

Examining Collaborative Writing through the Lens of a Pentad

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On two separate occasions, once in 2009 and again in 2010, Tom Buttery authored articles that appeared in the SRATE Journal which focused on the importance of writing for professional publication. In the first, Organizational Paradigm, Buttery focused on the motivation for writing, organizing a manuscript, and conducting the literature review. In the second, he emphasized the writing process and focused on the importance of organization and editing for publication. In keeping with Buttery's tradition of writing as a systematic process, the purpose of this article is to build upon his foundation of good writing strategies and examine one approach to mastering the task of article submission—collaboration in the writing process.

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multiple benefits to the writing process, and, what literature exists supports the benefits of writing with a partner or partners (Jones, Jones & Murk, 2012).

As a means to organize the collaborative writing process, the authors will rely upon a critical technique called dramatism, developed by Kenneth Burke. Essentially, Burke believed that issues of motivation could be addressed using five questions which he coined a pentad. These questions guide the purpose behind the action: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose <http://www.comm.umn.edu/burke/gm.html>. The use of these questions has also been likened to the journalistic approach of the 5 W's: who, what, where, when, and why. Using the pentad to describe collaborative writing, the process may be characterized structurally. In the "act", the writer attempts to describe or explain the action which also references the "what." The concept of "scene" focuses on the background of the event or the "where" and "when" of the process.

“Agent” emphasizes the “who” that is involved in the event; “agency” focuses on the means or instruments that are used (which incorporates the “how”). Finally, “purpose” focuses on the motivation, or the “why” for the action.

Act, or “The What”

Collaborative writing is hardly a new concept. Theorists abound who have long supported the notion that writing should be a social learning process. Vygotsky (1962) purported that language increases in meaning when it is shared. Similarly, one of the imminent scholars of social learning theory, Bakhtin (1981) gives power to the interactions between and among individuals and, as a result, increased learning occurs. In an article on graduate students’ collaborative writing efforts, Ens, Boyd, Matczuk and Nickerson (2011) state “Capitalizing on the dialogic nature of language, engagement with others in the process of writing creates intentional opportunities for developing relationships and generating knowledge” (p.64). Collaborative work can be seen in most disciplines. Team building activities abound in the workplace and support the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Jones, Jones, and Murk (2012) said it best, “To collaborate is truly like 2 Plus 2 Equals 6 (Synergy)” (p. 91).

Another feature of collaboration may be increased pleasure in the process. Instead of focusing on the end goal (“I must get this done so I can get published!”), the process of collaboration should provide its own extraneous benefits. The collaborative opportunity to learn from each other, to spend time together, to share the thrill of victory when the process is complete—these should be as important as the final product.

Scene, or “The When and Where”

The “when” is important to the act of writing, in that in order to be successful, attention must be given to a consistent, regular time. Otherwise,

procrastination and other demands rob a person of the ability to attend to writing. Key to the success of collaborative is the importance of a regular time. Humans are creatures of habit. Like any other activity—exercise, yoga, diet—discipline is the key to long term progress and success. Buttery (2010) recommends building in writing time as a regular part of a person’s schedule.

Research shows that writing in shorter spurts in a very systematic way is more productive than building large blocks of time. First, most individuals today do not have the time to break away for a morning or an afternoon and do nothing but write for publication. Short bursts of time are more realistic and more productive. With long blocks of time, writers frequently waste a lot of time “nesting” (get that cup of tea, set the lights and the temperature of the room, clean off the workspace, gather materials, review the last session’s production). All of those activities are counterproductive. Writing should be likened to a series of short sprints rather than a marathon. Rather, a better scenario is to build one hour per week into the routine and stick to it. Set the timer, and at the end of that hour, bring the process to closure. Felder and Brent, 2008, state, “Dedicate short and frequent periods of time to your major writing projects.” However, even after the hour is over, the participants will subconsciously still be processing the information and benefits will continue. Further, with a consistent meeting appointment, time will not be wasted doing the “prep.” Instead time will be better spent focusing on the task of writing.

Just as critical as the “when” is the “where” and, in this instance, two references to “where” refer both to where the writers work and where the document will be published. Meeting location is important. Do you need to change the environment in order to increase productivity? Do you need to move away from the distractions and interruptions of the office? Perhaps setting a regular meeting time at the local coffee shop that offers free Wi-Fi would be a good solution.

Also, consideration should be given to “where” the document will be housed. Identification of a place and sticking with it can keep a group organized. Writing collaboratively tends to get messy--hard to keep up with multiple documents, who said what, iterations of the document, emails, notes, etc. Wright, Burnham, and Hooper (2012) report it is important to stay organized to promote efficiency and effectiveness. In today’s technology-driven world, there are many options and tools available for research and writing. Determine which tools will be used and making sure the tools are available and accessible for everyone can facilitate open communication and ownership (Jones, Jones, & Murk, 2012; Wright, Burnham, & Hooper, 2012).

Identifying the “where” of the final publication is also important. Another benefit of collaboration is that more venues for which the research may and could be shared are presented. By collaborating with colleagues from different disciplines, the number of opportunities to publish is, potentially, doubled.

Agent, or “The Who”

Selecting writing partners can be as simple as collaborating with the colleague next door or as complex as identifying individuals from multiple locations who share a passion for a topic. On occasion, the partnership may be a familial one. Writing teams of spouses, father-son, mother-daughter, for example, are often created. As mentioned earlier, one of the benefits of collaborative writing is “getting” to spend time with individuals we love and admire, and the benefit of publication is an intended by-product of the relationship. That “someone” may be a person with whom you have much in common or little. Depending on the motivation to write, the individual or individuals you select may dictate the writing partner. Identifying someone who shares similar goals is one means;

likewise, identifying someone who possesses complementary traits. Working with professionals from various disciplines can enhance projects as well contribute new connections and ideas to the literature. Buttery (2010) adds that, in collaboration, “consider the ability to translate from one discipline to another” (pg. 1).

Once a writing partner is selected, it is important to maximize the strengths of both partners in order to gain the most productivity. Delegate tasks and identify roles as the process grows. Jones, Jones, and Murk (2012) recommend a group discussion at the beginning of the project to determine roles and responsibilities. It is also an opportunity to determine the strengths each individual brings to the project.

Agency, or “The How”

While this section on agency could focus on a myriad of side topics about writing--how information should be gleaned, how writing should occur, how the editing process should work, to name a few--the focus on this article is on the process of collaborative writing itself. Therefore, the “how” is focused on the process. How does one perform collaborative writing: consistently, respectfully, and purposefully? By performing the task with consistency, success will be achieved. By performing the task with respect, all parties will benefit mutually. And, by performing the task with purpose, the goal will be met. Elbow (1973), an early expert on the process of writing, explains “how” collaborative writing works in simplest terms: “Two heads are better than one because two heads can make conflicting material interact better than one head usually can. It’s why brainstorming works. I say something. You give a response and it constitutes some restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I see something new on the basis of your restricting and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said” (p. 50).

Purpose, or “The Why”

The “why” is the easy part—productivity, accountability. The concept of “practice what we preach” is an overworked expression but is apropos in this setting. In higher education, we encourage, if not require, group projects in classes—why not embrace the concept? People do not operate in silos; neither should we expect people to make writing a solitary process. Social learning theorists espouse the idea of interaction increasing learning for all involved. The same should be true in the writing process.

In summary, publication in higher education is paramount to survival. However, the writing process, as Buttery so clearly and eloquently illustrates in his articles, should not be the roadblock that prevents graduate students and new professors from surviving and even thriving in their professional journals. And, to build upon his suppositions, collaboration as a means to that end—publication—is a powerful tool that can and should be encouraged. The benefits truly are greater than the sum of the parts. Buttery purports that writing provides the opportunity to acquire and polish skills as well as gain knowledge about ideas in the field. Collaboration enhances that process and can and should make it enjoyable!

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