

12-11-2016

Collaborative Work and the Future of Humanities Teaching

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Recommended Citation

Ullyot, Michael and O'Neill, Kate E. (2016) "Collaborative Work and the Future of Humanities Teaching," *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea/vol7/iss2/3

Collaborative Work and the Future of Humanities Teaching

Abstract

This article explores the degree to which student collaborations on research and writing assignments can effectively realize learning outcomes. The assignment, in this case, encouraged students to contribute discrete parts of a research project in order to develop their complementary abilities: researching, consulting, drafting, and revising. The outcomes for students included appreciation for their individual expertise, and experience combining discrete contributions into a result that surpasses the sum of its parts. In the course, we gave students preliminary guidance for establishing team objectives and roles for the duration of this assignment and asked them to evaluate their learning experience at the end. In this paper, we analyze the students' quantitative and qualitative feedback, and suggest ways to structure and supervise collaborative assignments so that students develop their expertise and complementary skills. We suggest that collaborative work such as this is essential for advanced undergraduates in the humanities, where collaborations are less common than in other disciplines. Moreover, we conclude that future humanities instructors should be open to the benefits of collaborative research and writing. This article will be of interest to instructors who wish to develop collaborative assignments that improve students' disciplinary expertise, engagement with course materials, and outreach to audiences beyond the academy.

Cet article explore la mesure dans laquelle le travail en collaboration des étudiants en matière de recherche et de rédaction de devoirs peut aboutir à des résultats d'apprentissage efficaces. Dans le cas présent, le devoir demandé devait encourager les étudiants à contribuer à des sections distinctes d'un projet de recherche afin de développer leurs compétences complémentaires : mener à bien la recherche, consulter, préparer un brouillon et réviser. Pour les étudiants, les résultats comprenaient l'appréciation de leur expertise individuelle et l'expérience d'incorporer des contributions distinctes à un résultat qui dépassait la somme de ses parties. Dans le cours, nous avons fourni aux étudiants une orientation préliminaire pour établir les objectifs et les rôles du groupe pour la durée de ce devoir et nous leur avons demandé à la fin d'évaluer leur expérience d'apprentissage. Dans cet article, nous analysons la rétroaction qualitative et quantitative des étudiants et suggérons des manières de structurer et de superviser les devoirs en collaboration afin de permettre aux étudiants de développer leur expertise et leurs compétences complémentaires. Nous suggérons que le travail en collaboration tel que celui présenté ici est essentiel pour les étudiants de niveau avancé au premier cycle en sciences humaines, où le travail en collaboration est moins commun que dans d'autres disciplines. De plus, nous concluons que les futurs instructeurs en sciences humaines devraient se montrer ouverts aux avantages de la recherche et de la rédaction en collaboration. Cet article intéressera les instructeurs qui désirent créer des devoirs en collaboration pour améliorer l'expertise disciplinaire des étudiants, leur intérêt dans la matière enseignée et les activités de rayonnement pour des auditoires au-delà de l'université.

Keywords

critical reading, critical writing, collaborative work, peer learning, student reflection, Humanities teaching and learning, student engagement

Cover Page Footnote

The authors wish to acknowledge Leslie F. Reid, Tamaratt Teaching Professor, Department of Geoscience, University of Calgary for her templates and advice informing the delivery of this course, and the description of our research results.

A few years ago, Michael Ullyot designed a collaborative writing project for students in his advanced undergraduate course in sixteenth-century English literature (English 408) at the University of Calgary. Previously, students had worked in parallel to develop research, writing, and editing skills that Ullyot felt they could productively combine. He knew that benefits of collaboration in the humanities included rigorous academic debate and self-conscious co-authorship. Mindful of Anderson and Lord (2008)'s claim that "coauthoring often requires more revision, more rethinking, more critical examination of one's work than sole authoring does" (p. 211), he designed a more collaborative assignment. His aim was to give students a collective purpose and the license to learn the skills of critical reading, thinking, and writing from each other. He hoped that the result would surpass the sum of its parts, both in the written projects and in the students' own development.

This article reports the real outcomes of this experiment. It is itself a collaboration, coauthored by Ullyot and his research assistant Kate O'Neill.¹ We begin with Ullyot's rationale for structuring this project as he did, and evaluate the benefits of collaborative projects in the humanities. We offer guidelines for those considering similar experiments in their own classrooms, and describe three issues that Ullyot failed to anticipate: leadership, accountability, and the division of labor. While he required his students to agree in advance to their principles and protocols of collaboration, even to complete and sign morally binding team contracts, these protocols and agreements were overly optimistic. We address the importance not only of contractual agreements among collaborators, but of more realistic forms of leadership and accountability. Finally, we make recommendations for others considering collaborative projects, based on our evaluations of student learning outcomes, and their feedback on the experience.

Ullyot's research question when designing and implementing this collaborative assignment was how effectively team projects could realize the course's learning outcomes. These outcomes included the students' development of individual expertise not only in the subject area, but in their research and writing skills. These outcomes were the same when he taught English 408 twice before, when he assigned students research and critical writing projects that required solitary work. Namely, the students were to acquire seven skills:

1. reading texts for their historical and cultural significance
2. reading cultural history for its literary forms
3. investigating research on 1 and 2, and adapting it to their own arguments
4. writing arguments that are rigorous and thorough
5. writing and revising language to be clear, concise, and natural
6. working independently to develop 3, 4, and 5
7. collaborating with peers to explore and disseminate ideas, primarily in oral presentations

The team projects overturned the order of these seven skills, putting collaboration at the forefront. Ullyot's motive was to give students the peer-to-peer collaborations that are necessary to develop subject expertise. He wanted to develop their critical thinking and argumentative skills through collaborative discourse, encouraging students to reflect critically on their research and writing through comparison with their peers, and to empower students to see themselves as experts contributing to the group's collective enterprise.

¹ Throughout this article we refer to our collaborative work of data collection and analysis using the first-person-plural form "we," and to our individual work as course instructor (Ullyot) and research assistant (O'Neill) using our surnames.

It was a goal that these particular students were well positioned to realize. All but two of Ullyot's thirty-six students were advanced English majors or honors students, taking the course to fulfil the historical-breadth requirement for their program. They were moving along Dreyfus and Dreyfus's "novice-to-expert" scale of knowledge acquisition, which links the depth and complexity of a learner's knowledge with his or her sense of autonomy and self-direction (1986, p. 16). Open discourse among fledgling experts encourages students to develop expert methods and knowledge collaboratively. Ultimately, Ullyot wanted students to recognize that novices and experts exist on the same continuum, divided by knowledge and critical self-evaluation.

Peer collaborations are rarely practiced in humanities disciplines. Business schools have adopted collaborative problem solving as a mainstay of their teaching approach (Vik, 2001), and the sciences tend to privilege what Christine Borgman calls "collective cognition," but the humanities have far lower rates of collaboration and co-authorship (2007, p. 219-220). In fact, Ullyot's model for the team projects in this course came from a colleague in the Geosciences who redesigned a large-lecture course to incorporate a group project to improve student engagement (Reid, 2012). Scholars in recent decades have called for greater collaborations in the humanities (Lunsford and Ede, 1990; Damrosch, 1995). Leonard and Wharton (1994) and Moore Howard (2001) argue that this ongoing resistance owes to the humanities' traditional privileging of solitary authorship and ownership. Benson (2012) conducts an extended study of this tendency in English departments, and how the Romantic ideals of solitary authorship pervade tenure and promotion processes in the modern academy.

These traditional assumptions are under increasing scrutiny as interdisciplinary projects, particularly in the digital humanities, bring more humanists into contact with colleagues from other faculties: both from libraries, museums, and archives; and from the social, pure, applied, and computer sciences. Fitzpatrick (2011) has called for "a shift in our focus from the individualistic parts of our [humanists'] work to those that are more collective, more socially situated" (p. 74). Those parts include all networked facets of the writing process, from research to peer review to publication.

Yet collaborative writing is not merely urgent now in our age of digital exchange. Writing has always been part of the "conversation of mankind," a phrase that Bruffee (1984) adopts from the philosopher Michael Oakeshott (pp. 638-639). Bruffee also describes conversation as the natural habitat of thought, citing the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: "Human thought is consummately social: social in its origins, social in its functions, social in its form, social in its applications" (p. 639). Bruffee argues that all writing is, more or less overtly, collaborative. He has said that "[w]riting is a technologically displaced form of conversation;" it "has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation" (pp. 641-642). Lunsford (1991) advocates a shift in writing pedagogy toward "viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as, in short, the product of collaboration" (p. 4).

In previous years teaching English 408, Ullyot had observed that students in class discussions were reluctant to criticize one another's ideas. They preferred to support rather than correct one another, knowing that the instructor was present to evaluate their expertise. Fostering collaborative learning requires the instructor to surrender some authority to students, particularly to allow them to guide each other through the learning process. The instructor is not the sole guide to expertise, Bruffee (1984) writes: "collaborative learning inducts students into established knowledge communities and teaches them the normal discourse of those communities" (p. 649). Moore Howard (2001) adds that "collaborative pedagogy levels the teacher-student hierarchy"

when instructors guide the students' collaborative discovery and construction of knowledge (p. 57). The presence of an expert among novices is key to modeling expert-level methods, but this hierarchy can also be debilitating. Allowing students to develop their expertise collaboratively required Ullyot, at times, to remove himself from the conversation.

Many sources reinforce the necessity of an instructor's supervision and intervention to guide students through this process, to avoid Bruffee's (1984) catalogue of "the many possible negative effects of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality" -- to say nothing of arguments and disagreements (p. 651). Many of these are healthy exchanges of conflicting views that model how knowledge is socially constructed, but disagreements over work quality and individual commitments to the project can be debilitating. This is where the instructor's guidance is important. Joseph (2012) argues that instructors need to intervene regularly: "Students should be trained in teamwork skills, encouraged to reflect on their learning, and continually monitored and supported to ensure that the required performance outcomes and level of teamwork are attained" (2012, p. 224). Janangelo (1996) advises instructors to address the potential for conflicts to emerge, and not to expect that "collaborators will naturally arrive at consensus or share common definitions of entitlement, responsibility, or reward" (p. 99). More formal agreements are essential, particularly at the beginning of a project when team members are learning to trust each other's judgement. Janangelo elaborates: "If students perceive themselves as trapped in unproductive relationships based on unequal power distributions ... they can understandably react with disappointment, disengagement, recalcitrance, and withdrawal" (p. 102). Ervin and Fox (1994) advise that students can only aspire to "fair and honest collaborative relationships" when they are encouraged "to negotiate their goals and discuss their roles and expectations for joint projects, perhaps in writing" (p. 68).

So Ullyot required students to make these expectations in writing. Each group's team contract formalized these negotiations.² Sparrow (2012) cites the necessity of these charter documents, not only for setting out clear duties and consequences but also for mitigating conflicts later in the collaborative process. Instructors need therefore to ensure that these expectations are clear and explicit about each member's commitment to the project (Sparrow, 2012). Yet it is equally essential that instructors give teams sufficient time alone to build trust in each other's abilities and commitment. Joseph (2012) argues that teams perform poorly when they do not trust one another's commitment to higher standards (p. 224). Sparrow (2012) reinforces that the team members' mutual understanding of each other's skills and dispositions has a decisive effect on their performance (p. 1170).

Thus effective supervision of team projects requires a careful balance between freedom and oversight: not only of the instructor over the students, but of students over one another. Lunsford and Ede (1990) distinguish between dialogic collaboration, in which students work on all aspects of a project together, and hierarchical collaboration, in which students complete discrete parts of a project before combining them. Rogers and Horton (1992) advocate for the dialogic mode. Yet as our project description addresses below, most of the students in Ullyot's class opted for a hierarchical model, which had benefits (fostering individual expertise) and drawbacks (provoking some disagreements over work quality). Another difficulty is that individuals have to subsume their egos to the collective will, Moore Howard (2001) writes: students must prepare "for the ... prospect of having their work changed or eliminated. The group must dedicate itself to the best possible written product, and its members must ... help each other through potentially ego-deflating moments" (p. 64). This requires instructors not to "suppress dissent or enforce

² The next section will describe these contracts.

consensus” within groups, but rather to push students to accept that civil disagreement is a part of collaboration (p. 65). The ultimate goal of these civil dialogues is to form what Hughes and Lund (1994) call “a union that is greater than the . . . parts that composed it,” producing knowledge, expertise, and writing that could only result from this collaboration (p. 49).

Ultimately, collaborative work is a pedagogical model that humanities instructors must borrow, at least occasionally, from our colleagues in the sciences. After they leave our classes, our students will address multidisciplinary problems in teams that call on experts in multiple domains. That claim applies not only to those who are bound for extra-academic careers, but equally to those who address the future disciplinary questions and projects at disciplinary intersections: forensic anthropology, say, or digital text-analysis, or gender and media. This is not to say that the future of the humanities relies on interdisciplinarity alone, only that work in those disciplinary borderlands depends on the collaborative habits that need to be encouraged, not marginalized.

Organization

Team projects were the main research and writing component of English 408, with a shared grade comprising 30% of each student’s final grade in the course. Ulliyot provided grading rubrics for this 30%, comprising a topic proposal (5%), annotated bibliography (5%), oral presentation (5%), and final submission (15%). An additional 5% measured each student’s individual participation, based on peer evaluations of their substantive participation in the collaborative process. He measured this in two ways: by reading each team’s (required) meeting minutes and by periodically asking students anonymously to evaluate one another’s contributions to different stages of their project. He hoped that this would motivate students to meet their peers’ expectations and gave them greater autonomy over their final grade. Ulliyot modeled his grading rubrics, team contracts, and peer evaluation forms on those of a colleague. With the formal details of the collaboration in place, he began the experiment.

These collaborative projects followed three phases between October 2009 and April 2010 (the full-year course ran from September to April). The first phase, in the fall semester, divided the class into teams of three to four students, at which point they completed their team contracts. Roughly half of the teams formed themselves, often from acquaintances who sat nearby; the rest opted to be assigned their team by lottery. The second phase began in January 2010, when teams submitted a formal topic proposal (5%) and then an annotated bibliography (5%) at the end of February. Phase three began at the end of March, when teams delivered oral progress reports (5%) to their colleagues and solicited feedback. Final submissions (15%) were due in mid-April. Team members received the same grade for all four of these components, a grade divided equally between the project’s development and its result.

The contract was designed to offer teams an organizational structure. It established a set of common expectations to which students could refer in case of a conflict. Students collectively completed and individually signed this three-part document, which set out their procedures, expectations, and protocols, and the consequences for any member’s failure to abide by them. It specified how they would communicate, assign duties, and enforce internal deadlines. Ulliyot relied on his colleague’s model for this contract and on the research compiled by Mickan and Rodger (2000) on the characteristics of effective teams—that is, teams who conduct themselves with “[a] clear purpose,” “specific tasks,” “distinct roles,” and “suitable leadership” (p. 202). They also identify the need for clear protocols for “communication,” “decision making,” and “conflict management” (p. 202). All were essential components of the team contracts used in this course.

Ullyot provided each team with an empty form and asked them to complete it with as much detail as possible; he returned unclear or incomplete contracts for revision.

The contract's three sections worked together to mitigate conflicts. Having each group discuss and agree upon their regulating procedures, expectations, and disciplinary actions was an opportunity for each member to plan the successful completion of their project. The first section established team procedures for meetings and decision-making. Specifically, teams needed to set a time and place for regular meetings outside of class, though Ullyot also offered some sessions during class time. Teams had to declare how they would set and follow meeting agendas, and how they would record their meetings. Ullyot provided a template for meeting minutes, which recorded their discussions, plans, and individual responsibilities. Finally, teams needed to decide on a method of decision-making. The contract suggested that teams make decisions either by unanimous or majority vote, but left it to individual groups to choose the method that suited them.

The second section had three parts: work standards, team participation, and personal accountability. The questions about standards provoked discussions about each student's sense of what constituted "good" and "acceptable" work. Inconsistent standards of achievement might be a stumbling block for some groups, so agreeing on initial goals served to alleviate conflict as the project progressed. Groups also agreed on how they would distribute tasks and include ideas from all members, and on whether an individual leader would guide the project. A question on accountability set group expectations for individual involvement in each aspect of the project: attending meetings, meeting deadlines, communicating, and committing to team decisions.

The final section of the contract asked teams to discuss and set out consequences for members who failed to meet these expectations, from internal protocols to a more formal instructor intervention. It reminded students of the importance of addressing issues quickly to ensure a positive and productive experience.

The contracts also suggested that teams designate individual members to be responsible for one of the project's required components. This proposed division of labour balanced individual responsibility with the goals of collaboration. The Project Manager would write the topic proposal and organize and chair meetings, while recording the minutes of those meetings. Writer 1 would deliver the oral presentation and write the first draft of the final submission; Writer 2 would revise that draft into the final submission; and the Researcher would prepare both the submission's footnotes and bibliography and the annotated bibliography required at an earlier stage. (This model division assumed that each team would have four members, which was largely true.)

This division of labour mandated both regular contributions at different stages of the project, and substantive contributions to the final submission. Initially, Ullyot's rationale was to give students a flexible scheme to divide their work in complementary ways. Other advantages became clear only in retrospect. It also provided a roadmap to completing the project's four components; it clarified the different kinds of work the project would require; and it invested students in their team's success. One student noted that "there is always going to be issues [*sic*] with group work. But as long as people have assigned roles and meet frequently, the work will get done" (26 orange³). Mickan and Rodger (2000) argue that for effective teams, "tasks need to be sufficiently motivating for team members to share responsibility" (p. 203). This perspective is clear in another student's observation: "Having others rely on my contribution is an excellent motivator for a chronic procrastinator like myself" (56 orange).

³ When we refer to student feedback, we use the assigned group color and student number we used to anonymize this feedback when gathering it.

A potential disadvantage to this division of labour is that students will work in isolation from one another, integrating their contributions only when they cut and paste them together at the final hour. The contract's explicit emphasis on shared revisions focused only on the final submission, and team members were free to ignore its recommendations. The project manager, for example, might neglect her duty to work with the writers on revisions; or the researcher might contribute only to the annotated bibliography and then neglect the writers' requests for documentation. But as we discuss below, there is evidence that the teams who divided these components while collaborating at every stage earned higher grades. Ulliyot's rubric for the oral presentation, for instance, explicitly required each team member to address his or her contribution to the project. Research supports the need for students to be responsible for specific elements of a collaborative project, so long as individual responsibility is tempered with group discussion and exchange. Michaelsen, Fink, and Knight (1997) observe that in order to motivate group cohesion and productivity, "tasks should be explicitly designed to: 1) require a high level of individual accountability for group members...[and] 2) motivate a great deal of discussion among group members" (p. 377).

Having submitted their contracts, teams then began to develop their research questions. Ulliyot left these questions open, requiring only that teams address one of the major authors students read in the course, and that they made a critical argument about his or her text. Beyond that, they could follow their shared interests. The topics they proposed ranged from Francis Bacon's ethos of scientific progress; to the mental illnesses provoked by reading books; to vigilantes and the principles of justice in *Don Quixote*. Ulliyot's desired learning outcomes focused more on their reading, thinking, and writing skills than on prescribed topics in these texts. He suspected that teams would be more invested in a question they had devised collaboratively. This intellectual freedom would motivate them through the months of deadlines, procedures, and prescribed roles and expectations.

Evaluation

Collaboration has been shown to develop students' critical thinking and writing skills across numerous disciplines (Bruffee, 1984; Moore Howard 2001), and our own research has demonstrated similar improvements. In our post-course analysis, we have reviewed the grades and comments offered to students in two previous iterations of this course who completed a similar assignment individually. We have found that students who completed the assignment collaboratively earned a higher final project grade than those students who completed the assignment individually. In the previous iteration of this course -- for comparison -- with the same subject, same enrolment, and same instructor, the median grades for the two assigned research papers were 81% and 80% (2007-2008) and 77% and 77.5% (2008-2009) respectively. Comparatively, the median grade for the collaborative assignment in the course offering it was 87.8%. Other factors, like individual student skill and commitment, may be at work here: this is not decisive evidence that collaborative research and writing improve students' academic performance. However, the higher grades that students achieved through collaboration support both our conclusions from this collaborative assignment and the students' own analyses of their experience with it.

The students' evaluations of this pedagogical experiment were largely qualitative. At the end of English 408 we asked students to complete a five-question survey after their final projects were submitted, but before their project grades were released. Our questions were designed to reveal how team dynamics and organization affected their perception of the assignment's success. We processed twenty-three responses from a possible thirty-three students. The ten remaining students either failed to complete the survey or did not consent to participate in this research. However, these twenty-three responses address the experience of all seven teams who took part in this assignment. We then compared the experience of each team against their submitted team's contract to learn how the dynamics of the team developed or changed over the course of the project.

In the next section, we present the quantitative data and summarize the qualitative feedback that allowed us to prepare it. We divide this analysis using the questions we posed to students in the survey. Our questions reflect our interest in understanding how collaboration develops traditional academic skills as well as more general skills that can improve student success, such as collective engagement, effective communication, shared responsibility, and productive group dynamics.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis is derived from student responses to the five-question surveys we distributed at the conclusion of the final course project. Student responses to each question were categorized based on the type of commentary provided and used to understand larger trends in the challenges and successes experienced by members of the class throughout the collaborative assignment. Each question is listed below, followed by a data table which lays out general trends in student response. Then, we offer more specific detail about what students reported of their collaborative writing experience.

Q1: Did this project strengthen or weaken your academic skills (reading texts and criticisms, asking and researching questions, writing critical arguments)?

We have quantified the written responses into the three categories as shown in Table 1. Comments that made multiple positive statements with no negative comments were considered indicative of "much improvement." These comments consistently expressed an improvement in critical thinking, discussion skills, and writing skills. More specifically, these participants wrote that the project pushed them to consider a variety of learning approaches and perspectives. Finally, these students wrote that working in a group inspired greater commitment to the project and provided inspiration to produce high-quality work.

Table 1
Strengthening or Weakening Academic Skills

Response	Number of Responses	Responses as a Percentage	Overall Response Trend
Much Improved	13	56.5	91.3% positive
Somewhat Improved	8	34.8	
Not Improved	2	8.7	8.7% negative

Comments that made only single positive comments or offered both positive and negative assessments were marked as “somewhat improved.” These students generally noted that group work developed only some skills, as their team had distributed work unevenly. Students who commented on critical thinking skills conveyed a sense of improvement, but remarked that their writing skills remained the same. Others wrote that early work was beneficial, but that the project then focused on individual rather than collective efforts. Other negative statements expressed frustration with the slow pace of group work, and the difficulty of collaborative decision-making.

Comments that were entirely negative or that expressed high frustration were marked as “not improved.” They raised two issues: concern over the value of contributions by other group members and frustration with the need for consensus.

The quantitative data supports these self-assessments. To determine the degree of student improvement in written and argumentative skills, we have considered each student's final project grade against the grade they earned in those course components requiring individual work using comparable skills: three individual writing and research papers, and contributions to class discussions. 20 out of 23 students had higher grades in the collaborative work than in their individual work. Notably, the three students whose individual work received higher grades than their collaborative work scored 91% or higher in their individual work, marking them as high achievers within the class. This suggests that collaborative work improves most students' critical writing, research, and oral communication skills.

Q2: Did this project become a cohesive whole in which each group member’s work supported and developed the efforts of the next? Did you find this collaboration effective and helpful?

Using students’ qualitative comments in response to this question, as shown in Table 2, we determined that more than half the class felt their collaboration to have been “very effective.” These comments were entirely positive and specific. Students wrote that assigning distinct roles, working to people’s strengths, and demanding equal participation in group efforts helped to produce a strong collaborative effort. More specifically, they commented on the value of multiple editing sessions and in-person discussions in rendering the final version of the written assignment.

Table 2
Overall Group Cohesion and Collaboration

Response	Number of Responses	Responses as a Percentage	Overall Response Trend
Very Effective	13	56.5	86.9% positive
Somewhat Effective	7	30.4	
Not Effective	3	13.0	13.0% negative

Responses that mixed positive statements with minor concerns were determined to indicate a “somewhat effective” collaborative experience. They identified two consistent problems that limited collaboration: (a) the tendency of group members to cut-and-paste their writing together rather than to write collaboratively, and (b) the tendency of some students to rely too heavily on the strengths of others, which resulted in an uneven collaboration.

Feedback that responded negatively to this question indicated an ineffective collaboration. These students stated that there was little collaboration throughout and that the final product was compiled without adequate discussion. Some group members felt that they had higher standards than others in their group, which prompted them to complete work for others to ensure work quality.

At two discrete stages of the course, Ullyot also used evaluative criteria to measure the cohesion of each project. In the oral presentations, a third of each team's grade was a measure of how well they defined each member's particular contribution to the project thus far and to its successful completion. In the final submission, there were two measures of cohesion. First, if the two primary writers' styles were successfully merged, transitions between different stages of the argument would be invisible. Ullyot's qualitative feedback on the projects told students that he noticed these transitions – but this had no direct correlation to their quantitative grades, because he had not included transitions in his grading rubric. (Out of a possible 15 points, they received 12.0 and 13.8.) The other measure of cohesion was whether the analysis of texts and culture was supported by research, because a well-integrated researcher would work in tandem with writers. In two cases (out of seven), teams earned lower grades because they made claims without supporting research. (Again out of 15 points, they received 12.9 and 13.2.)

Finally, the questionnaire examined the students' perception of group collaboration as a productive method of work. We were particularly interested in three aspects of the collaboration: the adoption of specific roles and responsibilities within the group, the balance of work across the group, and the general perception of teamwork once collaboration ended. Because this section deals with the functionality of each group dynamic, which was not part of the instructor's formal evaluation, we will offer only the evidence derived from the student response forms in this section.

Q3: How effective and helpful were the roles developed by the instructor for use in this project?

The responses to this question were varied and detailed, as shown in Table 3. Our four categories here distinguish the ways that groups used roles in their collaboration. Students who distinctly stated that roles were used throughout the assignment expressed that the roles provided structure and expectations for individual work. These comments were generally positive, though one concern was that some participants resisted criticism of their work in a specific role. In these cases, inflexible roles negatively affected communications between group members.

Table 3
Usefulness of Defined Roles in Collaboration

Response	Number of Responses	Responses as a Percentage	Overall Response Trend
Set roles throughout	5	21.7	86.9 % used roles to structure work
Assigned roles, shared responsibilities	11	47.8	
Flexible roles throughout	4	17.4	
No specific roles assigned	3	13.0	13.0% used no roles

The majority of participants (86.9%) reported that they assigned roles to individual group members, but also worked collaboratively when the need arose. Their positive comments about the value of roles suggest that assigning roles was an effective way to initiate the collaborations. For these students, the roles did not make it difficult later to share responsibilities for given tasks.

A small group of students eschewed individual roles and preferred to assign roles flexibly over the duration of the project. They reported an early perception that permanently assigned roles were unrealistic, and so decided to share responsibility in every aspect of the project. They viewed flexible roles as providing mutual support and better morale throughout the assignment.

Three students reported using no roles, and instead divided tasks as they came up, according to who was available. These students reported that this approach encouraged compilation rather than collaboration, and two students noted that the balance of work was unfair. They described the experience of working without any roles in negative terms.

Q4: Specifically regarding the group dynamic, how fair was the division of labour? Was the workload of each participant balanced over the course of the project?

Students who mentioned no problems with the workload were identified as indicating a “well balanced workload” (see Table 4). They offered several suggestions as to why their collaboration was equitable: good communication, lots of meetings and discussions, equal contributions, and a willingness to help outside of assigned roles. They also emphasized how enjoyable the assignment had been.

Table 4
Workload Balance

Response	Number of Responses	Responses as a Percentage	Overall Response Trend
Well balanced workload	8	34.8	87% positive
Minor, resolved problems in balanced workload	6	26.1	
Minor, unresolved problems in balanced workload	6	26.1	
Major problems in balanced workload	3	13.0	13% negative

Comments that were positive about the division of labour but noted problems the students had resolved were considered to represent “minor resolved problems.” These responses raised concerns only about the workload balance at different stages of the assignment. Some found it difficult to establish clear guidelines for work at the beginning of the project, but most reported imbalances when preparing the final submission, when one or two members would take on additional work.

Groups who reported concerns that were not resolved before the final submission were identified as “minor unresolved problems.” These problems were consistently linked to imbalances in the group’s workload. Some students acknowledged that their concerns began when they assigned one person the task of writing the entire final submission, using the research of others. Students seemed to underestimate how much work this would entail. Others wrote that certain research questions dominated group discussions while others were ignored, resulting in unequal research contributions.

Q5: Has this experience changed your perception of group work for better or for worse?

Responses that were entirely positive and raised no concerns were identified as “positive.” These responses, tallied in Table 5, described a comfort with collaborative work, a sense of shared goals, and a tendency to collaborate rather than compete. Two students noted that collaborative skills were useful beyond this course and were pleased with the opportunity to complete this type of assignment. Two other students stated that the assignment’s formal requirements – taking minutes, completing peer reviews – were specifically responsible for their positive experience.

Table 5
Perception of Collaborative Work

Response	Number of Responses	Responses as a Percentage	Overall Response Trend
Positive experience	14	60.9	73.9% positive
Moderately positive experience	3	13.0	
Negative / frustrating experience	6	26.1	26.1% negative

Comments that stated a general positive attitude towards collaboration but that expressed concerns about their individual group were identified as “moderately positive.” These students observed that group work demanded more accountability and provided support for students during early planning, but also took more time and effort than independent research and writing. The tone of these comments was positive, but they tempered their enthusiasm by noting minor irritations.

Six students responded to this question with negative language and stating that it reinforced their pre-existing dissatisfaction with group work. Most of these students identified particular reasons for this frustration, including the difficulty of collaborative writing, the disparity of abilities between students, and the additional time required to forge consensus. The number of students reporting dissatisfaction with the overall assignment is higher than the number who raised issues with specific elements of the assignment, suggesting that while this style of assignment can offer benefits to students in terms of skill development and productive collaboration, it can also cause stresses that negate the assignment’s value.

So What Worked?

Student responses to the survey reveal that many developed skills in this collaborative assignment that are not usually required in essay writing. Overall, students reported improvements in the seven skills of undergraduate research and critical writing, and improvements in the skills of collaborative knowledge-production: clear self-expression, respectful debate, constructive criticism, and collective goal-setting. Moreover, these latter skills give students a sense of personal authority over their educational experience; this empowerment is a valuable benefit to collaborative projects.

The team projects developed students’ individual skills in research, writing, and revision by encouraging them to compare their methods and assumptions to those of other team members. As one student wrote, “Everyone has different research methodologies and a project which required everyone to work together exposed me to new ideas and information.” She added, “this project definitely helped me to strengthen my reading, writing and research skills because I gained insight and ideas from my team members regarding how to go about each of these practices” (39 pink).

This opportunity for comparison encouraged students to practice metacognition, or “thinking about thinking.” Students with good metacognitive skills can modify and regulate their own learning goals and methods (Ormand, 2013). Research has linked these skills to higher achievements among university students (Vanderstoep, Pintrich, & Fagerlin, 1996). In English 408, students who self-identified as having poor writing skills reported a benefit from these metacognitive comparisons:

I believe the team aspect of this project strengthened my ability to write in a different style than my normal analytical way. My group members were much better at writing [...]. It was a valuable growing experience for me trying to match their writing style. (37 red)

Students also developed collaborative skills such as academic debate, constructive criticism, and goal-setting. Students collaborating on a single topic learned to engage critically with the ideas of others. This was the skill Ullyot had particularly hoped to encourage with this assignment, and the feedback shows that students did become more confident and adept at intervening in academic debates. As one observed, “it strengthened my ability to re-evaluate my own opinions and ideas. It also helped me learn to think more critically about other people’s ideas” (49 yellow).

Increased motivation and dedication to personal and team learning was also widespread. Students reported being more engaged with texts and ideas through group discussions and shared inquiry: “I always find collaborative work to be more worthwhile. I find I retain more knowledge when engaged in a conversation” (56 orange). Others commented that “it strengthened my skills in reading criticism and writing critical arguments because even if I knew where I was going with something, I had to clearly outline it for my team” (51 red).

So What Didn’t Work?

While there were numerous positive outcomes to this collaborative assignment, three negative issues arose with some consistency: a lack of clear leadership; a failure to identify procedures and consequences for infractions of individual duties; and an unwillingness to communicate openly with other team members about these issues. In this section, we offer some ways to mitigate these problems.

The team contracts asked students to decide on a style of leadership and decision-making (shared or individual, formal or informal) to establish protocols and avoid conflict throughout the project. All seven teams opted for either informal or shared leadership, and agreed to make decisions either by consensus or by majority vote. Five teams opted to divide the tasks among team members, while two of seven teams opted to have an official project manager set both meeting agendas and interim due dates for group work. Whether or not they knew one another well, students were generally uncomfortable giving one team member a strong authoritative role in a group of peers.

The result was a widespread failure of leadership. Without a clear leader to gauge the feelings of individual members, and particularly to question workload balances and work standards, several teams struggled to maintain productivity and cohesion. Preferences for casual leadership and group consensus were more aspirational than realistic. Many students observed that their team’s lack of clear leadership or responsibility was a significant challenge. “We should have designated a project manager to keep things better on track,” wrote one student. “[N]o one was really comfortable with stepping up and taking charge. If we had clearly set out our roles we might have been able to avoid [...] problems” (44 green).

A clear purpose and suitable leadership are two aspects which ensure that team efforts are effectively managed and lead to productive collaborations. As Mickan and Rodger (2000) explain, “leaders need to maintain a strategic focus to support the organization’s vision, facilitate goal setting, educate, and evaluate achievement” (p. 203). A skilled leader can empower team members to work independently, which in academic projects encourages more intellectual variety. While early work could be done collaboratively, the long duration of this project required that teams have

a leader to maintain focus and commitment. To prevent any one member from taking sole responsibility for leadership, the position could rotate among team members.

Failures of leadership also led to a lack of accountability and clear consequences for infractions. Many of the teams had little trouble recording the practical details of their interactions and goal setting, but were unwilling or unable to identify the consequences for those who failed to meet established goals. In their contracts, team members consistently agreed to give the project a high priority and to submit their work by their own deadlines. However, students were more confident about potential conflicts than experience would bear out; no team clarified the measures that would be taken for members who did not complete their work on time. They set positive goals instead of making plans to address conflicts. Most pledged to address any issues internally, and to bring them to the instructor for arbitration only if problems continued, but they described no concrete means of disciplining team members at earlier stages. When problems did arise, teams had little recourse but to approach the instructor. Despite the fact that most students described collaborative challenges with their fellow team members, only one team requested mediation.

For one team in particular, the result was frustration and disillusionment with the whole process: “I have never enjoyed group work, and still do not. This project was another example of how some people do a lot of work, and others do none” (49 yellow). Another member of the same team wrote: “there should be methods [...] to address lazy group members” (21 yellow). In the same team’s contract, under the section concerned with consequences for failures to meet team expectations, they wrote that “if you miss a meeting you have to bring coffee. If the problem is large, consult prof.” Thereafter, if the infraction continued, “positive attitudes and dedication will not let infractions continue. We are all big kids” (yellow contract). Evidently the problem was large, but they did not seek Ullyot’s intervention. Had this team directly discussed how they would deal with individual failings, they would have been prepared to address them independently. Instead, two members had to take on additional responsibility in order to complete the project. In retrospect, Ullyot should have identified this (yellow) team’s failure to consider communication problems, and should have required them to propose a more productive approach to resolving conflicts. This realization affirms the instructor’s important role in guiding groups to establish functional terms of interaction, particularly at the contract stage.

An important aspect of productive team interaction, therefore, is a clear and effective approach to dealing with inter-team conflict. Even teams that function well can easily fall into destructive patterns or impasses. Teams should talk openly about conflicts that they foresee, and have a method of raising concerns about the performance of individual members. Not all conflict will detract from a positive collaboration; Mickan and Rodger (2000) write that “team conflict can source both creativity and destruction” (p. 205). However, teams need mediation strategies in order to work through conflict without losing focus on their shared purpose.

To avoid debilitating conflicts, it is important to ask students to identify processes for resolving disagreements and addressing resentments explicitly. It is understandable that teams did not anticipate serious problems at the outset of this project, but it is essential that they clarify the measures they will take if one or more member fails to meet expectations. This empowers individual students to enforce common expectations. Students in this situation will hold themselves and fellow team members to a standard which would otherwise require an instructor’s intervention.

Finally, we come to the most intractable challenge: how to encourage team members to raise the very topics of conversation that are most difficult and necessary. In their contracts, the students identified their primary mode of communication. Not surprisingly, all teams elected to use various forms of electronic communication, the most common of which were e-mail, text

messages, and the university's learning management system (Blackboard). Some opted for conversations over social networks and mobile phones. Lastly, all teams were able to use some classroom time for meetings and arranged to meet outside of class.

Despite this plethora of communication tools, several of the teams reported tensions and resentments that could have been addressed by more regular, forthright conversations about workload balance, work quality, and other issues. One team who reported themselves as successful at dividing work and ensuring equal commitment and effort from all members wrote that "the team contracts worked out well. All of the group members communicated with each other and compromised well. As long as the group keeps open communication, everything gets done" (52 orange). Sometimes optimism is justified: this team received high marks for every stage of their project, and reported a near-flawless experience. But in other cases, the absence of strong communication skills both for decision-making and for issue-identifying is highly problematic.

Research into the characteristics of effective teams has shown that the most essential quality is mutual trust, particularly among team members with "different competencies, assumptions and priorities." Teams must develop "confidence in each other's competence and reliability. Trusting individuals are willing to share their knowledge and skills without fear of being diminished or exploited" (Mickan & Rodger, 2000, p. 204). It is vital to raise this potential hurdle early in the process and to remind students to think carefully about both what and how they will communicate honestly with each other. The solution to this issue may be to require regular meetings or written reports with these issues on the agenda. Stringent monitoring of these questions would help students know that they need to raise these questions at the close of each meeting.

Three Recommendations

While we have made a series of specific recommendations in this article, we now conclude with three broad recommendations to those considering similar collaborative writing and research projects. All three focus on more deliberative team formations and divisions of labour.

1. **Mandate individual roles and responsibilities.** Role assignments were a common aspect of the successful teams, because they determined individual and shared responsibility. Several teams noted that having clear roles at the outset of the project gave them a clear division of labour and developed trust as team members met individual work deadlines throughout the year. In two cases, this trust enabled the teams to work collaboratively towards the end of the assignment, despite the initial division of responsibilities that these roles established. Every team that assigned clear roles at the outset of the project reported that these roles gave members valuable individual accountability. Teams that reported a positive working experience commented specifically on the effectiveness of individual roles in their success: "I think this is what held us together during the 'hard times.' Knowing what each responsibility was and to whom it was assigned lessened any potential for tension" (46 pink); "I think being assigned roles at the beginning really helped to organize our group. The work was evenly spread between all of us" (50 red).
2. **Assemble teams with complementary skills.** Careful team formation is essential to ensure effective collaborations between students with different skills and academic abilities. Moore Howard (2001) considers the problem of deciding between random or deliberate assignments of students to teams (pp. 64-65). Creating teams at random, or

among friends, inevitably allows for disparities either in terms of ability or individual approaches to collaborative work. However, this can be mitigated if instructors request that all students self-identify strengths, weaknesses, leadership preferences, and working style prior to creating student teams. Strengths and weaknesses should address their research, writing, and editing abilities. These are the requisite practical skills required for this team work. This self-identification would break academic engagement into specific skills, and give students an opportunity to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in the context of teamwork. Having clearly identified strengths and weaknesses enables instructors to form student teams with complementary skill sets. Furthermore, students working in a team so organized could develop their strengths, teach them to others, and learn from the strengths of others. As one of the students observed:

this project definitely helped to strengthen my reading, writing, and research skills because I gained insight and ideas from my team members regarding how to go about each of these practices; everyone has different research methodologies and a project which required everyone to work together exposed me to new ideas and information. (39 pink)

- 3. Create leadership opportunities.** Students should determine their leadership preferences—specifically, whether they prefer an active or collaborative form of leadership—before teams are assigned. Instructors could survey students' leadership styles in the classroom, and accordingly divide them into groups. While each team will contain a mix of both preferences, this would help to ensure that all teams contain at least one willing leader. Regardless of the leadership style chosen by any given team, all collaborations require some form of leadership or teams may be incapable of meeting clearly stated objectives. While instructors cannot possibly create teams in which all students share working methods and have similar approaches to completing course work, having students recognize their own preferences (e.g., work completed early or completed for deadlines; work conducted with the team or developed independently and then presented to the team) can provoke valuable discussions, and ensure that any compromises are part of the team contract. One group in particular struggled with the issue of leadership during this collaboration:

We, for the most part, ignored these [role] distinctions and tried to all play all roles in each of these areas. This, however, led to an imbalanced workload and research that was...unadaptable to a changing thesis. We should have designated a project manager to keep things better on track; seemingly, no one was really comfortable with stepping up and taking charge. If we had clearly set out our roles, we might have been able to avoid [these] problems. (44 green)

Conclusion: Limitations and Questions

There are some limitations to our study of collaborative writing in the humanities classroom. We conducted this experiment in one class over the course of one year, and while we have compared each team's results to identify effective organizational protocols and systems, our results need a wider application to be definitive. We elected not to create a control group for this

study, although we considered the benefits of running an identical section of English 408 with traditional individual writing assignments instead of collaborative writing assignments. In such a course, we would have asked students to evaluate themselves using an adapted rubric that addressed the same skills that we sought to develop through our collaborative writing assignment. However, as individual research and writing is accepted as the standard model of learning in humanities classes, we elected to focus on how students respond to and succeed within a less familiar assignment structure. We anticipated that our students, when asked to self-assess their academic development after working collaboratively, would be able to comment on whether their learning was improved through collaboration as compared to the more traditional style of humanities assignments. Additionally, we compared our students' first semester individual assignments with their later collaborative work to determine whether collaboration improved the quality of their work and found that there was consistent improvement in their later, collaborative efforts. However, it is possible that their evident improvement resulted from other factors, like their increased confidence as the year progressed.

In future iterations of this research, the use of a control group would help to quantify the improvements that we have noted qualitatively. It would also be enlightening to repeat this assignment in a similar course to compare both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. This group of twenty-three students in seven groups used a range of leadership styles and interactions, and it is clear that those who communicated their clear expectations of one another were the most successful. This conclusion is consistent with the research we have reviewed that supports the need for shared goals and support structures, but it is possible that other standards and protocols would yield equally positive results in future iterations of this experiment.

The results of this experiment raise a number of narrowly-focused research questions deserving further study. Within the realm of group dynamics, how do you effectively measure the skills that particular students have? Is it effective and desirable to reinforce these skills or to challenge them to expand them? On the subject of addressing problems within groups before they become intractable, is it more constructive to use direct, unmediated conversations or anonymous, technological communication methods?

Our argument has focused on the impact of a collaborative assignment imported from the sciences to the humanities. It would be worth measuring the results of similar pedagogical experiments in different humanities classrooms, particularly on scales as large as our colleagues in the sciences, like Leslie F. Reid, are operating in. This also raises a number of disciplinary questions. Among them is whether, as Fitzpatrick (2011) and others have advocated, humanities scholarship benefits from a shift toward greater collaboration. Do all humanities students need to excel in all aspects of research, writing, and editing? What are the implications of training them in more fluid kinds of discursive expertise, which manifests itself in a broader range of interventions than the traditional essay?

Phyllis Van Slyck (2006) argues that "if you encourage students to study in collaborative, creative, interdisciplinary ways, you promote the development of students who no longer fit the mold; they don't return passively to discipline-specific, lecture-based classes" (p. 166). The question facing humanities educators is whether a collaborative ethos will prepare students for a future of intersecting disciplines, a future well beyond any particular course's learning outcomes. As one student told us, this assignment helped her to develop skills that would extend beyond English 408: "Most of us will be involved in collaborative projects throughout life, and it takes respect, compromise, and humility...I think [this project] was *useful*" (51 red, emphasis original).

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