

## Collaborative Autoethnography: Best Practices for Developing Group Projects

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**Abstract.** Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) is an emerging practice that combines group interaction with qualitative research. Group projects are often deployed in course design to maximize the value of collaborative learning environments. Using existing scholarship, we describe best practices for group projects that apply principles of CAE. To advance the premise of the paper beyond descriptive summaries of pedagogical inquiry, we utilize a best practices mechanism to present a coherent guide for project collaborators to use in various classroom settings. The best practices proposed are research validated by existing CAE and project management literature.

Group projects and presentations are often included in coursework as student learning activities and assessments. Group projects and presentations provide students with the opportunity to refine their communication, problem-solving and management skills within the context of a shared goal. This skill is useful not only in their academic development but also in preparing them for their future careers. Cohen and Mule (2019) discuss the effective intersection of design thinking and collaborative pedagogy in coursework. Allan (2016) reviews the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) literature regarding approaches to small-group learning, small-group instruction and addresses some of the resistance to group pedagogical practices. Finally, Minei (2016) outlines the “Do Good Project”, a semester long small-group assignment that displays impactful pedagogy “by bridging the gap between theoretical concepts articulated during lecture and real world application of those concepts in practice” which means that “students can focus their skills through the lens of social awareness” (p. 74). Clearly the literature reflects the notion that effective facilitation of group assignments and projects is an integral pedagogical tool for instructors.

Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) is an emerging practice that combines group interaction with qualitative research. At the heart of CAE is collaboration or the “ensemble” which allows for varied perspectives to collect and analyze data (Chang et al., 2013, p. 24). Using group project management and small-group communication literature, we aim to describe best practices for learning CAE in an academic classroom venue using the small-group construct, affording an ideal platform to pedagogically apply the principles of CAE. As such, we first provide background information about CAE as method and then broadly discusses how to apply CAE as a best practices model

within a classroom setting. A CAE project is suitable for a wide variety of courses ranging from general education to upper-level social science and humanities as most topics are conducive for learning activities that include group assignments.

### **What is Collaborative Autoethnography?**

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a multivocal methodology that supports a shift from an individual to a collective agency, thereby offering a path toward personally engaging, non-exploitative, accessible research that enhances the reflexive method (Lapadat, 2017). CAE is a qualitative research method “that focuses on self-interrogation but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team of researchers” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17). The process involves writing reflexive narratives, employing open coding (Tracy, 2013) and then repeating the process to find points of connection and disconnection in experience (Chang et al., 2013). CAE is a response to credibility challenges in that it “presents itself as an alternative to single-authored self-narrative research such as autoethnography in which the credibility of a one-person act is often challenged in social science spaces where objectivity is still dominant” (Hernandez et al., 2017, p. 252). Simply stated, CAE is a “pedagogy of mutuality” (Taylor and Coia, 2009, p. 61). Hernandez et al. (2017) suggest CAE “holds potential for engendering power-sharing in the research process” and works to dismantled hierarchal power structures often associated with collaborative endeavors (p. 253). Thus, utilizing CAE to design group projects allows students to develop and apply CAE skills and methods to their coursework while fostering a richer and deeper learning experience.

### **CAE Best Practice Framework for Group Projects**

We propose the following best practice framework that incorporates CAE into a group project format. At the beginning of the course, we suggest placing students in small groups while 1) learning the course material and 2) learning about CAE. It is at this juncture group members exploratorily begin reflexive work to uncover parts of their experiences that could resonate with their peers. This is also the point in which the group discussions center on how to best use individual experiences to create a collective voice (Tombro, 2016). An important task of the group is to select a group leader who will take hold of the course and assignment guidelines and assign segments as they deem fitting certain members (Hackman, 2011). This allows each member of the group to have a clear idea of the overall assignment goals and objectives and facilitate a fixed collaborative mentality which transitions into project engagement. Having students complete the initial portions of the course in groups is essential in cementing their understanding of CAE as an applied exercise as well as preparing them for a later course assessment.

Because group assignments have all the underpinnings of a project (and the assignments in this case are indeed referred to as projects), we will treat an assignment as a project. A project may be defined as temporary work and can be viewed as a journey from start to finish (Morris, 1998). The journey, in project management terms, is known as the lifecycle (Westland, 2007). Intertwined throughout our proposed best

practice framework are features of a project lifecycle along with key disciplines of project management, each with a brief overview of function and purpose. Integrating principles of CAE and group project components of leadership, decision-making, and planning into course objectives and outcomes allows for a self-reflexive process that can be effectively applied, practiced, and managed. Certified project management professionals have a much more granular perspective of project execution (Richman, 2002). For the purposes of small groups conducting CAE-driven works, rudimentary project management knowledge will be sufficient. Group leaders and members will be exposed to the basic elements and not expected to become project management experts. The purpose is to acquire the project management mindset of process.

Group projects that employ CAE as a guiding framework are collaboratively constructed, thus allowing effectiveness, transparency, and most importantly accountability. Guidance derived from CAE as a methodology and best practices for successful project management forms the basis of our framework proposal. We suggest that an effective collaborative project must contain four primary elements: cognition, group construct, project construct, and communication. Emphasis on these factors cannot be understated. Adherence to these primary building blocks is instrumental to a successful and meaningful collaborative venture.

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### **Cognition**

Perhaps the most important aspect that each small group must grasp is that this method of learning CAE reinforces the intrinsic elements by first learning the subject matter and reflecting on its impact within group members' own culture (Hee, 2008). By contextual investigation within the group, students can conduct ethnographic research enabling them to break down the topic into concise and meaningful segments (Stahl, 2010). Additionally, awareness exposes each group member to core dynamics as they simultaneously witness and engage first-hand the elements in action within their own group. For students, the exposure itself is a reinforcement apparatus, and they can now present a more qualified perspective on the topic.

### **Group Construct**

Harvard professor Richard Hackman (2011) outlines key conditions that benefit group construct and includes a contractual instrument:

#### ***Group Contract***

A group contract (see example in Figure 1). This is the vehicle through which the small group leader and members agree to charter their operation. It is a collaborative effort to define and refine roles and responsibilities.

## Figure 1

### *Sample Student Group Contract*

#### **Student Group Contract**

##### **Team Values and Goals**

- What are our shared team values?
- What is our team goal?

##### **Team Roles and Leadership**

- Who does what within this team? (Who takes notes at the meeting? Who sets the agenda? Who assigns tasks? Who runs the meetings?)
- Does the team have a formal leader?
- If so, what are their roles?

##### **Team Decision Making**

- How are minor decisions made?
- How are major decisions made?

##### **Team Communication**

- Who do you contact if you cannot make a meeting?
- Who communicates with whom?
- How often will the team meet?

##### **Team Performance**

- What constitutes good team performance?
- What if a team member tries hard but does not seem to produce quality work?
- How will poor attendance/work quality be dealt with?

*Note.* Bauer, T. N., & Erdorgan, B. (2012). *An introduction to organizational behavior*. <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/pdfs/an-introduction-to-organizational-behavior-v1.1.pdf>

### ***Group Dynamics***

The group cannot be a group in name only with uncertainty about who is engaged. The contract vehicle provides a tangible step to assign and document tasking for each group member and more efficiently negotiate dialectical tensions (Young & McKibban, 2014, p. 370). The right number and the right mix of people collectively assigned the right tasks is important in maintaining a healthy group dynamic.

### ***Concise Purpose***

Develop a concise purpose. Ensure each member understands what the group is to achieve, similar to a project mission statement. Clearly articulating the purpose early on is important in aligning future activities to avoid unproductive tasks.

### ***Group Leader***

An effective group leader interfaces with supportive organizational elements that provide resources, information, and coaching to ensure the group is on track.

Although this information seems intuitive, it is important to outline this step as it grounds the whole project within a CAE framework.

### Project Construct

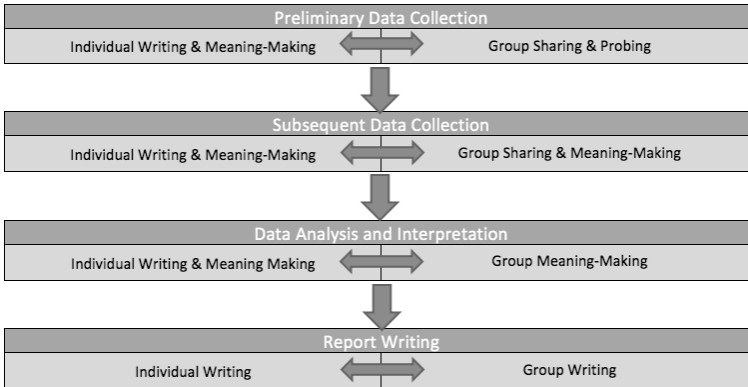
This element is a critical factor as it provides an essential structure for group members to operate in and guides members to the goal using components such as time, quantity, and quality. Collaboratively contrived, agreed upon, and with a defined monitoring methodology, each element is assigned corresponding tasks and responsible group member(s). The group leader ensures each task is on track and the elements of the project are implemented and adhered. Components of the project construct should include at minimum:

### Compliance

It is important the students understand and comply to CAE data collection process. As seen in Figure 2, this methodology provides a pathway for collaborators to engage in the iterative process of collaborative autoethnography. Group leaders should familiarize themselves with the process then convey the mechanics to group members.

Figure 2

*The Iterative Process of Collaborative Autoethnography*



Note. Figures 1-3 in Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., Hernandez, K. C. (2012). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Routledge.

### Scope

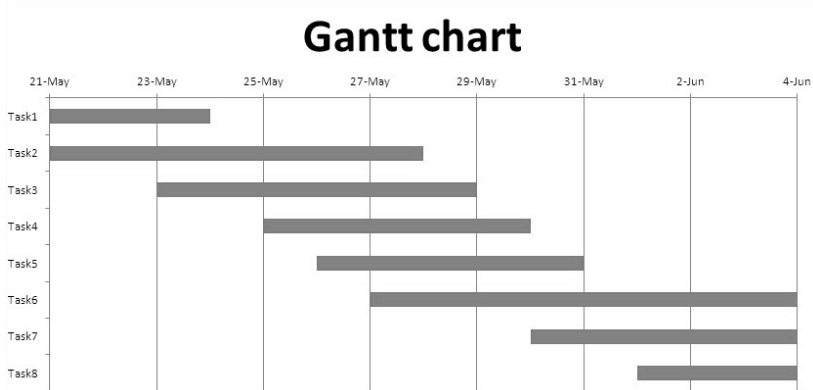
Much like a mission statement, a well-defined scope outlines the goals of the project. The group leader must ensure the scope is in alignment with the assignment, and that all members understand.

### ***Achievable Schedule***

Time is perhaps the most critical factor to any project. The schedule should display the tasks that must be performed, when the tasks commence and conclude and who is responsible to meet the requirements of each task. This can be the most complex part of the project. A Gantt chart (see Figure 3), which is a time-based visual representation that shows the amount of work done or production completed in relation to the project plan, is the most appropriate tool for project schedules, but a simple calendar will do just fine for small projects (“What is a Gantt Chart”, n.d.). A Gantt chart provides a visual presentation of the progress of assigned tasking over a course of time. It shows when tasks are to be started and when they are scheduled to be completed. Beneficial in project management, the Gantt chart should be visible for all group members to clarify their individual responsibilities, with whom they share tasking, and to provide an overall assessment of project health.

**Figure 3**

*Gantt Chart*



*Note.* What is a Gantt Chart? (n.d.). Retrieved October 10, 2019 from <https://www.gantt.com/>

### ***Routine to Report Status***

Information is a powerful instrument, especially when deadlines are to be met via a defined communication protocol set up in the group contract. The contract ensures that status reports are consistently given through the lifecycle of the project.

### ***Identify Technical Aptitude***

Establishing the communication vehicle, the leader and members must demonstrate the ability to effectively present the group project to the intended audiences.

## **Communication**

For effective planning and project execution, there must be a defined and clear line of communication within the group. Grounding the project in CAE as Chang et al. (2013) suggest allows for “deeper learning about self and others” (p. 28). A critical subset of communication is routine interaction. While most communication will take effect during planned and regular meetings, it is prudent for the group to create a vehicle that all members can access to submit and review action items and to keep informed of changes to meetings or other project elements. Furthermore, it is important to define the modes of communication in the group contract so that members may inform the leader of tardiness or absences. This is a courtesy to all group members and allows the leader time to assess appropriate options. Routine meetings must be meaningful, with a set agenda (Creighton, 2009). Record meeting minutes and make available for all members to review. Make sure group members are involved in both the meeting preparation and action items. Meeting times should be used as spaces of individual and group reflection in order to evaluate the project status.

### ***Planning***

Thomas, et al. (2008) state “the most effective team cannot overcome a poor project plan” (p. 105). Therefore, it is important to outline roles and responsibilities in the project plan and how each member will attend to their tasks then amend the group contract accordingly. This will provide transparency and keep task assignments on time. A clear plan and detailed goals are critical to the success of the project. If the plan is ambiguous, unrealistic, not agreed upon, or not in writing, the project is in trouble before it begins (Richman, 2002).

### ***Timeliness***

The group leader is accountable to meet assignment deadlines. Procrastination can be damaging when a group is depending on individual input, particularly in a linear or dependent scenario. Keeping the project moving along a pre-planned timeline is critical and reduces stress downstream. The timeline should have built in flexibility to accommodate unforeseen events known as “project creep” (Richman, 2002).

### ***Efficiency***

Often compared to productivity, this element is worth elevation. According to Shenhar et al. (2001), project efficiency is listed as one of the four levels of project success. Efficiency is a measure of management effectiveness with elements of time and quality. Group projects have time constraints and members must understand the value of time as it is critical to successful execution. The collective project goal can get lost in extraneous and tangential elements; therefore, project oversight is paramount while moving forward. The group’s leader is effectively accountable for task completion, and each member is responsible for concise and efficient processing of their assigned tasks.

### *Delegation*

Planning is critical to group success, as the delegations and decisions made at the beginning set the stage for later execution (Morris, 1998). The group leader must balance tasking that takes place within the group to ensure equilibrium. Groups work best when members can equally carry their weight. In delegating project tasks, the leader ensures a somewhat equal distribution of project input by members.

### *Delivery*

By following the previous guidance, the group members are now confidently able to coherently deliver in front of other groups. Deciding who should present what topics depends on the overall objectives of the group and the command of the content each member has. What CAE does in terms of presentation planning is force the students to think about what other experiences outside of speaking does each member contribute to the project (Giuliano, 2005).

### *Closure*

Finally, it is important to take the time to regroup and discuss what could be done differently. An example of this would be to annotate and distribute a collective “lessons learned” summary document to each group member to use in their future endeavors.

## **Incorporating the Framework into Course Design**

For a CAE framework to be effective, it is important to embed the principles into the design of instruction. The collaborative elements should be strategically developed as course objectives, appear in the syllabus, and throughout course assignments’ instructions. Cassard and Sloboda (2014) suggest “incorporating [students’] perspectives” when designing courses and CAE allows students some agency in constructing learning activities (p. 45). We suggest introduction to course content be preceded by lecture and reinforcement of the fundamentals of CAE. Once established, the following weeks of instruction should be segmented into meaningful small group discussions connecting CAE principles with course topics. This component of course design is important to help mitigate resistance by helping students “begin to understand, see the value in, and invest energy in small-group learning” (Cooper et al., 2000, p. 26).

Class meetings might be structured to introduce students to a new CAE element via lecture, assigned readings or autoethnographic journaling in concert with the course (Fritson, 2008). Each lesson is strategically integrated into assignments from the previous weeks to facilitate reinforcement. Subsequent class meetings could be structured to assess the understanding of CAE and other course materials through group presentations, which includes oral and visual aids (Hastings, 2003). The ultimate purpose of this exercise is to authentically fold lessons learned into a final assessment using a collaborative framework.



## Conclusion

This paper was designed to help instructors facilitate the development of group work within the framework of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) in a variety of courses. Our objective was to present a tactical discussion of group projects using a CAE framework that contributes to best practices discourse and could be deployed course design. The associated and coordinated group activities within a CAE structure have the potential to enhance learning outcomes by immersing students directly within the subject matter through a self-reflexive but shared approach. Group projects of the collaborative autoethnographic nature will certainly remain a part of academic innovation as pedagogical interest in synergic methods continues to grow in popularity. It then becomes clear that by virtue of participation in a group, each member augments their understanding by being an integral part of the very CAE experience about which they are learning.

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“In order to make teaching and learning more equitable, providing opportunities for all students to be included and to be able to express themselves, it is essential that instructors connect with their students, provide structure to intercultural dialogue and model intercultural practices” (p. 14).

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