

Transforming the Group Paper with Collaborative Online Writing

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The group paper: as a student, you may have had experiences similar to ours, because you probably liked to write more than your peers. This paper often came at the end of the semester, a culmination of all the work that you and, supposedly, your peers had completed up to that point, seamlessly synthesized into a final report. Or, if your experience was like ours, *you* ended up shaping a collection of disconnected paragraphs from your peers into some kind of document, hardly a cohesive paper, strung together with poor transitions and the whiff of a thesis.

Fast-forward to today, where problems with the group paper are compounded by a number of other matters: fears of plagiarism, credibility of online sources, students' ability to work (or not) across time and space to develop their writing, and, of course, the concerns that writing teachers always face about peers reading and responding to each others' work in productive ways rather than just offering a glib "that's good" or "I like it." Given our normal concerns about group writing as well as questions that writing in online spaces raises, how do we as teachers understand collaborative writing through a new literacies perspective? More important, how can we teach collaborative writing using technology, such as blogs, wikis, online word processors, and other social networks?

Although a number of teachers and scholars have begun to ask questions and offer some examples about how wikis and other information and communication technology (ICT) tools can enable collaboration, allow us to rethink pedagogy, and engage all of our students in critical examinations of texts, most of that discussion is focused on the theoretical and pedagogical

benefits of that type of writing and not so much on concrete teaching ideas (WIDE 2005; Garza and Hern 2006; Moxley and Meehan 2006; Richardson 2006). As we all know from our own schooling and teaching experiences, actually having a group collaborate to create a document is hard work. Thus, in this article, we extend those theories into practical activities for teaching and learning collaborative writing utilizing Web-based applications, all the while discussing issues about how groups work together and what the tools can enable, synchronously and asynchronously.

How New Literacies Change Collaboration

Knobel and Lankshear (2006: 80) describe two features of new literacies: the “technical stuff” and the “ethos stuff.” We concern ourselves with both of these and discuss why collaboration in digital environments must engage them both. Along with the technical knowledge about how to operate a computer, upload a photo, or any number of other new literacy tasks, Knobel and Lankshear also argue that new literacies require a different ethos, one that acknowledges “collaborative practices, involving distributed participation and collaboration, where rules and procedures are flexible and open to change” (81). This distinction between a world that is simply full of more technology and a mindset that encourages participation and collaboration in many new ways becomes increasingly important as we think about collaborative writing.

In further considering the ethos, we unpack the definition of collaboration. As mentioned, we have all had the experience of being the one in the group who shoulders the largest burden or (although we may not want to admit it) shirks off most of the work. In thinking about what it means to be a collaborative writer, then, we need to understand what that task ideally might look like. Haring-Smith (1994: 360), in *Writing Together: Collaborative Learning in the Writing Classroom*, suggests that

Although there are many ways in which people can collaborate on a text, we will focus here on papers that involve more than one person contributing directly to the creation of a text and so sharing responsibility for it. This usually means that a number of people interact directly at some point during the production of the text. Most often, a group brainstorms and plans a document that is researched and drafted by one or more individuals working alone. Then the draft is revised and published by a group. Collaborative writing may also involve shared production and/or responsibility for a text, in which the group establishes the initial goals for the project and retains responsibility over the final text by revising it. Although

one or more individual writers may actually draft the work, they are fulfilling the group's goals.

Haring-Smith's definition suggests many points about collaboration that are worth considering, especially from a new literacies perspective. First, people can contribute to a project or cooperate in a group without truly collaborating. Genuine collaboration involves a number of tasks beyond simply getting along and adding one part: giving ideas and feedback, creating content, debating the merits of an overall argument for the paper, writing and revising a particular section, researching information for that section, sharing one's writing by raising questions for peers about content and style, editing all parts of the document, taking a risk as a writer by sharing all of this publicly, and encouraging one's group members to engage in all of these tasks. In short, when a collaborative writing group produces a text, its members share full responsibility for the final product.

Another aspect of ethos is that this type of collaboration raises issues about authorship, especially in our "remix culture" ("Remix Culture" 2006). When a group composes a text, its members might agree and aim toward the goal that no one voice stands out; everyone retains responsibility for his/her own contributions, but the synergy of the group produces a new text that no one could have produced alone. Moreover, in the spirit of the remix culture, group members may take texts they have previously composed — be it from another class, a recently written blog post, or an addition made on a wiki — for integration into the group text. Paul Allison (2005), a teacher in New York City, posted a screencast to his blog illustrating how this process unfolded for his students working on a wiki article on Latino pride. He notes the many ways students both contributed their own writing to the article and revised the writing of others, all the while negotiating the meaning and significance of the subject matter.

When faced with writing in digital environments, the new literacies ethos, as Knobel and Lankshear argue, creates the aforementioned situations of "distributed participation and collaboration, where rules and procedures are flexible and open to change" (2006: 81). To connect this to the technical side of their argument, if one group member creates a wiki page, how do others feel about editing it? If another group member "owns" a Google document, to what extent do other members feel right about adding to or subtracting from it? All of these concerns force us, as teachers of writing, carefully to consider the ethical and technical aspects of collaboration and

to understand the complicated relationship between literacy, “new literacy,” and collaboration.

Moreover, Haring-Smith, who suggests that collaborative writing can take many forms, from the traditional peer response/editing and brainstorming/planning that a group might do all the way through writing a final document with one another, defines collaborative writing in three ways (1994: 361–65):

- **Serial writing:** In this mode of collaborative writing, a “train of individuals” works on a text (361). This could take the form of employees creating individual sections of a report that the supervisor compiles and sends out without further collaboration. From our perspective, this would be cooperation, not collaboration.
- **Compiled writing:** Here, individuals all add components of the text and retain “some control over part of the final text” so the reader can tell who wrote what (362). This might be a collection of essays or poems. This would be a more advanced form of cooperation, because all the parts have to fit but there is not a great deal of negotiation or collaboration among all the writers that goes into this kind of writing, except for perhaps choosing a theme for the text.
- **Co-authored writing:** in this type of writing, “it is difficult (indeed, often impossible) to distinguish the work of one writer from another” (363). In terms of how we are defining collaboration, this would be a text where all authors have a stake in what is said. There is often one facilitator who coordinates the final draft of the text, but everyone is expected to contribute in the critical and creative ways described previously.

Given these three broad modes of collaborative writing and the differing ways in which each mode requires writers to engage in a group’s work, what problems have writing teachers typically had with collaboration? We can think of at least four questions that must factor into our discussion of how to teach in this manner. First, how do we help students manage personality differences, both in terms of social habits and traits required for group work? Second, how do we set reasonable deadlines for groups so they can manage their time? Third, in what ways can our classrooms be structured so that peers trust one another? Finally, how do we deal with the inevitable differences in students’ individual motivation levels as a group project proceeds?

We contend that discussing these issues openly with students as we plan collaborative work is a first step to having true collaboration. The second step is that new technologies now allow us to enact the types of collaborative pedagogy that most teachers have always wanted. Moreover, we contend that these technologies can make the process more streamlined, transparent, and

ultimately collaborative than the types of group papers that we had to write as students.

Writing Activities that Utilize New Technologies for Collaboration

In this section, we suggest a number of activities that we have found useful in writing instruction for everyone from elementary students to in-service teachers in both classroom and professional development settings. We focus on two tools, online word processors and wikis, because they both have advantageous features for collaboration. These case studies should provide some ideas about how and why teachers might want to integrate these technologies into collaborative writing projects, both synchronous and asynchronous.

Cooperative Synchronous Writing with Google Docs:

Creating a List of Favorites

The Silicon Valley giant Google is known worldwide for its Web-searching capabilities, but the company has consistently added a variety of interesting ICT tools to its repertoire. One of tremendous interest to writing teachers is the addition of Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>). On first glance, Google Docs appears to be simply an online word processor, allowing the user to create and edit documents much as one would create and edit documents using any word processing software. The critical difference is the ease with which the user may share authorship; by adding the e-mail addresses of others to a Google document through a “collaborate” function, an author can invite collaborators to view and comment on the document or contribute to it. On a logistical note, using Google Docs requires a free Google account, which in turn requires an active e-mail account.¹

Google Docs possesses one distinct advantage as a writing tool: students can work on the same document, at the same time, and see the changes manifest themselves almost simultaneously in the text. Unlike a wiki, where the writer must save versions—and two different people could be working on a version unbeknownst to each other—the Google Docs interface has three features that enable synchronous writing. First, in the lower left corner of the screen, writers can see who, besides themselves, is currently logged into the document. Second, at regular intervals, Google Docs refreshes the page and saves the changes that have been made.

Third, and most interesting in collaborative writing tasks, Google Docs will tell users if the text that they are working on has also been changed by another writer. If a user tries to save a change to a section of text that someone else has deleted or already edited, Google Docs will give a warning that

the text the user is trying to change is no longer present and so changes will not be recorded. In other words, if someone else beats the user to a revision, he or she cannot revise the work (accidentally or on purpose) without at least looking at it first.

Because of these features, Google Docs presents itself as a unique space for synchronous writing, whether writers are in one classroom and able to talk to one another or sitting at their own computers at home, communicating with one another with a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) client, such as Yahoo Messenger or Skype.

One activity, creating a list of favorites, can be used to introduce students to the Google Docs interface in a computer laboratory and invite them to think about the challenges of cooperatively composing a text from a blank screen. In it, students develop a list of favorites — movies, restaurants, songs, books, and so forth — and contribute to an emerging document. As they write, teachers might ask students to monitor both what they are doing as well as how they feel about it, because this will lead into the discussion at the end of the task. A sample procedure follows:

- Begin a new Google Docs document and invite all the students in as collaborators. Teachers will want to be sure to have their e-mail addresses in a list, such as in a spreadsheet, that can be quickly copied and pasted into the document.
- At the top of the document, type “A list of our favorite ——” and ask the students what they would like to write about.
- Once a topic is chosen, instruct the students to begin writing, editing, and revising the document for ten minutes in whatever ways they see fit. Suggest that they use the many tools that Google Docs offers including comments, highlighting, and hyperlinks.
- As they work, monitor the room. Note feelings of frustration that some students may have as they work. Make mental notes about what is happening in the document.
- Once the time is up, ask students to create their own Google document and write down what they are feeling and thinking about the activity.
- Facilitate a discussion about their feelings first and thoughts about collaboration second. It is important for them to note some of the successes but also the feelings of frustration that cooperatively editing a document in a synchronous environment can produce.

In our experience, this activity leads students to describe some of the feelings that they had the first time that they were in a chat room, but it also allows

them to think about how multiple authors on one document at one time could be beneficial, especially if they are focused on revising one section and make it known who will be doing what.

Other Activities using Google Docs

- Brainstorming a list of ideas.
- Embedding hyperlinks to sources so the group can all check them out easily.
- Clarifying the purpose and audience for an assignment by writing about key words and phrases that are important or confusing.
- Generating questions about the assignment that could be used for peer response.
- Highlighting or copying important pieces of text to show significance.
- Asking questions about clarity or purpose and inviting responders to insert comments as a way of discussing the effectiveness of specific points in a draft.
- Responding to drafts via comments on a blog post, in the discussion page of a wiki, or with the comment feature in Google Docs.
- Editing drafts, looking at changes in versions, and discussing mechanical and rhetorical decisions that went into those changes.
- Revising others' work to clarify meaning, add detail, reorganize ideas, and contribute to the overall meaning of the writing.
- Creating a discussion item or note explaining why and how revisions have been made.

Wikis and Collaborative Writing

By now, most educators have heard of the (sometimes eyebrow-raising) effects of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia. Because Wikipedia is user-editable, meaning that (practically) any entry in it can be modified by anyone online, its reliability and authority raise thoroughly legitimate questions in the minds of most educators. Who wrote the entry on a given topic? What professional knowledge does that writer have? What sources informed the writer in constructing the entry? Although these questions express valid concerns about the Wikipedia entry in question, they demonstrate a mindset focused on the final product to the exclusion of the social processes involved in creating that product. These latter processes are a locus of any wiki's power and at the heart of a new literacies vision of collaborative composing. Although Wikipedia is clearly the best-known example, wikis abound, and we have experience using three interfaces, all with benefits and drawbacks that are too numerous to describe here: Wikispaces, PB Wiki, and Seedwiki. For a complete comparison guide to wikis, see the "Wiki Choice Matrix" at www.wikimatrix.org/wizard.php.

A defining feature of all wikis is that they feature several tabs or links with names such as “Edit,” “History,” and “Discuss” on each and every page. These links are fairly self-explanatory, but they warrant a closer look as we think about collaborative composition. Following the “Edit” link allows the user, as a visitor of the wiki, to change the content of the page from whatever appeared before, whether it is fixing a misplaced comma or erasing an entire entry. The “History” link reveals the changes the page has gone through since its creation; every revision made is saved and viewable, along with information about the time, date, and author (if available) of each change (Google Docs also has a similar feature). Clicking “Discuss” links the user to a page wherein discussions about the page take place; these often include writers’ rationales for why they made particular changes to the page. The implications of these wiki features for collaborative writing should be clear, although for more ideas, see “For Teachers New to Wikis” (Moxley, Morgan, Barton et al. 2006).

Using a Wiki to Support Inquiry

Students engaged in inquiry projects are often asked to read widely and take notes about their reading. Although this is a time-tested procedure, the impact of such note taking is usually limited to the student alone. Using a wiki can widen the audience for students’ notes and provide a means of gathering and considering more information than individuals would be able to accomplish on their own. The following is an activity that replicates a jigsaw reading project but with more visible and lasting results. It involves a number of different writing tasks, most of which would be characterized as informal; the activity as a whole operates as a scaffolding—an extended prewriting—for a more formal composition. A sample procedure follows:

- Find four texts related to the class’s inquiry project.
- Divide the class into groups of four, and assign each group member a different text.
- Create a wiki page for each group, with links to three other wiki pages:

Schema
Readings
Findings

- Have group members brainstorm what they know about the inquiry topic and collaboratively create the “Schema” page. When completed, share pages with entire class to get a wider sense of class members’ prior knowledge about the topic.

- After students have read their assigned article, ask them to write a synthesis of it on the “Readings” page. The synthesis may take a number of forms: summary, response, notes, and so forth. Students can use the “Discussion” section of this page to debate the merits and drawbacks of the synthesis.
- Ask students to read the syntheses of students in other groups who read the same article and reflect on the similarities and differences in the syntheses. These reflections can be completed as new wiki pages, blog entries, or simply response journal entries.
- Have students revise their syntheses based on their readings of their classmates’ work.
- In their groups, students read together their “Readings” page in its entirety, identifying key ideas about the inquiry topic. The collection of key ideas goes into the “Findings” page.
- Finally, share each group’s “Findings” pages with the entire class. Use these findings as springboards for the more formal writing about the inquiry project and ask students to reflect upon the collaborative knowledge-building processes in a blog or other informal genre.

Representing a Book: Multigenre Collaborative Writing

Harvey Daniels, author of *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups* (2002), advocates literature circle pedagogy, a teaching practice that has become increasingly common in secondary and higher education. By their nature, book clubs are collaborative structures wherein groups of people socially construct knowledge about the book they are reading together. They are exciting, vibrant additions to the classroom; however, online collaborative writing environments, such as Google Docs or wikis, can enhance these already positive classroom experiences.

Most literature circles culminate in projects through which the group members represent the book they have read — its events, characters, themes, and implications. One method that engages students in critical thinking about the book, as well as provides practice in working with and understanding a variety of genres, is to ask reading groups to construct multigenre online book projects. The multigenre project, first described by Tom Romano in *Writing with Passion* (1995) and further explicated in *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers* (2000: 4), invites students to write about a topic from a variety of perspectives using many genres. Its multivocal nature lends itself well to the task of representing a group’s view of a book. In a more traditional form, the group might be expected to present a unified and coherent perspective through one final essay, even if they had widely divergent responses to the text. These diverse points of view, which might be obstacles

to collaboration in a more traditional project, become strengths in a cooperative multigenre project. A sample procedure follows:

- Provide students with samples of multigenre projects, and study as a class the ways that such texts operate. Many examples can be found online; Romano's books provide numerous samples as well. It is useful to ask students to note the genre, speaker, audience, point of view, and claim for each genre of the sample being studied.
- Create, or have students create, a new wiki page or Google Doc for each book read in literature circles.
- On the new Web page, brainstorm ideas for genre-based responses to the book. For each idea, include the genre, the speaker, the point of view, the claim that can be made with that idea, and why it would be a good contribution to the project. Several Web sites have extensive lists of genres that may prove helpful in the brainstorming stage, and ReadWriteThink.org offers the "Multigenre Mapper" (2007) tool. Because the final projects will be Web-based, the inclusion of visual genres (photographs, artwork, video, sound recordings) is also possible.
- Distribute the work. Group members determine responsibilities for completing the genres. Some groups have completed each genre as individuals; others have worked as whole groups or subgroups. Provide a due date for first drafts.
- Allot time for group review of projects. Once all genres have been written, conduct a "read around" with other groups. Each group member should read the draft multigenre project of another group and insert comments or questions into that group's project (having responders use a different font color is useful). Different groups will require varying amounts of support for this activity, depending on how much peer revision they have already completed in class.
- Once the comments have been reviewed by the writers, allow time for revision to improve the project.
- Create (or ask students to create) a master page that links all of the multigenre projects. Include in the master page an explanation of the projects (what they are and the purpose they serve).
- Publicize the master page's Web address to the school, district, and community as a resource for others interested in the books. Over time, as your book selections change, simply add more links to your master page.

Collaborative Online Study Guides

The ease with which wikis and Google Docs are created and shared makes them ideal venues for collaborative efforts to capture and present the learning that takes place in a classroom. In classes that use examinations for assess-

ment, effective teachers usually create a study guide in some form that provides students with an overview of the test's content. Such an approach helps students by alerting them to the teacher's expectations but also limits the learning value to that established by the teacher alone, excluding the student perspective. With the power of an online collaborative writing environment at one's disposal, the teacher can make an outline of the content to be covered by the examination and ask students to edit and expand the document. The use of typographical elements can demonstrate where some edits, particularly ones that may be useful to discuss further, have taken place. Consider the following sentence from a recent college literature course examination wiki: "The palimpsest is a model for intertextuality described by ~~Julia Kristeva~~Roland Barthes." The strikethrough type shows that Kristeva's name was initially attributed to the palimpsest but replaced when another student edited the document. Rather than a simple deletion and insertion, the use of strikethrough shows a location of potential confusion that the teacher can address in class. Ideally, the student input into the review document will be useful in the construction of the actual examination. A sample procedure follows:

- Create a new wiki page or Google Doc. Add an outline of the major concepts, texts, or units of study to be assessed in the examination.
- Invite students to edit or elaborate on the study guide.
- Provide guidelines about how to represent different types of input into the study guide. Using typography (as in the strikethrough example) can make the document more interactive. For instance, ordinary black type can represent factual assertions, red type can indicate that the writer is posing a question, blue type can represent answers to the questions posed by others, and green type can be used to show student claims that are not factual but that may reflect discussions from class.
- Review the study guide with students periodically to address any issues being raised within the document. Creating the document at the beginning of the unit of study allows the document to take shape as the topics are introduced (and therefore fresh in the minds of students), providing a road map of the class's learning.

Other Sticky Parts about Collaboration:

Supporting a Social Space and Thinking through

Assessment in the Group Paper

As we conclude this discussion of collaborative writing from a new literacies perspective, we are left with more questions than answers:

- What about authorship? Who “owns” a collaborative piece? The initiator of the document? The contributors? The viewers?
- Will there have to be a single, final author for each piece or can it truly be an equal experience? Should it be?
- What about assessment? How and when do we assess the group? Individuals?

As we have talked with colleagues from other schools and teaching situations, we have been able to gather some advice on how to think through these issues. Here is a list of what might be done to avoid problems when teaching collaborative writing:

- Initiate group discussion about ethical concerns related to authorship and responsibility. Talk about copyright, plagiarism, and other fair use in educational contexts, including opportunities for using materials licensed by Creative Commons.
- Let students “mess up” documents and then fix them (revert to previous versions) so they can experience the tools afforded by the technology in terms of revisions and history functions.
- Make the social behaviors of collaboration transparent (primarily asking good questions and appropriately responding to thoughts and feelings of others).
- Ask students, as individuals, to name their assets and liabilities as a group member and choose tasks accordingly. Examine and acknowledge changing group dynamics over time.
- Create a list of next steps for the group and individuals to take as a project proceeds.
- Have frank discussions about the nature of revision, especially how it differs from editing, so no one gets offended when phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or entire sections are revised.
- Encourage participants to ask good questions and keep conversations going through the “Discussion” page or with inserted comments.
- Encourage students to move beyond simple responses to more thoughtful and constructive ones. Have them advocate for themselves as authors and members of the group by asking good questions and providing the type of feedback that they would want to hear, too.
- Discuss access issues related to hardware and connectivity so no group member is left out, especially in the initial planning stage or as a project nears completion.

Given the many ways in which students can compose using online word processors and wikis, and the fact that they can do it synchronously and

asynchronously, we believe that teachers can use these tools to promote truly collaborative learning and avoid the pitfalls that typically occur with the group paper.

Notes

In the spirit of collaboration, we thank the many people who have contributed to our thinking on this topic, several of whom attended our collaborative writing session in November 2006 at the National Writing Project Annual Meeting in Nashville, Tennessee.

1. Like all technologies, there are many other services that teachers can use besides the ones we mention here. Writeboard, Insta Coll, and Think Free are three other online word processors. Also, groups can use mind-mapping tools like Gliffy or research tools like Diigo in the prewriting and organizational stages of a writing project.

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Teaching Marx, Dickens, and Yunus to Business Students

Deborah Vlock

Teaching literature at a business college can be a complicated but rewarding experience. Although most of my first-year students will mention they like to read books by entrepreneurs or CEOs rather than works of fiction or poetry, there are many points on which we meet, both intellectually and personally. Almost everyone in the class reads *something*, and most of them like to be intellectually challenged. But what happens when the syllabus includes texts that are critical of the socioeconomic structures that have inspired them to choose their major?

Here is my recurring challenge: to create an atmosphere in which my students can read, consider, and even appreciate opinions on business and capitalism that may differ from their own — and from the general culture of our institution. How have I been able to accomplish this? By sharing the reins with them, so that they have a stake in the exchange of ideas that characterizes our learning experience, and by helping them to read the course texts through the lens of their own experience. Our community is one in which readers and texts intersect in provocative ways, the culture of business and profit that informs much of these students' education is scrutinized, and the classroom ethos is characterized by a particular focus on ethics.

Let me be completely honest. Like many of my humanities colleagues, I bring to the table a slight prejudice against the untempered pursuit of wealth and a strong belief in the ethical and humanistic imperatives of doing business. Many of my students feel a certain commitment to doing

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