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Collaborative teaching in language departments: Benefits and pitfalls

Abstract

This article is a reflective piece which explores Collaborative Teaching in the School of Languages and Cultures at the University of Sydney by discussing the specific example of the sharing of courses between the Department of French Studies, the International Comparative Literature Studies (ICLS) program and the European Studies (EUST) program. Although academics from the departments of Italian, German and French were involved in the teaching of the course, this study originates from the lecturers of the Department of French Studies. Collaborative teaching is enriching for individual lecturing staff who have the opportunity to teach in their area of research, as it enables cross-fertilisation and renewal of ideas, and can lead to collaborative research initiatives. Such collaborative teaching has also been positive for students, who expressed a very high level of satisfaction. However, the growth of interdisciplinary co-operation raises important questions for the future of language departments in their role of language providers and in regard to their academic mission within and outside language departments. Interdisciplinary team teaching is gaining more and more acceptance in the world of academia, particularly in the humanities, with academics increasingly being asked to develop interdisciplinary courses in collaboration with other departments. Language departments are often under pressure to create interdisciplinary courses. This article will examine the reasons driving the development of interdisciplinary co-taught courses and the benefits and pitfalls for students and staff. The growth of interdisciplinary co-operation raises important questions for the future of language departments, questions we will discuss in the first part of this article. We will then present a specific example of a collaborative unit shared between the Department of French Studies and EUST.
1. Type of collaborative teaching

Collaborative teaching, at times called co-teaching or team teaching, can be defined as “two or more people sharing responsibility for educating some or all of the students in a classroom” (Villa, Thousand and Nevin 2008: 5). It “involves the distribution of responsibility among people for planning, instruction and evaluation for a classroom of students’ (Villa, Thousand and Nevin 2008: 5). The type of collaborative teaching that is the most commonly found in the School of Languages and Cultures at the University of Sydney is what has been defined by researchers as “the specialist type” (Easterby-Smith and Olv 1984): a team of lecturers designs the program collectively, with each individual taking a major teaching role corresponding to their area of specialisation and all participating in tutorial discussions. They develop a program around a common theme or period but integrate their own perspectives and select their own specific topics. They share the responsibility for planning, teaching, and assessing the progress of students. However, a coordinator gathers the material and holds administrative responsibilities. This type of collaboration is seen as the easiest way to organise the course and the least time consuming.

The main aim of these courses is to promote interdisciplinary learning and provide students with connections between different disciplines (literature, social sciences, history, cinema, etc), cultures and national literary canons. These courses often require the participation of three or four departments and are always taught in English.

2. Why collaborative teaching?

2.1 Managerial reasons

There are many managerial reasons driving the development of team taught courses: they are often seen by managers as a solution to shrinking budgets. It is a cost-effective way to utilise staff since new courses can be developed at a small cost to the school with no additional staff needing to be appointed. New programs or departments can be developed without having to create permanent positions.

Thus in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney (as in many other departments across Australia), the European Studies program (EUST) and International Comparative Literature Studies program (ICLS) do not have their own teaching staff and rely entirely on interdisciplinary team teaching offered by language departments and other departments in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Collaborative teaching is therefore essential for the existence of those programs.

Units of study in language departments often attract small enrolments. Collaborative teaching in English is seen as a way to address this issue by drawing a
larger cohort of students. Courses offered by language departments are varied and taught in the target language and the curricula are often perceived by managers as fragmented and lacking depth: these curricula include literature, social sciences, film and linguistics units in addition to language courses. Collaborative units can offer a more in-depth coherent academic content without the linguistic limitations present in courses taught in a Language Other Than English.

### 2.2 Academic reasons

There are sound academic reasons for teaching collaboratively: academics tend to be over-specialised in their research area and this can lead to the development of a tunnel vision which is reflected in their teaching. If experts from different cultures and perspectives pool their resources, lecturers and students can be exposed to the strength of the differing viewpoints, and as explained by Letterman and Dugan (2004: 76): “students can develop critical thinking by synthesising multiple perspectives and relating the information to a larger conceptual framework”.

Lecturers can often be intensely involved in developing their research and knowledge without paying much attention to how they interact with their colleagues. According to Nevin, Thousand and Villa (2009: 572), “how professors perceive each other and interact with one another is a neglected aspect of university life and should not be ignored”. Lecturers who teach collaboratively become aware of this aspect of their work and this leads to a better understanding and increased interactions between colleagues. In small departments, collaborative teaching can provide opportunities to meet new colleagues and to develop common research projects.

Many academics experience isolation in their teaching work, a problem which has been reported by several scholars (Davis 1995; Hinton and Downing 1998; Robinson and Schaible 1995). Team-taught courses can remedy this. Collaborative teaching allows academics to share their ideas on pedagogy and to engage in discussion about their research interests. As pointed out by Letterman and Dugan (2004: 76), professors and young academics can benefit from each other’s experience and ideas: “the more practiced professor can acquire satisfaction from learning new teaching methods (Davis 1995) and hearing fresh ideas from colleagues (Robinson and Schaible 1995)”.

In language departments, academics have little opportunity to teach in their area of research as there are not enough departmental courses to go around, so team teaching gives them additional opportunities to teach in their research speciality.

Students exposed to collaborative teaching are given the opportunity to experience many perspectives from various disciplines. They also benefit from learning how to incorporate information from different disciplines into their own field of study. Literature on collaborative teaching (Davis 1995) suggests that students exposed to team teaching will learn to critically evaluate, analyse and synthesise information, and learn better ways to apply it. It has also been shown that students
can improve their social and communication skills by mixing with students from different academic backgrounds (Harris and Watson 1997).

There are good reasons for academics to be involved in collaborative teaching, a great deal of literature that supports it, universities are encouraging the development of new cross-disciplinary team-taught courses. So why are academics reluctant to get involved?

3. What are the pitfalls?

Firstly, it is generally agreed by those involved that team teaching is difficult to organise because so many lecturers are involved. With regular meetings and long negotiations, it takes more time to teach in a team than to teach alone (especially in the planning stages). In most departments and faculties, team teaching is not rewarded nor is it compensated. In fact, it is considered to take no more time than single teaching. There are no provisions for collaborative teaching even in the more recent standardised workload formulas. Therefore collaborators are in fact penalised in their research, which explains people’s reluctance to become involved in collaborative teaching.

Conflict can arise if the role of each team member is unclear or not agreed upon by all members. In addition, the team members must adapt to their new colleagues. The work can be intense over a short period of time, giving team members little time to negotiate and adapt. As explained by Letterman and Dugan (2004: 78), “any collaboration will invite unique configurations of power. Conflict may develop as a result of traditional conceptions of power such as gender, race, and age, or it may occur as a function of personality differences”, but team members in interdisciplinary courses have to be able to adapt quickly and function efficiently in a concentrated lapse of time.

Collaboration involves a loss of individual autonomy. The individual academic cannot control matters, for instance, if one team member does not provide preparation for students on time or is slow to mark papers, the whole team is slowed down and tension arises. There is a loss of flexibility as well. What happens when one’s lecture time is over and important material has not been covered?

More importantly, team teaching can be a problem for the management of language departments. Timetabling becomes a nightmare when lecturers have to teach fifteen hours one week and five the other while timetabling and the booking of rooms have to be organised over a semester. Because the online timetabling system has no flexibility, it is very difficult for students to avoid clashes and hence absenteeism, which makes it harder for staff to interact with students in their courses.

While Letterman and Dugan (2004) quote studies which have found that students who participated in team-taught classes reported improved teacher-student relationships, it has not been the case in our own experience: because students
spend less time with each individual lecturer or tutor, teaching staff do not have the opportunity to get to know their students very well, so the relationship remains somewhat anonymous. In addition, collaborative teaching in English attracts a larger cohort of students and as a result larger tutorial groups. For language teachers, who are used to smaller tutorials, this is perceived as a loss in the quality of teaching.

It requires a great deal of effort to develop a course that is rigorous and coherent when three or four lecturers work on different sections of the unit. Students often complain of a lack of cohesion, of fragmentation of the course and of the difficulty of obtaining a coherent picture of what the course is about. In our next section, with the help of a case study, we will look at a collaborative unit of study entitled Romanticism and Revolution, and examine the reactions of students to this team-taught course.

4. Collaborative teaching: A case study

For many students, university provides the first experience of collaborative teaching. That is the case with the units of study offered in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney. For several courses in International and Comparative Literature and in European Studies, collaborative teaching is the norm. The workload is shared among lecturers from different language departments (usually three or four departments). A team of lecturers designs the program. Each lecturer takes a teaching role (lectures and tutorials) and assesses class presentation and essays across three or four weeks. The responsibility for planning and communicating with the students is in the hands of the coordinator who holds administrative responsibilities.

EUST2613 Romanticism and Revolution was offered in 2009 for the first time under the umbrella of European Studies. It was a joint venture of the Department of English, the Department of Germanic Studies and the Department of French Studies. The coordinator was from the Department of French Studies. The course was taught in English.

4.1 EUST2613 Romanticism and Revolution: Course description and objectives

As with all collaborative teaching, the main aim of this unit of study is to promote interdisciplinary learning, in this case by providing students with connections between the different European Romantic movements. The Course Description and Objectives states that the unit deals with the impact of the Romantic Movement across Europe by examining the historical and cultural connections between three European countries (Germany, England and France) during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Different national contexts are examined separately. The course examines their influence on each other and the influence of Romantic thought throughout European society, identifying ways in which Romantic ideas and
values revolutionised social, cultural and aesthetic ideas, transformed worldviews and shaped the future of Europe.

The course objectives state that by the end of this Unit of Study, students will:

- Have independently undertaken detailed literary and historical research, making use of the library as well as internet resources
- Be familiar with key thinkers and writers in German/English/French culture of the 18th and 19th century, able to assess their work critically and understand their thought and impact
- Have effectively synthesised and communicated their reflection in appropriate forms (assessed in both essays and class presentation)
- Have a thorough understanding of the Romantic Movement in a European context.

4.2 EUST2613 Romanticism and Revolution in 2009

In order to bring this unit together, several preparatory meetings were needed as the collaborators had to create an environment conducive to team teaching. It was, from the start, experimental because it was, for the three lecturers involved, their first experience of team teaching across departments. Moreover, even though there was a coordinator for the course, because each member of staff is encouraged to be creative and ‘free’ within their own module, each of the three team members had a different vision and ideas for teaching their module. For example, one envisaged the course as more historical than literary and wanted to include historical studies in the required reading list. Another put the emphasis on textual analysis and wanted to spend more time on analysing the texts than on talking about the historical context. One colleague wanted to choose a complete novel and another wanted very short texts of the period in order to provide more variety for the students. The selection of texts presented a problem: some texts had not been translated either at all or since the nineteenth century or were out of print. It took four or five one-hour meetings to reach agreement on the content.

On the practical side, two colleagues preferred to have a course reader, the remaining colleague preferred to have all the texts available on the Internet. One colleague preferred to improvise week by week and deliberately gave very loose descriptions of the content for each week (just a title and a text). Two on the contrary wanted to follow a strict and detailed program with discussion topics for each week.

In 2009 and 2010, feedback was not collected systematically for a research project on collaborative teaching. For this case study, we are using the discussions between the team members and the results of the 2009 and 2010 Student Evaluation Questionnaires, designed and administered by the Institute for Teaching and Learning at the University of Sydney, and administered at the end of the semester. 73 responses were received for the two questionnaires.
The surveys provide statistical breakdowns of the students’ ratings and their explanations of their ratings for each item. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data allows unit of study coordinators to identify strengths and weaknesses of courses from the students’ perspective and to gain an insight into why students consider particular aspects of the teaching and learning process to be effective.

In 2009, there were 35 enrolments and 31 feedback questionnaires were collected. To Item 1 [The learning outcomes and expected standard of this unit of study were clear to me], 67% answered yes. To Item 12 [Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit of study], 80% said they were satisfied with the course. The data revealed that a good proportion of students understood what was expected of them but some students commented on one of the pitfalls of collaborative teaching: lack of cohesion, fragmentation of the course and difficulty in seeing the ‘bigger picture’. Even though the course description promised that the influence of the different national movements on each other would be considered, as would the influence of Romantic thought on European society, there was simply no time to provide a general conclusion or to mention how each Romantic text or writer influenced the others. Some major trends were presented but ultimately it was up to the student to find the common threads between all the historical, cultural and national elements. The comments noted that “Not all readings were contained in reading pack” and the course was “too unstructured” and “could have been more organised” or that “it was unclear at times as to the cohesiveness of the course”. Comments also included a reference to the collaborative teaching: “having 3 ‘different’ tutors was a bit disruptive”. Some students were unsettled by having three different lecturers, which contributed to the general feeling of fragmentation of the course.

4.3 EUST2613 Romanticism and Revolution in 2010

The course was offered again in 2010 with 63 students, almost twice as many as in 2009. We took on board all the comments from the previous delivery. A Course Reader containing the material to be discussed in lectures and tutorials and which formed the basis for class presentations and essay topics was adopted. Two textbooks (Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther and E. J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution (1789-1848)) provided a much-needed historical framework for the unit of study. A standardised style of presentation was adopted for each week, and a list of reading material and presentation topics which could double as essay topics appeared at the end of each module. In Week 1 an overview of the program was introduced so that the students could see the connection between the different countries.

Each module was for four weeks, with a one-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial per week (for 63 students, divided into three tutorial groups). The assessment comprised one class presentation and two essays, with one exercise selected from each module.
Table 1: EUST2613 Romanticism and Revolution course outline

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<tr>
<th>WEEKS</th>
<th>LECTURES</th>
<th>TUTORIALS</th>
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<tr>
<td>WEEK 1</td>
<td>Welcome and Introduction Course structure</td>
<td>No tutorials</td>
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<td>WEEK 2</td>
<td>Rousseau and The French Revolution (FG)</td>
<td>General Discussion</td>
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<td>Michelet, The French Revolution; Chateaubriand, Memoirs (on the French</td>
<td>1. What influence did Jean-Jacques Rousseau have on French Romanticism?</td>
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<td>Revolution)</td>
<td>2. Discuss Chateaubriand and Michelet’s points of view on the French</td>
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<td>Introduction to <em>French Romanticism</em></td>
<td>Revolution. How do they differ?</td>
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<td>Presentations Sign-Up</td>
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<td>WEEK 3</td>
<td><em>British Romanticism</em>: Eighteenth-Century Anticipations</td>
<td>Ossian, selections; Burns, “To a Mouse”; Hugh Blair, Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian; Thomas Gray, “The Bard”</td>
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<td>WEEK 4</td>
<td><em>German Romanticism</em></td>
<td>Discussion of Goethe’s <em>Werther</em> as romantic novel ‘before its time.’ Links to France and to Rousseau.</td>
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<td>Goethe’s <em>Werther</em>, Enlightenment and Romanticism.</td>
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<td>WEEK 5</td>
<td><em>German Romanticism</em></td>
<td>Kleist’s novella as a study in the determinants of human happiness</td>
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<td>Kleist’s <em>Marquise of O</em>... : Nature, Culture and Human Happiness</td>
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<td>WEEK 6</td>
<td><em>German Romanticism</em></td>
<td>Hoffmann’s story as a study of the crisis of romantic modernity. Does technology provide answers to the questions of romantic humanism?</td>
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<td>E.T.A. Hoffmann’s <em>The Sandmann</em> : Madness and Reason: Is Harmony possible</td>
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<td>between the Inner and Outer Worlds?</td>
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<td>WEEK 7</td>
<td><em>German Romanticism</em></td>
<td>Discussion of texts introduced in the lecture and of definitions and understandings of the term, ‘romanticism’ in German literature.</td>
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<td>Overview of the period and the terminology of Romanticism.</td>
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<td>German Romantic texts as studies of the modern conflict between the inner</td>
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<td>and outer worlds, biology and society, desires and prohibitions.</td>
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<td>Wordsworth, “Goody Blake and Harry Gill”; “Simon Lee”; “The Thorn”; “The Idiot Boy”; “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”.</td>
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<td>WEEK 9</td>
<td><em>British Romanticism</em>: Poems of the Supernatural</td>
<td>The <em>Rime of the Ancient Mariner</em>.</td>
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<td>Coleridge, “Kubla Khan”; <em>The Rime of the Ancient Mariner</em>.</td>
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| WEEK 10 | British Romanticism  
Byron and the Byronic: Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, cantos I and III; The Giaour; Byron's European influence. | The Giaour. |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| WEEK 11 | Influence of English and German Romanticism (Chateaubriand, On Byron ; Mme de Staël, On Germany)  
What is French Romanticism? (Stendhal, Racine and Shakespeare)  
Nationalism and political theories of Romanticism. | 1. Compare Chateaubriand’s view on Byron with what you know of this Romantic writer.  
2. Discuss Mme de Staël’s role in promoting German Romanticism in France  
3. How do the French Romantic writers link literature with social and political changes? |
| WEEK 12 | The cult of the hero (search for heroes in the national past) (Chateaubriand, Memoirs (on Napoleon); Victor Hugo, Napoleon the Little; Alfred de Musset, Confessions). The Role of the Romantic Artist as genius and prophet (Hugo, The poet's Function; Gautier, The Pine in the Landes; Vigny, Moses, The Death of the Wolf). | 1. Summarise and discuss the myth of Napoleon in Chateaubriand, Hugo, Musset.  
2. In what ways are the poems of Gautier, Hugo and Musset related to the function of the Romantic Artist? |
| WEEK 13 | Nature and other aesthetic aspects of Romanticism (Lamartine, The Lake, The Valley; Hugo, Tomorrow at dawn; Vigny, The house of the shepherd)  
Creativity/Imagination (Musset, Night Thought in May, Night Thought in December)  
Extremes of emotions, inspiration and the importance of the mental world, intuition versus reason.  
Dreams and madness (Nerval, El Desdichado, Aurélia, Fantasy) | 1. Choose one of the poems on nature and discuss the representation of nature as a romantic element. What critique does it offer of French/European society?  
2. How did the poems of Vigny and Musset seek to capture the mental world of the Romantic Artist?  
3. Examine Nerval's poems and life in the context of the role of imagination in Romantic Literature. |

At the end of the semester, 42 feedback questionnaires were collected. To Item 1 [The learning outcomes and expected standard of this unit of study were clear to me], 83% answered yes. To Item 12 [Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this unit of study], 85% said they were satisfied with the course. Students’ comments were largely positive. In contrast to the first group, they enjoyed the variety provided by different lecturers and the depth of each module. Even though a general conclusion was not provided, lecturers were encouraged to make connections as often as possible and to find echoes in the texts so that the students could have some sense of a general direction. For the lecturers, this meant knowing the other texts, anticipating the students’ future readings or reminding them where the connections
were, for example the influence of Byron on Chateaubriand. All subjects were considered in relation to the others.

The comments noted that “The mixture of different national cultures is something you rarely get to study at university — it’s very interesting and exciting” and that the course was “challenging, interesting, and exciting”. Comments also included references to the collaborative teaching: instead of being disruptive, “having experts from the fields of French, British and German” provided a good diversity; “I really enjoyed having just a few weeks on every country — kept it interesting”. The structure of the course and the different viewpoints were appreciated: “I really enjoyed the structure and texts of this course and enjoying having lecturers who were specialists in their field”; “having three different tutors and lecturers, each a specialist in the particular field we were learning meant that the standard of knowledge shown was of the highest degree”. Students also commented on the originality of the presentation: “very interesting + quite different to other units I have studied”.

The most striking difference between the comments of 2009 and those of 2010 is that the students commented on the fragmented aspect of the course in 2009 and, overwhelmingly, on the cohesion of the course in 2010, a result which reflects the improvement in the presentation of the content.

This discussion leads to a number of conclusions. In the case of team teaching, it is essential to have in place strategies that provide students, from the very start of the unit of study program, with detailed work plans and an emphasis on cohesion. Even though team teaching is difficult to organise and time consuming, when cohesiveness is obtained, it has benefits for students because it exposes them to different cultures and perspectives. Finally, academics enjoy the opportunity to teach in their area of research, which they have limited opportunity to do in the context of language departments.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, there are several interesting questions raised by our venture into collaborative teaching. These questions have implications for the future of language departments if collaborative teaching in English continues to grow.

Firstly, there is a financial concern: language departments involved in collaborative teaching do not always get the benefits of the student load, but rather it is the host program or the school which does. The transfer of EFTSUs (Equivalent Full Time Student Unit) is so complex that no one is ready to solve the problem. However, this has very serious budgetary implications. As more staff teach outside their departments, this can become an important problem in lost EFTSUs. In addition, the head of department has to run the department with a reduced teaching team of full-time lecturers. More casuals are sometimes employed to compensate but they normally teach language units and cannot be asked to coordinate courses. If
universities continue to encourage team teaching, a rigorous system must be put in place so that it is financially compensated at the departmental level.

Secondly, although, as we have reported, academics may feel energised by the experience of collaborative teaching, less of their energy is invested in their own department as some staff members have little and sometimes no teaching at all in their own department. The number of team-taught courses has to be carefully monitored by the heads of department to ensure the department curriculum is not reduced to language units being taught by casualties.

Team-taught units are cross-listed so students can attend them instead of attending the units offered in the target language by the language department. Students then become part of the host department or program, which will reap the benefits in financial and load terms as students may enrol in Honours in the host department or program if they wish to pursue their studies.

Thirdly, the implications for developing HDR (Higher Degree by Research) students are also of concern. While it is commonly assumed that collaborative teaching in English opens the doors to research for students, it is important to monitor what actually happens: do students pursue postgraduate studies in the language department or do they go to the host program, i.e. EUST or ICLS? There is a potential danger that research in Languages Other Than English will be lost as students carry out their research in English in programs outside of language departments. This is not an insignificant matter considering that the value and health of a department is partly based on its number of Honours and PhD students.

However, some colleagues have argued that the reverse may be happening, with students discovering through team-taught courses in English the value of learning a language or of becoming more involved in the language(s) and culture(s) they are already studying. This too needs to be monitored to provide data for analysis.

There is little doubt that collaborative teaching in English brings benefits to students and staff but at the moment heads of departments do not have any control over the involvement of their staff members in collaborative teaching. The decision to be involved rests on the individual academic, and departments have to deal with the consequences. Academics and heads of department need to be involved in the long-term planning of collaborative teaching and to closely monitor what is happening so that language departments are not reduced to the role of language providers. Faculties have a role to play in assisting departments so that collaborative teaching is viable and has a legitimate place in curricula.

References


