

**Shifting Ideology:
Re-thinking Collaborative
Writing**

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I am a believer in small group work. Small groups encourage students to voice opinions, formulate ideas, and articulate interpretations. So, as a first-year doctoral teaching associate responsible for a class entitled Literary Interpretation, I created a syllabus that included permanent small groups, primarily for class discussion and peer-responding purposes. Early on I could see that the groups were working well, but I also noticed a serious disconnect between the collaborative class activities and the singular writing assignments. Initially, I was not bothered by this disconnect. While I am not a believer in Romantic notions of genius and the individual, I strongly feel that writing is an intensely personal mode of communication. This personal element intensifies when writing about literary interpretations, the purpose of the class.

On the other hand, I was intrigued by John Schilb's claim that "when we have our students 'collaborate' with one another in our classrooms, and prepare them to 'collaborate' in their workplaces, we should encourage them to study how their activities connect to struggles for freedom in the larger world" (106). Further, Schilb claims that "people need to collaborate with others in the public sphere if they are to produce genuine social change" (115). I started

delving into the research and theory behind collaborative pedagogy. As I read, I felt myself concurring with the ideology behind the pedagogy. Much of it corresponds with the ideas behind critical pedagogy and cultural studies – two of my great loves. On the theoretical side, there are some affinities between the communal aspects of collaborative pedagogy and those of my other great love, Marxist literary theory. Schilb's claims struck a resounding chord within me and made me realize that critics who perceive group work as "touchy-feely" pedagogy miss the crucial point that an education is not a sign of completing academic exercises, rather it is a process whereby we learn to work together to change and mold our environment so that exploitation, oppression, and discrimination are eradicated. In short, my personal convictions, philosophy of education, and research into the pedagogy all indicated that I needed to include collaborative writing in my class. With these laudable goals in mind, I experimented mid-semester with my first collaborative writing assignment, one that asked small groups of students to co-author a series of poetry terms. This essay describes the assignment, and then, more importantly, the two co-authoring models that emerged in my classroom.

**The Genius of the Individual and
Resistance to Collaborative Writing**

When I started to resist the idea of collaborative writing, I remembered Lisa Ede's and Andrea

Lunsford's discussion of the socially constructed concept of the individual author: "Our discussion [. . .] indicates the extent to which our concept of authorship itself is a construct. Rather than representing an inherent and natural connection between the 'man (sic) and his work,' authorship functions in multiple, complex, and often conflicting ways" (101). James Leonard and Christine Wharton also address this problem in their essay "Breaking the Silence: Collaboration and the Isolationist Paradigm." They spend a few pages discussing the ideal of the Romantic poet to make the point that this has pervaded composition and problematized the teaching of composition:

But the point has to do with a tenacious tendency, however inexplicit, to fit writing, including critical/theoretical writing, to the Romantic mold, as if the written were most essentially 'palpable and must as a globed fruit.' With that tendency, its companion piece, the paradigmatic writer / critic-as-lone-genius, materializes as a withdrawn, distant figure powered by unearthly inspiration [. . .] whose solitary soul is more sensitive than those of ordinary mortals [. . .]. (27)

As I read about the pervasiveness of the Romantic genius ideal of the writer, I felt that this was not the source of my resistance. I simply kept returning to the idea that each of us

has something very personal to be taken up through individual writing.

I had been greatly influenced by the work of Peter Elbow. Didn't that entail collaboration? Again, Ede and Lunsford point to the flaw in my logic:

Yet in spite of its emphasis on the importance of audience response to revision, Elbow's work rests on assumptions about individualism and individual creativity that fail to problematize traditional conceptions of the author and that deny the social nature of writing. For Elbow, expressing personal authenticity requires not social interaction but mining the depths of the self, searching inside the self for a unique voice. (114)

The isolated writer model ignores the fact that reading and writing are social acts. I believed in group work for clarifying thinking about reading; why couldn't collaboration work for clarifying thinking about writing? Why couldn't it work for clarifying writing? Leonard and Wharton identify my resistance: "Uneasiness about collaboration reflects our generalized contemporary uneasiness with the complications of cultural convention / conviction [. . .] as high court of appeals" (37). I realized that my resistance to collaborative writing was rooted in my fear of the dominant culture suppressing individual acts of expression. This is an obstacle that I struggled to overcome. How could I believe that educators need to

empower their students to social change, to facilitate the process of their students becoming better writers, and to model collaboration while still retaining the personal element of composition?

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford posit some interesting questions that led me to keep reading the research and theory:

Why in our culture is authorship regularly attributed to some documents (essays, poems, letters) but not to others (advertisements, contracts, instructions)? What is at stake when we argue about the authorship of a text, whether an anonymous Jacobean play or a student's research paper, parts of which we suspect may have been plagiarized? What kind of relationship between authors and texts does the term *authorship* imply? (72-3)

While discussing the perspectives of Barthes, Foucault, Raymond Williams, and Bakhtin, they illustrate that these questions are a part of the postmodern society. Their answer in Chapter Three is predictive of their discussion in Chapter Four of the pedagogy of collaboration:

Our discussion in this chapter indicates the extent to which our concept of authorship itself is a construct. Rather than representing an inherent and natural connection between the 'man (sic) and his work,' authorship functions in multiple, complex, and often conflicting

ways. This constructed nature of authorship – and challenges to the traditional concept – appear in many contemporary sources in the sciences and the humanities, in corporations and in libraries. These challenges have great suggestive power for writing teachers, who deal every day with student authors producing texts. (101-2)

It was with these things in mind that I began to consider the structure of my course and how I could introduce collaborative writing.

Soliciting Individual Voices for the Collective Response

In soliciting the students' feedback about the role of collaboration in the course, I had received some astonishingly positive replies from unexpected sources. They liked the small groups for exactly the reasons that I felt they were pedagogically sound. During the fiction and drama units, a class session would run something similar to the following example:

Writing prompt
Discussion of writing prompt
Mini-lecture
Small group work
Large group work

The small groups were assigned a discussion question or group of questions for which they were responsible to present to the rest of the class. There was cognitive collaboration, but no collaborative composition.

Furthermore, the students had read and responded to each other's fiction and drama papers in peer review. They had very clear guidelines of elements to respond to while reviewing a peer's paper. Also, they were expected to write a letter of sorts to the writer about their impressions of the paper and the accomplishments of the paper.

And yet they had not composed any piece of writing collaboratively. I still felt some resistance to the realm of collaborative composition. By its very nature, group writing seemed wrong to me. Sure, I had heard the "real world" examples of treaty writers, scientists, and even literary theorists who wrote collaboratively. But I wondered about opinion. Who gets editorial control? Do all members of the group share in veto power? And what about the sensitive student? What if someone in my class started crying?

While all of the group members were a vocal presence in their groups during discussion, it occurred to me that they had no compositional identity or relation to one another. I suppose David Bleich's ideas on the pedagogy of self-disclosure somewhat influenced my ideas for getting my feet wet in the pool of collaborative writing. None of the group members knew about each other's experiences with poetry. It has been my experience that students love or hate poetry. Often the ones who love it cannot articulate why they love it. So why not give them a chance to tell me, and more importantly, to disclose to the rest of the group their

thoughts and feelings on reading and writing about poetry? At the very least, students who hated poetry would be exposed to new perspectives. Furthermore, these students would be allowed to *safely* express their opinions about and their experiences with poetry.

I suppose the impulse guiding this assignment came from my own experiences with poetry. As a high school student heavily entrenched in music, my English teachers encouraged me to explore the rhythm and metaphors found in song lyrics. My personal reactions and formal observations were expressed and validated. However, when I reached college, many of my professors discouraged or did not allow voice to personal reactions to poetry. Almost immediately, I felt cut off from poetry. When I read it, I no longer understood what a poet was conveying. Instead, reading poetry started to make me feel unintelligent and unworthy. Poetry suddenly seemed to me to belong to the privileged, upper echelons of society, to those students I imagined were born smart and whose families read Donne, Milton, and Keats in the evenings. In graduate school, I was rescued from this way of thinking, as I came to love Heather McHugh, Ann Carson, and Amiri Baraka.

But as I began to consider encouraging my students' expressions of their opinions of poetry, I wondered how many of them had been denied authentic experiences with poetry because it had appeared to them to be the province of the privileged. How

many of them felt denied their individual voices as a result of dominant cultural oppression? How could I encourage individual expression about poetry in a collaborative context? For me, it was about more than just poetry; it was about modeling this concept in the classroom and extending it "real life." The medium just happened to be poetry.

The last class meeting before starting our poetry unit, I asked the class to write about their experiences with poetry. At the next class meeting, the small groups shared their pieces. I overheard them laughing with each other, empathizing, relating, being envious of another's positive experiences, and best of all disclosing experience and sharing voice.

How to begin this collaborative composition? After several collaborative activities loosely based on literature circles, I realized that the groups had not still not written anything collaboratively. I then decided to use another component of the course to explore collaborative writing. The course outcomes require a familiarity with literary terms, so a group assignment to define poetry terms seemed like a natural fit. Each group was assigned ten terms to define in their vernacular and to cite a poem or line of poetry to exemplify the concept. I decided to let each group chose whether or not they would divide the labor. Furthermore, I gave them the option of choosing when they would work on this project. We were still in our poetry unit, so the groups would be working on either discussing my writing

prompts or composing discussion questions. The groups could work on the poetry terms first, last, or in the middle of things. What evolved from the level of choice was a sense of ownership of the project.

Observing the group dynamics during this project was illuminating. Small choices, such as who would be responsible for retaining the piece of paper with the definitions until the next class meeting and who would actually do the physical writing were given a great deal of attention. One group decided that each member would define two terms. The three other groups decided to hammer out the definitions and examples collectively. While this took a great deal more time, there was unity and cohesion in their work. The definitions and examples were the result of the combined voices and processes behind thinking, defining, and writing. Furthermore, when these groups presented their terms to the large group they exuded a collective sense of ownership of their project. When the group that had divided the terms among the members presented their definitions, they each presented the terms for which they had been responsible. The level of definition and detail varied from presenter to presenter, and there was no sense that the group members had worked together on this project.

I then turned to Priscilla Rogers and Marjorie Horton to consider the dynamic of what they refer to as "face-to-face collaborative writing." Rogers and Horton define it as "collaboration in which co-authors are

physically present in the same room and interact directly to plan, draft, and revise a document" (120). They suggest that there is great pedagogical value in face-to-face collaborative writing: "[F]ace-to-face collaborative writing allows groups to understand their rhetorical situation, examine their language choices, consider the ethical dimensions of their decisions, and reappraise their decisions in greater depth than could be achieved if any aspect of the writing were completed individually" (120). Enlightened by this theory and research, I began to understand why the two types of groups in the above example had achieved such radically different results. Accordingly, Rogers and Horton highlight this dimension of the pedagogy: "[F]ace-to-face collaborative writing experiences enable group members to present a more uniform and consistent message [. . .]" (130). I did not feel like the activity had been a failure, but my experience and Rogers and Horton's work revealed what could be changed about the assignment. The next time I would try this activity, I decided, I would insist that the group members collectively write each definition and choose the example. It would certainly take more time, but the difference in the learning benefits would justify the time spent on the activity.

Reflections: Risk-taking and Rewards

Defining poetry terms certainly did not precipitate any groundbreaking social change, nor did it inspire and struggle for freedom. On the other

hand, maybe it did. As I looked back on my personal pedagogical goals, I realized that beyond learning content area material I wanted the classroom to be an environment that would foster principles to be extended in the context of the real world. I also took a look at my own heroes: W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, my tenth-grade English teacher Mrs. Janet Tower, and my father. These are all people who understand three concepts critical to social action and change. First, change starts with action, and action starts on the individual level. Second, individuals have to be given contexts in which it is safe to practice individual expression before it can be expanded to the broader social arena. And third, in collaboration it is the blending of unique and individual expression that comprises the richness of the sound.

In reflecting over the semester, I realized that my ideology had shifted. I had thought I was a radical, innovative professor. In reality, I realized that I had fallen into the trap of putting new wine in old wineskins. Ede and Lunsford identify one of the main problems with which collaborative pedagogy has been faced:

The recent attention given to collaborative writing might thus seem a natural extension or subset of collaborative learning theory. Yet collaborative learning theory has from its inception failed to challenge traditional concepts of individualism and ownership of ideas and has operated primarily

in traditional ways. Students may work together on revising or problem solving, but when they write, they typically write alone in settings structured and governed by a teacher/ authority in whom power is vested. Studies of collaborative writing, on the other hand, make such silent accommodations less easy to maintain and as a result offer the potential to challenge and hence re-situate collaborative learning theories. (118)

In spite of my anxieties about being a first-time college instructor, I was still in the learning process. I felt that being armed with the theory and research behind collaborative writing, I could more fully define and implement the rest of my pedagogical concerns. The principles of collective labor and the social construction of knowledge even helped me to better articulate my own literary scholarship.

Most importantly, I realized that in the best interest of my students and their education, I was capable of examining my position and evaluating the research. Understanding that my resistance to collaborative writing was reflective of larger social issues of oppression and dominance was an awakening of sorts for me. All along I had feared that collaborative composition would suppress individual voices only to discover that, in the end, it is one of the most effective means of expressing individuality in a community context. Overcoming the resistance and educating myself has been

empowering. I will trust the pedagogy to do the same for my students.

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Contributor's Note

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