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Original Article

## Uncivil academics: A qualitative case study on the impact of collegial breakdown on team teaching and student engagement.

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Page | 1 **Abstract**

### Abstract

Collegiality among academic staff is a cornerstone of effective higher education delivery, particularly in team-teaching environments. However, breakdowns in collegial relationships, manifested through incivility, lack of communication, and mistrust, can negatively affect collaborative teaching strategies and diminish student engagement. This study examines the impact of deteriorating professional relationships among faculty members on team teaching and student experiences in a South African university context.

### Methods

A qualitative case study design was employed at a South African university between February and April 2022. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A purposive sample of 18 participants was selected: 12 academic staff involved in team-taught modules and 6 final-year undergraduate students enrolled in those modules. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, was used to identify patterns in experiences related to collegiality, pedagogical collaboration, and classroom engagement.

### Results

Of the 12 academic staff participants, 7 were male and 5 female, with an average of 11 years of teaching experience (range 6–18 years). The student group included 4 females and 2 males, with a mean age of 22 years. Findings revealed that 9 of 12 staff reported recurring tensions, poor communication, and unresolved conflicts that disrupted coordinated teaching efforts. These breakdowns led to inconsistencies in lecture content delivery, unclear role allocations, and a lack of mutual support. Students reported a decline in class coherence, conflicting feedback from instructors, and reduced interest in the learning material. Overall, collegial breakdown was found to contribute to fragmented teaching and lower student engagement levels.

### Conclusion

Collegial breakdowns undermine the integrity and effectiveness of team teaching, leading to disjointed course delivery and student dissatisfaction.

### Recommendation

Institutions should establish conflict resolution platforms, enforce codes of collegial conduct, and provide professional development workshops on teamwork and academic civility to foster sustainable collaboration.

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**Keywords:** Academic. conflict, professional development, sustainable collaboration, student outcomes

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## **Introduction and Background Information**

Collegiality in academia serves as a vital component in fostering collaborative teaching, shared governance, and a productive academic culture. In the context of team teaching, where multiple educators work together to plan, instruct, and assess a course, professional relationships among faculty become even more crucial. When these relationships break down due to incivility, lack of communication, or unresolved conflicts, the consequences extend beyond interpersonal tensions to affect course delivery and, ultimately, student learning outcomes. Literature emphasizes that collegiality supports not only organizational health but also teaching effectiveness. According to Gillespie et al. (2021), unresolved faculty conflict can ripple through departments, lowering morale and impacting institutional performance. Kadiyono et al. (2020) argue that team-teaching success depends largely on inter-faculty trust and collaboration, while Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) demonstrate that students are acutely affected by the nature of faculty relationships, which shape their engagement, academic satisfaction, and learning outcomes. Despite its significance, collegiality is often under-recognized in performance appraisals and institutional frameworks, particularly in postcolonial contexts where faculty workloads are high and resources are limited. In South African higher education institutions, where team teaching is used to address large class sizes and curriculum transformation, the need for faculty cohesion is especially urgent.

Collegiality, defined as the professional respect, cooperation, and mutual support among academic staff, is foundational to the integrity of teaching and learning in higher education. Within university environments where team teaching is implemented, particularly in response to large enrolments or interdisciplinary curricula, the need for sustained collegial relations becomes paramount. Team teaching demands not only shared content knowledge but also synchronized pedagogical strategies, open communication, and unified feedback practices. When collegiality breaks down due to interpersonal tensions, professional jealousy, lack of communication, or unresolved conflict, these core teaching practices are severely disrupted, with far-reaching implications for student engagement and course coherence. Globally, the adverse effects of academic incivility have been documented. Gillespie, Walsh, and Johnston (2021) describe how deteriorating faculty relationships can lead to disengagement, stress, and loss of morale, contributing to reduced teaching quality and institutional instability. Similarly, Kadiyono, Herlina, and Subroto (2020) argue

that trust and collaboration are key determinants of successful team-teaching environments, and the absence of these attributes fosters disjointed instruction and faculty burnout. From the student perspective, Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that students are not passive observers of institutional dynamics; rather, they are deeply impacted by the emotional and pedagogical tone set by their lecturers. Disruptions in team teaching, often invisible in management dashboards, are keenly felt in the classroom, where learners experience inconsistency, mixed messages, and disengagement.

In the South African higher education context, these challenges are further exacerbated by resource constraints, high teaching loads, and ongoing institutional transformation. Team teaching is frequently employed to address capacity gaps, yet little empirical work has examined how interpersonal breakdowns among staff undermine this model. Given the increasing use of collaborative teaching in both undergraduate and postgraduate education, understanding the human dynamics that either support or hinder its effectiveness is essential. This study explores how collegial breakdown among academic staff affects team teaching and student engagement in a South African university. By drawing on qualitative data from both lecturers and students involved in team-taught modules, the study sheds light on the subtle but significant ways in which academic incivility disrupts pedagogical alignment and impairs the student learning experience.

## **Methodology**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the impact of collegial breakdown on team teaching and student engagement. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth investigation of lived experiences and institutional dynamics within a single university context, capturing the nuanced effects of interpersonal faculty conflict on collaborative teaching practices and student learning outcomes.

### **Study Setting**

The research was conducted at a public university located in Umlazi Township, south of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Data were collected between February and April 2022. The study focused on the Faculty of Natural Sciences, where team-teaching modules are commonly

implemented to address curriculum integration and large class sizes.

### Participants

A purposive sample of 18 participants was included, comprising two groups:

12 academic staff members are directly involved in team-teaching arrangements, selected from various departments within the Faculty of Natural Sciences.

6 final-year undergraduate students enrolled in the team-taught modules, chosen based on their exposure to at least two lecturers within a single module.

### Inclusion criteria

Staff: Active participation in at least one team-teaching course during the past academic year.

Students: Registered in a module with multiple instructors and willing to share their learning experiences.

### Exclusion criteria

Academic staff not engaged in team teaching.

Students in earlier years of study with no exposure to multiple lecturers in one module.

Any individual unwilling or unable to provide informed consent.

### Method of Selection

Participants were approached face-to-face by the researcher after being identified through departmental records (staff) and class registers (students). Information sheets outlining the study were distributed, and those willing to participate signed consent forms.

### Non-Participation

Of the 14 staff members approached, 2 declined, citing time constraints. Among students, 8 were approached, and 2 declined due to examination commitments. Therefore, a total of 18 participants were included. No participants dropped out after consenting.

### Presence of non-participants

During interviews and focus group discussions, only the participants and the researcher were present. No external observers or institutional administrators attended the sessions.

### Bias

To minimize researcher bias and ensure credibility, the study utilized triangulation by incorporating perspectives from both staff and students. Interview guides were pilot tested for neutrality and clarity, and the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the data collection process. Confidentiality assurances encouraged honest and open responses.

### Study Size

A total of 18 participants were interviewed, which was adequate to reach thematic saturation.

### Data Collection

Interviews: Conducted with 12 staff members, each lasting 45–60 minutes.

Focus group discussions (FGDs): Two FGDs with students (3 per group), each lasting 90 minutes.

Field notes: Taken both during and immediately after each interview and FGD to capture contextual details, group dynamics, and non-verbal expressions.

### Statistical Analysis / Qualitative Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study, no inferential statistical methods were employed. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis.

Data coders: Two independent coders analysed the transcripts. Coding discrepancies were resolved through consensus.

Coding tree: Codes were first generated inductively from transcripts (e.g., "communication breakdown," "conflicting instructions," "loss of student trust"), then grouped into higher-order themes. Cross-group analysis compared staff and student narratives.



## Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Mangosuthu University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (MUT-IREC). Approval was granted on 11 February 2022, authorising data collection between February and April 2025. All participants gave written informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time.

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics

Staff (n = 12): 7 males, 5 females; mean teaching experience = 11 years (range 6–18).

Students (n = 6): 2 males, 4 females; mean age = 22 years.

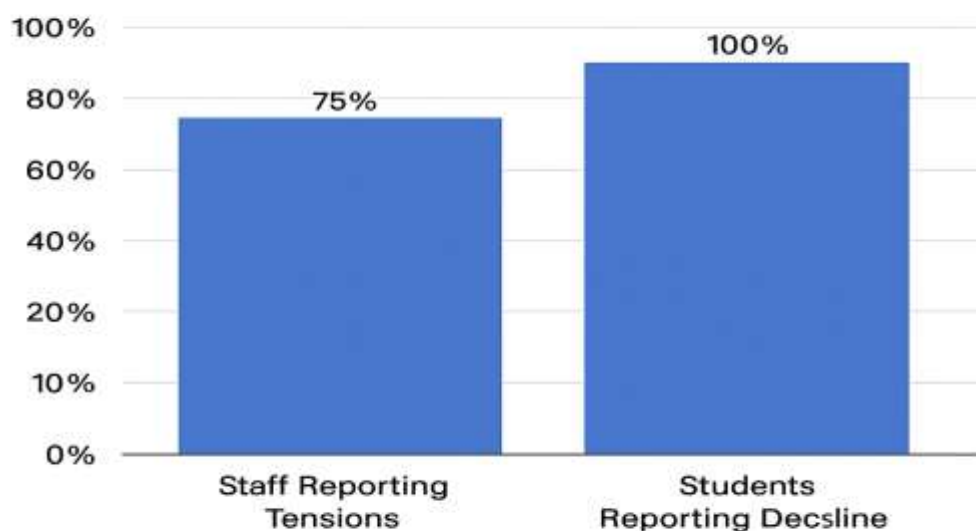
**Table 1. Themes and Codes Generated from Interviews**

Theme	Codes (examples)	Number of References
Communication breakdown	Poor information flow, avoidance, unresolved conflicts	15
Role ambiguity	Conflicting instructions, unclear responsibilities	11
Lack of mutual support	Absence of collaboration, silo teaching	9
Student disengagement	Loss of trust, reduced interest, class confusion	10
Desire for collegial repair	Calls for respect, structured dialogue, conflict mediation	8

The bar graph illustrates the significant impact of collegial breakdown on both academic staff and students, with 75% of staff reporting persistent tensions during team-teaching activities and 100% of students noting a decline in engagement. Staff highlighted issues such as poor communication, lack of collaboration, and interpersonal conflicts, which disrupted coordinated lesson delivery and created a fragmented teaching environment. These

internal conflicts had direct pedagogical consequences, as students experienced confusion from inconsistent instruction, conflicting feedback, and a diminished connection to the learning process. The data underscores that collegial incivility among academics not only undermines professional relationships but also has a cascading effect on student learning, engagement, and overall classroom experience

## Impact of Collegial Breakdown on Teaching and Engagement



**Figure 1: The graph shows the impact of collegial breakdown on teaching and engagement**

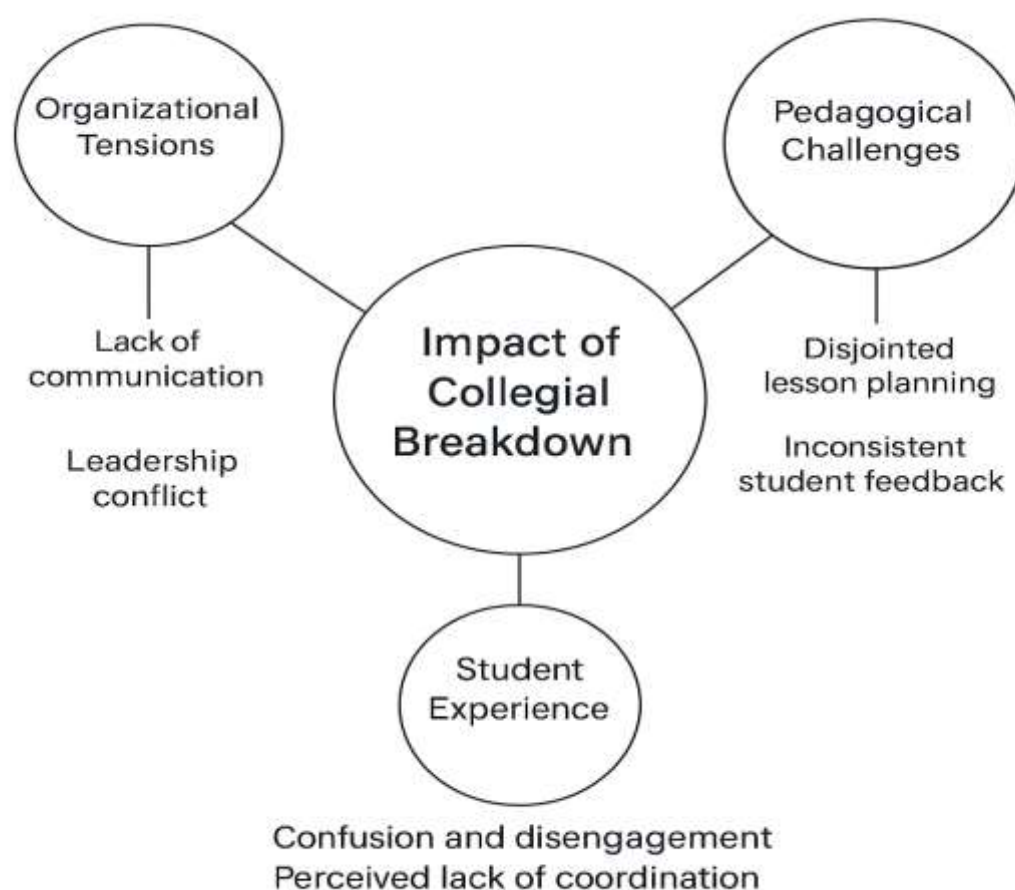
### Discussions

The findings of this study, as visualized in the bar graph and thematic network diagram, reveal a critical link between collegial breakdown among academic staff and diminished student engagement. The bar graph shows that 75% of staff experienced tensions that disrupted teaching coordination, while 100% of students reported a noticeable decline in learning quality, largely due to inconsistent instruction and poor classroom coherence. The thematic diagram further unpacks these dynamics, highlighting how organizational tensions, such as poor communication and leadership conflict, catalyse pedagogical challenges and negatively shape the student experience. These findings align with Kadiyono et al. (2020), who argue that effective team teaching relies heavily on professional trust and collaborative planning, and when these are absent, student learning outcomes suffer. Similarly, Gillespie et al. (2021) found that academic incivility undermines teaching morale and institutional productivity, echoing the staff frustrations

seen in this study. Moreover, the unanimous student response aligns with the work of Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), who emphasize that students are sensitive to faculty dynamics, and disruptions in faculty collaboration often manifest as disengagement, confusion, and academic dissatisfaction. Collectively, this study reinforces that collegiality is not a peripheral professional trait, but a core driver of teaching effectiveness and student success.

### Generalizability

While the findings offer valuable insights into how collegial breakdown affects teaching and student learning, the results should be interpreted with caution when applying them to other institutions. However, the strong alignment with findings from existing literature suggests the study has theoretical transferability, especially in institutions where team teaching is common, and collegiality is a known concern. Further research across multiple institutions and with a larger sample size is recommended to enhance generalizability.



## Conclusion

Diagram 1. Thematic network diagram showing the impact of collegial breakdown on team teaching and student engagement, based on coded qualitative responses.

This study concludes that collegial breakdown among academic staff significantly undermines the quality of team teaching and diminishes student engagement. With 75% of staff reporting interpersonal tensions and 100% of students experiencing negative impacts on their learning, it is evident that poor collegial relationships are not confined to internal staff matters but have far-reaching consequences on pedagogical delivery. The thematic analysis revealed organizational tensions, pedagogical fragmentation, and student disengagement as core outcomes of incivility among faculty. These findings

reinforce the need for institutions to recognize collegiality as a fundamental pillar in maintaining academic excellence and student-centred learning environments, see diagram.

## Limitations

This study was limited by its small sample size, 12 academic staff and 6 students, within a single institutional context, which may not capture the full complexity of collegial dynamics across different departments or universities. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias, particularly in interviews dealing with professional relationships and workplace conflict.





## Recommendations

To mitigate the effects of collegial breakdown, higher education institutions should establish clear policies on academic civility and enforce them through codes of conduct. Professional development workshops focused on team collaboration, conflict resolution, and communication skills should be institutionalized. Furthermore, early-intervention mechanisms such as peer mediation, faculty mentoring, and joint curriculum planning forums can help foster a culture of respect and accountability. Student feedback mechanisms should also be integrated into team-taught modules to detect disruptions caused by faculty discord and ensure continuous improvement.

## Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.

## Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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