Collaborative Considerations For Corporate Writers: Insights From The Academy And The Corporation

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Collaborative writing is pervasive in the contemporary corporate workplace. North American research reports that nine out of ten business professionals produce some of their documents as part of a team. As workplace writers seek to meet the business goals of their employers, and further their own careers, they require sophisticated skills in joining with other writers to collaboratively produce documents. Taking advantage of the benefits and meeting the challenges of this demand requires corporate and academic communities to collaborate: to address gaps in the knowledge about collaborative writing and to train and develop competent collaborative writers.

In 1754, the first American political cartoon—a woodcut drawing of a snake in pieces, each representing a colonial government—appeared in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*. Entitled "Join, or Die", the cartoon was based on the superstition that a severed snake would come to life if the pieces were re-joined ("Archiving Early America", n.d.). In contemporary organizations, the survival (both retention *and* progression) of professionals not only requires the ability to write, but the ability to join with others—to collaborate—during the writing process (Gueldenzoph & May, 2002; Lay & Karis, 1991; Odell & Goswami, 1982). Dias (p. 4, 1999) describes how "in some settings, composing is an intensely collaborative activity, involving intricate layers of responding and revising, each with its own complex political and social dimensions". Richardson (2002) claims that collaboration is "this decade's hottest skill". Improving collaborative writing practice in the workplace requires the joint efforts of the academy and the corporation. In this paper, we examine the demands for collaborative writing skills and processes; the benefits and challenges of collaborative writing; desirable skills for corporate collaborative writers; practical strategies offered by research; and areas where the corporate and the academic communities can join together to improve the practice of collaboration.

Collaborative Writing: Interacting In The Workplace

Writing in the workplace frequently requires collaboration (Couture & Rymer, 1989; Paradis, Dobrin, & Miller, 1985). But what constitutes collaborative writing? Many writing theorists (Blyler & Thralls, 1993; Faigley, 1985; LeFevre, 1987) argue that writing is inherently social: "writing involves more than the generation, organization, and translation of ideas into text...each act of writing is an episode of interaction" (Nystrand, 1989, p. 70). Ede and Lunsford (2001) also share the view of writing as a socially constructed act, as "inherently collaborative" (p. 355). Others provide a more specific framework:

> Although there has been some confusion in the use of "collaboration" to refer to both collaborative writing and collaborative learning about writing, collaborative writing is now identified as writing involving two or more

writers working together to produce a joint product (Anderson, 1995, p. 195).

Augmenting this definition, collaboration occurs when there is "production of a shared document, substantive interaction among members, and shared decision-making power over...the document" (Allen, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987, quoted in Debs, 1991, p. 479). While these definitions illustrate the act of collaboration, the writing-as-social-interaction view is particularly helpful in understanding the nature of collaborative writing in the workplace.

Within the organizational context, collaborative writing is influenced by cultural, political, and technological factors (Odell & Goswami, 1982; Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Beard & Rymer, 1990; Driskill, 1989; Mabrito, 1999). A workplace writer may complete much of their writing independently, interacting only occasionally to seek advice and feedback from a peer. The nature of collaboration in this example appears simple; however, contextual factors—the writing situation, the organization's procedures, and the document's readers—act as collaborative forces (Driskill, 1989, p. 136). Such context is an important source of meaning in collaborative writing situations:

> A rhetorical situation, with its range of reader/audience roles, purposes, ... genres, individuals, and temporal and technological constraints, must be seen as embedded within a complex context that affects both writers and readers. The "subject" or "topic" is not context-free, but situated, involved in what the members of the organization must know, feel, or believe in order to accomplish their goals (Driskill, 1989, p. 130).

The Demand For Collaborative Skills

Across professions, industries, organizations, departments, and functional areas, writing is a common job requirement: "many people must write with some skill in order to succeed with (indeed, to retain) their jobs" (Odell & Goswami, 1982, p. 221); "it is important to understand workplace writing as part of the power and politics that characterize corporate workplaces (Hansen, 1995).Many documents are composed on a regular basis in the workplace (Redish, 1989, p. 100). While some of these documents are planned, drafted, revised, and edited by a single author, "most business reports and significant shorter communications are either formally written in groups or are reviewed by key readers in a company" (Forman & Katsky, 1986, p. 23). Ede and Lunsford (1990, p. 20) report that 87% of workplace writers they surveyed collaborate in the course of their writing. Beyond the ability to write well, professionals require competency—skills, knowledge, and abilities—in collaborative writing. As Gueldenzoph and May (2002) observe, "collaborative skill is a prerequisite for most business jobs today" (p. 9). Collaborative competency is significant not only to the individual (who may seek advancement based on their competency), but also to their employing organization: "writers in businesses seek to create meanings that produce sales, cooperation, approval, compliance, or agreement" (Driskill, 1989, p. 129). Consequently, workplace writers require sophisticated skills in joining together to produce documents that meet their employer's business objectives and sustain their own careers.

The Demand For Collaborative Processes

Collaboration is prompted by a number of practical and political factors related to the writing task and corporate events. Practically, a lengthy, complex document (such as some business proposals) presents a significant challenge, in terms of both the knowledge and effort required, for a solitary writer (Ede & Lunsford, 2001, p. 361). Business procedures and supervision also drive the collaborative process: workplace writers are often required to "account for and incorporate the views and reviews of others into their own documents" (Couture & Rymer, 1989, p. 75). Politically, collaboration facilitates the meeting of organizational objectives where stakeholders must reach a consensus, or where authorship is shared because "no one person wants the sole responsibility for the success or failure of the document" (McLaren & Locker, 1995, p. 308). The benefits and challenges of the collaborative process are comprehensively documented in business communication literature (Bacon, 1990; Bogert & Butt, 1990; Cross, 1994; Forman & Katsky, 1986; Haley, 1999; Nelson & Smith, 1990).

Benefits include:

- higher quality documents (because of the range of perspectives, knowledge, and skills contributed by the participants)
- higher levels of motivation, because participants encourage each other to give their best
- co-writers who operate as readers in the first instance, giving valuable feedback while the document is in draft stage
- opportunities for less experienced writers to improve their skills and to become acculturated to organizational norms, values, and standards by working with more experienced senior colleagues
- enhanced work relationships among colleagues
- higher levels of acceptance of the final document, because a range of staff or sections of an organization have worked together (Putnis & Petelin, 1996).

However, collaborative writing is not always successful in the face of the following logistical, political, and social challenges:

- coordinating a collaborative process is much more complex than producing an individual document
- collaboratively written documents generally take longer than individually written documents
- documents are not necessarily of a higher quality than those individually authored
- the personal communication, learning, and conflict styles of participants can interfere with their receptivity to the ideas of others
- personal conflict may arise because of agenda, status and power differences, and lack of diplomacy and sensitivity
- the revising-editing process can continue *ad nauseam*, because so many people "own" the document

- different participants will have different writing styles, leading to stylistic inconsistencies that may, or may not, be eliminated in a final edit (Putnis & Petelin, 1996).

Cross's (1994) ethnographic study of the writing of a two-page executive letter for inclusion in an annual report—detailing flaws in the 77-day process and in the final written product—distills the factors influencing the collaborative process. Cross argues that the process became inordinately protracted for a number of reasons: chief among them were the low status of the writer (the most junior member of the team); the failure of senior staff to properly brief the writer about what they wanted; the physical separation of the participants (on separate floors in a high-rise building; the large number of people who edited the letter (five members of middle management and then the Chief Executive Officer and the President); and the idiosyncratic changes made to the letter by the executive secretaries who were asked to type it). These benefits and challenges aside, collaborative writing processes are a practical and political requirement of contemporary organizations.

While "collaborative writing is pervasive on the job" (Couture & Rymer, 1989, p. 74), the configuration, or model, of the interaction varies from document to document or from day to day. As Debs (1991) notes, there is a multitude of possible models: "our understanding of collaborative writing and our sense of what interactions we will accept as being collaborative expand when we consider writing as a process with stages" (p. 478). From a research perspective, understandings of collaborative models have been informed by two key projects: Couture and Rymer (1989) surveyed more than 400 organizational writers about the type and frequency of their interactions with others while writing; Ede and Lunsford (1990) surveyed members of seven professional organizations and conducted follow-up interviews to profile writers in collaborative settings. These projects have established that workplace writers collaborate frequently, but not necessarily according to the academic model—where "two or three equals...plan, draft, and revise cooperatively" (Couture & Rymer, 1989, p. 74). The complexity or importance of the writing task influences the level of collaboration, with writers seeking to engage stakeholders in the document (Couture & Rymer, 1989; Debs, 1991). Research shows that workplace writers collaborate by:

- Participating in planning groups or workshops—where drafting is completed by a single writer
- Participating in writing teams—where authorship is shared
- Reviewing, editing, and providing feedback on the work of others—peers or subordinates
- Ghostwriting (Couture & Rymer, 1989; Reither & Vipond, 1989; Cross, 1990).

Accounting for the rhetorical situation and contextual factors, workplace writers require the ability to identify and apply appropriate collaborative models and processes in the course of their work. Richardson (2002) lists the interpersonal qualities and skills that contribute to successful collaborative writing:

- Self-reflection skills
- Active listening skills

- Trust building skills (via a history of perceived integrity, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy)
- The management of defensiveness
- The ability to process multiple perspectives
- The ability to distinguish others' interests, issues, and positions
- The ability to respond to others' communication, learning, and conflict styles
- The ability to mange one's assumption-making processes or to resolve conflicts that arise when wrong assumptions have been made
- Decision-making skills.

Advice from the Academy

Moving beyond observation and theory, researchers describe some practical strategies that apply to specific stages of the writing process (such as planning or drafting) or to specific collaborative activities (such as meetings and problem solving) (Bacon, 1990; Bogert & Butt, 1990; Burnett, 1990; Gebhardt, 1980; Hill Duin, 1990). At the planning stage, Burnett (1990) advocates the technique of collaborative planning, allowing participants to explore and plan their writing together by discussing the rhetorical elements of content, purpose, audience, organization, and document design (p. 10). Richardson (2002) advocates sharing credentials and references at the start of a project. If the document is lengthy and complex, Bacon (1990) recommends "storyboarding": an interactive and visual development technique that involves physically displaying the document outline and then posting drafted sections (p. 8). In addition, management literature offers advice for conducting meetings, facilitating group discussions, and evaluating group effectiveness (Bogert & Butt, 1990).

Many collaborative writing strategies address the writing process. Research also recommends the use of technology in collaborative writing—e-mail, word processing features (for example, commenting, merging or comparing documents, tracking changes)—to circulate drafts, manage versions, and incorporate revisions and edits (Easton, Easton, Flatley, & Penrose, 1990; Kraut, Galegher, & Fish, 1992; Sharples, 1993).

Future Directions

Building the collaborative competency of workplace writers requires continued collaboration of another kind—joint effort between corporate and academic communities. Ede and Lunsford (2001) reinforce the need for collaboration to extend "beyond the academy" (p. 361): "workplace writers and [educators] should continue to make connections between our two communities so we can help each other learn" (Morgan, 1991, p. 545). These connections allow insights and expertise to be shared; they could also provide the catalyst to refocus the existing practical strategies—primarily designed for the classroom context—for the workplace. Debs (1991) suggests that organizations can "contribute to this area of research and to their own understanding of the [collaborative] process by opening sometimes sensitive procedures and proprietary materials to the presence of a researcher" (p. 483).

To support the collaborative efforts of workplace writers, future research could be directed to the concept of multi-authorship, or the writing team. Investigating the frequency, nature, sites, and cultural context of this type of collaboration would enhance understandings of group composing techniques and particular problems faced by writing teams (Couture & Rymer, 1989, p. 88). Studies of writing teams would provide valuable information for the theory and practice of collaboration: definition of best practices (relating to the writing process, the group process, and group management); analysis of rhetorical situations where a writing team is effectively employed; and an evaluation of the task requirements. Cross (1994) argues that a key concern for future research into writing groups is the concept of audience: how do writing teams perceive, prioritize, and address their audience/s (p. 144-145)? Specifically, "do writers and editors often create documents to suit internal audiences at the expense of external audiences?" (p. 145). In addition to answering these questions, such studies may help writers understand how writing teams integrate the work of multiple authors to achieve both political objectives (such as ownership and compliance) and stylistic quality (such as consistent "voice").

The ability of collaborative, corporate-academe partnerships to translate the findings and recommendations of research into solutions for the corporate community will be an important indicator of success. As Dyson (1995) argues, "contemporary cultural capital will lie in...nurturing the movement of content through networks of users and producers" (quoted in Ede & Lunsford, 2001, p. 362). The products of research—such as conference presentations, dissertations, and journal articles—are typically consumed by the academic community. In contrast, research by Gilsdorf (1998) shows that organizations commonly use meetings, training (including orientation), and circulated documents (such as memos, newsletters, and manuals) to influence communication behavior (pp. 189-190). Therefore, research products designed to improve the collaborative skills and processes of workplace writers could take the form of white papers, straightforward guidelines for practice, or educational materials (such as manuals, writing workshops, or seminars).

Join, Or Die?

By 1789, the early American colonial governments had joined to become a nation. Similarly, the future of successful collaborative workplace writing is underpinned by continued collaborative efforts of the corporate and academic communities: building the collaborative competency of workplace writers, investigating collaborative models, and packaging the results of research to educate workplace writers about collaborative writing processes. As it was for the colonial governments, the priority now is for 21st century organizations to join.

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