Commitment-Driven Co-Authoring

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Scholarly Publication in a Changing Academic Landscape: Models for Success

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can share the workload with you, including research, writing, and revision, which can make the process of disseminating your work move more quickly. More notable, however, are the ways in which collaboration allows you to cover more ground than would be possible if you were only drawing from your own expertise and experience and to consider perspectives or questions that may not have occurred to you while working on your own. Certainly this reciprocity may be the case when working with a colleague in your field with whom you share a common pedagogical or theoretical foundation, yet it is also true in cases where collaborators come together from very different academic disciplines. Cross-disciplinary collaborations often break new ground by addressing old questions in new ways and creating new avenues for scholarly work. You may find that interdisciplinary collaboration also opens your work to dissemination in venues you would not have considered and/or that would not be relevant to your individual research. In terms of the potential impact of your work, collaboration may allow you to speak to new audiences.

Working with a co-author(s) helps to keep writers accountable and motivated. If a writing deadline looms, you are less likely to ignore it if you know that someone is waiting on a draft or a revision. If you find yourself stuck or unable to move forward with a project, a collaborator may be able to ask the right questions to motivate you, suggest another line of inquiry, or simply take over a troubling task while you move onto another section or piece of the project. When recognition or credit for scholarly work is slow in coming (which is often the case for contingent faculty), a collaborator can often become an important ally and vital conduit in helping you network, following your project to completion, and getting your work disseminated in appropriate scholarly venues. Beyond serving as co-authors/presenters, you should also consider seeking out collaborators who stimulate your academic thinking and with whom you enjoy working.

Commitment-driven co-authoring

In our experience collaborating—with each other and with others—we have come to see again and again that shared commitment is what really drives collaboration, what makes it possible. Lack of shared commitment (or voicing of, explicit agreement on, or even evident effort toward enacting shared commitment) seems to underlie co-authoring experiences that go awry. In this way, co-authoring is not about a procedural division of labor; rather, it is about expressing and trusting our shared commitment and learning the strengths of each collaborator so that we can draw on—lean into—each others’ strengths to move ourselves and the current project forward. Coming to a clear understanding of each aspect of the project is, of course, essential to our process. It is not that everyone necessarily does equal work, but instead equitable (fair, agreed-upon, and recognized as important) work, which means that everyone is fully acting from their strengths and embodying stated, shared, and agreed-on commitments. In other words, no one displays an attitude of deferral or waiting for others to assign tasks; everyone has full agency and ownership over the project.

Understanding each aspect of the project means we have explicit conversations about what needs to be done, what can be done, and what must be let go. Put another way, it forces us to ask ourselves, “What does our ‘balanced best’ look like?” And to ensure these conversations take place, we’ve found it is crucial for someone to take on at least two important roles:

1. The Counselor—one person in the group who says the hard things and asks the tough questions, regardless of consequences, so that we honor one another, and

2. The Motivator—one person who translates ideas into actions and who keeps us organized, on schedule, and working toward clearly articulated milestones and tasks.

These roles may rotate among collaborators, but it truly is important that someone plays them and that they are discussed, intentionally put into place, and reflected upon from time to time by the group. This recursive and reflective process helps us avoid resentment on one hand and feel realized (both professionally and personally benefiting from and enriched by the project) on the other. We have found that if a group just focuses on eliminating resentment but doesn’t work toward realization (that is, realizing both the writers and the written project), people won’t be happy. Because we believe the work matters, we co-author. Because we clearly state this value as a commitment and because we see that being involved in the work moves us toward realizing our shared goal and our Selves, we persist despite the complexity of writing and
writing with others. When the group functions at its balanced best, co-authoring involves (1) having a project, (2) being committed to a project, and (3) making the effort for the project. Proof of commitment is revealed in doing, not in professing its worth.

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Defining academic collaboration

In Writing Together: Collaboration in Theory and Practice, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede discuss (in 24 essays) in-depth issues related to collaborative authoring—all gleaned from their 30 years of experience writing together. They explain how they create a text together, rather than to simply divide and conquer a project: “We discovered and thought through ideas together, talked through almost every section and draft of the papers together, and often wrote drafts by talking and recording directly” (28). They call the kind of collaboration they engage in “co-authorship.” Kami Day and Michelle Eodice label similar kinds of collaboration (First Person)³, whereby co-authors weave together different voices and writing styles, collaborating “sentence by sentence” (1). Day and Eodice interviewed ten established collaborative academic teams to better understand the nature of collaboration in general and intense “co-authoring” or (first person)⁴ writing in particular. They offer extensive information about the act of collaborating gleaned from interviews with successful collaborators, and finally assert that co-authoring “can transform academia into a place that nurtures intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally” (184).

In workplace situations (including academic departments), however, collaboration often happens by committee, whereby writers co-author by contributing individual sections of the final project. Often, a lead writer may edit the final project written by the committee members. Think about the kinds of documents and websites that are produced for your department—catalogs describing department requirements, accreditation reports, even syllabi for large-scale courses; many of these documents require the expertise of different faculty members or include university statements that protect teachers and students.