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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Professional Collaborative Writing: Teaching, Writing, and Learning – Together

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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Professional Collaborative Writing: Teaching, Writing, and Learning – Together

Abstract

The article discusses the significance of writing professionally and collaboratively in English learning. It states that if people consider writing as just an individual act, they miss the big part of the value of professional writing. It says that oftentimes, professional writing explicitly represents an organization. It adds that collaborative writing involves the work of two or more members of a team.

Keywords

English language, English writing, methodology, collaborative writing, professionalism, collective action

Disciplines

Educational Methods | English Language and Literature | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments

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Professional Writing in the English Classroom

Professional Collaborative Writing: Teaching, Writing, and Learning—Together

In our roles as educators, every day is full of written communication: we write to our colleagues and peers, to parents, to staff; sometimes we write to administrators. Much of this writing is done individually and is attributed directly to our own authorship. Emails are explicitly attached to our names and accounts; lesson plans are typically ours and ours alone. Individual writing still comprises a majority of the writing we do. And, as we have come to know, writing as an individual certainly isn't simple: it requires carefully considering our audience, purposes, genres, available means of persuasion, complications—and interpreting these and other factors as part of the process we use to complete our writing tasks. As teachers, we use the knowledge we have as writers and translate that as we teach students how to write individually.

But if we consider writing only as an individual act, we are missing a large part of what it means to write professionally. We find that more and more of our high-stakes writing tends to be collaborative. Informal compositions can

be dashed off individually; short memos can be written quickly by a single person; notes to parents and colleagues giving simple information can be put together without group input. But those that have heavy implications for the organization—either because they have a significant audience, involve a tricky or complicated issue, or include some sort of financial element—tend to need a collaborative writing environment in order to have a chance of success. For example, Jonathan just completed a grant application and narrative—with a team of nearly ten collaborators. His team had to consider the stated and unstated goals and context of the grant agency while also considering how they would come to consensus about the task, divide work, build a single voice, produce and collaborate on various elements of the work, and share results as they moved from ideas toward production, editing, and completion. Several sessions were spent solely discussing tone and how to integrate each author's voice into a singular voice. The result is still pending, but everyone in the team agreed that the proposal was much stronger as a result of the collaborative nature of the writing. Similarly, Leah co-teaches an orientation course for new faculty

at her college. She and her colleague frequently co-write documents—from the course syllabus, to “framing” documents introducing key concepts to the group, to essential emails, to instructions for homework assignments. Like Jonathan's team, she and her colleague find that their collaborative approach to composing can enhance what they are able to offer through their writing.

If we consider writing only as an individual act, we are missing a large part of what it means to write professionally.

Our experiences with collaborative writing are not unique. Very rarely is a professional document, especially one written for public consumption, written individually. Professional writing is often explicitly representative of an organization. Rather than writing in an individual role, a professional writer (or a professional writing team) is writing at the behest of the entire organization—as in the case of the Web developer who, in creating websites, is writing text that represents an entire organization. Likewise, a technical writer of an instructional document may write on behalf of an entire company. The cost of a misstep can be so high—a lawsuit for a faulty

instructional manual or the fall-out for a website public relations gaffe, for example—that the context itself creates the inherent need for collaboration. The group-writing environment creates accountability within a team and throughout a chain of command. Even when a team or individual creates a document, continued collaboration will always occur as the document works its way up the organizational hierarchy. Each level continues to collaborate on the document until it is finally released. In cases such as these, despite the inherent challenges, writing collaboratively is simply a good idea. Multiple voices and perspectives lead to better and deeper understanding of tasks and goals. More eyes and more perspectives also limit the possibility of embarrassing errors.

Collaboration for Student Writers

Collaborative writing is accomplished through the work of two or more team members. But not all writings completed by an authoring team are collaborative. Some group-authored documents are actually segments completed by individual authors and pieced together consecutively, with each author retaining responsibility for his or her contribution. In these writings, the sum of the parts is just that: the sum of the parts. In true collaborative writing, the authors are thinking partners who share the power and responsibility for making decisions, working toward consensus about their shared final product (Allen et al. 72). Even if they compose portions of the document independently,

collaborative writers work as a team to weave the pieces together in service of a cohesive finished piece. Readers may be able to attribute some portions to an individual author, but the document exhibits unity. In some cases, the readers—and even the authors—may not be able to tell who wrote what or where one person’s ideas end and another’s words begin. The writing is truly the product of a coauthoring process.

If we look at the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), we might consider such knowledge a “must” for student writers. The CCSS explicitly emphasizes “collaborating with others” (Writing Standard 6, Grades 6, 7, 8) and “shared writing products” (Writing Standard 6, Grades 9–10, 11–12). We’re pleased to see these nods to coauthoring in the CCSS, though we think these references could be stated more clearly as robust requirements. We are also convinced there are more compelling arguments than “the standards say so” for teaching collaborative writing—arguments related directly to the realities of writing in the professional world.

In a study of communication activities in the workplace, faculty members and students in technical, business, and scientific communications at North Carolina State University conducted 463 interviews with “working professionals that students identified as appropriate role models for their own careers” (Miller, Larsen, and Gaitens 7). As a group, these professionals reported that 15% of their time on the job is spent collaborating with others to plan and write documents (10). That 15% may not sound like much, but it’s

six hours in a 40-hour work week. Per week! This brings up a pedagogical point: how many of our students have had six total hours of instruction and guided practice in collaborative writing over the course of their schooling? Our interactions with student writers and writing instructors across grade levels (as well as anecdotal evidence from conversations with employers) suggest that the answer is that curricula and instruction devoted to collaborative writing are a rarity.

When teachers are effective in helping students to learn processes for collaborative writing, everyone involved needs to speak, listen, write, and read about how to write well and what makes writing good.

Even as we argue that preparation for workplace writing is important, we acknowledge that it can be problematic to view the English language arts classroom as a site for workforce training. With that in mind, we contend that there is another reason—perhaps the most compelling reason of all—that collaborative writing studies are a must for secondary students. Quite simply, when teachers are effective in helping students to learn processes for collaborative writing, everyone involved needs to speak, listen, write, and read about how to write well and what makes writing good. Students are forced to “go meta” about their writing processes and products. They learn more about the *why* and *how* of their writing choices, and when

they apply these lessons in the midst of learning them, they gain greater control over their writing. Put quite simply: lessons in collaborative writing help students to become better writers.

The process of writing is both complicated and enhanced by the collaboration that occurs, and, although this makes for great challenges for us as teachers, it also presents many opportunities. By complicating the act of writing, collaborative writing also gives us the chance to teach students academic teamwork. This doesn't mean it is popular with students (or even with our colleagues—collaborative writing can be a colossal failure and is a difficult task in even the best of situations). In addition to all the complicated concepts we talk about in individual writing tasks, writers have to negotiate a relationship—a sometimes complicated one—between various writers, ideas, processes, goals, and all the other things that come when two or more people are working on a task together.

Lessons in Collaborative Writing

Let's look at a couple of examples of collaborative professional writing and what makes a "good" project for collaborative writing with our students. The underlying task in collaborative writing can be complex; it is up to the teacher to create processes that effectively guide students as they negotiate such complex territories. A quick means to an unsuccessful project would be to simply take a standard writing assignment and give it to a group without effective scaffolding. Much work for a

collaborative project has to occur prior to the start of the project—resources, handouts, prewriting, roles, and other essential elements need to be carefully considered before students are asked to take on a collaborative writing task.

Some of the best advice we've found to help us successfully develop collaborative projects comes from Richard M. Chisholm. In 1990, Chisholm presented an excellent analysis of the problems that often occur in collaborative writing. He also presented us with some potential solutions. Much of what he wrote is still relevant today, and perhaps even complicated further by the advances in information technology. In his piece, Chisholm considers four major issues that often occur in these sorts of projects: resistance, inexperience, friction, and fairness.

Resistance: There can be an inherent resistance from students to participating in a collaborative writing project. There can be good reasons for this—bad prior experiences, reluctance to modify ideas to meet those of other group members, and scheduling issues can all have an effect. Chisholm suggests that this can be overcome in several ways: primarily by planning the project extensively prior to beginning. Students can understand the project; know the schedule, and focus on the goals. The project also needs to be feasible, reasonable, engaging, and constructed in a way that allows students to see small stages and accomplishments as part of the larger goal.

In Jonathan's classes, he often conducts group work as part of an "inservice project." In this proj-

ect, teams of preservice teaching students work to create materials to support an inservice session on teaching writing. He ensures that the vast majority of the project is done during class time, minimizing scheduling conflicts. Jonathan provides significant contextual details, scaffolds the skills to be used, and provides a series of process elements that break down the project into smaller elements. The teams remain accountable throughout the process by producing progress memos to Jonathan as the project director, stating the team's progress toward specific elements and stages of the project. This keeps the team internally accountable for work done by specific team members and also provides Jonathan a means of following the team's work and stepping in to ensure that all team members are adequately participating.

Inexperience and Friction: These two issues often are seen together, with friction stemming from inexperience. Schooling has conditioned our students to exist in a competitive environment. Often, students will come with a zero-sum attitude. Others fear the academic intimacy of collaborative work and the vulnerability of having peers work with and consider writing and ideas. Without guidance, students are often unable to productively accept and/or give critical advice on a piece. Or they are not able to find a "happy medium" to the work. The result can be quarrels and/or lack of productivity with the project.

In both of our classes, when we build a collaborative activity in professional writing, we position the class as a workspace—students

assume roles as professionals: as a team of teachers, or as writers working together on a professional document; in some courses, our students take on a client to conduct some sort of meaningful work (often this is another organization in the school—a club with a communication problem, perhaps). By doing this, we move the ethos of the class from a teacher-directed activity to one that is focused more on successful task completion. The teams need to work together, much like we do when we work professionally, in order to successfully negotiate the task. Following a framework shared in Bruce W. Speck's *Facilitating Students' Collaborative Writing*, we teach students to value debate about ideas (“good conflict”) while taking preventive steps to minimize personal and procedural struggles (“bad conflict”) by developing group expectations and policies and using them to negotiate team dilemmas.

Fairness: A final problem is one that students often cite, particularly in regards to students they perceive as not carrying their weight in the project. This can run several ways: sometimes a student may explicitly slack off; other times, this is the result of an inexperienced overachiever who freezes others out of important elements of the project, leaving them to do inconsequential work.

This can be an especially tricky issue. In Jonathan's classes, he

ensures that in every project, there is an individual grading element, typically somewhere in the 10–20% range. Mostly, this is done via an individual memo, in which each student justifies his or her work on the project. We've seen colleagues who ask team members to anonymously evaluate each other's work. We understand this technique but find it a bit too draconian for our classrooms. Leah requests “status report” memos from individuals at intervals during their project work as a way to help monitor each team's progress and the contributions of individual team members. Like Jonathan's students, writers in her class also write confidential memos at the conclusion of their collaborative project work. They analyze what worked well in their documents and group processes, describe the contributions that they and their team members each made, and reflect on how—in 20/20 hindsight—they wish they had improved their written work and team efforts. Leah uses this feedback and her own observations of team meetings and drafts (often shared with her via Google Docs) to make adjustments to individuals' grades relative to the team score.

Collaborative projects can be fraught with peril, to be sure. They can be messy; they can be difficult, but the end result can be exciting. Giving students the opportunity not only to collabo-

rate, but to collaborate productively in a professional setting can give them the chance to experience how much writing is done in the professional world—written together, with multiple voices, multiple viewpoints, and (sometimes) significant conflict. The results can give students a new perspective on writing and the task of working together toward a common goal. It can also give students and teachers insight into the work of professional writers and the collaborative thought and production process that goes into so many of the public documents we take for granted. 

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