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### **CAN WE ESTABLISH AN EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TEACHING PROFESSIONAL WRITING VIA WebCT?**

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Although collaborative learning in the traditional classroom has faced criticism and resistance by students and teachers, most studies suggest that if it is implemented and facilitated properly, shared learning through collaboration can be an effective tool in how students learn. However, as more and more classes are being taught online, the concept of collaboration as a learning tool becomes problematic, especially in online professional writing courses where collaboration is a significant factor in this genre of writing. Beginning with a history of collaborative learning and its characteristics, my paper applies the necessity for collaboration to the professional writing class. I then explore and critique some of the interactive techniques used in online instruction in previous WebCT classes. Following this, my paper outlines some important features necessary in creating an effective collaborative environment for the online professional writing student, which requires a synthesis of group discussion, peer review, collaborative invention and collaborative writing. Because the computer can be seen as a means of isolation, facilitating collaboration becomes imperative to reestablishing a connection among students and instructor in a virtual classroom where the discourse community might otherwise appear short-circuited. Furthermore, as we move toward a more technologically-centered professional world, the computer is taking on more importance and becoming an essential tool for communication and collaboration in the professional environment.

#### **Collaborative Learning's History and Characteristics**

Kenneth A. Bruffee's seminal work on collaboration, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind (1984)," situates collaboration as a major component of composition studies. Bruffee's article, drawing on the

social constructivism of William Perry, Stanley Fish, and Richard Rorty maintains that thought is socially developed and as children grow, their thought and conversation mirrors what is learned and sanctioned through the community. This becomes important in college where a student's thought and writing ability are measured against academic standards; thus, collaboration is necessary to facilitate this academic discourse. Bruffee's later work, *Collaborative Learning* (1993), furthers this argument by emphasizing that true knowledge is grounded in conversations among community members and these social relationships in education become imperative to the building of knowledge. Collaboration looks towards a synthesis of interests in "translation communities" that always questions and probes. This nonfoundational method of education allows for students to bring different perspectives to others, giving them a chance to view worlds outside of their own. For Bruffee, the collaborative model includes several features such as students working in small groups of three to six to solve problems or produce a group project with clearly defined tasks, diverse group composition, and teacher as group facilitator.

Harvey Wiener's research on collaborative learning further defines collaborative learning by presenting an ideal model for evaluating the effectiveness of collaborative teaching. According to Wiener, the paradigm proposed by Bruffee conflicts with the way teachers are using collaboration today. Wiener outlines several features important to true collaborative learning where students do not merely do "group work," but negotiate intellectually in an attempt to arrive at a consensus using their own authority. Some characteristics of the teacher's role necessary to a collaborative model are the teacher functions as task setter, classroom manager, invisible evaluator, and synthesizer. Not only must the task allow students to arrive at collective judgment, but the assignment must be written out, and clearly articulated before the students are grouped. The teacher's role must not intervene with group discussion until the consensus of the various groups are discussed and the results of each group are compared and synthesized, then measured against those opinions of the academic community. This establishes not only what has been learned, but how it was learned (238-246).

Rebecca Moore Howard's study on collaborative pedagogy traces other notable proponents of collaboration in the classroom, such as Anne Ruggles Gere and Andrea Lunsford, and also points out some distinct characteristics of collaborative learning: small-group discussion, peer review, and collaborative writing (55). Both group discussion and peer response, Howard points out, have been successful fixtures in the composition classroom. The result of these collaborative techniques is the discovery of new ideas that could not have been achieved independently, as well as a clear understanding of audience (57-60). One other important feature of collaborative pedagogy was explored and developed by Karen Burke LeFevre who advocated for *collaborative* and *collective invention* where people work together and brainstorm on a specific topic (Howard 61). Although neither collaborative invention nor collaborative writing have been as universally accepted as peer response and group discussion, both characteristics seem important to the concept of collaborative learning and should not be ignored.

While many of these characteristics of collaborative learning have been implemented within composition studies with much success, there are still many scholars of pedagogy who criticize student collaboration for challenging the single authorial voice. As Kurt Spellmeyer points out, Bruffee's notion of collaboration moves away from the Lockean sense of "private significance" and toward the "common" where the "social" aspect of collaboration takes on a negative connotation. It is precisely such a "social construction" that reinforces a hierarchical system as individuals must sacrifice independent thought for the good of the group, which ultimately serves the interests of those who deploy the demands (79). In this sense, communities of knowledge are like prisons since both operate on the premise of "shared conventions" (83). What Spellmeyer's work alludes to is the absence of the individual voice within the constraints of collaborative pedagogy. This, I believe, is what students and teachers have the most difficulty with when understanding how to work with collaborative learning. If we are taught as novice writers from the beginning that our views count for something and what we create is its own genius, then how are we, as students and teachers, to understand the necessity to form groups in order to generate ideas? One answer to this is workplace writing.

### **Collaboration in the Professional Writing Class**

Although Rebecca Howard mentions that many students and teachers resist collaborative writing, it is an

essential component in professional writing, which is consistently a collaborative effort. Because professional writing classes attempt to simulate real-world scenarios, collaboration is necessary for students who need to understand the dynamics of group interactions and projects in the workplace. Many professional writers would attest that professional documents are rarely written alone. Most workplace writing has several contributors, including coworkers and even clientele. For example, contracts are negotiated texts between purchaser and seller, company websites include input from several different sources, and even brochures, financial reports and manuals are rarely, if ever, written by a single author. In fact, many company reports are considered “authored” by the company even though several individuals contributed to the document. So, although collaborative efforts do, to some extent, transcend the individual, they also reflect real workplace writing.

While Spellmeyer makes a valid point in finding fault with Bruffee's assumption of a democratic society that seems to ignore the tensions and restraints that might emerge in his “egalitarian project,” real collaboration, at least in the professional world, can never make everyone happy. True, Bruffee doesn't quite seem to anticipate all the conflict that attends communicative decision-making; yet, Spellmeyer's lament at the loss of equality that results in collaborative environments seems to miss the point—a nonhierarchical system just doesn't and will never exist. If students in professional writing need to work on projects that prepare them for situations they will later face “out there,” then collaborative learning, through its four main features—**peer review, group discussion, collaborative invention, and collaborative writing**—seems the logical approach. Most, if not all, traditional professional writing courses (whether introductory or advanced) utilize various aspects of collaborative learning, from group discussion and peer review to collaborative invention and collaborative writing. As Rebecca Howard has pointed out, many of these collaborative techniques (primarily group discussion and peer review) are used at different points throughout composition (59-60); however, both collaborative invention and collaborative writing seem as important, if not more, in the professional writing classroom.

Specifically, for example, in my technical writing classes, students are required to get into groups of four to five based on area of study (engineering, nursing, pre-med, etc.) and workshop or brainstorm proposal ideas that eventually lead to analytical reports. In this sense, students are participating in LeFevre's notion of collaborative invention, which asks students to work together to generate ideas. For example, one of the core assignments in my technical writing class asks for students to work in their formed groups to come up with a problem or issue and narrow it down to a local idea that is feasible as a proposal topic within the scope of the class. One group in particular (pre-med and physical therapy students) came up with communication inadequacies in the medical field/doctor-patient discourse. From there, the students continued to generate ideas in order to propose some form of research that would eventually culminate in a feasibility report. What this group came up with, after several sessions of discussion, was to propose doing research on implementing a health communication course as part of the prerequisites of pre-professional students in the health care field at the University of New Mexico. For this particular assignment, my role as a teacher/facilitator of collaborative learning was fairly simple to manipulate. Applying Wiener's notion of teacher as task setter (Wiener 240), the quality of the task was one where students negotiated intellectually to arrive at a consensus as to the best method for making healthcare students aware of communication difficulties in their field. Although there were disagreements, the solution seemed to represent a collective judgment through several modifications and revisions, rather than stifle or ignore certain members. Because I could physically organize students strategically to facilitate communication and prevent interruption, my role as “manager” (Wiener 243) was relatively easy to implement.

When these same groups were then asked to research and write both the proposal and its following feasibility report, they, again, had to negotiate. However, this consensus included collaborative writing—they had to collaborate on who would write which section of the proposal and feasibility report. Once the sections of the documents were written, the groups had to reconvene to organize and edit the final product, conceding as to the final document they would turn in for a group grade. Although I did go from group to group assisting students with their projects, something Wiener warns against as undermining student confidence and authority (243), I was able to clearly witness group dynamics and interaction. As a result, some members tended to monopolize more time than others, while others contributed nothing to group discussion on their projects. This allowed me to later reevaluate the way students were grouped and change tactics in the future.

Other characteristics of collaboration were also utilized in my technical writing class with much success. Each proposal and report was peer reviewed by another group, the evaluation of which was presented in class with an overhead projector. In this way, all students could see comments made on several reports, rather than just one, and discuss the comments as a class. All of these collaborative techniques, important and necessary as they are, become extremely difficult to achieve in an online environment. Yet, significantly, as more and more individuals are using electronic interfaces in the professional world to complete projects and communicate, the online environment via WebCT seems the optimal medium to instruct collaborative learning in professional writing. Or is it?

### **Collaboration in the Virtual Classroom**

Learning cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

When Paulo Freire argued this point in the early '70s, I do not believe he anticipated how this concept of socially constructed knowledge would work in an electronic classroom. Other pedagogical theorists, each with his or her own notion of what collaboration entails—Kenneth Bruffee, Anne Gere, Peter Elbow, Karen Burke LeFevre, and Harvey Wiener, to name only a few—did not seem to foresee how technology might interfere with student interactive learning. To what extent, then, is this social constructivist notion of communicative learning possible in the absence of physical bodies? To engage in what Freire refers to as “critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people” seems antithetical to the text-based interactions of electronic classrooms emerging in many colleges and universities throughout the United States.

Although there have been several studies conducted that analyze online collaborative efforts in specific WebCT classes, to date there have been no detailed analyses of online collaboration in professional writing courses, which seems to merit the necessity for this type of analysis. If teachers of professional writing need to implement peer review, discussion, collaborative invention and collaborative writing in order to achieve a real collaborative learning environment, how and in what way can we achieve these aims with the effectiveness of a traditional class? If, according to Wiener, successful collaborative efforts in the classroom require the instructor to take a hands-off approach in group discussion, serving as an invisible observer, how can this role be reconciled in an online environment that requires more guidance on the part of the teacher? Recent studies that look at several interactive techniques in online courses emphasize the necessity for the teacher to dramatically be involved in student interaction and discussion through the primary features of online dialogue, such as intra-email, asynchronous discussion boards, and synchronous chat (Agostinho, Lefoe, and Hedberg 10; Strohschen and Heaney 36). Nicol, Minty, and Sinclair refer to this issue as a conflict between “tight” and “loose” involvement. Upset with poor student performance in online discussion, instructors tend to revert to tighter structure and authority (275). Furthermore, Nicol et al. argue that social constructivism applied to online teaching requires more than simply providing opportunities for students to collaborate and interact socially (271) [1]. Because students new to online learning must move from a conventional understanding of learning in a classroom with clearly delineated walls and boundaries to an online forum that appears not only amorphous but limitless requires an almost forceful presence on the part of the instructor to create what's not physically present. [Roxanne Starr Hiltz](#) refers to this lack of “social presence” in Asynchronous Learning Networks as a weakness that leads to decreased motivation and student engagement in the class (4).

Initially, many students showed concern at the beginning of my online professional writing class; not having an instructor physically in front of them, guiding class discussion and work, was scary. Many wondered who the other students were and how exactly they were to interact with one another with the asynchronous nature of discussion and collaboration. Because my discussion prompts asked students, first, to respond to the prompt for that week then, second, to respond to another peer's response, many students later indicated that the absence

of a physical presence in front of them made it difficult to write their responses. One possible reason is the absence of demarcations in a borderless virtual space. To better organize discussion and prevent students from feeling disconnected, should I, then, interject my comments within the discussion board, acting as if I'm another student? Christian Weisser addresses this by pointing out that the online instructor's task is complex, but can be remedied if teachers join class discussion as “conversational partners rather than instructional leaders” (6). Such involvement in group discussion could help reinforce guidance and direction and remind students of class expectations. Yet, if I do this, then don't I, to some extent, contradict the collaboration among students I'm trying to establish in the first place? And don't I possibly run the risk of becoming Paulo Freire's feared “oppressor”? I don't want to undermine student authority, yet more input from me seems needed in this specific medium. Other studies have looked into similar situations.

One article that looks at Conferencing on the Web, which is compatible with asynchronous WebCT discussion boards, as a means to facilitate student communication outside the traditional classroom takes into consideration the method of discussion [2]. Although this particular course was WebCT enhanced, rather than a fully online course, the author raises some important issues. In the study, Angeli notes that clearly organized and facilitated “constructivist learning environments” can enhance student critical thinking. Drawing on a previous study by Salmon, Angeli emphasizes some necessary methods teachers should use in facilitating the construction of knowledge and dialogue, such as questioning, role assigning, synthesizing online contributions, summarizing, implementing a task, and initiating a debate. Yet, the author points out that the specific teachers in this study were new to online learning and thus their participation in the necessary facilitation strategies was limited (40). What these particular mentors did contribute was a significant amount of feedback to discussion responses, directing students to think more deeply about a particular topic and take into consideration the views of others (33). Although the purpose of this study was to help promote quality teaching by analyzing the level of teacher mentoring (high or low), the emphasis placed on teacher involvement in class discussion seemed to go against Wiener's notion of teacher as observer; such involvement might thereby undermine student authority in collaborative learning. In this article, the approach of the study was to improve the quality of student interaction by focusing on the depth of instructor participation. What Angeli's article does not consider is how much teacher participation is too much and how much time is too little to reinforce quality student collaboration.

Another study that poses the problematic nature of online group discussion was conducted by Janice Fauske and Suzanne Wade (2004), which looks at instructor involvement in computer mediated discussions (CMDs); the concern in this study was that a structured environment might be potentially stifling to student collaboration [3]. When surveyed about discussion questions, the students said they did not like the questions asked by the instructor and preferred to come up with their own. Eventually, these students wanted to participate in discussions where the instructor's guidance was completely absent. As the authors posit, does the structuring of online discussion prevent the creation of a democratic atmosphere? One solution devised by Fauske and Wade is for teachers to begin the course with structured questions, but reduce this structure once discussion is firmly established (147). The implications of this, however, also seem to contradict the role of teacher as task-setter in collaborative learning—extremely important for professional writing students who are working toward understanding the collaborative efforts necessary in the work-place. Such collaboration must culminate in consensus or collective judgment, which might not necessarily occur if students set their own tasks in group discussion. Furthermore, there are specific format requirements and deliverables expected in professional writing group projects, whether a progress report, analytic report, or a proposal. There are some possible strategies, however, that may create the structure necessary for online learning, but also give the students more authority in the construction of learning. The University of Phoenix, for instance, uses two different modes of communication—class discussion and group discussion—that could be beneficial to the online professional writing class.

### **Solutions for Online Collaborative Strategies—Group Discussion, Peer Review, Collaborative Invention, Collaborative Writing and Instructor Role**

A recent online interview with a university instructor who works through the medium of online instruction purported a terrific model for trying to understand the best methods for facilitating and maintaining an effective

online collaborative environment in the classroom. This particular instructor's courses are fully asynchronous, with many of her students living in different parts of the country in different time zones. It's rarely, if ever, possible for her students to chat "live" or meet in any other synchronous environment. More importantly, the instructor's pedagogy emphasizes Project Based Learning, a necessary component of professional writing. I reviewed her answers to some of the questions I posed during her interview and applied this feedback to some of my own thoughts on the most suitable techniques for facilitating collaboration in the online professional writing class.

## Main Folder

An effective way to incorporate peer review, group discussion, collaborative invention, and collaborative writing without losing the student's individual voice, while maintaining the consensual agreement necessary for collaboration to occur, is to work with two different folders or boards within the WebCT course. For example, students could respond to prompts placed within a main folder which the entire class has access to and to which all must contribute. A nice way to accomplish this aspect of collaboration is to ask students to first, respond to the question (prompt #1), and then respond to another student's response (prompt #2). The main folder could assume the role of evaluative comments where students critique and evaluate different examples (from the Web or government sites) of the specific genre being studied, be it a resume, proposal, recommendation report, etc. This would allow students to think critically about a subject using their own voices and then post their thoughts for others to later respond to.

## Team Folder

The students, then, must also respond to their team folder, which the instructor assigns and organizes based on early class introductions and heterogeneous mixture. These groups remain the same throughout the entire course, allowing individuals to get to know one another and each other's writing and learning styles. Early on in the course, the groups would agree on a set of guidelines and expectations for which each student would be responsible, whether it is how often every member should check his or her email or when replies to team prompts can be expected. Because professional writing includes projects related to various genres, e.g., resumes, user manuals, proposals, reports, etc., early in the semester the team would also be responsible for designing a three-point evaluation form, which evaluates the project they are working on, their own performance, and their peers' performance. This would be private and sent to the instructor by the end of every week.

Because many of the professional writing projects are large and time consuming, specific mini-tasks should be set for each group as they work toward their major task—i.e., a formal report. The *students* could come up with a set of different tasks they want to fulfill as they work toward a larger project. For example, drawing on my feasibility report assignment, one group might choose (over the course of two weeks) to complete the following mini-tasks: establish a methodology, create a set of criteria, and determine the report's purpose and audience. They would write these out and submit their agreed-upon (consensual) list to me, which I would approve or ask them to revise, then the group would post them to the discussion board. In this way, student groups would be inventing tasks collaboratively and feel empowered by establishing their own outcomes. I could then design my questions around the groups' tasks. This could allow for the structure necessary in a virtual environment without quashing the voices of the students.

The resume would be an excellent project through which to introduce peer review, since this specific professional document doesn't lend itself to collaborative invention or collaborative writing as the other genres do, but would benefit from several peer reviews by each group member. Peer review on other projects can possibly be accomplished between teams, each team reviewing another team's document as a group through WebCT email and posting the critique to the discussion board where everyone can view it. This concept is even more necessary in the professional world where writers must constantly reconsider and rethink the content of professional documents, sometimes revising findings for superiors and clientele. Other team-related prompts could be guided by the instructor based on each team's list of mini-tasks, or might be group directed since the end product (both the final project and the tasks leading to this) is clearly articulated and cooperative in nature.

This would give the group autonomy, authority, and voice, yet with some structured format on what is expected within a certain time period.

Since collaborative writing is the most difficult to work with both in the traditional classroom as well as online, introducing projects that will necessitate this collaboration later on in the course would be beneficial. However, groups should remain the same throughout the semester. Once familiarity is established within the group, peer review could be introduced, followed by informal discussion on an upcoming project requiring collaborative invention. Once these three features of collaboration are established, collaborative writing will be easier to accomplish. Furthermore, the smaller groups (in contrast to the entire class) can make it easier to resolve conflicts since each member is responsible for the guidelines submitted by the group. The mini-tasks at this point might require more feedback and guidance on the part of the instructor, but the teacher should enter the team folder only when asked or when she believes a possible conflict needs her attention.

### **Instructor's Role in Collaboration—Task Setter, Observer, and Manager**

Allowing for the use of two different folders (main and team) gives students a chance to respond independently to assignment-related questions, yet has them work cooperatively with their group toward a consensus on the different professional genre projects they're working on. This also gives the instructor a chance to observe group dynamics through the weekly evaluation reports, yet prevents the teacher from taking too much control of the classroom. Because each team folder is private and prevents the instructor from easily entering the conversation, the students are more apt to feel empowered in the construction of their own learning.

### **Conclusion**

One reason many online courses encounter difficulty in creating a learning environment is because of the disembodied classroom in virtual time and space, leaving many students confused and disconnected. One solution to this short-circuit is to create an effective collaborative environment drawing on the collaborative techniques espoused by Bruffee and Wiener in the traditional classroom. Although requiring additional work on the part of the instructor, the professional writing course lends itself easily to the implementation of group discussion, peer review, collaborative invention, and collaborative writing. Furthermore, the technology attendant in an online environment prepares professional writing students for the medium used in most work-place writing and professional discourse communities that sometimes require virtual collaboration. The lack of clearly defined boundaries in an online environment can make teaching collaboration difficult, but not impossible.

Requiring students to be held responsible for guidelines and objectives they create within their groups empowers them; at the same time, articulating clearly delineated tasks that must be completed consensually recreates those boundaries lost in the traditional classroom. The required reflective process embedded in student evaluations of their group projects moves the focus away from technical and professional product-specific outcomes and toward an understanding of the reasoning behind the creation of a specific product or document. Although student projects in the professional writing class ask that students utilize a specific format, evaluating their own as well as their peers' contributions to the project not only keeps the teacher as invisible observer involved in online student-student interaction, but forces students to reflect on choices made within that interaction.

I believe an important issue to consider with respect to online collaborative learning is to work with two different discourse communities within the WebCT platform—main folder and team folder. This is something that really needs to be considered since it is the coexistence of these two disparate, yet not completely separate, dialogues that give way to an effective interactive environment. Although there are several studies that look at online group discussion and collaboration as problematic, very few sources offer any type of solutions to the disconnection in online social interaction. Elizabeth Murphy's analysis of "Recognizing and Promoting Collaboration in an Online Asynchronous Discussion" probably gets the closest to detailing the underpinnings of interactive gaps in online communication. According to Murphy, online collaboration needs to be analyzed as a hierarchical process along a continuum with six major stages: 1) social presence, 2) articulating individual perspectives, 3) accommodating

or reflecting the perspectives of others, 4)co-constructing shared perspectives and meanings, 5)building shared goals and purposes, and 6) producing shared artifacts. What I believe works best, however, is not to lose sight of steps 1 and 2—social presence and articulating individual perspectives. If students move away from this type of “monologue” discourse and toward a collaborative production, students can lose their place, voice, and subsequent identity. I believe what is important is for students to maintain a firm grounding on where they've come from (main folder) in order to continue moving forward (team folder). To disregard the individual presence and perspective is to annihilate the foundation on which group collaboration was constructed in the first place.

## Notes

[1] An interesting point to consider here is the role of teacher as task-setter. One possible reason for poor student performance in online discussion is because the tasks and expectations are not clearly articulated by the instructor. This seems to be what happened in a study conducted by Elizabeth Murphy. According to Murphy's analysis of online asynchronous collaboration, student responses were more individual rather than group-oriented. Yet, within this study, I found no indication of task specific items asking students to think beyond their own perspectives. [[return to main text](#)]

[2] This article as well as subsequent studies that reference online collaboration work from the assumption that collaborative learning techniques foster student engagement with the learning process. [[return to main text](#)]

[3] This study, as with several others, was supplemented with face-to-face meetings, yet the concerns raised by instructors and students are applicable to fully online courses. [[return to main text](#)]

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