not utilize the skills of both teachers or differentiate student learning. Murawski and Swanson (2001) reported that co-teaching had a small to moderate positive effect on reading and math scores of students with disabilities. More recently, McDuffie, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2009) discovered that middle school students with and without disabilities in co-taught science classrooms significantly outperformed those in non-co-taught classes on forced-choice but not open-ended questions. However, Murawski (2006) found no significant differences for student outcomes in co-taught, non-co-taught, and resource settings. Students with disabilities reported that they preferred co-taught classes over other instructional settings because they received more support, learned from different teaching styles, and achieved higher grades (Wilson & Michaels, 2006). Although attendance and report card grades improved for students in co-taught settings (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002), co-teaching may have limited impact on high-stakes test scores for students with and without disabilities (Idol, 2006).

One possible reason for these equivocal results is that special educators are often unsure how to meaningfully contribute to the co-taught classroom. They sometimes lack secondary content knowledge, have not received co-teaching training, have not observed exemplary co-teaching practices, or have little co-planning time with their general education co-teacher (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2009). Having the special educator assume the role of strategy leader provides a clear role and purpose for co-teaching, adds an evidence-based practice to classroom instruction, and may help students with disabilities more efficiently meet goals on their individualized education program. Teachers assuming this role would research applicable strategies, share and model these for the general educator, and, in collaboration with the general educator, decide how and when to infuse them into the existing general education curriculum. Carefully selecting strategies that support the existing curriculum and are connected to core standards, such as teaching a writing strategy in a composition class, may actually increase instructional efficiency, especially if students can apply the strategy or parts of the strategy to several class assignments or skills.

The role of strategy leader does not eliminate the need for co-planning, nor does it reduce the need for special educators to learn content. In fact, teaching a strategy assumes great familiarity with both the skill and subject matter. As one way to improve student outcomes in co-taught classrooms, this article describes how special education co-teachers can contribute meaningfully by adding a strategy component to classroom instruction.

### Strategies

Learning strategies are principles, procedures, or rules for solving problems and independently completing tasks (Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Strategies are effective and efficient ways of approaching or completing tasks. Therefore,
teachers should choose strategies that are efficient in terms of the number of steps, time, and effort required of students (Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009).

**Research on Strategy Instruction**

Several researchers have concluded that strategy instruction is effective for learners with disabilities. For example, over the past 30 years, researchers at the University of Kansas—Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) have developed and studied strategies for students with learning disabilities (LD) and ensured that their instructional procedures met rigorous standards before dissemination (KU-CRL, n.d.). Because these specialized strategies provide in-depth instruction, they are best taught in settings in which teachers can devote at least 30 minutes of strategy instruction each day (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996). Similarly, Graham, Harris, and their collaborators have validated the self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) model with more than 20 years of research (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). The SRSD model includes six instructional steps for teachers to use when teaching strategies. In addition, some studies have focused on strategy instruction in general. For example, Swanson and Sachs-Lee (2000) used meta-analysis to determine the effectiveness of various instructional approaches used in special education for students with LD. The most effective methods included step-by-step prompts or instructions as well as cues or reminders to use strategies or procedures. Students taught through strategy instruction showed the most improvement compared to other methods.

**Types of Strategies**

In co-taught classes, special educators can present general or specific strategies. General strategies consume the least amount of teacher preparation and instructional time, may or may not contain specific steps, have wide applicability, and therefore are useful in most subjects. These can be viewed as (a) organizational strategies (e.g., task analysis, cue cards, graphic organizers), (b) emphasis strategies (e.g., color coding and big ideas), and (c) general study skills (e.g., mnemonics, study skills, and think-alouds).

**Organizational Strategies.** One general strategy that helps students organize their learning is task analysis. Special educators can contribute to co-taught classes by infusing task analysis into all phases of instruction. For example, during co-planning, they can help plan instruction for multistep tasks and identify difficult skills for students. During co-instruction, they can model for all students how to break large, complex assignments or tasks into smaller steps and then explicitly teach specific steps that students find difficult. During co-assessment, special educators can score projects based on rubrics they helped develop that were based on task analysis.

After assigning multitask assignments or projects, co-teachers can require that students gather teacher approval of satisfactory performance (e.g., teacher initials) before advancing to the next step. Providing prompt student feedback regarding progress on these intermediate steps and as necessary differentiating steps is often more manageable in co-taught classrooms than when teaching solo. While one teacher is providing instruction, for example, the co-teacher can circulate and check student progress. Similarly, both teachers can share assessment responsibilities by grading an equal number of student products.

After carefully considering steps in a problem, process, or project, special educators can also develop cue cards. These portable, low-tech devices, often the size of a large index card, contain written or visual steps, processes, abbreviations, or a mnemonic (Conderman & Hedin, 2011) to support students’ strategy use. Cue cards may include (a) only the steps of a process, (b) steps and a visual or checklist for self-monitoring for each step, (c) an example of each step, and a monitoring checklist, (d) pictures or icons that illustrate steps or processes, or (e) a list of questions students should ask themselves when completing a task (Conderman & Hedin, 2011).

Cue cards have wide applicability and have been used successfully in academic subjects and nonacademic areas such as social skills and self-regulation (Reid & Lienemann, 2006). In co-taught classrooms, the special educator can differentiate and scaffold support for students as they learn content and procedures, develop individualized cue cards, model their use, monitor student use of cue cards, and gradually wean students from cue card use. With teacher guidance, students can develop their own cue cards and use them for daily work as well as a test preparation tool. Alternative or station teaching allows co-teachers to introduce the cue card only to students needing this type of support.

Similarly, co-teachers may determine that a graphic organizer would benefit some or all of their students. Graphic organizers, an evidence-based strategy (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003), are visual displays depicting main and subordinate ideas and their connections. Carefully selected graphic organizers are appropriate for use before co-instruction (e.g., to activate background knowledge, anticipate text organization, direct student attention to main ideas, plan and organize written work), during co-instruction (e.g., to provide an outline for note taking or emphasize relationships among concepts), and after co-instruction (e.g., to use as a study guide for tests or assess student learning). Co-teachers should (a) choose the organizer corresponding to instructional objectives (e.g., Venn diagrams for compare and contrast), (b) include line labels or connectors (short words or phrases that connect big ideas to details), and...
(c) add visuals, such as pictures or icons to represent ideas (Conderman et al., 2009).

During team teaching, special educators can complement general educators’ instruction by developing and displaying graphic organizers in real time for all students. They can also craft individualized organizers with different levels of support and model their use during alternative or station teaching. For example, special educators can model studying for a test by covering components of the completed graphic organizer, recalling main ideas or details from memory, and double-checking for accuracy by using the RCRC strategy (Read a little bit of information, Cover the material, Recite what you read, Check for accuracy; Archer & Gleason, 2011).

**Emphasis Strategies.** Special educators can also enhance co-teaching by infusing emphasis strategies that draw students’ attention to important information. These include (a) color coding (Birsh, 2011), (b) providing mannerism cues (e.g., using gestures, repeating words, stressing certain words), (c) providing organizational cues (e.g., sharing the agenda, numbering points, summarizing information), and (d) providing emphasis cues (e.g., reminding students that something is important, asking students to listen carefully; Boyle & Scanlon, 2010) as well as explicitly stating big ideas (Coyne, Carnine, & Kame’enui, 2010). These general strategies are especially helpful for students with LD or attention-deficit disorders.

When color coding, special educators can mark text to emphasize details in a field of visual information. For example, in a lesson on rounding decimals, they can model using blue and green to highlight or underline the hundredths and tenths places, respectively. Similarly, for a reading lesson, special educators can mark text with green indicating main ideas, yellow as important details, and red as trivial information. During initial lessons, consistency with color coding is important, so students can quickly identify its meaning. In addition, during co-planning, special educators can preview material and highlight, circle, underlining words formed by taking the first letters of items in the list; (b) acrostics—sentences formed by using the first letter of each word; (c) keywords—words that sound like and can be drawn in an interactive image with the target word; (d) mimetics—pictorial representations of all items to be remembered; or (e) pegwords—rhyming words associated with numbers and facts (Reid & Lienemann, 2006). Other times, only a few students might need mnemonic instruction. In these situations, special educators can gather a small group of students for more extensive mnemonic instruction through alternative teaching. If both co-teachers are comfortable with mnemonics, each teacher can present a different type of mnemonic to their group during parallel teaching. Following parallel teaching, one student from each group can teach a mnemonic or method to a peer from the other group.

Special educators can also offer test-taking skills, study skills, and content area reading strategies to some or all students in the co-taught classroom. For example, all students may benefit from instruction in becoming test wise (Reid & Lienemann, 2006); learning how to take notes, outline, and manage their time (Hoover & Patton, 2007); and interacting with their textbook by surveying chapters, determining main ideas, interpreting visual displays, and using textbook supports (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). Reviewing these strategies frequently rather than only before high-stakes tests signals their importance and wide applicability. During station or alternative teaching, special educators can provide frequent mini-lessons on these strategies, model their use with textbooks, and later prompt students to use them during independent work and assessments. Similarly, students may benefit from explicit modeling in using planners to display upcoming due dates for projects, tests, and homework assignments. Special educators may also select, show, and discuss short applicable video clips of effective study skills. These study skills are applicable to all subjects and can be regularly integrated into the curriculum in short instructional segments without sacrificing course content.

Finally, modeling skills with a think-aloud provides students with examples of language to use and steps to follow when tasks become difficult or confusing. During think-alouds, teachers model their thought processes and strategies to guide students’ use (Oster, 2001). Effective think-alouds demonstrate metacognitive skills such as planning the task, staying on task, monitoring one’s performance, and coping with frustration (Reid & Lienemann, 2006). Examples of
content appropriate for think-alouds in co-taught classes, include how to (a) paraphrase content; (b) make connections, predictions, elaborations, and self-questions for reading tasks; (c) solve problems such as defining an unknown word or correcting a reading miscue using context; (d) monitor comprehension; and (e) solve math problems.

**Specialized Strategies.** Specialized strategies differ from general strategies as they have defined steps, are narrow in use, and are content or skill specific. Examples of specialized strategies from various grade levels and subjects are presented in Table 2.

Teachers must model the steps of these strategies in their proper sequence and insist students follow the ordered steps. When teaching specialized strategies, students benefit when teachers use the SRSD instructional model recommended by K. R. Harris, Graham, and Mason (2003), as shown in Table 3 and as explained in the IRIS module “SRSD: Using Learning Strategies to Enhance Student Learning” (IRIS Center for Training Enhancements, n.d.).

Teachers must also model the full range of examples (i.e., applying regrouping steps with math problems containing all numbers 0 to 9) and teach students what to do if a strategy step does not apply (i.e., if an order of operations math problem does not contain exponents, but students have learned *Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally* as the strategy). Like general strategies, special education co-teachers at all grade levels and in all subjects can present specialized strategies. However, for maximum gain, students need daily and sustained instruction, multiple opportunities to practice the strategy in a variety of situations, individualized feedback, and teachers who hold them accountable for mastering the strategy and who present the strategy using validated instructional steps (Deshler et al., 1996). Therefore, these strategies require a greater time commitment in terms of teacher planning and instruction.

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**Table 2. Specialized Strategies, Target Skill Areas, and Steps.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialized Strategy</th>
<th>Target Skill Areas (level)</th>
<th>Strategy Steps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **STOP** (Boyle & Walker-Seibert, 1997) | Phonemic awareness, phonics, or decoding (elementary grades) | S–Stare at the unknown word  
T–Tell yourself each letter sound  
O–Open mouth, say letter sounds  
P–Put letters together to say word |
| **DRAW** (C. A. Harris, Miller, & Mercer, 1995) | Math calculations (elementary grades) | D–Discover the sign  
R–Read the problem  
A–Answer the problem or draw  
W–Write the answer |
| **POW + TREE** (K. R. Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003) | Writing persuasive essays (Grades 3–8) | P–Pick an idea  
O–Organize notes  
W–Write and say more  
T–Topic sentence  
R–Reasons  
E–Examples  
E–Ending |
| **CAP** (Mercer, Jordan, & Miller, 1996) | Solving algebra problems (middle and high school) | C–Combine like terms  
A–Ask yourself, “How can I isolate the variable?”  
P–Put the values of the variable in the initial equation and check to see if the equation is balanced |
| **TASSEL** (Minskoff & Allsopp, 2003) | On-task behavior during class (upper elementary and middle grades) | T–Try not to doodle  
A–Arrive at class prepared  
S–Sit near the front  
S–Sit away from friends  
E–End daydreaming  
L–Look at the teacher |
| **WATCH** (Reid & Lienemann, 2006) | Study skills (middle grades) | W–Write down assignment and due date  
A–Ask for clarification/help  
T–Task-analyze the assignment, schedule tasks over available days  
Ch–Check all work for neatness, completeness, and accuracy |
| **SPLASH** (Simmonds, Luchow, Kaminsky, & Cottone, 1989) | Test taking (middle and high school) | S–Skim the test  
P–Plan your strategy  
L–Leave out tough questions  
A–Attack questions you know  
S–Systematically guess  
H–House clean |
The following vignette illustrates how special education co-teachers can promote evidence-based instructional practices into the general curriculum by introducing a specialized strategy. Teacher names for the following vignettes are fictionalized, but the situations are based on authentic situations.

**Elementary Example—STOP Strategy**

While reviewing first quarter assessment results, first-grade reading co-teachers Mr. Albers and special educator Mrs. Hartson noticed that although students could produce individual letter sounds, several students were unable to sound out regular words. Realizing the importance of this early decoding skill (Bursuck & Damer, 2007), these partners wondered how to be more strategic to maximize reading gains. Mrs. Hartson noticed that although students could produce individual letter sounds, several students were unable to sound out regular words. Realizing the importance of this early decoding skill (Bursuck & Damer, 2007), these partners wondered how to be more strategic to maximize reading gains. Mrs. Hartson volunteered to model the STOP strategy (see Table 2) to all students. Even though not every student needed the strategy, providing large-group instruction prepared students for subsequent partner work with the strategy.

During a team-taught lesson, Mrs. Hartson followed SRSD instruction steps (see Table 3). As she voiced her thoughts aloud, she modeled the steps and included her metacognitive processes (i.e., What strategy will help me sound out this word? What do I do first? What is my next step? How am I doing? Does that make sense?). Both teachers alternated engaging the whole class in guided practice (i.e., while one practiced an example with the class, the other observed students and offered support, as needed), and then students practiced with partners. The co-teachers developed cue cards and additional practice activities for students needing supplemental skill reinforcement. Periodically, they used alternative or station teaching to differentiate instruction for students needing additional direct strategy instruction. They also incorporated more frequent formative assessments to evaluate the impact of their strategy instruction on student learning.

**Middle School Example—POW + TREE**

Special educator Mr. Earl co-taught seventh grade language arts with Miss Emma. Both were frustrated with disappointing results on the previous year’s district persuasive essay writing assessment. Mr. Earl suggested the POW + TREE writing strategy (see Table 2) as an evidence-based writing intervention (Graham et al., 2005).

Both teachers researched the strategy, and during co-planning they agreed on cue cards, handouts, and examples for initial teacher modeling. During co-instruction, all students met as a large group for the first 15 minutes of class for announcements and daily oral language (DOL) mini-lessons. Co-teachers alternated responsibility of preparing and guiding DOL and purposefully included skills assessed on the district writing exam, skills that confused students, and preskills or skills directly associated with the lesson goal for that day. For example, early DOL examples included topic sentences and later examples emphasized transition words and closing a paragraph. Purposefully choosing DOL skills ensured that students reviewed necessary prerequisite skills prior to learning strategy instruction (Deshler et al., 1996).

After DOL mini-lessons, each co-teacher took a group for parallel instruction in POW + TREE and followed the SRSD instructional steps. During a later guided practice lesson with the same groups, students wrote essays on two different prompts. Students then shared their essays with a peer from the other group who provided feedback using a writing rubric. To promote generalization, Mr. Earl and Miss Emma shared POW + TREE with other seventh grade teachers who used it across content areas.

**High School Example—SPLASH**

High school science co-teachers Mr. Knapp and Mr. Ginther assumed that students in their chemistry class had

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**Table 3. Instructional Steps of the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) Model.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop and activate background knowledge</td>
<td>Mr. Edwin determines whether students already know or use a similar strategy (e.g., administers a pretest, uses a KWL (what we know, what we want to know and what we learned; Ogle, 1989), etc.); he uses an analogy or connects the new strategy to students’ background knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss and explain the strategy</td>
<td>Mr. Edwin introduces the strategy, explains its benefits, shares how other students improved with the strategy, obtains students’ cooperation to learn the strategy, and commits himself to teaching the strategy to his best ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model the strategy</td>
<td>Mr. Edwin models each strategy step using a think-aloud, verbally elaborates on both how and why he makes certain decisions as he applies the strategy, and uses positive self-talk (e.g., “What step comes next?” and “This strategy really helped me to write a better paragraph!”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorize the strategy</td>
<td>Students memorize strategy steps through rehearsal over several lessons; students use a cue card or checklist as they memorize steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative support (guided practice)</td>
<td>Students and Mr. Edwin practice the strategy over several days using different examples; Mr. Edwin gradually fades his support for strategy use as he observes students developing mastery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent practice</td>
<td>Students independently apply the strategy to new examples and situations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**High School Example—SPLASH**

High school science co-teachers Mr. Knapp and Mr. Ginther assumed that students in their chemistry class had
learned study skills by this time in their educational career. Consequently, they were perplexed by poor student performance on various types of science assessments, even when students received testing accommodations. During class discussions, students acknowledged having few test-taking strategies. The teachers realized that their assumption had been wrong.

Mr. Ginther researched the SPLASH strategy (see Table 2) and shared it with Mr. Knapp as a possible intervention. Using the most recent science exam, teachers used role playing to introduce strategy steps through daily mini-lessons. They modeled how to skim the test quickly to get a sense of the questions and various parts, plan where to begin based on item point values and one’s strength (i.e., short answer vs. multiple choice), leave out unknown questions, attack (i.e., answer) known questions, systematically guess, and review test responses before submission (house clean). They infused additional tips such as (a) attempting all questions even if guessing, (b) eliminating known incorrect responses before selecting the best answer, (c) using information from the test to answer tough or unknown questions, (d) periodically checking the time and monitoring progress, and (e) jotting down mnemonics or other reminders on the answer sheet before beginning.

To provide sustained instruction, Mr. Knapp and Mr. Ginther used science test questions and possible answers as lesson warm-ups once per week. Students answered these questions using personal response systems. The co-teachers also developed stations, each reviewing a different test-taking skill, which provided students with critical practice and timely reminders prior to midterms and finals.

**Developing Your Own Strategies**

Because researchers have not developed strategies for every content area, teachers may need to adapt strategies from other curricular areas or develop their own strategies. One way of doing this is to complete a careful task analysis. First, co-teachers can complete the task, being as efficient as possible, while being mindful of steps leading to the final outcome (Reid & Lienemann, 2006). Special educators may be especially helpful in this role, particularly as they are engaging with the content for the first time and approaching the task as novice learners. As teachers develop the steps and formalize the strategy, they should include requirements for a good strategy (Deshler et al., 1996; Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009), which include the following:

1. Strategies should contain a series of steps leading to a successful outcome
2. Steps should be sequenced for efficient task completion
3. Steps should cue cognitive and/or metacognitive processing (e.g., What is my first step? Why do I do this? Does this answer seem reasonable?)
4. Steps should cue the student to take some type of overt action (e.g., write, say)
5. Each step should begin with a verb
6. Strategies should contain no more than seven steps to limit processing or memory load
7. Strategy steps should include words that students can easily understand

Using these principles, middle school co-teachers Mrs. Mae and Mr. Benjamin developed an individualized strategy for Corey, who frequently responded verbally in class without raising his hand and made off-topic comments. His individualized self-monitoring strategy, designed to foster self-regulation, consisted of three steps: (a) Did I raise my hand to speak? (b) Did I wait to be called on by the teacher? and (c) Did I say relevant comments? After explicit instruction and practice, Corey monitored his own behavior on his cue card by tallying instances of each behavior. His *raise, wait, say* strategy illustrates how teachers can develop strategies, differentiate instruction, and involve students in self-monitoring (Maag, 2004).

**Concluding Thoughts**

Despite the growing popularity of co-teaching, in some classrooms this intervention has yet to realize its potential, perhaps because special educators lack a distinct role and therefore often assume a position similar to a paraprofessional. Instead, special education co-teachers can contribute meaningfully by adding strategy components to classroom instruction through (a) infusing general strategies, such as cue cards, graphic organizers, or mnemonics, (b) teaching specialized strategies specific to the content or curriculum, or (c) developing individualized strategies based on students’ strengths, needs, and task-analysis. Adding strategy components to co-taught classrooms may be one way to systematically improve student outcomes in co-taught settings.

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**Note**

1. The vignettes related in this article are based on authentic observed teaching situations. All names are pseudonyms.

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