
Collaborative Writing in Social Psychology: An Experiment

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The topic of student collaborative writing received considerable and enthusiastic discussion at the Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop led by Toby Fulwiler June 2, 1988, at Plymouth State College. Until then I had never seriously considered assigning collaborative writing in lower-level courses. As I listened to that discussion, however, I realized that such an experience might be incorporated very naturally into my sophomore-level course Social Psychology. This course deals with group processes, and it occurred to me that a collaborative writing experience might be useful in its own right and also provide an example to which students could apply ideas from the course. As I began to explore how I would put this into practice, I realized it might also solve several problems I had been having with the course.

When I first taught Social Psychology at Plymouth in 1977, we offered just one section annually, and it drew about 25 students. As our major has grown and as other departments have come to require or recommend the course, it has steadily expanded until now we offer seven or eight sections a year, and they enroll between 30 and 35 students each. In recent years I have typically taught two sections each semester. One problem I have with the course is finding the time to read all of the writing I want to assign.

Because of this practical problem I have actually reduced the amount

of required writing somewhat over the years. The hour exams continue to be composed of short answer questions and short-essay questions, and the final exam goes beyond these questions to include several longer essay questions requiring integration of material from the entire course. When the course was smaller, however, I also required four short (two- to four-page) thought papers. When it had expanded to the point where I was teaching two full sections a semester, I reduced the number of papers required to three.

Two or three years ago as use of journals became popular on this campus, I decided to cut the papers back to two and add a journal. I actually thought—silly me—that this was going to reduce the amount of time I had to spend reading student writing. It had the opposite effect. Although I enjoy reading journals more than papers, certainly by the end of the semester they have taken me considerably longer to read than a set of papers would have. So as of last year, a problem I had once again was too much grading in Social Psychology.

I was reluctant to cut out the journal, however, because some students seemed to enjoy it and to profit so much from it. However, there were always others who did not take it seriously, and a few who actively resented it. So a second problem I perceived was the need to make the journal more meaningful for those who did not enjoy it.

A third problem I had was the nature of the paper assignments. Because the reading in this course is already heavy and because my primary goal in the course is to teach students to think as social psychologists do, I assign thought papers rather than research papers. I try in these to make students think about either methodology or applications of social psychology. Years ago I created an assignment that works so well for the first paper in the course that I have used it ever since. I give students a saying or an adage from folklore, such as "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," "Gentlemen prefer blondes," or "Opposites attract," and ask them to derive a testable hypothesis about social behavior from the saying, to design both an experiment and a correlational study that could be done to test the hypothesis, and to evaluate which would be the better approach. I have five or six adages that I rotate across semesters. I have never come up with an equally successful assignment for the second paper, however,

and thinking of one each semester is always a problem.

Finally, it happened to be the case that because of another change in my teaching assignment, I was scheduled to teach Social Psychology in Fall of 1988 on a Tuesday/Thursday schedule for the first time. My teaching technique in this course had always been a mixture of lecture and discussion, with lecture predominating. This had worked well on a Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedule. Most of the material in the course is interesting enough to stimulate attention for 50 minutes, but I was worried about the 75-minute format. I had decided to try to introduce more activities of some kind to break up the longer sessions.

During the June workshop I realized that replacing one of the usual short paper assignments in Social Psychology with a collaborative writing assignment might have a number of advantages. It would provide students with an example of group interaction to which to apply concepts from the course and would provide me with a modest reduction in the amount of grading. I realized that if the collaborative paper were a part of an on-going small-group experience, I might address the other problems as well.

The plan I formulated was this: early in the semester the students would be divided into groups of four or five. Groups would sit together throughout the remainder of the semester and participate in various small-group exercises in class. They would write the first of the two thought papers collaboratively. The second paper would be written individually and its topic would be an analysis of the student's small group experience. Students would know from the beginning of the semester what this assignment would be and would be instructed to keep an on-going record of their group's interactions in their journals. The small-group experience provided me a natural format for introduction of new class activities. The change also suggested an appropriate assignment for the second paper, and one that might be used semester after semester, since depending as it would on one's own group experience it could not be plagiarized from past papers. The nature of this assignment had also suggested a new use for the journal, which I hoped would provide a focus and sense of purpose to those students who seem to lack direction in journal keeping.

Method

I put this plan into effect for the first time in my two sections of Social Psychology in the Fall of 1988. The syllabus I distributed at the first meeting described the small group experience the students would have. It informed them they would write the first of the two papers as a group and that the second would be their personal analysis of how the group had functioned, based on entries they had regularly made in their journals.

At the start of the second week of the semester (the first class after the Add'l period ended, when the enrollment had presumably stabilized), the classes divided into groups. I considered making group assignment a random matter, but hoping to get groups that would be congenial, I tried letting the students form their own groups. To do this I sent them all out of the class room into a nearby lobby area and told them to mill around and organize themselves into groups of four or five. While they were doing this, I quickly reorganized the furniture in the classroom into clusters—in each octant of the room I grouped four or five chairs.

By the time I was done they had formed their groups. This seemed to have gone smoothly—no one had been left out. In the larger of the two classes, one group did have only three members. I decided that rather than disrupt another group I would let it be a group of three. In that class I ended up with the group of three, three groups of four, and four groups of five. The other class was somewhat smaller, and there the students had formed six groups—three of four and three of five.

I returned one group at a time to the classroom to pick an octant to be its own for the rest of the semester. The remainder of the period that day I devoted to a group decision making exercise I had formerly done very late in the semester as a one-time only group experience. I knew that it typically produced lively discussions and gave people a chance to get to know one another a bit, so even though it was two months before we were going to study group decision making, the exercise seemed like a good way to break the ice in the small groups. Indeed, it seemed to be: the discussions were lively, and most of the students reported in their journals that their groups had had a good beginning.

For the next three or four weeks, I arranged for each group to participate in some kind of in-class exercise at least once a week. In several cases I modified exercises I had done with the entire class to be done within the small groups. For example, before I went over a homework exercise on methodology with the group as a whole, I asked each small group to discuss it individually and try to reach consensus on the correct answers.

I also devised several new exercises to provide activities for the groups. On days when we had read fairly complicated and challenging research reports, for example, I had each small group discuss and prepare answers to questions about the articles. Sometimes all groups worked on the same set of questions, so that when the class as a whole considered them, the discussion took the form of groups debating the conclusions they had come to. Other times, especially when the reading had been long, I gave different groups different questions to prepare, so that in the final class discussion, each group was the expert on different parts of the problem. I designed some of these purposefully to illustrate certain group phenomena we study in the course: cooperation, competition, the jigsaw technique. It pleased me to note that a number of the students came to realize what I was doing and to comment on this in their journals.

About three weeks after the groups were created, they were given the assignment for the collaborative paper. They were allowed 15 minutes in class that day to discuss it and plan but then were expected to do the writing outside of the class. Because I realized that some groups might experience logistical problems, I gave them four weeks for the assignment, more time than I would have had the students been working alone. The assignment was the one I had been using for years: to design an experiment and a correlational study to test a hypothesis derived from an adage. It happened to be time to use the adage, "Gentlemen prefer blondes."

The collaborative paper was due the eighth week of the semester. The formal written assignment for the individual paper was given out about a week later. The students were asked to write a paper about how their group had functioned throughout the course and particularly how it had functioned while writing the collaborative paper. The assignment was

first to describe what had happened and then to analyze this in terms of concepts from the course. This paper was due one week before the final exam.

Results

To assess this experiment in collaboration, I have several sources of evidence to consider. There is the quality of the collaborative papers. There is also what the students had to say about their groups in their journals and in the second paper. Finally, there are the results of a supplement I created to the usual student course evaluation form: here I asked direct open-ended questions about the innovations I had tried.

The quality of the collaborative papers was very high and was on the average higher than individual performance on the previous analogous assignment had been. On the collaborative papers, 3 groups received a grade of A and 2 more an A-; there were 2 B+'s and 3 B's; 2 C+'s and 2 C-'s. Since there seemed to be no reliable method of discriminating performance on this assignment within individual groups, all members received the same grade. The result was that 37% of the students received a grade in the A range, 37% a grade in the B range, and 26% in the C range. These percentages can be compared with those from the previous semester when a comparable number of students wrote individual papers on the same assignment (except that the adage was "Opposites attract.") That semester only 13% received grades in the A range; 38% got grades in the B range, 18% got C's of some kind, 8% got D's, and 10% F's. Another way of making the comparison is to note that the median grade on the collaborative papers was B+, whereas it had been B- the previous semester on the comparable individual papers.

Of course, since this assignment requires a certain amount of creativity, the quality of a group paper may be determined by the talent of the best group member. If each group deferred to its strongest member and let that person do most of the work, average grades on the assignment would be expected to be higher than average grades on individual papers would have been. On the other hand, it may be that group discussion of ideas stimulates creativity, and that better ideas sometimes emerge from the

collaboration than would be produced by even the best group member working alone. That the latter possibility is viable is supported by what students had to say in their journals and in Paper #2 about the process of writing the paper.

Those sources suggested that in almost every group true collaboration had occurred. It is noteworthy that very few groups seemed to perceive themselves as having a single leader. Several groups reported having co-leaders who shared responsibility and contributed more than the other two or three members. Two or three groups reported power struggles between two individuals for the position of leader, but in none of these cases did one of the individuals seem to win out; instead in each case the group seemed to find a compromise between their ideas. It is true, however, that a number of groups did contain one or sometimes two "social loafers," as we call them in Social Psychology, who contributed next to nothing.

It is interesting that three of the four cases where the paper was of C quality involved groups with serious interpersonal conflicts. In each case there was an extreme social loafer who others said contributed absolutely nothing to the paper and who in some cases disrupted the process by renegeing on commitments to do certain tasks, failing to show up for group meetings, and making others too angry to function.

The fourth group who received a C was in many ways the most interesting of all the 14 groups. On the basis of oral work and performance on exams, this appeared to be the strongest combination of people in either class. This was the group that I had expected to produce the best paper of all; instead it produced one of the worst. Based on their journal and Paper #2 reports my guess is that they shared my perception that they were the top group and were absolutely confident any paper they wrote would be fine. Thus, effort was low. In fact, they were the only group who admitted writing the whole paper in a single evening session. It was also interesting to learn that this group apparently ignored its strongest member who had warned the others of the paper's weaknesses—they had out-voted him about the design of one of the studies, only to learn later that he had been right and the rest of them wrong.

The other 10 groups all seem to have had positive experiences writing the paper. They produced papers of good or excellent quality. In their journals and second papers they reported that the writing process involved cooperation by at least a majority of the group members. Many of them felt that the group effort had stimulated creativity and that they had learned more and had produced a better paper working together than they would have working alone.

Student responses to the course evaluation supplement provide further evidence that the collaborative experience was a success. Students were asked on this form to write evaluations of several aspects of the course including the experience of being in a group and the specific experience of writing Paper #1 collaboratively. The results were remarkably positive. Of the 59 students who completed the form, 56 (95%) evaluated the experience of participating in the group positively. Those who elaborated most often explained that being in a group had indeed allowed them to learn about group processes, indicated that they had profited from hearing others' ideas, or said that they liked the chance to make friends. The specific group experience of collaborative writing was not quite so well-received, though again a strong majority found it a worthwhile experience: 46 of 59 students (78%) evaluated it positively. They argued that they had learned more and produced a better paper and made more friends than they would have doing the assignment alone. Of the 13 whose evaluations were negative, about half complained that others in their groups had not done a fair share. A few others cited the logistical problems of getting the group together outside of class as their reason for not enjoying the experience. Two argued that it is unfair for grades to depend on others' performance.

Conclusion

I was much impressed with the overall quality of Paper #2, in which students were to analyze their group experiences in terms of ideas encountered in the course. Many did an excellent job. They drew up concepts of group dynamics to explain the collaborative writing process, concepts of interpersonal attraction to explain the feelings that had developed within

the groups, and concepts of social perception to explain the inferences they had made about the other members. An advantage of this assignment was that those who had been actively involved in their groups had more to say and so did better than those who had been social loafers. Hence, the grades on this paper tended to correct any inequities that may have resulted from the group receiving a common grade on Paper #1.

On the basis of all of this evidence, I regard my first experience in the use of collaborative writing as a success. I am now enthusiastically replicating this Writing Across the Curriculum experiment.

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