
TEACHING TIP SHEET

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

by *Emily Viggiano*

Definition and History of Collaborative Pedagogy (The “What”)

Collaborative pedagogy is a term used to describe classroom activities in which students work and learn together. The term can describe activities as diverse as peer tutoring/response/discussion (in which students comment on each others' work) and group papers (in which several students or the entire class work together to create one finished product). Its uses include distribution of information, the creation of collaborative class artifacts, and a space for discussion and review outside of the classroom (Guzdial, 271). This tip sheet will focus specifically on collaborative writing, a specific kind of collaborative pedagogy in which several students work together to co-author a text.

Modern interest in collaborative pedagogy grew out of the influx of nontraditional students in the 1970s, following the establishment of open-admission policies at institutions of higher learning (Howard, Stewart). The method then gained popularity in the social constructionist movement of the late 1980s, which valued "its attempt to do away with the sterile and non-productive authoritarianism of the traditional classroom" (Stewart, 59). Despite its advantages, many composition theorists note that the concept of collaborative writing "contradicts a long cultural tradition that privileges the individual agent and especially the solitary author" (Howard, 2) and the practice has received its share of criticism. This tip sheet will address those criticisms and make suggestions as to how to overcome them in the classroom. Finally, it will offer Peter Elbow's Collaborative Collage as an example of one in-class collaborative writing assignment that can be easily integrated into your syllabus.

The Benefits of Incorporating Collaborative Writing in the Composition Classroom (The “Why”)

- ? The process of writing collaboratively forces the writer to put “tacit” decisions about his/her writing process into words. This, according to Elbow, “forces students to become more conscious and articulate about rhetorical decision making” (373).
- ? Collaboration allows students to learn from each other, as confident students will model successful writing practices for struggling students (Webb, 607).
- ? Co-authorship allows students to work on complex projects, which may otherwise be too large in scope for an individual author to tackle over the course of the semester (Howard, 10).
- ? The process of working in a group fosters relationships among a community of writers. Elbow describes this as taking away the “loneliness” of the writing act (372).
- ? Collaboration focuses on the generation of many possible points of view/solutions to a problem, which ultimately leads to more complex conclusions (Howard, 10).
- ? Collaborative writing gives students practice at a kind of writing that will benefit them in their chosen careers, as much professional/business writing is co-authored (Stewart, 63).

Common Criticisms of Collaborative Writing, and Tips to Overcome them in the Classroom

? **Criticism:** *Groups are difficult to manage at both the organizational and personal level.*

Helen Dale's research on collaborative writing found that group work is nearly universally unpopular with students (68). This is frequently because groups (depending on size) can become difficult to manage, and the time allocated to group organization, meeting times and meeting places can detract from time spent on meaningful work. In addition to this, difficult group members can disrupt the dynamic of a group.

? **Answer:** *Class time spent discussing the difficulties frequently encountered in group work can produce valuable strategies for managing the work load and dealing with difficult members.*

Tip - Let students know about the project at the beginning of the term, so they can plan their time accordingly. If the assignment is large or multi-stage, consider providing a timeline with suggestions of when specific tasks should be completed. Even better, have students come up with their own timeline. Howard suggests that you "require that they commit their timetable to writing" (12). This provides accountability, and lets you know when to expect "deliverables."

Tip - Provide a complete class list to students including school email addresses, or else set up a class listserv or blog so that students can be in contact with each other outside of class.

Tip - Ask students to fill out a survey (or to free-write) on what kind of a member they are in a group. (Too passive? A group hijacker? The secretary? The moderator?) Who do they like to work with in a group? As Terry mentioned, these self-reflections can inform group formation.

Tip - Discuss Barbara Oakley's suggestions for dealing with difficult group members as a class! She gives wonderful descriptions of difficult personalities, and how to deal with them (Ex: "reflect back the dysfunctional behavior of the hitchhiker, so the hitchhiker pays the price-not you. Never accept accusations, blame, or criticism from a hitchhiker.")

? **Criticism:** *Collaboration unfairly penalizes above-average students, who would rather work alone.*

Collaboration in the classroom has been labeled as "more dangerous than traditional teaching, because it masks asymmetrical power relations in the classroom" (Zellermayer, 187). In other words, collaboration often assumes a group dynamic in which all members are equal participants in both ability and desire to contribute. As a result, groups containing above-average students produce the best work consistently and below-average students who are paired with above-average students (in a heterogeneous grouping) benefit. Because above-average students perform best when placed in a group of their high-performing peers (a homogeneous group), some argue that collaborative learning unfairly penalizes the above-average student. However, according to a study conducted by Webb, et al., "heterogeneous groups provide a greater benefit for below average students than they impose a detriment on high-ability students" (607).

? **Answer:** *The type of assignment you give can help overcome this difficulty.*

Tip - Make sure that, as Howard puts it, your assignment is one "best accomplished by a group rather than an individual; otherwise, the task is artificial, leading to students' frustration and irritation" (9). For example, Howard assigned her groups to work together in order to write a chapter from her course's style textbook (which they had criticized). This assignment was successful because the topics students wound up writing on "were not topics that solitary

sophomores could have treated authoritatively, for they demanded intensive labor and high-level synthesis" (10).

Tip - When writing assignments, keep in mind the different kinds of collaboration described by Lunsford and Ede, and the benefits of each. In dialogic collaboration, the group works together on all aspects of the project, whereas in hierarchical collaboration, different parts of the project are assigned to individual members (133-134). Dialogic collaboration may benefit the below-average student, whereas hierarchical collaboration may be favored by above-average students, who prefer to work alone. Try balancing these two in your assignments, by having groups work dialogically during the brainstorming phase of the project, and then working together to assign individual tasks to be worked on by specific members.

Tip - Try a "limited" collaboration project, like Peter Elbow's Collaborative Collage. Elbow puts his students into small groups. He has them individually write as much as possible on a given topic and choose sections they like most. Students then share their favorite pieces with the group, and decide together which pieces will be included in the collage essay (at least one thing from every member must be used). Then the students individually write feedback on what's been selected. As a group, they decide on the sequence for pieces, and whether anything needs to be added. Individually, they write those new pieces, and then come back together to make revisions to the draft. This "limited collaboration" assignment can be used as a bridge to better solo-writing, and the ability to "talk to oneself, to give voice to the multiple views and consciousnesses that inhabit us" (Elbow, 377).

? **Criticism:** *Collaborative writing technology encourages students not to "own" what they write*

Technological applications to allow communal authorship of one text (such as the Wiki or the CoWeb) employ open-authorship, which makes no distinction between teacher and student editing privileges. As a result, some argue that this encourages irresponsible and destructive edits, in which students vandalize each others' work without fear of repercussion. However, according to Guzdial, who has used over 100 CoWebs at GeorgiaTech in the past three years, there are very few instances of "malicious behavior" (Guzdial, 270).

? **Answer:** *If you want to make use of available technology, a class overview/exploration of online collaborative writing and its etiquette may prevent malicious edits before they happen.*

Tip - Have students investigate and analyze technologies available to support collaborative writing (there's an extensive list of collaborative writing projects compiled under the Wikipedia entry for "collaborative writing"). How do people post differently on each of these formats? Which keep track of modifications (who made them and when?) Do some formats lend themselves more to author accountability? How will the class deal with vandalization, should it occur?

? **Criticism:** *Collaborative writing and "group papers" are difficult to grade*

Because "the entire educational institution predicates its judgments on individual performance" (Howard, 9), teachers face difficulty in grading group work.

? **Answer:** *Discuss the evaluation of collaborative papers as a class.*

Tip - Come up with a grading rubric together as a class - should the paper receive one grade, or should students be evaluated individually?

Tip – Ask students to write a reflective piece on the experience of group work, detailing how the dynamic of the group either helped or hindered their experience, and to make suggestions about grading.

References and Further Reading on Collaborative Pedagogy (Mostly Theory)

- Handa, Carolyn. "Politics, Ideology, and the Strange, Slow Death of the Isolated Composer or Why We Need Community in the Writing Classroom." *Computers and Community: Teaching Composition in the Twenty-first Century*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990. 160-184.
- Stewart, Donald C. "Collaborative Learning and Composition: Boon or Bane?" *Rhetoric Review*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988): 58-83.
- Webb, Noreen M., Kariane M. Nemer, Alexander W. Chizhik and Brenda Sugrue. "Equity Issues in Collaborative Group Assessment: Group Composition and Performance." *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter, 1998): 607-651.
- Zellermayer, Michal. "When We Talk about Collaborative Curriculum-Making, What Are We Talking about?" *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer, 1997): 187-214.

References and Further Reading on Collaborative Writing Practices Specifically

- Dale, Helen. "Collaborative Research on Collaborative Writing." *The English Journal*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (January, 1994): 66-70.
Article makes some very interesting points about valuing the process of collaboration and the ideas generated through discussion over the final product. Also interesting discussion of how planning is emphasized in the coauthoring process.
- Ede, Lisa and Andrea Lunsford. "Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing." Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois University Press: 1990.
This article does a wonderful job of making explicit all the benefits of incorporating collaborative writing in the classroom, and on how the practice helps students learn to integrate multiple voices/arguments into one text.
- Elbow, Peter. "Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing." In *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. Oxford University Press: 2000 (pp 372-378).
Particularly helpful for specific suggestions of classroom activities which use collaborative writing as a bridge to better solo writing, such as the collaborative collage.
- Guzdial, Mark, Jochen Rick and Colleen Kehoe. "Beyond Adoption to Invention: Teacher-Created Collaborative Activities in Higher Education." *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2001): 265-279.
Article written by the inventor of the CoWeb, a computer technology that (like a Wiki) facilitates co-authorship. Useful for those considering using such technology in the classroom.
- Howard, Rebecca Moore. "Collaborative Pedagogy," in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Gary Tate et al., eds. Oxford University Press: 2000.
The first half of this article deals with collaborative learning in general, but about nine pages in, the author has an excellent section on her experiences with collaborative writing in the classroom, including recommendations, and examples of collaborative writing assignments she used.
- Oakley, Barbara. "It Takes Two to Tango." *Journal of Student Centered Learning*, Vol. 1, No.1 (2003): 19-28. New Forum Press http://www.newforums.com/news_jccpage.htm.
This is a longer version of the article, "Coping with Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams," which provides valuable advice to teams on how to manage difficult group members.