
Coping with the Problems of Collaborative Writing

Richard M. Chisholm

Sometimes just making people aware of potential problems helps them.

—Rebecca E. Barnett

Group members sink or swim together.

—Tom Morton

Our most consequential human problems will be solved not through competition, but collaboration.

—Ernest L. Boyer

“If you use your imagination,” Lucy remarked to Linus and Charlie Brown as they looked up at the clouds, “you can see lots of things in the cloud formations. . . What do you think you see, Linus?”

Linus pointed to clouds which “look to me like the map of the British Honduras in the Caribbean.” Another cloud looked “a little like the profile of Thomas Eakin, the famous painter and sculptor.” And a third group gave “the impression of the stoning of Stephen. . . . I can see the Apostle

Paul standing there to one side.”

“Uh hun. . . That’s very good,” Lucy commented. “What do *you* see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?”

With a bewildered look on his face, Charlie Brown answered, “Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind!”

—from Schultz

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An Array of Problems

“When the instructor told us we would collaborate and be graded as a group, I thought ‘Uh-oh. I’ll have to do someone else’s work. It *always* goes that way.’”

This comment is surely familiar to faculty who mount collaborative projects in college courses. Here is the way one student put it: “Group projects: I dislike them from the bottom of my heart! They are never fair. Members do not contribute evenly.”

Problems with collaboration won’t go away. But we can devise strategies to help students recognize them, accept them as normal and inevitable, and find tactics for coping with them.

When I say *collaboration*, what I have in mind is primarily a class project in which student groups work collectively to produce a joint product and are graded on it as a group. Students meet to devise a plan for a joint project, then work individually to do research and write drafts of the product. When they have something in writing, they review each other’s work. (These strategies work as well for peer reviews, where individual writers retain control of their own work.)

Oh, but collaboration raises lots of problems! There are pushy, dominant personalities. There are slackers and sluggards who need to go to the ant. Underachievers and overachievers, eager enthusiasts and resisters—the range is broad and rich with problems. And all of them, all types, agree on one thing: they always need more time.

Out of this plethora of problems I have selected four that I think cause the most trouble for groups of students who collaborate on writing projects: resistance, inexperience, friction, and fairness.

Strategies for Coping with the Problems

We can best meet these problems, I think, by planning the project well, explaining the plan, and helping students think problems through ahead of time and plan strategies to deal with them. What we need are appropriate procedures: how we plan the project, give the assignment, train students, monitor their work, give opportunity for groups to work together, encourage participation, and evaluate the processes and products. But at the same time I believe that students need to work through their own problems as much as they are able. No doubt there will be crises where the instructor needs to intervene, but if we set up the class with an environment congenial to collaboration and provide students with problem-solving strategies, they can cope with the problems themselves. In this way, they will learn something about processes and procedures they probably won't learn anywhere else. They will learn how to participate in a learning community.

Problem 1: Resistance

I have met few cases of overt resistance to group work, but I know that a good deal of it swirls beneath the surface. Many students place a low priority on a collaborative project. They may be unwilling to invest the time and effort that a group project requires. Some of them simply don't

want to participate in group work. They may be reluctant, shy, disdainful, or lazy, but for one reason or another they don't commit themselves to full participation.

Students readily admit their reasons for resisting the out-of-class work that collaboration entails. One student will miss meetings because she writes for the student newspaper, another because she runs the campus radio station. One man is on the soccer team and another an officer in his fraternity. "Add these factors up," a student says, "and you get nothing but scheduling conflicts."

This comment, which is not unusual for college students today, exposes a severe problem. Even 20-year-olds fill their pocket calendars weeks in advance with appointments. Another student's comment reveals a lack of commitment:

In a corporate structure, everyone that is on a team to do a project of this sort is in the same building so it is very easy for them to get together. Also, it's their job, so writing a paper is on the top of their priority list. Here on campus that isn't so. Finding time to meet with the group was almost impossible for me. Because of Student Senate I go to an average of 5-7 meetings a week, take 6 classes, and work. That's why I wasn't too thrilled when I found out I had to do a group paper.

This student has no doubt idealized the work world. But such comments show where some students' priorities lie. We should not be surprised that collaborative projects do not always attract their immediate commitment.

Comments such as these, fortunately, are not typical. Most students report that they enjoy working on collaborative projects, get a lot out of them, and willingly accommodate their schedules to the work of the group. Yet these comments no doubt reveal what many students feel. The problems of scheduling, priorities, and interest account for a good deal of the resistance

some students feel toward collaboration. What can we do about them?

Strategies for Coping with Resistance. Several strategies mobilize even the Lone Rangers in the class by replacing negative expectations with positive ones.

1. Devise a well-conceived project: Plan well so that you reduce resistance. (This strategy also reduces the severity of other problems.)
 - Select a project that is inherently worthwhile and interesting.
 - Select a project that is feasible within the limits of time, abilities, and resources of the class.
 - Give adequate instructions.
 - Break the project into phases and work on a specific aspect of the task during each phase. I provide way-stations during the semester that require abstracts, synthesis essays, outlines, and drafts at various times. Ensure that students produce concrete results at the end of each phase.
2. Run the collaborative project during the early part of the semester, before schedules fill up, patterns are set, interest wanes, and students find alternative ways to perform in your course.
3. Execute the plan systematically and matter-of-factly. Treat all aspects of the plan seriously but as a matter of course. Make clear your intentions from the first and stick to them. Tell them what you are doing and why you are doing it.
4. Announce clearly that you will give one grade for the group's project; everyone in the group will receive the same grade. Explain that the purpose of collaborative writing is to produce an integrated final report, not merely a collection of parts. Then grade as you said you would.

5. Provide sufficient time for students to complete the project— but not too much.

- Groups need time to form, storm, and norm before they can perform efficiently (Tuckman). Since most students are unaccustomed to collaborative procedures and are naturally gregarious, the forming and storming time may take longer than for more experienced groups. Build that time into your plan. Help students learn to distinguish unproductive fooling around from pre-productive talk.
- Provide specific class time for students to plan their work, outline the project, assign responsibilities to individuals, review each other's contributions, and assemble materials in a complete report.
- Expect students to meet out of class. Schedules being as tight as they are, students tell me that they can find only one or two hours a week to meet out of class. But they need to do it, however tight their schedules. Make this clear from the beginning.
- Don't allow too much time. Keep to your schedule.

6. Emphasize the positive values of collaboration.

- Make clear the importance of collaborative writing in college, on the job, and, in general, in a democratic society. One recent study, for example, shows that professionals in various fields spend more than 40% of their time writing—much of it collaborative. As Caryl Klein Sills put it, "Human progress has been as much a record of group effort as it has been a consequence of individual genius. Everyone needs to learn to work productively in groups; writers are no exceptions."
- Show the benefits of group collaboration: pooled

resources, pleasant associations, and a chance to perform a specialized function. As one student said, "Collaborating with the group is a great learning experience."

- Emphasize both of the benefits of collaboration: learning group skills and gaining knowledge of the subject itself. Tori Haring-Smith put it this way: "The end product is important. How you got there is more important."
- Help students understand the importance of learning to know each other, to rely on each other, and to be accountable to each other.

7. Have groups devise their own projects (for example, "We are writing a report on industrial robots for Ford Motor Company.")

Problem 2: Inexperience

In teaching collaborative writing, we are trying to create learning environments in which newly-formed groups can move as quickly as possible to become mature, systematic, and habitual collaborative units. But most students have very little experience with collaborative writing. They have everything to learn about it. As Dana Herreman says, "The group process must be taught . . . Just because individuals can be configured into a circle does not mean that they will automatically become good communicators."

Our society affords students so little opportunity to practice collaboration that few of them know how to work productively in a group. Oh sure, they play on teams and they mix and mingle at parties and such, but rarely do they contribute to genuinely collaborative projects. They are uneasy and apprehensive. They work inefficiently and ineffectively and become discouraged.

Students who lack experience are likely to be timid. "I am going to have a hard time reading my drafts aloud and having other people evaluate

them," one student wrote. "I am going to have to overcome my stage fright." Recognize that most students begin with some trepidation. We have to find ways to help them overcome their timidity.

Other students fear group work as an intrusion on privacy. Being inexperienced, they are not used to dealing with the intense intimacy that collaborative work demands. Before they build personal relationships with people in a collaborative group, they are unwilling to disclose private thoughts and feelings. Disclosure—even of their ideas—makes them feel vulnerable, and until they develop trust, they hesitate to participate. When the power of restraint outpulls the power of candor, we need to help them conceal less and reveal more.

The low level of skill at writing, analyzing writing, and talking about writing is even more difficult to deal with. As one student said, "You cannot expect 'group critique' to work on a group of people with limited skills." From time to time we run into students who give others bum advice and others who receive it eagerly. One student wrote "choppy" in the margin beside a fine paragraph written by a colleague, and the writer did not have the sense to leave the paragraph alone. A student told another student to put an apostrophe in "Dickens." Lack of experience is a serious problem, all right. Yet students do learn from each other and thrive on companionship and improve their skills in "group critique."

Strategies for Coping with Inexperience. The remedy for inexperience is training and guided practice. We need to teach collaborative learning skills, and we need to support and monitor students' use of those skills.

The strategy is to train students to collaborate effectively. And *training* seems the appropriate term for what they learn and the way they learn it. Students can learn to interact fruitfully in a way similar to how they learn to ski or swim or roller skate. The things they do and say to each other can thus be taught "as a kind of motor skill" (Argyle 52). They first learn about the way people interact, and why. Then they learn some actual things to say to each other. With practice, their acting soon becomes reality

and their learned behavior becomes habitual.

In teaching students new ways to act toward each other, I give them four kinds of instruction: 1) theory, 2) strategy, 3) tactics, and 4) appropriate language. The theory comes first: I explain the need for praising a colleague's paper. I make the point that praise oils the machinery of interpersonal relations and that people need praise because they are shy or because they doubt the value of their work and they crave esteem. I make similar explanations about the need for describing a colleague's paper, for asking questions, and for giving suggestions (Spear).

When I talk strategy, I urge participants, "Give your colleagues genuine praise early in your collaborative session; your words of praise will echo in their ears throughout the session." And for tactics suitable for this strategy, I urge students to find the strongest parts of the paper and to praise them.

When it comes to appropriate language, I give students some statements they can use to praise a piece of writing: "I like the way you started," or "I learned a lot, especially about how cooperation among mole rats is different from collaboration." (A colleague once wrote to me, "This is a lovely piece. . . . I like the talky, amiable tone." I won't soon forget that comment.)

At first, this learning is bound to seem awkward and self-conscious, especially using language that is new to them. Some students will have trouble understanding what I mean by theory, strategy, and tactics. But eventually it begins to make sense and the language itself comes naturally.

Here are the specific things I have tried:

1. Explain that what you are doing is training them in collaborative writing.
 - Determine what students currently know about collabo-

rative techniques and how much they use them.

- Give practice collaborating with an instructor-written piece of writing. Prepare an essay of your own and have students respond to it. This procedure will show that you believe in the process enough to use it yourself.
 - Give additional practice, under supervision. "At first, we were slow to offer any thoughts on each others' work," one student wrote, "but we became comfortable when the paper started taking form."
2. Provide suggestions for leaders. Thrust into a leadership role, some students find the experience unsettling. One student, who was appointed leader in a collaborative group, wrote, "At first, I felt apprehensive in giving out assignments." Other members of his group, though, helped him out, he explained. To judge from his group's report, he became an effective leader.
 3. Brief students on the psychology of interpersonal relations. (I take this tip from a student who urged me, "Spend at least one class period describing the characteristics of groups—how they work together, roles people play—so people know what to expect.")
 4. Have students agree on an explicit plan of work. Have them list their goals, timetable, assignments, and so on.
 5. Devise ways for groups to develop a unified plan, including descriptions of audience, main idea, style, outline, and content. Have them agree early on what this report will include, their individual responsibilities, the timetable, and the way the final report will fit together.
 6. Encourage groups to get all of their agreements on paper in order to identify possible areas of disagreement and to iron them out before they invest time unwisely.
 7. Help students revise specifications at various stages of their project.

Help them begin with preliminary specifications and make them increasingly detailed until the report “falls out.”

8. Provide a way for teams to reconsider, revise, and redraft the specifications and outline as their project matures. (There is excellent material on revising in Paul V. Anderson’s award-winning *Technical Writing*, chapter 23.)

Teaching Peer Feedback. Peer feedback is the heart of the collaborative process. In a workshop atmosphere, students get together in groups to review the work of others. Specific strategies to improve the quality of peer feedback include the following:

1. Facilitate peer feedback at every stage of the writing process, from first inception through final editing. Have students exchange ideas, notes, and drafts to share insights and points of view, explore meanings, and reconceptualize their papers. Show them how to do this, beginning with simple procedures such as Karen Spear’s four-part Praise, Describe, Question, Suggest. Have them make notes, talk together, and exchange ideas.
2. Provide increasingly detailed checklists for peer review and editing.
3. Provide explicit training in procedures for review, for fruitful writer-editor relations, and for proofreading.
4. Know when to step aside and let students do their work. “I think the best help you gave,” one student commented, “was to be there to answer questions and then let our minds run wild.” (I like the “run wild” part. I see myself as facilitator as often as instructor, and if the best thing I can do is get out of the way and let their minds run, I try to do it. In helping them become self-sufficient writers, I can serve them best by setting up a context for their work and then letting them work in it.)

5. Provide for a test reading by an outside reader. Devote time to this task when drafts are nearing completion but early enough so that students can make use of the input from the outside reviewer. (Again, see Anderson's book, chapter 24, for procedures.)
6. So that students will know how to collaborate better next time, conduct a post-project evaluation:
 - Have students explain how their groups solved problems.
 - Have students write about their own personal responses to collaboration. Perhaps frame it this way: "Now that you have had this experience with collaboration, what responses to similar kinds of groups do you expect to make in the future? What would you tell students in later classes about collaborative writing—the problems they will face, how they can cope with them, and the benefits they will derive?"

I hate to see students wasting the time they spend in groups. If the problem is that they do not know what to do or how to do it, I need to train them how to be productive in groups. I need to give them guided instruction and practice under supervision. Then, when they have learned how to collaborate, they can join a student who commented, "We taught each other."

(On the other hand, when students are sufficiently motivated, even inefficiency can have its brighter side. One student of mine went to Boston to find sources not available locally: "I personally killed a *day* in Boston," he reported. "I went to four major libraries, picked up two parking tickets, and got caught in the evening rush hour. But I actually had fun doing this because it was good to be in a group, and I didn't want to let them down.")

Problem 3: Friction

Some friction in human interaction is unavoidable. Sometimes ordinary rivalries and clashes burst into quarrels. Especially when people are thrown together to produce a piece of work that is important to them, there are bound to be conflicts.

“Perhaps our opinions will clash so violently that we get nothing done.” This comment came early in the semester from a student who anticipated conflicts. Friction which brings about bad feelings is probably the stickiest problem we need to deal with.

Strategies for Coping with Interpersonal Friction. The general strategy for coping with interpersonal friction is to encourage students to find solutions themselves. We can help them take charge of problem situations, take responsibility for coping with them, choose their own procedures, work out the problems themselves, analyze them, and exercise control and choice.

Here are some specific strategies for coping with interpersonal conflict:

1. Help students anticipate problems.
 - Elicit from students problems they anticipate.
 - Have students devise guidelines that specify expected behavior for participants in collaborative groups. Help them agree on acceptable standards for meeting outside of class, preparing drafts on time, interacting, and so on.

2. Help students accept the problems they encounter as a given.
 - Acknowledge the fact that there will be problems because friction is a natural part of human interaction.

- Help students understand that there may indeed be no *solution* to a problem but that there are values, guidelines, alternatives and procedures that are appropriate for coping.
3. Help students treat friction problems objectively but with compassion and understanding. Show them how to admit the problem openly. Try to get it out in the open so that it does not rankle.
 4. Help students accept a problem as *their* problem, not the problem of the instructor. Make it clear that the problem is theirs to work out. Let them figure out how to solve it.
 5. Help students prepare creative ways to encounter problems.
 - Help them to be ready, when problems arise, to say, "Yes, we expected this problem; now let's find a way to cope with it."
 - Help students devise strategies for coping with the problems and tactics for implementing the strategies.
 6. Have students role play or negotiate a solution.
 - Volunteer to observe their negotiation. Refrain from being directive or supplying a solution from the outside, but help them work it out.
 7. Train students to refrain from *defending* their work. Have them ask as many questions as they want, but not defend what they have written.
 8. Be alert to severe problems and prepare to deal with exceptions.
 - When necessary, help students work through serious or chronic problems. Sit down with them in the group and try to help them work out their problem. But make it

clear from the beginning that part of the group's assignment is to iron out problems.

- Determine whether students can handle the problem on their own or whether they need outside help—from you or from somebody else. If someone seriously falls down on the job, for example, ask them whether they can complete the project by filling in the holes left by others.
 - Ask students if they want you to intervene.
 - Insofar as possible, resist being arbitrator; take on the role of consultant or facilitator.
 - If all other tactics fail, re-form the groups.
9. Try to avert disaster. When severe clashes or other problems have crippled group efforts, give a good amount of credit simply for a project that is completed.

Problem 4: Fairness

The biggest complaint I used to get from students about group work was about the “hitchhiker,” who goes along for the ride but doesn’t contribute.

—Tom Morton

“I just think of it as cheating,” a student wrote, “when people who did nothing get the grade that others got . . . I don’t think it is fair to give the slackers a free ride.” Some students prefer to work alone and to receive individual credit for individual work because they do not want to be dragged down by a sluggard. Such attitudes are well founded.

In many groups, someone will work hard and someone else won’t. We all know that’s not fair. One of the values our society holds dearest is “Equal Pay for Equal Work,” and since grades are seen as rewards, it is impossible to reward the workers equally. On the other hand, our society severely taboos tattletales. We are caught in a nutcracker.

The fairness problem becomes most acute when older or more highly-motivated students are thrown together with immature students. The immature students are willing to have the go-getter do the work, but the older student soon learns to resent the load. Our goal is to lead students to the kind of success that one student reported: "At first I wondered if everyone would pull their own weight, but I was wrong to doubt them. They did a great job." But things don't always work out that way.

Grades are a primary motivation for students, so it is not surprising that a change in grading system—indeed of the whole basis of grading—should cause discomfort. Yet the main idea of collaborative learning is cooperation; one purpose is to develop a cooperative team spirit. We want to replace competition and individual rewards with a system in which all will pitch in and share the load. We want students to say, "We helped each other out in tough spots." In trying to convert competition into contribution, however, we must not forget the students rightly value their own individual work and expect to be credited for it.

Strategies for Coping with the "Fairness" Problem. As with the friction problem, it is important to face this one well ahead of time. Get the problem out into the open. Early in the semester, have students describe their experiences with slackers and identify their worst fears and apprehensions. This activity will help them anticipate problems they may encounter and to plan their own reactions to them. Forewarned is forearmed. Then it is useful to get students to freewrite on the topic. Have them participate in a written brainstorm and discussion or make a journal entry. Help them understand the shortcomings of human nature. Discussing the values and problems of collaboration will help students see the problem in context.

Specific strategies for coping with the "fairness" problem include the following:

1. Assign an individual grade to some portion of the project.
2. Require students to append an acknowledgements page to their joint

efforts. Giving credit to contributors will encourage contribution (Haring-Smith).

3. At the end of the project, give students the occasion to assess the project. Have them evaluate the group's procedures and product and explain their own part in it. Letting everybody tell what they did at least gives them a chance, as one student told me, "to let off steam."
4. Devise a grading system that permits students to drop one grade at the end of the semester. It may be the grade on the collaborative paper.

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In sum, the strategies require adequate planning, explanation, assigning and mounting of collaborative projects, followed by insistence that students design their own tasks and execute their own strategies for coping with problems.

These strategies won't make the problems go away. But they will reduce the degree that problems hinder collaborative efforts. And as we think of ways to cope with the problems that collaborative writing raises—and they are formidable—it is helpful to keep in mind what students are learning. In a well-run collaborative classroom, students learn theory and practice of brainstorming, collaborative writing, and problem solving. They learn how other people work. They learn about different styles of writing and ways to meld them. They learn to interact in a creative process, dealing with tight schedules, deadlines, and time constraints. Most importantly, they learn how to draw on individual abilities and how to cope with personal differences. What they learn from the collaborative experience itself may be more valuable than the substance of their report. It will surely be more valuable than the grade.

I find, finally, that collaboration stimulates students to do their best work—or at least better work. They will often work harder for their peers than they will for me. As one of them put it, collaboration "helped my writing a lot because I was very conscious of how my group would accept it. I felt like it had to be perfect." The method itself encourages students

who write casually to write seriously. Sometimes it helps those who normally write seriously to write strenuously. And even the slackers are less slack. That is quite a bit to say about any method.

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Note: I have slightly edited the quotations from students, but only to remove irrelevant topical references.

Richard M. Chisholm is a professor in the English Department and a member of the Writing Task Force. His chapter, "Improving the Management of Technical Writers: Creating a Contest for Useable Documentation," appears in Effective Documentation: What We Learned from Research. Ed. Stephen Doheny-Farina. MIT Press, 1988, voted Best Collection of Essays in Technical Communication by the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing.