

Classroom Practice: Collaborative Writing

Description

The practice of collaborative writing has fairly recently (in comparison to other, more traditional techniques) entered classrooms in response to the need of addressing the issues of structuring, negotiating, and combining ideas in a written form. Though there are some scholars (Anne Ruggles Gere) who argue that it had existed throughout the history of education, it was most comprehensively treated, both in terms of theory and practice, in “Singular Texts/Plural Authors” (1990, based on the 1984 research), the seminal work of Lisa S. Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford. The application of collaborative writing has since become so widespread that it now can be regarded as a particular method but also as an underlying pedagogical principle.

The basic idea this practice rests upon is that all texts are in some way generated by groups of people. Some of those people are traditionally acknowledged (author, source), some are merely taken for granted (reader, society). In every classroom act of collaborative writing, whether it be a single exercise or a semester long practice, the members of the text-generating group are identified, their input is analyzed, valued and rehearsed. Through this process the text itself is deconstructed, its formative elements are described, tested, and reinvented for the benefit of students’ understanding of the meaning, importance and practice of writing.

In the most elementary application of collaboration in the writing process, students would be required to jointly discuss a topic, plan out an outline, and contribute elements of text (paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or words) to a collaborative piece, while at the same time questioning their choices from multiple perspectives.

Here collaborative writing implies the immediacy of roles of both a writer and a reader (in fact these roles become functionally interchangeable), communication is not postponed, thus making students more aware of the relationship between the processes of text-creation and text-consumption. In other words, students learn they are responsible for any given text both as creators and as consumers. Individuality is, rather than being suppressed (as the critics of this approach often argue), promoted through a dialogue, ideas are recognized as having a wider, universal value exactly because they are formed by a group, a community.

This democratizing of knowledge and the emphasis on learner-responsibility are certainly results of subscribing to creative writing as the general teaching principle. On the other hand, in its more practical form, it can be an efficient exercise in use of conversational, analytical, and organizational skills, while at the same time developing students’ writing in terms of structure, voice, audience, clarity of expression, and continuation of dialogue within the academic discourse.

Practical Application - Writing a Collaborative Argument Essay

This exercise would be organized over a series of classes (series of steps, or assignments), and would revolve around a single topic, or an issue determined by the instructor.

Assignment No. 1

- a) According to the parameters set by the instructor (type of source, length, broadness of subject) each student would have to find a text (essay, article) that corresponds to the particular topic. Each student would be required to read the text, and produce a written summary, as well as to prepare a short presentation in which s/he would inform his/her colleagues about the way his/her chosen text reflects the main topic.
- b) In a class discussion students (guided by the instructor) would choose three texts that cover the main topic to the fullest. It would be best if two of these texts would be in the most extreme opposition to each other, with the third text positioned somewhere in between.

Assignment No. 2

- a) All students would be required to read the three chosen texts and come up with at least three questions that would have to be answered in regards to the main topic.
- b) During a classroom discussion the questions would be analyzed, and those that the class decides are the best would be grouped in a sequence that should resemble an outline of an argument paper.

Assignment No. 3

- a) Out of these questions each student would be assigned one to develop in a paragraph corresponding to the place of that particular question in the overall essay outline. Students would be encouraged to draw quotes from any of the texts that were considered in the class (not just the selected three), and to produce a strong, polished paragraph.
- b) All the paragraphs would be read in class and arranged into a single essay, or, depending on the number of students and the length of their paragraphs, in multiple essays. These composite essays would be discussed, students would offer suggestions how to improve them etc.

Assignment No. 4

Each student would be required to revise and edit the same composite essay, now focusing on issues of voice, flow, and coherence. Students would be allowed to modify this essay to fit their own individual ideas, introduce new paragraphs, sources, or, in other words, to individualize the collaborative text. They would also be expected to work on these, now individual, essays with tutors, in order to receive a more objective feedback. The new, individualized essay would be submitted as the final product of this particular project.

Ideally, through this exercise, students would develop practice in:

- ❖ researching a topic
- ❖ developing a thesis (and questions to support it)

- ❖ outlining
- ❖ constructing an efficient paragraph
- ❖ structuring a convincing argument
- ❖ critically reading both their own writing, but also the writing of others
- ❖ class discussion
- ❖ defining the audience
- ❖ use of voice
- ❖ revising and editing
- ❖ importance of listing sources (along with other sources students would be required to mention their own classmates as co-authors)

This project should not take more than five weeks, and could take place in the first third of the semester, in a class the objective of which would be that the students write further (one or two) argument/research essays independently. By being engaged in collaborative work, students would develop a clearer understanding of what is expected of them in terms of academic writing, but at the same time would not feel the full pressure of constructing the very first essay themselves.

For this particular exercise, an online tool, such as Blackboard, would be extremely helpful, although any type of an online forum could serve the purpose.

Additionally, by placing this exercise (or project) at the beginning of the writing course, the instructor could avoid the use of the narrative essay which is traditionally employed to introduce the students to the concept of college composition. Thus, at least in theory, this exercise would be most applicable in schools/disciplines which insist more narrowly on developing analytical skills and clarity of academic expression. One of the important gains of this project would be to show students how, although they are writing a certain kind of essay with its determined rules, they still develop their individual approaches – the physical evidence of this being the many different essays reproduced out of one, collective, cooperative essay.

Annotated Bibliography

Belanger, Kelly, and Jane Greer. "Beyond the Group Project: A Blueprint for a Collaborative Writing Course." Journal Of Business and Technical Communication 6.1 (1992): 99-115.

The article describes a 10-week (computer-enhanced) collaborative writing course designed for students of business (at OSU). It includes a detailed layout of the classroom with basic hardware requirements. The students are divided into fixed collaborative groups during the quarter, working on genres pertaining to the field of business (direct-mail assignments, customer complaints, job application letters etc.).

Duin, Ann Hill. "Computer-Supported Collaborative Writing: The Workplace and the Writing Classroom." Journal Of Business and Technical Communication 5.2 (1991): 123-50.

An overview of computer technology supporting the collaborative writing method. Description of early software tools (The Coordinator, EXPRES, Collaborative Editing System, Quilt, CRUISER, Seen etc.) with a more detailed analysis of Collaborative Writer and AppleShare. Identifies problems with each of the particular tools and defines questions/issues that need to be addressed in development of future computer applications.

Ebest, Sally Barr, Thomas Fox, and David Bleich. Writing with : New Directions in Collaborative Teaching, Learning, and Research. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994.

Collection of seventeen essays interested in "changing social and institutional conditions so that collaboration can be more regularly successful" and pushing "toward new identities for students and teachers." Part I deals with issues of ideology, society and university, whereas Part II is more oriented towards classroom practices. Covers collaborative writing/learning applications in graduate, ESL, race and gender studies, and introduces alternative models of collaboration.

Ede, Lisa S., and Andrea A. Lunsford. Singular texts/plural Authors : Perspectives on Collaborative Writing. Pbk. ed. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.

Detailed description of Ede and Lunsford 1984 research of all aspects of group writing, with underlying theoretical concepts. Chapter "The Pedagogy of Collaboration" deals with practical challenges of employing collaborative writing methods in teaching of composition. Appendix contains collaborative writing assignments (for students of business and engineering).

Forman, Janis. New Visions of Collaborative Writing. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992.

Collection of nine essays from 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Each text has a section on pedagogical implications of collaborative writing theory. The subjects range from historical overviews ("For Profit and Pleasure: Collaboration in Nineteenth Century Women's Literary Clubs", by Anne Ruggles Gere and Laura Jane Roop) and gender issues ("The Androgynous Collaborator: The Impact of Gender Studies on Collaboration", by Mary M. Lay) to new technologies ("Computer-Based Conversations and the Changing Nature of Collaboration", by Cynthia L. Selfe).

Gere, Anne Ruggles. Writing Groups : History, Theory, and Implications. Carbondale: Published for the Conference on College Composition and Communication by Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

Dates collaborative practices in the US to the early 19th century, contesting the misconception that writing groups emerged with Peter Elbow's student-centered learning. Has a whole chapter (Practical Directions) with advice and examples on how to implement the collaborative writing theory in composition classrooms. Contains a detailed bibliography organized by year and subject (quality, intellectual, rhetorical, instructional, paper-load, and attitude).

Janda, Mary Ann. "Collaboration in a Traditional Classroom Environment." Written Communication 7.3 (1990): 291-315.

The article investigates the impact of collaborative writing practices in a traditional classroom setting resulting in a more democratic learning process. A detailed account of class in which methods of collaboration were used is provided to demonstrate how the knowledge is negotiated rather than simply transferred from an instructor to a student.