Chapter 6

Managing Your Collaboration

In our teaching of service-learning writing courses, we've found that the collaborative emphasis of service-learning projects can lead to students' greatest challenges and best learning. Many experienced students groan when they learn that a class requires extensive group work. Who doesn't have bad memories of the slacker who never holds up her end of the work, or the bossy person who insists on doing everything his way, or the couple of people in the group who talk only to each other and never have anything to contribute to group deliberation? We certainly have our own stories to tell about collaboration. As we wrote this section we reflected on a bad experience we had in graduate school ten years ago when we sat down and tried to write a proposal for a conference together. At the time, we agreed on the major points we wanted to make and were intellectually in sync, but when we sat down at the computer to quickly put together a *one-page* document that was due the next day, we learned that even the best of friends can run into serious problems when it comes to writing together. We have different styles and different processes. We imagine texts differently from each other and picture their evolution along different trajectories. As best we can recall, by the time we finally finished that document, we were angry with each other and neither of us was proud of our final product. We can't remember whether the proposal was accepted or rejected, but we remember our feelings of surprise and frustration. Fortunately, we have since learned that through careful planning, concerted effort, and mutual commitment to a project, we can make a collaboration work. So can you.

We want to clarify up front that collaboration is hard work—it's as hard or harder than creating a document on your own—but if it's done correctly and in the right spirit, it almost always leads to better work than one person can do alone. Our students who have graduated and gone on to work as engineers, technical writers, scientists, business executives, and other kinds of professionals tell us that the writing they do in their jobs is almost always collaborative to some extent. When they write reports, they must often meld the work of several writers into a single seamless text. When they write letters to clients, they must keep in mind the ethos and the standards of their companies. When they write documentation, they might work with technical developers, marketing representatives, and prospective users to ensure accuracy, marketability, and user friendliness. When they write proposals, they might collaborate with cost, legal, and other experts. All of this is collaborative writing.

Though not as serious as in the workplace, the stakes are also high for collaborative course projects. In our experience, most student groups face challenges that, if not handled well, can compromise the quality of the final projects and the pleasantness of the collaborative experience. Members who don't pull their weight can be asked to leave the group, which can present a problem for all involved. Among the many student projects we've supervised, we've only seen a few groups fall apart in this way, but it can happen if members don't follow some basic guidelines.

STUDENT VOICES 6.A Comments on Collaboration

Sandy: Working on team projects can often be frustrating. Everyone has their own ideas and it can become time-consuming. On the other hand, brainstorming with a group of people often produces great ideas. My most important advice to collaborators would be to allow plenty of time for collaborating and to plan ways to deal with problems like attachments you can't open, etc. Plan for Murphy's Law!

Sam: Despite the fact that I am technically working alone on my project, I will certainly need the help of a number of other people to get it done. The rules for collaborating with classmates also apply to working with agency contact people. It may be even more important to do things like leaving plenty of time and so forth with this group. I'm the only one with a grade on the line.

Tabitha: I groaned when I heard the term "group project," but once I chose a partner with interests similar to mine, I felt better. Because this is a web-based course, we are primarily using the "divide and conquer" approach. Our schedules are pretty different, so the more stuff we can do and report back to the other on, the better off we are. The division of labor is a little tricky since there's only two of us—so we each have to wear many hats, but that's turning out well because we each get a chance to do a variety of kinds of work. Also—as much as I love my email, it's amazing how a phone call or two can clear up confusion.

Gia: I really believe in the "results-driven meetings" idea. I've found that if I take some notes when there's something I need to know (or need clarified) then collect these notes over a day or two, I can (1) either figure out what I need on my own (so as to avoid asking dumb questions I just needed a clear head to find answers to) and (2) avoid bugging my groupmates with a zillion emails.

Jose: Collaborative work always seems more challenging to me than it should. I tend to work better alone because I know exactly what my goal is and I do not have to worry about what goals another person or group of people has in mind. In the course of being a tech writing major, I have learned a great deal about collaborative work and how to form a common goal with a writing team. I'm getting better at using tools to facilitate teamwork. One of the most important for me is what one of our classmates called "icebreakers"—these are activities that help us to get to know each other.

Collaboration Challenges and Strategies for Handling Them

When we were writing the proposal described above, we faced three kinds of challenges. First, we had a *writing* challenge. We had to produce a tight, persuasive, and intellectually engaging document. It had to be 300 or fewer words long and include enough references to texts and theories to demonstrate that we knew what we were talking about. It also had to persuade our readers that we had a new and interesting point to make. This was a hard task, especially for a couple of relatively inexperienced students.

Next, we had a *personality* challenge. We had to negotiate between Blake's more linear, pre-planned approach and Melody's more exploratory one. (You can only imagine how long it took us to settle on those labels, and we're still not altogether satisfied with them.) We had to accommodate the strong personalities of two highly opinionated people with different ideas about what to write. Our fear about our lack of experience and our deep desire to get our paper accepted only magnified this challenge.

Finally, we faced *logistical* concerns. The proposal was due in less than 24 hours, and we each had other responsibilities to fulfill during that period. We had to make six photocopies of some sections, three of another, and take all of it to the post office to be postmarked.

Each challenge was enough to cause us frustration, but when all of the challenges were grouped together, we experienced some serious stress. As you face your own collaboration tasks, you'll find that these types of challenges compound each other throughout the process. Sometimes a personality difference creates a writing problem, or a logistical problem such as a tight deadline exacerbates a personality problem. In the pages that follow, we'll suggest a number of strategies for making your group's collaboration on all of these levels as smooth and successful as possible. We'll insert some examples from our own work and some anecdotes from student projects. But we'd like to begin with a few simple rules.

- *Allow adequate time.* While two or three or four heads are almost always better than one, they are not necessarily faster than one. Often the process of collaborating takes much longer than working individually. Don't save joint work for the last minute, thinking that you can divide it up quickly and complete it. Finish drafts as early as possible to leave plenty of time to accommodate each person's writing pace, habits, thinking processes, and so on.
- *Follow the Golden Rule.* It may seem trite or obvious, but treating your teammates as you'd like to be treated is probably the most important strategy you can follow. Assume that even the most confident person is sensitive about her or his writing. Remember that everyone has her or his own values and habits. Try to be aware of and sensitive to your groupmates' feelings and opinions.
- *Don't take things personally.* Remember that you are working together toward a final goal. This project, other schoolwork, and other life responsibilities may overshadow your colleagues' concern for your feelings from time to time. Try

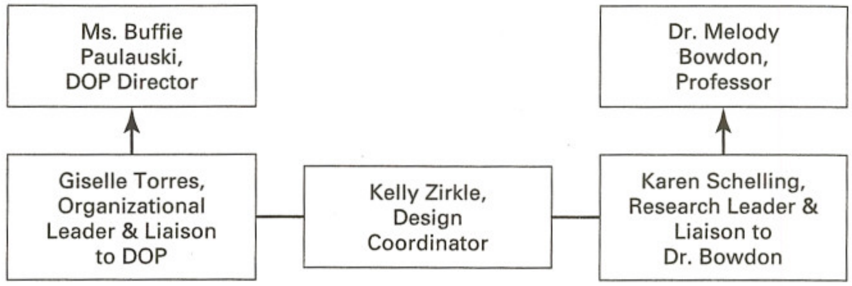

Figure 6.1 Collaboration planning chart

not to take bad moods, brusque comments, low enthusiasm, or tepid first reactions too seriously.

- *Don't assume that group members can read your mind.* We've seen several groups become stressed mainly because the members didn't communicate with each other honestly. Though it may seem completely obvious to you and one or two others that one group member is not carrying her part of the load or is making everyone miserable by railroading things, that person may not be at all conscious of the problem. The person who shows up at the library ten minutes late for every meeting may not recognize how frustrating those of you who have made the effort to be punctual find this pattern. Though it may sound obvious, we suggest that you remind yourself regularly to just *tell the person.* Most people don't want to be disliked by their group members and will make an effort to change their behavior if they are alerted to problems.
- *Create a visual representation of your collaboration.* It can be quite helpful to diagram your relationships as you begin to work on a joint project. Don't forget that you are not collaborating only with your team members; you are also working with one or more agency representatives. Further, you will be collaborating with other members of your class through peer review and class presentations and discussions. Your instructor will also be providing input and guidance. As you design your collaborative plan and model, figure these characters in as well. See the simple chart one group used to represent their collaborative responsibilities in Figure 6.1.
- *Approach these concerns in a sophisticated way.* Together apply the ideas you'll find throughout this chapter. Learn as much as you can about your joint goals and ideas, and look at them from an intellectual standpoint as well as a practical one. Develop a framework for thinking about collaboration that will apply to your work beyond this course. Develop your own set of strategies and policies for collaboration.

Types of Collaboration

As we've noted, most students have one or two disastrous collaboration stories to share before they start their service-learning classes. Our negative joint writing experience described above is a typical example: we came to the computer, sat down together, and expected to quickly produce a seamless text. Fortunately, through the years we've learned that this is not the only kind of collaboration available to us. There are at least three distinct models of collaboration as well as combinations of these. Your group will likely rely on all of them before you finish your project.

Simultaneous Collaboration

As you probably guessed, in this approach group members take on one task together at one time. Although such document-sharing technologies as MOOs and NetMeeting may allow you to do this kind of collaboration from different physical spaces, most people engaging in simultaneous collaboration are working in a room together. This can happen in all kinds of spaces—a computer lab with several terminals, someone's office or apartment with everyone huddled around one computer, a regular classroom, or a library workroom. Simultaneous collaboration is most appropriate for work at the beginning or the end of a project phase. If your instructor gives you time in class to work together, consider saving some of the duties below for those periods. Specific activities that can be accomplished through simultaneous collaboration include:

- *Planning.* Your final product will be better and you will save time if everyone's voice is included in the planning of the project, whether it's about research, writing, design, or revision.
- *Outlining.* If you're deciding what to include in a document, you'll want to involve more than one person to avoid leaving anything out. You might have everyone send preliminary lists of inclusions to one person for compiling, but we advise that you hold at least one group session to finalize the outline.
- *Determining group guidelines.* Although many writing activities are best done solo, it's important that you work together to define a general group style and ethos. We'll describe specific strategies for accomplishing this later in the chapter.
- *Processing feedback.* If you're receiving input from members of a peer group, your instructor, and/or your agency contact person, we suggest that you make an effort to process this information together. Comments on your documents can often be interpreted in several ways, and it's helpful to have more than one pair of eyes looking at them together to determine what they mean and how important they are. You may want to make copies of responses or divide several responses up among your group for reading, but decide how to act on those ideas together.
- *Putting together the final product.* After a long process of producing a major project, it may seem that the last few steps are the easy part. But we've found that some of the most difficult and frustrating experiences of the entire process come at the very end. It never fails that a printer will malfunction or the photocopier at the print shop will jam or there will be some kind of last minute decision to be made about the appearance of the portfolio or the cost of binding or reproduction. For this reason, it is critical to involve all group members at this stage. Everyone should have a chance to

assess the product's contents and appearance. Together you're less likely to forget to include something, overlook a misspelled name, or put things in the wrong order. Meeting simultaneously also ensures that everyone signs off on the project, which prevents placing the onus of final responsibility on one or two members.

- *Presenting your project.* If you've ever waited until the last minute to rehearse a group presentation, then you know how important it is to plan and practice together to ensure coherence and professionalism. Although your actual presentation will probably be sequential—one person presenting at a time—your preparation should be largely simultaneous.

"Divide-and-Conquer" Collaboration

Some parts of a project don't need to involve more than one person. These activities can be assigned to individual group members and then processed by the group as a whole. When you use this approach, be sure to distribute the work fairly and to avoid duplicating efforts. The following kinds of activities fit well in this approach.

- *Research.* Typically only one member of your group needs to go to the library or onto the web to find a piece of information or to locate a source. Some people are considerably more effective as researchers when working alone.
- *Composing/Drafting.* Very few people can write effectively while several people are talking to them. Most of us need quiet time and a clear mind to generate good texts. We recommend that you work individually to write initial versions of most texts, keeping the ethos and decisions of your group in mind.
- *Correspondence.* You may choose to give one member primary responsibility for corresponding with your agency contact person or your instructor. This will help you to avoid duplication or contradiction. It will also simplify things for your correspondent, as she or he will not have to puzzle over which member to contact with a question or problem. The group member who takes on this responsibility must commit to keeping all other members up to date about messages. It's a good idea to copy the group on any emails or letters that you generate.
- *Miscellaneous details.* A complex writing project involves many small details such as photocopying and collating. It can also involve formatting the page numbers or headings in the text or delivering the final product to the agency. Assign these tasks to individuals, but be sure that no one is given more than her or his share.

Sequential Collaboration

In this approach collaborators take turns working on the same document or project. One person may be responsible for starting the project or laying the foundation, and other members must add to or review that initial work. As we'll discuss later in this chapter, communication and text-sharing technology can simplify this process. Sending a document as an email attachment, for example, is much simpler and faster than meeting your partner at the library at 6 P.M. on Saturday to hand-deliver it. Activities that are best accomplished through sequential collaboration include:

- *Early revising.* Though we've advocated that individuals take responsibility for generating early versions of texts, we suggest that early revision, which involves evaluating global concerns such as content and arrangement, be done sequentially. You might pass an early draft among the members of your group and have each person make comments about the shape of the document and add missing elements. We specify that we are referring to *early* revising because, as you'll note in several places in this chapter, we believe that the overall process of revising is a group responsibility.
- *Preliminary editing.* Again, it's important for everyone to be involved in editing a document, but even with a very tough skin, it's hard for some of the most experienced and confident writers to be present for and participate in the editing of their own texts. Likewise, most of us hate to mark up someone's text while they're watching us. We suggest that you split up the first round of editing, perhaps have different group members focus on different aspects of the text in their editing passes. The sequential approach to this process will also mean that the group members see the document with fresh eyes; if a document is new or you haven't seen it in a few days, you will be better able to assess its strengths and weaknesses.

Combination Approaches

Although we've categorized certain parts of the collaboration process as particularly suited to sequential, divide-and-conquer, or simultaneous models, the reality is that *most processes require a combination approach.* Even if one person is primarily responsible for composing a first draft, for example, he might consult with the rest of the group several times during that process. Although a research task may be assigned to one member, the group might help her brainstorm sources to pursue and keywords with which to search. Although a group might design a document grid collectively, one member might draw the final version to distribute.

In the process of writing this book, we have followed each of these models at one point or another. Table 6.1 shows our collaboration system for the first three chapters. After planning the chapters together, we each took the primary responsibility for drafting certain chapters, agreeing to do most of the research and writing separately. (Later chapters required us to draft sequentially, with one person writing a segment of the chapter and then sending it to the other for completion.) Then we exchanged the chapters and made revisions to each other's work directly on electronic copies of files, saving them under new names to preserve the old copies. We then exchanged chapters again so that the original author could see and respond to the changes made by the reviser. After we were confident that the drafts were complete and fairly polished, we sent them to the publisher and our series editor for review, and the drafts went to outside reviewers with expertise in technical and professional writing. After receiving feedback from our editors

Table 6.1 Chart of author's collaboration scheme for first three chapters

	Planning →	Drafting →	Work-shopping →	Planning Changes →	Revising
Chapter One	Both, simultaneous	Melody, then Blake	Series Editor, Reviewers	Both, simultaneous	Blake, then Melody
Chapter Two	"	Melody, then Blake	"	"	Blake, then Melody
Chapter Three	"	Blake, then Melody	"	"	Melody, then Blake

and reviewers, we returned to simultaneous collaboration, working together to synthesize suggestions and formulate a revision plan. Revision and editing responsibilities for each chapter were then split up.

More than any one combination of models, we advocate a careful, thorough planning of your collaboration. We also recommend considering the following factors that shaped our own collaboration.

- *Interests.* Occasionally one of us was more enthusiastic about the subject of a chapter than was the other. In those cases, it was easy to choose our combination approach. We planned simultaneously, gave one writer the responsibility for composing, and then revised and edited sequentially.
- *Abilities.* Similarly, in some cases, one of us had more experience or knowledge about a topic than the other.
- *Schedules.* We wrote the book on a fairly quick and tight timeline. Sometimes it was simply more practical for one or the other to write a first draft or tie up loose ends. This factor also determined which of us would travel to the other's town for work that required simultaneous collaboration.
- *Equity.* Though we didn't bother to keep track of it on paper, we kept an informal running tally of whose turn it was to add page numbers or drop off a package at the post office. This allowed us to each occasionally have responsibility for simple tasks that didn't require much thought and sometimes to be able to finish the writing or editing without worrying about the next step.

The rest of this chapter presents strategies that apply to your group regardless of the combination of models on which you decide. Following these strategies, based on our own observations and research on industry teams and student groups, will help ensure that your process is productive, smooth, and successful.

Characteristics of Effective Teams

In *Team Players and Teamwork,* Glenn Parker identifies several characteristics of effective teams in business. According to Parker, members of effective teams do the following (33):

OTHER VOICES 6.A Summer Smith

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Whole-Class Collaboration on a Single Document

If your class is working together to produce one substantial document, the task of coordinating everyone's efforts can seem overwhelming at first. One of my students remembers the experience this way:

> When I stepped out of the first class this semester, I was truly scared! How could 24 people collaborate to write a report?!! But somehow we did it, and along the way, we learned a lot about working together, being professional, and accomplishing a task.

This student's class collaborated to write an annual report for a governmental agency in charge of recycling and solid waste collection in the county. It was the agency's first annual report, so the students also worked together to research the audience's and client's needs and write a proposal for the content, organization, and design of the report. Thousands of copies of the report were printed and distributed by the agency.

In this class, just as in a small group, effective collaboration depended on collective decision making. Here are some strategies that can help your class make decisions together.

- ***Short arguments.*** When the class needs to make a decision, everyone's voice should be heard. Short arguments are brief email or bulletin board messages arguing for a position on an issue such as how groups should be formed, what should be covered during class time next week, what factors should influence the style of the class's document, or how the class could improve its collaboration. Everyone in the class should write a message, and everyone should read the messages before a class discussion or vote.
- ***Presentations and progress reports.*** Your class may divide into small groups that research different questions or write different sections of the document. Weekly oral progress reports from each group to the class and presentations of completed work (such as a research report or a section of the class's document) provide an opportunity for groups to share ideas and recognize conflicts or overlap in their work.
- ***Storyboarding.*** To produce your class's document, small groups or individuals will probably write separate sections that need to fit together without contradictions or excessive repetition. Storyboarding allows everyone in the class to share ideas about all sections of the document. Begin storyboarding when you are deciding what information to include in your section. Write your ideas on a sheet of paper and post it on the wall of your classroom with a blank sheet for comments. Everyone in class "walks the walls," reading each storyboard and writing comments. Continue posting storyboards throughout the writing process as you develop drafts.

1. Share a clear purpose.
2. Participate in open discussions.
3. Listen carefully to one another.

4. Engage in civilized disagreement.
5. Arrive at consensus decisions.
6. Maintain open communication.
7. Establish clear task assignments.
8. Share leadership roles.
9. Develop effective external relations.
10. Engage in periodic self-assessment.

Recall the last highly successful group project in which you participated. How many of the above characteristics were true of your group? In what follows we elaborate on some of these characteristics and how to achieve them.

Establish a Group Identity

The first and most fundamental group activity is to establish a group identity or team ethos. As we have already discussed in the last chapter, this involves getting to know the other team members—their backgrounds, values, skills, and communication styles—and giving the team a name. By calling themselves the Zoo Crew, the students who worked with the Central Florida Zoological Park, for example, reconceptualized themselves as a unit and made such details as email subject lines and group correspondence simpler.

On the task level, this part of the process involves establishing a collective mission and set of objectives. Research on dysfunctional teams has shown that one of the main reasons for their dysfunction is the lack of a shared mission. Part of your mission should be to produce a better product as a group than any of you could as individuals. When determining group objectives, remember that objectives are specific, measurable outcomes. Your objectives might be course related (e.g., to earn an "A" on the assignment), agency related (e.g., to recruit 20 new volunteers for a new program with brochures), and text related (e.g., to improve the design and thereby the usability of two brochures).

Distribute Leadership Roles Strategically

To distribute leadership roles strategically, you will draw on each group member's project-related strengths, based on your previous assessment activities. Along with comparing each group member's strengths, you should identify the leadership roles the project will involve. These might include the following:

- Group coordinator—in charge of group communication, coordinating group meetings, and setting agendas.
- Lead liaison to agency—in charge of correspondence with the organization's contact person and other involved members.
- Lead liaison to course—in charge of correspondence with the instructor and other class groups.
- Design leader—in charge of designing the documents, producing visuals, and integrating visuals into the text.
- Invention leader—in charge of research for the texts and of developing the style sheet.

- Writing head—might be split up according to the main parts of the texts; if you were producing a set of instructions, for example, one person could be in charge of the introductory sections, another the step-by-step instructions, and another the troubleshooting and warning elements.
- Revision leader—in charge of preparing the texts for writing workshops, synthesizing feedback, and implementing changes.

Now it's time to divvy up the roles, keeping in mind that effective teams take advantage of each group member's expertise and experience. The group member with the most layout or computer experience should be the design leader, for instance, and the person with the most technical knowledge of the texts' subject should be in charge of research. Because your group will probably not have seven or more members, each group member will obviously have to assume more than one of the leadership roles mentioned above. Consider that the drafting and the revision will probably be the two most time-consuming elements, and leadership in these areas should likely be circulated among members.

We are not suggesting that each leader should be solely responsible for a task, only that she or he be the director or primary facilitator of that task. One of the most important characteristics of a leader, in our view, is the ability to facilitate the participation of others. Rather than micromanaging or simply taking over the work of other team members who are struggling, a leader finds ways to enable their production and raise their standards. If your instructor follows our suggestion, she or he will require that each group member do some of the writing and that all of these tasks—especially revision—involve some simultaneous collaboration.

Determine Clear and Fair Task Assignments

Along with distributing leadership roles, this task is the nuts and bolts of group planning. Before you can determine who will do what, you'll need to decide what collaboration model(s) will be most productive and efficient for your group. It should be obvious by now that we recommend a combination, using simultaneous, divide-and-conquer, and sequential approaches for various phases of the project. Consider one another's schedules and writing preferences when devising your plan.

You'll then need to discuss specific tasks and assignments for the divide-and-conquer parts of the project. These assignments should be as clear and precise as possible. In addition, everyone should participate in this decision making. In our experience, tasks assigned to absent members are seldom completed on time, if at all.

An equitable distribution of tasks is not only crucial to the group's morale, but also to its success. In our observation of student groups, we have found that groups that benefit from the full involvement of all members produce higher-quality products than those that have one or two members doing all the work. There is no room for slackers or control freaks in service-learning groups. We have often seen high-achieving students take over the project at the revising/editing stage. What usually happens, however, is that the student grossly underestimates the time and effort

OTHER VOICES 6.B Sheila Cole

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Successful Collaboration with a Non-Profit Organization

I took Dr. Bowdon's professional writing course during a condensed summer term. There was a lot of material to cover, a lot of new concepts to learn, and our service-learning project was due in only six weeks.

During the second class, I was chosen as our project team's agency liaison, responsible for keeping in touch with our non-profit organization. To get the ball rolling, I sent an email to our agency the day after my selection. I am so glad that I didn't wait. The early communiqué impressed our agency contact, Jessa, which got us started in the right direction, and her quick response showed me that she, too, would be responsive to our needs.

Jessa became an active member of our team, and communication became an integral part of our collaboration effort. When Jessa clarified or changed a requirement, I was responsible for sharing that information with the rest of the team. When a question arose from a team member, I made sure that the message made it to Jessa and that she was aware of our deadline for a response. The arrangement worked well for both the agency and the team. Jessa didn't have to be concerned about whom to contact with suggestions or issues, and the team's tasks stayed on target which, with our short-term constraints, was exceedingly important. The process allowed us to move continually forward with our project.

Even though we exchanged phone numbers, e-mail became the team's primary means of communication. This worked well for our agency contact, too. When Jessa was out of town on business, she was still able to respond to our messages in a timely manner.

Despite the short semester and conflicting schedules, our project was completed on time. We learned a lot from our service-learning experience, and we made new friends and important new contacts. Without a doubt, successful collaboration was the key to our success.

required at this stage and, as a result, ends up with a mistake-ridden, only somewhat coherent text that doesn't represent the group's efforts fairly. We repeat: Everyone must be involved in the writing and revising of the project texts.

You may not be able to anticipate all tasks, and you may want to adjust task assignments as you go along to ensure equity. For these reasons, we strongly recommend clarifying at the end of every meeting what each person is expected to do before the next meeting and putting that information in writing, perhaps in your field journal, an assignment we explain in detail at the end of this chapter.

Facilitate Open Communication

Open communication among all group members is crucial to the success of a writing group. It is not something that just happens, however, but must be actively nurtured by your group. You can start by establishing communication channels and protocols outside of class. As we'll discuss later in the chapter, this could include a group email list or an electronic bulletin board. For any system to work, group members have to use the group's communication channels consistently, of course. You should commit to checking your email or the bulletin board daily for questions, concerns, reminders, and so on. You should also commit to responding promptly to one another's correspondence (just as you would your instructor's) and to notifying other group members promptly if, on a rare occasion, you are unable to meet a group deadline or attend a group meeting. Unless you have an emergency, however, you should never miss or even show up late to a group meeting; not only is this extremely disrespectful, but it burdens other group members with extra work and leaves you out of the loop.

It is especially important to communicate about problems that arise. Relationship problems, such as personality or ego conflicts, can be especially difficult to discuss. Addressing the problem, however, if done diplomatically and supportively, can be the first step in resolving it. At the most basic level, creating a supportive, open environment involves listening to each other. You can show your teammates that you are actively listening to them by not interrupting, giving them verbal and nonverbal signals (e.g., shaking your head, saying "uh huh"), paraphrasing or summarizing their ideas, asking questions, and taking notes on what they say.

Encourage Active Participation and Consensus

In addition to establishing procedures for open communication, your group should establish meeting procedures that encourage active participation and collective decision making. You might, for example, take turns giving input at the beginnings and endings of meetings. The group member in charge of the work being discussed should take the lead in ensuring that the other members actively contribute. Some group members might feel more comfortable contributing by email or some other electronic forum; whenever possible, create multiple channels for contributing.

Remembering that some disagreement is a sign of a healthy group, don't be afraid to offer differing opinions in your group meetings and other communication. Group members who never disagree are not invested enough in the project and/or do not feel comfortable voicing their opinions, sometimes because one overbearing member is making all of the decisions. You may remember from our discussion of rhetoric in Chapter Three that ancient rhetoricians saw deliberation with others and identifying alternative courses of action as necessary steps in determining the best course.

Run Results-Driven Meetings

As you have probably already discovered, integrating group meetings and exchanges into your already busy schedule can be a difficult task. Despite this difficulty, many student groups don't take advantage of meetings adequately and, as a result, have to schedule more meetings. Making results the bottom line of your meetings can help you avoid this problem.

- One way to run a results-driven meeting is to *set an agenda.* Group members should discuss ahead of time what to address in the meeting and what work to bring. We recommend that at the end of each meeting the group set a tentative agenda for the next one. Once the project is underway, meetings should revolve at least partly around reporting results of each person's work in progress. Assigning group members to bring their results can prevent them from procrastinating and can enable you to take full advantage of the time you have together. Group meetings should be used for simultaneous collaboration, such as group planning and revision. With this in mind, you should treat assignments for meetings just as seriously as course or agency deadlines.
- A second way to make your meetings count is to *establish procedures for resolving conflict and arriving at consensus decisions.* This is not to say that part of your meeting shouldn't consist of open discussion of differing opinions and courses of action, only that you don't want to end the meeting without coming to a decision that will guide your future work. You can't let disagreements be debilitating. We recommend democratic voting after each group member has one last chance to state a position. If you are at an impasse, you can always ask for your instructor's opinion or agree to table the issue for a short period of time if that's logistically feasible. A solution may be clearer to all the members in a day or two. In arriving at a decision, each group member should be prepared to compromise—this is one reason you should avoid becoming emotionally attached to your ideas.
- As a group, you should *keep a record of decisions.* Once decisions are reached, at least one person in the group should note those decisions for future reference. As we've noted above, this record can be part of your field journal. This record might also be kept in an electronic forum such as a bulletin board.

Your collaboration outside of meetings should also be at least somewhat results driven. In addition to discussing your ongoing work via email, for example, you might exchange and comment on drafts, about which we offer more advice below.

Assess Your Work

Though we dedicate Chapter Nine of this book to project assessment and evaluation, we believe that this process must be a constant part of your project. You can see that we've provided guidelines for assessment throughout the text in the form of writing workshop guides and end-of-chapter activities. In addition to the assessment your instructor assigns you, however, you'll want to assess your group's interpersonal dynamics and progress periodically throughout the process. This will enable you to discover and solve problems before they become serious roadblocks.

Strategies for Managing Drafts

Because your group will probably divide writing tasks for at least part of the project, you will need to establish procedures for exchanging drafts, giving each other feedback, and making your texts consistent and coherent. We discuss below some strategies for managing your work on drafts from the planning stages to the final stages of editing. We also suggest some technologies for facilitating this process.

Create (and Revise) a Style Sheet

Style sheets are reference texts that document the choices or rules for a text style, including grammar, mechanics, word choice, and sentence structure. They might indicate, for example, whether to use a comma before the final element in a series, how to represent numbers, or whether passive or active voice should be primarily used. Style sheets often record design rules as well, such as how to distinguish among different levels of headings and how many spaces to indent.

Professional communicators use style sheets when writing and editing mostly to ensure consistency and visual coherence. Style sheets are especially useful for collaborative projects in which different writers draft different parts of the text. Creating a style sheet early in a project can help a writing team clarify its style and document design choices. Individual group members can then make sure their drafts conform to the style sheet, saving the group editing time later. Once they reach the editing stage, the group members have a reference point against which to check their work.

We should emphasize here that style sheets are malleable instruments that writers modify and add to throughout a writing project. Your group won't always be able to anticipate all of the stylistic and design decisions that you will face. As you develop additional guidelines for the style sheet, make sure you share and discuss these with your teammates so that everyone's writing style is consistent. We discuss style sheets in more detail and show you an example of one in the next chapter, where we take you through the recursive steps of executing your project. You can find another sample style sheet in Appendix B.

Provide and Track Specific, Helpful Feedback

Another recommendation for managing your group's writing process is providing each other specific, helpful feedback, not just at the end but throughout the process. Group meetings are ideal venues for doing this, of course, but you might also share and comment on drafts electronically. Although you can certainly send drafts via email or a bulletin board, you may also have access to text-sharing and commenting software. Regardless of the method, group members engaged in divide-and-conquer collaboration should be well aware of one another's work and how it is progressing in relation to their own.

If part of your collaboration is sequential, that is if you are transmitting drafts on which to work one at a time, it might help to determine a procedure for tracking the changes each person makes and comparing one version of the text with another. You may decide that some of the changes a group member made should be reversed, for instance. Commenting, tracking changes, and comparing, which are also useful at the revision and editing stages, are features of most word processing programs. In Word, the commenting function is under the "Insert" column on the toolbar, and tracking and comparing are located under "Tools."

Commenting on your peers' drafts can be a tricky task. Unless they are also training to be teachers, writing students are rarely trained on how to approach this important process. The first step is to create a group environment that encourages critical feedback that is given in a constructive manner. Agree to offer clear, strong, and specific criticisms. Remember that the term *critical* doesn't necessarily mean negative. A critical comment is simply one that is clearly engaged with the text and offers analysis and suggestions for improvement. Besides being critical, your comments should be encouraging. When we comment on student papers, we try to write some of our comments in a coaching tone, giving the writer specific questions to think about or offering a couple of suggestions for improvement. Here are some additional recommendations for commenting.

- Start with positive comments that point out the text's strengths.
- Make both line-specific comments and summary comments.
- Write summary comments in a numbered list, from the most to the least important.
- Offer suggestions and identify problems.
- Ask questions.
- Comment on the text, not the writer.

We also suggest that you tell your peers what you want from them, preferably in writing or via email. Figure 6.2 shows an example of such an email that one student sent his proposal writing group when giving them a draft of his work. Notice the specificity of his concerns and the request for feedback.

Allot Extra Time for Collective Revising and Editing

In our experience, the most common task-oriented mistake that student writing groups make is underestimating the time it takes to revise and edit their work, especially to make it consistent and coherent. Often someone in the group will generously but perhaps naïvely volunteer to do this alone, asking the other members to send their parts of the project to her or him to compile.

But revising and editing a document is a multi-step, problem-ridden, time-consuming exercise that requires the resources of the entire group. You will undoubtedly experience some kind of file, computer, or printer problem as you put the parts of the text together and integrate illustrations. After you receive feedback from writing workshops and, perhaps, usability tests, you will need to develop a revision plan and then actually implement the changes, some of which will require more invention. Even at the final editing stages, you group will need to take a number of passes through the text, focusing on different elements and levels in each one. At the very least, you might use your style sheet to edit for the following:

- correctness
- accuracy
- completeness
- stylistic consistency
- design consistency

Subject: My requested response criteria

Previous Thread
Next Thread
Close

Reply
Reply Privately
Quote
Download

Message no. 236:
posted by Joseph Dale (jcd61518)
Mon Nov 13, 2000 20:44
My target audience will understand the terms and budget, but class peers probably have no basis to critique these areas. My request for feedback targets style and organization areas which do not require specialized topic knowledge.

I want to know about style and content in five areas and request that you ignore spelling and punctuation in my proposal. 1. The major issue I am struggling with is the problem statement. Did I define the problem clearly? If you think I did, then please paraphrase it for me. If not, a simple no is not sufficient; please comment on what seems fuzzy in the problem statement.

2. The second major issue I am struggling with is the who cares part of the problem. Did I explain why my project should be funded? Is it persuasive?

3. On the initial read without any reasons other than instinct, what sentences or areas just do not feel right or are fuzzy? I want to target areas where I assumed too much knowledge on the part of my target audience. If it is fuzzy to you, it will be fuzzy to them.

4. What headings or topics seem out of sequence or place? I want to target the organization and flow of the proposal. If you stumble in one area or have to reread a previous or subsequent area to understand a topic, then I want to revise it to explain to the reader what seemed implied or obvious to me.

5. Specific style issues that I have a real problem with are metaphors and nominalizations. Please look for areas where I slipped out of first person voice or used bad metaphors. These two style issues are the major tools I will use to establish rapport with the grant makers.
Previous Message
Next Message

Previous Thread
Next Thread
Close

Figure 6.2 Student's email requesting information from group

- verbal–visual integration
- coherence among the document's parts.

Creating a coherent document and editing for consistency are often the most time-consuming parts of the editing process. They are also often the most crucial. Even if its parts have been well written, a team document can still come across as disjointed and unprofessional if its parts do not smoothly "hang together" verbally and visually. This coherence is especially important when the text will represent a larger organization. The organization's ethos is on the line. As we've noted above, we hope that part of this process will be the synthesis of comments from your peers, instructor, agency contact person, and possibly even such additional audiences as projected users or a professor in your department with extensive expertise in the subject area. Interpreting and negotiating what to do with this potentially contradictory input can be time consuming and difficult.

Even if your group revises as you go along, you should probably allocate at least a couple of weeks for revising and editing. Once again, allow plenty of time for simultaneous collaboration during this time period. Revision decisions are group decisions, and revision and editing are group tasks.

Use Collaboration-Enhancing Technology

As we've noted earlier, communication technologies can facilitate and simplify a wide range of collaborative activities. Before you begin to rely too heavily on these tools, however, keep in mind that some group members may not have access to them. You might want to check with your campus computer services office to find out what programs are available in campus labs. Even if everyone has access, some tools will be more practical and familiar than others. And of course no matter how up-to-date our summary of the tools in this section may be, by the time you are reading and using this book, they may well be enhanced or even obsolete. What we want you to take away from the discussion below is a willingness to experiment with technology; this can sometimes make an inconvenient process doable or even turn an activity that might otherwise feel like drudgework into something enjoyable. Use the ideas below to guide your experimentation.

Communication technologies fall into two categories—**asynchronous** and **synchronous.** Asynchronous tools allow you to collaborate sequentially. They do not require that all students be online at the same time. Some examples of this kind of tool include:

- *Email:* This is our collaboration tool of choice. We prefer using email to talking on the phone for most of our work on documents because it allows us to send at any time and helps us not to hedge our opinions. We regularly attach Word documents to emails and send them back and forth. We sometimes use the "tracking changes," "compare," or "save versions" features to see exactly what each of us has done with the texts. As we've suggested before, if you choose to use this method, you'll want to be sure that everyone in your group uses an email program such as Eudora that allows them to send and receive attachments easily. Also make sure that everyone uses an up-to-date antivirus program.

- *Bulletin boards:* Your group may choose to use a web-based bulletin board program for sharing and recording your plans and ideas. This tool stores a threaded discussion on a web page. The major advantages of the web board are that it maintains all of your postings in one space and that it is often searchable by the subject and the writer's name. Many comprehensive online course tools such as WebCT include built-in discussion features. Your instructor can set up a private space for your group to store your conversations.

Synchronous or real-time collaboration requires that you and your collaborators be online at the same time. You may be dialing in from distant locations, but you must all be working simultaneously. Some examples of this type of tool include:

- *Chatrooms:* A chatroom is a virtual space for conversation among group members. Participants can read each other's comments and post immediately visible responses. Your group may choose to enter an established chatroom that is part of your course tools or to create one of your own using another service provider. One advantage of the chatroom function of most school-affiliated programs is that they often maintain a log of the conversation.
- *Group conferencing software:* Programs such as NetMeeting allow collaborators to work on documents together at the same time. The author of a text can give and take away control over the document, allowing the collaborator to edit or comment on a text from a distance. With a fast enough connection and the right equipment, users can also introduce video and audio components, which allow them to see each other's faces and hear each other's voices during the exchange. This kind of software works best when only two or three people are involved.
- *Whiteboards:* Most conferencing software and course programs include a whiteboard function. This is a virtual space where you can work together to draw diagrams, make notes, and record information. This function also works best with a small number of people. The results can be saved in word-processing documents for future reference.
- *MOOs:* MOOs are basically text-based virtual environments. The MOO is an enhanced version of the MUD, or multiple user domain, an early version of today's chatrooms that was developed by online gamers. MOOs add another element to the mix—they allow users to create virtual worlds, including buildings, landmarks, and objects. The two *O*s in MOO stand for *object oriented.* Authorized builders can use text to create offices and homes for their characters, which are represented by user names. Your campus may have a MOO or may subscribe to one owned and managed by another institution. This kind of space allows you to store your documents in a virtual workroom and interact together as you work on them. It can host many users at one time. Logs of MOO sessions can be a part of your group's work record.

Keeping It All Together: The Field Journal

At several points in this chapter, we've mentioned the field journal. This is an ongoing record of your work on the project. Whether you are working in a group or as an individual, we recommend that you maintain such a log. It can serve several functions, including these.

- *Record keeping:* Recording such things as mini-progress reports, updated timelines, group decisions, and plans of action in your field journal will help you stay on track as a group. It will also give you a record of all the work you put into the project.
- *Collaboration:* Working together to summarize what you've done during the course of a week or of the entire project can help create unity as well as shed light on conflicts. It is certainly better to deal with conflict early than to watch your project fall apart late in the game.
- *Reflection:* The field journal is an excellent place to store your personal reactions to what is happening in your group and with your project. Unlike most of your other assignments, the field journal invites you to write about frustrations or triumphs in an informal way. As you'll recall, reflection is one of the critical elements that distinguishes service-learning projects from other real-world projects.
- *Future reference:* Your teacher may ask to keep a copy of your field journal as a resource for future students. If a group in a future class wants to work with your agency, they might get a sense of how to approach it from reading your field journal. They could learn more about the kinds of work that actually go into a complex project or pick up strategies for managing the workload and dealing with collaboration problems.

Field journals can take many different forms. Your instructor may assign a particular format or allow you to design your own as a group. Our students have experimented with many approaches, but most fit into one of the following categories.

- *One journal compiled by the entire group.* Some groups like to create a single document that meets their standards for joint documents and has no clearly identifiable single author. For this kind of approach, they might compose each entry together at the beginning or the end of regular meetings and insert important documents as they are produced.
- *One journal with multiple authors.* Other students prefer to take turns keeping up with the field journal, recording notes from meetings and decisions from correspondence. Most entries identify the writer's name to document his or her contribution.
- *A compilation of separate journals by each group member.* You may also choose to keep individual records and reflections throughout the project and then put them together in one journal at the end of the term. This can be an especially interesting approach if you include in a cover memo some reflection about the differences among individuals' perceptions of the same events or processes.

Figure 6.3 shows a portion of a field journal kept by two University of Central Florida students, Cat and Kattie. You can see that it includes a wide range of items, including

- references to correspondence
- group decisions
- task assignments

Field Journal

9/29 Met for first time regarding organization selection for our project. Narrowed down to two organizations (Coalition on Donation and Outreach Love). Decided on date that we will pick one based on interaction with contacts. Created a milestone chart to have specific dates for group meetings and deadlines.

9/30 Kattie tried to contact CR of Coalition on Donation to find out about specific projects they may need assistance with. She was out of town. Left message.

10/06 Kattie tried to contact Carol Rumsey again. Left message.

10/10 Cat talked with HG, Outreach Love Volunteer, regarding possible ideas for our project. Received a copy of "Help Wanted" flier for tutors that is currently in circulation. Heather listed many needs of Outreach Love, but upon clarification of our requirements she referred Cat to contact CW for more information regarding tutor and textbook needs.

10/11 7:30pm–10:00pm We met to finalize organization selection. Opted for Outreach Love because of inability to speak to someone at Coalition on Donation and pending deadline. Worked on first rough draft of proposal. Updated milestone chart. Focused on list of potential needs and benefactors, as well as creating the introduction and objectives portions of Outreach Love proposal.

10/17 Cat talked with CW regarding the tutor and textbook needs. She explained our desire to design marketing tools for tutor recruitment and organizational information for potential benefactors. C referred us to BG for project approval. B is currently on vacation.

> 2:00pm–4:30pm We met to finalize the first draft of proposal one. Utilized feedback from Melody and peers. Gained more focus on scope of the project. We narrowed down donation needs and brainstormed marketing possibilities. Updated milestone chart. Added "Scope of Project" to the proposal.
>
> Assigned responsibilities for next week. Cat will research newspaper/ newsletter advertisement costs. Kattie will research printing costs. Kattie will also research the potential of marketing tutor opportunities to University of Central Florida students.

10/18 Kattie called copy center to get price quotes for various types of copies for budget purposes.

10/20 7:15pm–8:15pm Met in class to discuss "plan of attack" regarding deadlines. Prepared questions for BG regarding organizational history.

(continued)

Figure 6.3 Sample from students' field journal

Figure 6.3 *(continued)*

10/21 Cat called BG to discuss scope of project. B provided possible contacts for research materials. She was very excited and happy about us helping her organization. Scheduled a meeting with her for Monday, October 25th at 7:30pm.

11:30am Cat called Kattie regarding project update, meeting with Beverly and reconfirming group meeting for this evening.

Cat called *Orlando Sentinel* regarding cost for placing a classified advertisement.

7:30pm–9:30pm Met to discuss organizational history. Discussed meeting with B. Discussed resources for supplies and production of brochures and fliers.

10/25 7:30pm–9:00pm Cat met with BG regarding organizational history and scope of project. Discussed several aspects of what we hoped to do. B helped narrow down the needs of Outreach Love as pertaining to our project. Our primary focus will be to market the program to recruit tutors. If time permits, we will assist with the solicitation of educational resources for the program.

9:15pm–10:30pm We met to create rough draft of the organizational history for peer review.

10/31 2:00pm–5:30pm Met to finalize organizational history and to complete our final draft of the proposal. Updated milestone chart. Contacted BG regarding specific questions on Outreach Love and our project.

11/1 7:30pm–9:30pm Met to complete cover letter for proposal. Updated field journal. Began work on the brochure for the Outreach Love marketing strategy.

11/3 Worked on progress report in class. We reevaluated our timeline and due dates.

11/8 7:30pm–9:30pm Met to complete rough draft of progress report. Added text to brochure. Updated milestone chart.

11/10 Met before class to exchange progress report with the team for Children's Home Society. Met with Melody regarding status of project.

11/15 7:30pm–8:30pm Met to finalize the progress report.

11/17 7:30pm–9:15pm Used class time to develop form letters for tutor requests and supplies.

11/28 12:00pm–6:00pm Updated all graded materials to be turned in with final project. Completed form letters, fliers, advertisement, and worked on brochure. Minor glitch with computer and brochure file.

12/01 Class time. Updated progress report. Developed new brochure due to computer glitch.

12/04 3:00pm–6:30pm Worked on brochure. Assigned final responsibilities. Kattie will work with brochure graphics. Cat will obtain video for presentation and final photos for brochure and PowerPoint.

12/06 6:45pm–9:30pm Completed brochure. Printed final documents. Developed presentation. Created PowerPoint for our presentation.

- discussion summaries
- occasional glitches in the process.

Their journal also demonstrates each type of collaboration and explains how they made those approaches work. Depending on your instructor's expectations, you may also choose to include other items that Kattie and Cat put in their extended journal, such as

- actual copies of correspondence (letters, memos, emails)
- "before" versions of documents
- research materials—printouts from web searches and transcripts of interviews
- informal notes from discussions with the instructor and agency contact persons
- meeting minutes.

If you are assigned to keep a field journal, do not put it off until the last minute. Use this task as an ongoing opportunity to reflect on your progress and work through problems and concerns. Keep it up as you move into the process of creating your documents.

Activities

1. Draw diagrams of at least three different collaboration approaches your group could take. Keep in mind that most groups combine different models in their approach.
2. As a group, decide on a set of criteria for evaluating your task-level progress and your relationship-level interaction. Then look at some of the writing workshop guides in earlier chapters of this book. Based on some of the criteria covered in them and on your own sense of effective writing and collaborating, design a guide to assess your progress. Compare your guide with those of two other groups in the class to find ways to modify it.
3. Practice using the "commenting" and "tracking changes" functions in Word by having each person in the group add to the agenda for the next group meeting. Figure out a way to track each person's contributions.
4. Create a set of collaboration ground rules for your group. They can include all kinds of concerns. You might agree to avoid certain negative behaviors, prohibit the use of certain words, limit debate time on certain subjects, or build rewards into the process. Agree to follow these rules and to gently remind each other of them in the event of a slip-up.

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