Exploring the Dialogical Affordances of Co-teaching for Student Learning

Zainab Afshan Sheikh and Alexandra Middleton

University of Copenhagen

Introduction

Dialogue is frequently highlighted as a cornerstone of student-centered teaching and active learning because it invites students to participate in the construction of knowledge rather than merely receiving information from instructors (Dysthe 1996). Through dialogue, students can test ideas, encounter alternative perspectives, and engage more critically with complex subject matter. This is particularly relevant in research-based teaching, where knowledge is often characterized by uncertainty, interpretation, and ongoing inquiry rather than fixed answers (Damsholt & Jensen, 2023). Research-based teaching is a defining characteristic of university education and a central principle at the University of Copenhagen.

As colleagues conducting collaborative research on uterus transplantation from the perspectives of medical anthropology and public health, we have been invited on several occasions to teach about uterus transplantation and the social implications of frontier reproductive technologies. Over the past year, we have jointly taught lectures on uterus transplantation in two different educational contexts — the Master of Global Health and the Master of Anthropology of Health programmes at the University of Copenhagen. Across these teaching experiences, we became increasingly interested in the role that dialogue plays in supporting student engagement with complex research topics. Our interest emerged through co-teaching — that is, the co-presence of two instructors who, together and simultaneously, plan and facilitate teaching of a shared group of students in a single classroom (Beninghof 2020). In our experiences of co-teaching, we observed that the presence of two teachers appeared to create a different classroom dynamic than traditional

lecture formats. Rather than presenting knowledge through a single expert voice, co-teaching allowed us to engage in ongoing dialogue with one another, pose questions, build on each other's perspectives, and engage collectively with student contributions. While lectures remain a dominant teaching format in higher education, they may limit opportunities for student participation and interaction (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Instead of more traditional and unidirectional teacher-to-student lecture formats, we experimented with pushing the boundaries of these formats towards increased student activation, with dialogue at the center of this activation. We encouraged student engagement in the lecture context by incorporating and interspersing directed activities and opportunities for conversation. These experiences led us to wonder whether the value of co-teaching lies less in the presence of two instructors and more in the dialogical learning opportunities that such a format may create. We thus became interested in exploring the affordances for student learning that co-teaching might create.

While optimistic about the possibility of affordances for student learning in co-teaching contexts, we were also aware of the specificities of our teaching situation. We were invited as guest lecturers into existing courses, had only two hours available for teaching, and were tasked with presenting a complex research area characterized by ethical ambiguity and multiple legitimate critical perspectives. The empirical basis for this project is our third co-taught 2-hour guest lecture for approximately 20 students, delivered in Spring 2026 as part of a course in the Master of Science in Anthropology of Health study programme.

Drawing on our previous teaching experience, we developed a teaching intervention that integrated dialogue into both the teaching format and the learning activities. Our goal was not simply to communicate research findings, but to foster a classroom environment in which ideas about uterus transplantation and its ethical and social implications could be explored collectively and in an open-ended manner. More specifically, we sought to encourage active student participation, experiment with dialogical forms of co-teaching, and explore how dialogue might support deeper engagement with complex research topics. In particular, we focus on the affordances of dialogical activities that co-teaching enables and the ways these may support active participation and

deeper learning in a research-based lecture setting. Our hypothesis is that dialogical modes of learning and co-construction of knowledge can help foment student engagement and challenge traditional ways of thinking about and doing lecturing. We believe that the dialogical mode can support a deeper understanding of complex, ethically-charged research contexts, such as uterus transplantation, among both teachers/researchers and students. Therefore, our pedagogical approach will also inform our own research process, involving student thinking in our own modes of understanding, which destabilizes the constructed divide between the research field and the classroom.

The guiding question for this project is:

How do students and instructors experience co-taught research-based teaching that combines dialogue between two instructors with activities designed to support dialogue, active participation and deeper learning?

Theoretical Perspectives on Dialogue and Co-Teaching

Our intervention was informed by literature on dialogical teaching, active learning and co-teaching. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding how classroom dialogue may support student engagement and learning, and also how co-teaching can create particular opportunities for such dialogue to emerge.

Dialogical perspectives on learning emphasize that knowledge is not simply transmitted from teacher to student as passive recipients, but rather learning happens through interaction with others. Dysthe argues that learning is fundamentally social and develops through a "diversity of voices heard" (1996: 385). A central concept of her work is "multivoicedness," which refers to the coexistence of different viewpoints within the classroom. Dialogical teaching invites students to participate actively in the co-construction of meaning through discussion, reflection and engagement with "authentic questions" (Dysthe, 1996: 385). Dialogical approaches are particularly relevant when addressing complex and ethically contested topics that do not have straightforward answers, like our topic of uterus transplantation.

The emphasis on dialogue also aligns with research on active learning. Studies have demonstrated that student engagement and participation can support deeper learning than more traditional lecture-based approaches. Deslauriers et al. (2019), for example, found that students often perceive themselves as learning less in active learning environments, despite actually demonstrating greater learning outcomes. Similarly, Russell et al. (2016) have argued for incorporating evidence-based teaching strategies to interrupt the potentially passive nature of the lecture format by interspersing shorter lecture segments with structured opportunities for student discussion, reflection, and collaborative meaning-making. The findings suggest that learning is enhanced when students are invited to actively work with concepts. Inspired by these perspectives and tools, we sought to challenge some of the traditionally transmissive characteristics of the lecture format by incorporating structured opportunities for dialogue in the class and for active participation.

Literature on co-teaching emphasizes that the presence of two or more teachers can transform classroom dynamics by expanding room for exchange and dialogue, and therefore multiply perspectives, among both teachers and students. Tobin (2006) argues that the effectiveness of co-teaching depends on maintaining a focus on student learning while adopting complementary teaching roles. Rather than functioning as two independent lecturers, co-teachers work collaboratively to create learning opportunities for students. A central feature of successful co-teaching is what Tobin describes as a "step-forward, step-back" dynamic, where one teacher temporarily assumes a more central role while the other attends to student responses, identifies signs of uncertainty or disengagement, and contributes additional questions, examples, or perspectives. Such complementary roles create opportunities for responsiveness that may be difficult to achieve in traditional single-instructor teaching. Tobin further highlights the importance of co-generative dialogue as a core component of co-teaching. Through ongoing dialogue, teachers and students learn from one another and share responsibility for the learning process. Co-teaching is therefore not simply a matter of having two instructors present. Rather, it is a pedagogical approach that foregrounds the interaction, the negotiation of meaning, and collective inquiry. Roth and

Tobin (2001) similarly argue that co-teaching allows teaching and learning to be viewed from multiple perspectives simultaneously, creating opportunities for reflection and adaptation in response to what unfolds in the classroom.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that co-teaching may provide unique affordances for dialogical and active forms of learning. We might even call co-teaching a particular dialogical form of teaching. Students not only engage in dialogue with instructors and peers but also observe dialogue between instructors. Through this, teachers model processes through which knowledge is developed. These considerations informed the design of our teaching intervention.

The intervention

Context

The teaching took place in March 2026 as part of the Master's programme in Anthropology of Health at the University of Copenhagen. We were invited to deliver a guest lecture in a course in medical anthropology attended by approximately 25 Master's and advanced Bachelor's students, including both degree-seeking and international exchange students at the University of Copenhagen. The teaching language was English. The session constituted the third of four course modules, meaning that students had already established rapport with one another and were accustomed to the didactical model of having guest lecturers present about their research, though we were the first to co-teach with two teachers present. The class met from 3-6pm, with an introductory lecture from 3-4pm by the lead instructor of the course, and 4-6pm for our guest lecture. In line with the University of Copenhagen's understanding of research integration, the session combined the presentation of current research with opportunities for students to engage with the questions, uncertainties, and interpretive processes that characterize research itself. The intervention was further informed by evidence-based teaching principles emphasizing clear structure, active participation, and opportunities for collaborative learning (Tanner, 2013).

Aims

The intervention had three aims. First, we sought to support active student participation by integrating structured dialogue and group-based activities into a research-based lecture. Second, we wanted to explore dialogical co-teaching (that is, a fluid form of team teaching in which we take turns taking the lead roles) as an alternative to traditional single-instructor lecture formats. Third, we aimed to investigate whether dialogue could support a more nuanced and deeper understanding of complex-ethically charged research contexts among students, including and beyond uterus transplantation. We wanted to keep ourselves, as teachers, open to surprise as to what our activities would surface, rather than to deliver a fully-formed package of information from teacher to student.

More broadly, we wanted to create a learning environment in which ideas could be explored collectively rather than presented as a fixed body of knowledge. Rather than positioning ourselves solely as experts transmitting research findings, we sought to invite students into an ongoing process of inquiry and reflection.

Intervention Design

The two-hour teaching session was organized as two interconnected lecture blocks separated by a short 15-minute break. The lecture materials and activities were planned collaboratively and designed to draw on our different disciplinary perspectives within medical anthropology and public health. Alexandra took the lead in the first lecture block, while Zainab led the second. Core to the design of our intervention, we interspersed the dialogical presentations with two major conversation-based group activities designed to activate and engage students with one another facing a common problem or prompt. Both blocks revolved around their own dialogical activity. In this way, co-teaching was designed as an ongoing dialogue rather than a division of labour.

The first lecture block was designed to encourage students to explore specific cases of uterus transplantation in different global contexts to draw out broader themes about the adoption of experimental medical technologies into standard healthcare. Here, our main aim was to engage students to approach uterus transplantation as a site of

ethnographic study by prompting them in a group activity to devise their own study, identifying who, where, and what they would focus on investigating. Students formed four groups of ~5-7 students each to gather their thoughts, discuss in their groups, and share their 3 main ideas or points in plenum. Unlike the prior two teaching occasions, in this intervention we placed the activity up towards the middle of the block, immediately followed by the devolution of the lecture, which drew upon students' own generated reflections from the opening prompt to institutionalize the background of uterus transplantation as a technology currently at the inflection point towards a clinical practice (Artigue et al. 2014). Our aim was to use the students' own formulations in a validation format in which the lecture about medical anthropological work on UTx validated and affirmed their own curiosities and foci generated during the activation. In this way, the lecture becomes less a unidirectional delivery of information and more a validated connection with the students' own thinking.

The second block, was designed to invite students to employ uterus transplantation as a lens for examining the module's key theoretical foci: personhood, embodiment, and boundaries between life and death. We wanted to encourage students to think along with our co-authored article (Sheikh, Middleton and Jensen 2026), which we had assigned them to read prior to class, using the article as a springboard for articulating their own ideas about how uterus transplantation connected to core themes and categories they were exploring in the course. To encourage different assortments of students from the first activity, we had students count off 1 to 3 and rearrange themselves in three groups throughout the room. We posted three different questions on the board related to three different categories or dimensions of the course (personhood, embodiment/the body, boundaries between life and death) and assigned one question to each group, asking them to think through the questions using the lens of what we had discussed and read about UTx. After 10 minutes of discussion, students shared what they discussed with the class, assuming for a moment the role of teacher and taking on a degree of expertise for the dimension they were assigned while welcoming in the rest of the class into conversation. In this way, students were also included in the co-teaching element.

Evaluation Design

To evaluate the intervention, we collected qualitative feedback from students during the final ten minutes of the session. Students worked in small groups and responded to three evaluation questions using colour-coded post-it notes. The questions focused on students' experiences of the interactions between teachers and students, the role of conversation in their learning, and their main takeaways from the session. In addition to the student evaluations, we draw on observation notes produced by a supervisor who attended the session and on our own post-teaching reflections. Together, these materials provide insight into how the intervention unfolded and how students experienced the dialogical co-teaching format.

Empirical moments

Several moments during the session highlighted how the design, and its embedded ambitions around dialogue and active participation, translated into classroom interactions. Drawing on our own reflections and observation notes from a colleague-supervisor, we focus on three forms of dialogue that emerged during the teaching session: dialogue between teachers, dialogue between teachers and students, and dialogue among students. These forms illustrate how dialogue emerged across multiple levels of the classroom and created opportunities for collective meaning-making. Rather than being confined to particular activities, dialogue became a recurring feature of the learning environment and a central mechanism through which students engaged with the complexities of the topic.

Teacher–Teacher Dialogue: Making Dialogue Visible

One noticeable feature of the teaching was the continuous dialogue between us as instructors. Although we both led different parts of the lecture, the teaching rarely unfolded as two separate presentations. At several points, one of us would elaborate on a point raised by the other, offer an alternative perspective, or connect the discussion to a different aspect of our shared research. Our observer described this interaction as

a "balanced and productive ping-pong" in which comments were exchanged respectfully and supportively. Rather than functioning as interruptions, these exchanges became part of the teaching itself. While one instructor temporarily occupied a more central role, the other remained actively engaged by contributing examples, clarifications, or alternative perspectives. This dynamic resembles what Tobin (2006) describes as complementary teaching roles and a step-forward, step-back approach to co-teaching. Rather than interruptions or disruptions to the flow of teaching, this interaction became part of the teaching itself.

In this sense, students were not only invited into dialogue but were also observing dialogue in action. Through our interaction, uncertainty, interpretation, and knowledge construction became visible rather than hidden behind a single authoritative voice. In this sense, dialogue functioned not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a model for how complex questions can be approached in a collaborative manner.

Teacher–Student Dialogue: Validation Through Student Contributions

To set the classroom tone for the kind of active engagement and dialogical activation we expected to carry through the two hours right from the beginning, we inverted our approach from the prior two lectures and, drawing inspiration from the theory of didactical situations (TDS) model (Artigue et. al. 2014), began the class with an activation exercise. This activation invited students to reflect on what first hearing about uterus transplantation (whether from our pre-assigned article, or from other prior encounters) evoked in each of them. Students were instructed to think for a moment on their own, pair with their neighbor to discuss, and then share one or two thoughts in plenum as a pair, which we captured in writing on the whiteboard. This classical think-pair-share model (Kaddoura 2013) involved a scalar form of dialogue in which students test out their ideas within the relative safety of a person-to-person conversational format before opening up to the wider classroom. As students began sharing their reflections in plenary, one of us facilitated the discussion while the other recorded key words and phrases on the whiteboard. Rather than beginning with expert knowledge, the session began with student voices. According

to the observer's notes, the nature of the responses appeared to shift once students realized that all groups would be invited to contribute and that their comments were being visibly documented. Students moved beyond brief reactions and began offering more elaborate reflections and questions. The whiteboard gradually filled with a range of perspectives, concerns, and interpretations, creating a visible record of the collective thinking in the room. Looking back, this moment illustrates how student contributions became part of the teaching itself rather than simply a precursor to it.

This moment highlighted the importance of validation within a dialogical teaching approach. Our experience was that by writing student contributions on the board and subsequently drawing on them throughout the lecture, student perspectives became part of the teaching itself rather than simply a preliminary exercise before the "real" content began. This practice helped establish an open teaching environment in which ideas could be explored without immediate judgement or categorization as right or wrong. There were no wrong answers. The topic itself, characterized by ethical complexity and multiple legitimate perspectives, further supported this openness.

Student–Student Dialogue: Exploring Ideas Together

The group activities created opportunities for dialogue among students. As we circulated through the classroom, we observed students testing ideas, questioning assumptions, and collectively exploring the implications of uterus transplantation from different perspectives. Rather than reproducing information from the lecture, students frequently extended discussions into related ethical, social, and political questions that they had read or heard about.

Our role as teachers during these activities varied. Different forms of dialogical engagement with the students appeared to generate different dynamics. In some groups, a brief question or comment was sufficient to keep discussion going, while in others we engaged in longer conversations before stepping away. One group that had interacted extensively with Zainab was among the first to volunteer contributions during the plenary discussion, prompting reflection on how teacher

involvement may influence students' confidence to participate publicly. At the same time, another group received relatively little direct interaction from either of us yet still contributed actively to the classroom discussion. These observations suggest that student participation was shaped not only by teacher intervention but also by the broader learning environment that had been established, for example by the opening activity. The activities gave students the opportunity to articulate ideas, encounter alternative perspectives, and develop their thinking collectively before sharing it with the wider class. In this way, dialogue among students became an important mechanism through which engagement and meaning-making occurred.

Evaluation of Student Learning

In the evaluation we used color-coded post-its to record student responses to three questions. On the yellow post-its we invited them to answer: *How did you experience the interactions between: a) the two teachers, b) the teachers and the students?* On the pink we invited them to answer: *What role did conversation play for you (as students), in what you learned during the class?* On the blue we invited them to answer: *What were the main take-aways, in your opinion, from today's class?* In retrospect, we could have asked the students to reflect on their own student-to-student interactions on the yellow post-it, as this was the third part of a triangle of interactions. Student responses were overall enthusiastically positive about the co-teaching experience and the dialogical moments that unfolded in class. For the first question about how they experienced interactions, responses addressed both the interactions between the teachers and between teachers and students. Between the teachers, students commented on a "good balance, switching and interacting," and "bounc(ing) off each other well" in a manner that was "gentle but quick" and felt "natural," "balanced." One student in particular appreciated that one teacher was talking while the other was writing on the whiteboard. Between teachers and students, several students remarked upon how the dialogical mode and activities engendered participation, that we "made (them) participate and put us on the spot (in a nice way 😊)" [smiley face theirs]. Others felt particularly validated in their own responses and

found the teachers "acknowledging;" one student in particular "enjoyed responsiveness" of the teachers and appreciated how we "reinforced points raised by (the students)." Another called the lecture "eye-level teaching" with "no hierarchy" between the students and teachers.

For the second question about the role conversation played for the students in the class, students found it to "shape a very good dynamic," calling what unfolded a "nice group dialogue interaction." Several students commented upon how the conversation "helped dive deep" and "put into practice" and "think critically" about "the concepts we were introduced to," making the material "feel more concrete, less abstract," and voiced appreciation for the "opportunity to talk about examples." One student in particular found it "enlightening to see how different people (background and personality) react differently," though in this case it's unclear from the student evaluation whether the reaction was to the conversation or to the case of UTx – a shortcoming of written and collected versus discussed oral feedback.

Though much of the feedback on class takeaways falls outside the scope of this UP final paper, all students remarked upon a strong sense of the "complexity" -- ethically, morally, medically, politically, and personally – bound up in UTx as a frontier medical technology. A sense of and appreciation for this complexity and the dimensionality, as reflected in the students' responses, was precisely what we had hoped the class would bring about, and is – we believe – related to the dialogical mode of sustaining openness and welcoming in multiple perspectives rather than closing down or narrowing adjudications, or reaching a consensus of opinion.

While the student evaluations seem to indicate that the co-teaching format and dialogical mode of lecturing and activities worked well to support student learning, our evaluations do not contain much by way of constructive criticism, which we could have explicitly asked for in the evaluation instructions. Their responses indicate that it was a positive experience. Still, the evaluations seemed to mirror what we experienced in the class as an engaged room where interpretations and ideas were circulating in a generative and open way, and the lectures did not merely disseminate pre-formed information but rather included students in approaching the complexity of the subject in a more inductive manner.

Reflecting on the teaching and learning environment that we attempted, and were evidently successful, in creating, a pedagogical question that emerges concerns the role of validation in dialogical teaching. Dialogical approaches emphasize exploration, multiple perspectives, and open-ended inquiry rather than the reproduction of predetermined answers. However, students may still seek or need some form of indication that their contributions are relevant and moving in a productive direction. Without some form of validation, open-ended dialogue can create uncertainty about what constitutes meaningful participation. This challenge was not particularly relevant in our teaching context because uterus transplantation is characterized by ethical ambiguity and multiple legitimate interpretations. Rather than evaluating student contributions as right or wrong, we sought to acknowledge and build upon the many perspectives students generated in the classroom. Students were invited into the topic before receiving substantial instruction. In this sense, validation became less explicit than in more traditional teaching formats. Rather than confirming whether answers were correct, validation occurred through recognition, elaboration, and incorporation into the ongoing dialogue. However, dialogue does not eliminate the need for clarification or institutionalization. Particularly in research-based teaching, students may benefit from opportunities to connect their own reflections to relevant concepts, empirical findings, or disciplinary understandings. The challenge is therefore not whether validation should occur, but how it can occur in ways that preserve openness while still providing students with a sense of direction. In our case, the whiteboard functioned as an important intermediary space between open exploration and more structured academic framing and discussion.

Conclusion and future perspectives

Lectures remain a dominant mode of teaching in higher education (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). While they offer an efficient means of communicating complex knowledge, they may also position students as relatively passive recipients of information and pose a challenge for generating active dialogue. In this project, we explored whether a

dialogically designed co-teaching format could create opportunities for more active participation and deeper engagement within a research-based lecture setting.

Our findings suggest that students generally experienced the combination of dialogue, co-teaching, and structured activities positively. The presence of two instructors appeared to support a more dynamic learning environment in which multiple perspectives could be explored and discussed. Dialogue emerged at several levels of the classroom, and rather than functioning merely as a way of communicating knowledge, dialogue became a mechanism through which students engaged with and made sense of the research we collectively explored.

Dialogical teaching is not without challenges and is certainly no pedagogical panacea. Students often enter higher education with expectations shaped by more authoritative forms of teaching, where instructors are expected to provide answers, clarify what is correct, and guide students towards predetermined conclusions. Dialogical approaches, by contrast, require a greater tolerance for uncertainty and open-ended inquiry. Some students may find this productive and engaging, while others may experience it as unsettling or insufficiently structured. A central pedagogical challenge therefore concerns how to balance openness and exploration with forms of validation and academic guidance that help students feel confident that they are progressing in meaningful directions.

Other challenges may emerge in the particular cultural and social environment of the classroom. Not all students participate actively, certain voices can assume dominance, and sometimes students can close open chains of dialogue down—it takes moderation by the teachers to attempt to mediate social dynamics within the classroom and redistribute opportunities for vocalizing thoughts in an open and non-judgmental space. Even still, elements within the broader learning culture that pre-exist the particular classroom environment may also hinder participation in dialogue.

Furthermore, broader structural and cultural challenges shape opportunities for dialogue in higher education. Time constraints, curricular demands, classroom layouts, assessment practices, and established teaching traditions may all limit opportunities for extended

dialogue and collaborative inquiry. Even when teachers seek to create more dialogical learning environments, students and instructors alike remain influenced by educational cultures that often privilege short, authoritative exchanges over longer and more collective explorations of topics. It remains an open question how universities can support teaching formats that prioritizes dialogue and participation, not only through individual pedagogical initiatives but also through the infrastructures, resource allocations, and cultures that shape everyday teaching practice. Ultimately, if research-based teaching aims to engage students not only with knowledge but also with the processes through which knowledge is produced, dialogue may be one important pathway for achieving this.

Despite these challenges, our experience suggests that co-teaching may offer particular affordances for supporting dialogical learning. The visible dialogue between instructors provided a model of collaborative inquiry, while the presence of two teachers created opportunities to attend more closely to student contributions and classroom dynamics, thereby facilitating an atmosphere that centered dialogue and open exchange. For research-based teaching in particular, co-teaching may help bridge the distance between research and teaching by inviting students into the very questions, uncertainties, and interpretive processes that also resemble and characterize the fundaments of academic inquiry.

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