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## **Collaborative Writing Assignments**

*by*

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Explain to students that part of their grade in a course will be based upon successful completion of a collaborative writing assignment and one can assuredly expect to elicit rolled eyes and grimaces, if not audible groans. Yet, collaborative writing can be both a rewarding academic experience for the student and an effective educational tool for the academician.

In business courses, faculty teach students that a business organization consists of individuals of various socio-economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds who come together to achieve the organization's goals. These individuals bring to the company their own skills, knowledge, values and expertise which, in many instances, are widely diverse. Still, employees are able to accomplish the corporate objective through cooperation, coordination, and a willingness to arrive at a common goal, i.e. the "bottom line."

Students required to complete a collaborative writing assignment are, in many respects, analogous to members of a business organization who work together to achieve the company objective. They each bring to the assignment their own level of writing skills, their knowledge of the subject matter, their particular composition styles, and their individual methods of research. Students assigned a group writing exercise must learn to harmonize each other's individual creative strengths and weaknesses to produce the final work product.

The collaborative writing approach is being used more and more in virtually every aspect of American business, from interdepartmental committee reports to peer and subordinate performance appraisals, employee manuals, intercompany communications, etc. Students who understand and who have experienced the teamwork writing dynamic may find that they more easily learn their jobs once out of school.

Moreover, there is a call for educators to recognize, "the dichotomy between current models of teaching writing, almost all of which assume single authorship, and the actual writing situations students will face upon graduation, many of which require co- or group authorship." (Ede and Lunsford 1985, 69-70). The reality faculty must face is that students need exposure to collaborative writing *before* they go into the workplace so that they will be adequately and competitively prepared for the challenges and demands that they will face.

### **Example: Labor-Management Relations Negotiation Exercise**

I have implemented collaborative writing assignments with measurable success in my Labor-Management Relations course. This course lends itself well to the collaborative writing experience for a couple of reasons.

First, it is a 300 level course, which means that the students most likely have already had some exposure to group projects in other courses. This exposure is significant because it would be difficult to toss someone into a lake and expect them to swim to shore without first giving them a few swimming lessons in a shallow pool. I have discovered that prior exposure makes the more complicated collaborative assignments faced later in a curriculum more easily (and willingly!) accepted. Second, the group-negotiating activities which culminate in the final written work product have real life applications. In this writing

exercise, students are required to research, negotiate, and draft a new labor contract as though they were the actual members of a company or union contract negotiating team.

The Labor-Management Relations collaborative writing project is assigned in conjunction with an oral negotiation exercise in which two groups of students--one playing a management negotiation team, and one acting as union representatives--renegotiate an expiring labor contract. Each group is expected to produce a 15+ page paper which must include the following information:

- mandatory bargaining issues presented at the negotiating table by each team
- roles played by each group member (e.g., CEO, department head, staff attorney, chief negotiator for the union local, national union representative)
- the actual negotiation process which includes negotiating strategies, impasse resolution techniques, etc.
- terms of the final negotiated contract

Appendices to the paper include the costing figures for each of the bargaining demands, the entire renegotiated labor agreement in contract language, and a "bargaining book" which contains a company comparison of historical gains and concessions made by either management or union and its relation to current key contract issues. Students also include a list of optimistic and realistic bargaining objectives they brought to the negotiating table, and discuss in the paper whether or not any of these goals were realized.

The research component of the project requires the students to discover industry standards for such bargaining issues as wages, comprehensive benefits, retirement and pension plans, safety procedures, grievance processes, etc. The final work product is a culmination of the group's total negotiating experience.

### **Cooperation, Coordination, and Collaboration**

I refer to cooperation, coordination, and collaboration as the three C's of any joint writing effort. All three are necessary not only to produce quality collaborative writing which reflects the harmonized intellectual diversity of each group member, but also to make the experience stimulating, enjoyable, and less stressful for the students.

Interestingly, cooperation may be the most difficult of the three C's for students to achieve. This problem occurs even when students are allowed to choose their fellow teammates, usually friends. Some group members are likely to be more opinionated than others. Usually, a natural leader will emerge who "caretakes" the entire project, telling the others how the assignment should be approached, the different tasks which need to be accomplished, and so on. More passive group members may make little noise, opting to go along with the leader and accepting the responsibilities assigned them. Others may feel resentment and challenge the new-found leader's perceived power.

In a perfect world, everyone would come to the collaborative writing experience sans ego; everyone would agree with and cooperate fully with each other. But this is not a perfect world, and part of the instructor's job when monitoring collaborative writing projects is to mediate conflicts that arise due to team members' inability to cooperate with each other, if indeed the individuals cannot work out their differences on their own.

Coordination involves the ordering of tasks and responsibilities so that each individual group member's contributions are not lost or duplicated. Coordination is a lot more difficult when there is more than one author, because some students find it very difficult to delegate any portion of a project, on which they will receive a collective grade, to anyone but themselves. The outcome is obvious; less motivated students are inclined to use this student as the

project "workhorse," the compulsive student ends up angry and exhausted, and even though the grade may be an "A," the whole purpose of the assignment has failed. The student log, which I will refer to in the "quality control" section of this paper, will be examined as one method of avoiding this problem.

Those using the collaborative approach must emphasize that the coordination of a collective effort becomes the objective of the assignment as much as the final product itself. That does not mean that group members must do everything as a unit. This is not feasible or practical. What the group members are responsible for doing as a unit is to agree on the division of tasks, to control the product, both in quality and content, and to coordinate each member's contribution so that the writing is a reflection of all those involved in its creation.

Lastly, there is collaboration. The ability to work together is the focal point of the collaborative writing assignment. Frequently, students find that their communication of ideas stimulates others; it gets the group's "creative juices" flowing. Consequently, there must be a commitment by each student to actively listen to the other group members' ideas and opinions. The ability to compromise, to communicate, and to consult will make or break this learning experience.

It must be kept in mind that the goal of a collaborative writing assignment is to stimulate creative co-authorship no matter whether the result is a business document, a short story, a research paper, or so on. The vehicle for achieving this goal is to stimulate discussion, compromise differences, order and assign tasks, and to process the culmination of these group activities down to a written product.

## **Quality Control**

One question I am invariably asked when assigning a collaborative writing exercise is, "I really want a good grade on this paper, yet I am just as busy as everyone else. How can I make sure that my fellow group members will pull their own weight on this project?" A follow-up question which I receive some time after the writing has been assigned is, "I seem to be doing all of the work. My teammates don't show up for meetings; they always have an excuse. Is it fair to give them the same grade when I'm the one who researched, negotiated, and drafted the final labor contract?"

Quality control is always an important factor to consider when assigning projects to be worked on collaboratively. It is preferable to define rules and procedures for the students regarding your expectations of the group and its individual members than to be barraged later with questions and complaints when it is too late to reach a group compromise or to dole out sanctions. Students should be made aware of these expectations up front when the project is assigned, in writing, so that there is no mistake as to their responsibilities.

Consequently, the first thing I do when assigning the negotiation exercise is to provide each student with a handout, detailing the objectives, procedures, and expectations that must be met in order to successfully complete the assignment. This includes a list of issues that the work product must address, many of them posed as interrogatories.

For example, such inquiries may include: On what bargaining issues did the two negotiating teams finally agree? Does your group feel as though it "won" in negotiating any issue or issues? How did the teams ultimately reach a settlement? What negotiating strategies did your group employ? Were they successful or unsuccessful? In order to incorporate answers to these questions into the

group's written work product, the students are forced to come to a consensus on the answers to the questions, something that is many times more difficult than it appears.

For example, students will often agree that their team either won a better wage, hour, or working condition issue, yet disagree on which strategy was used to obtain that issue. This exercise helps students to learn how to analyze oral negotiations as a unit, compromising individual perspectives for the collective viewpoint.

Another quality control technique which I have just developed for use in courses which use collaborative writing assignments is the log. The log addresses the problem of the absent team member whose only contribution to the group exercise is to show up the day I hand out the project grades. The objective of the log is to motivate individuals to work as a team and to make individual students accountable for their lack of participation. It "keeps everyone honest."

The way it works is analogous to a time clock. The group members designate a "timekeeper" who is responsible for recording meeting times and dates. Each time the group meets to discuss, research, negotiate, etc., the timekeeper records the date and the hours worked. Each participating member signs his or her name under that date. This log is attached to the finished work product and becomes evidence of each group member's level of participation in the assignment.

One advantage of the log is the virtual elimination of *ex parte* hearings where angry students rush to your office to complain about a "deadbeat" team member who refuses to do any of the work (recognizing that it is a *group* grade), tempting you to compromise your own principles and impose the ultimate sanction (an "F" grade) on the person who is not even present to defend himself or herself. You can now ask the students to produce the log, which will either verify their story or demonstrate perhaps an

exaggeration of the individual's lack of cooperation. It gives you a better basis to communicate with a student who may be failing to participate adequately without having to rely on "he said/she said" testimony.

Additionally, with any collaborative writing exercise it is crucial to keep the size of the groups as small as possible. Depending upon the average class size for the course, this may or may not be realistic. I usually expect to have between 40 to 50 students enrolled in a typical Labor-Management Relations class, so therefore I usually place a four-person limit on group size. Those faculty with considerably smaller class sizes may be able to set limits of two or three. Small group size is certainly no guarantee of group cohesiveness; however, it does make coordination of the exercise more manageable for the students.

I usually try to set aside one class period where the students may get together outside of the classroom to work on their projects. During that time I am available in my office to answer any questions or address any problems the groups may be having. The complaint most often heard about group assignments is that it is difficult for students to get together because "so and so" commutes, or "whatshis-name" plays sports, etc. This one-time class period gives the groups a chance to coordinate activities and divide up tasks.

The collaborative writing experience, to be valid, must truly be collaborative. Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, in their book on collaborative writing, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors*, address this issue by stating that "poor collaborative writing assignments are artificial in the sense that one person could really complete the assignment alone: such assignments lead only to busy work and frustration" (2). Coupled with unclear objectives and inadequate instructions, the collaborative exercise teaches students nothing about the creative group process.



Consequently, in the labor negotiations exercise, the quality of the collaborative aspect of the assignment is controlled through the roles each student assumes as a member of either the union or management negotiation team. Each role is an integral part of the negotiations process; each role carries specific functions that are directly linked to the others. For example, one student might assume the role of chief spokesperson for the company's negotiating team; another might assume the role of an outside expert in the area of benefits costing; another, the chief executive officer, etc. It is impossible to assume more than one role, or to complete the written assignment without input from all of the roles.

### **Conclusion**

One of the "advantages" of my labor relations course that students mention orally and in course evaluation is the negotiations exercise. Students generally come away from this collaborative writing exercise with positive impressions. I have had students make comments such as, "I wasn't too psyched when you gave us this assignment, but I have really learned a lot about working with others in a team and about the process of negotiating with other groups."

Students have also commented on the expectations they had of the project, and how their expectations were met or not met upon completion of the exercise. Many students have expressed the fact that they thought their fellow group members would not "get into" the assignment, yet, later found out that "John" was really an aggressive negotiator, or that "Sue" was able to persuade the other group to concede a compensation issue because of her powerful presentation of costing figures. Their perceptions of the collaborative assignment and of each other change as they assume their union or management roles, become embroiled in the negotiation of a new labor contract, and

attempt to relate the experience in the form of a collectively written paper.

Finally, I find that students who take this type of exercise seriously come away with an understanding of the broader purpose of the collaborative writing assignment. They realize that someday a job may require them to work with a fellow employee to produce a document, write a manual, draw-up a performance appraisal, or maybe even draft a new labor contract. We as faculty should provide them with that collaborative experience while they are still students.

#### WORKS CITED

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