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Peter Elbow



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## Using the Collage for Collaborative Writing

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Plenty of people have celebrated collaborative writing (e.g., Ede and Lunsford; LeFevre), so I can invoke the medieval trope of *occupatio*: I will *not* give all the reasons why collaborative writing is a good thing; I will *not* write about how frequently it occurs in the world and therefore how our students should learn to use it; nor about the collaborative dimension of writing we think of as private; nor about how collaborative writing helps students learn better because of all the pooling of information, ideas, and points of view; nor about students who have hated writing because it makes them feel lonely and helpless but who come to like it when they write with others; nor will I cite the much cited Harvard research showing how students who study together get better grades (Light).

But I will mention in passing one interesting benefit of collaborative writing that I've noticed but found under-celebrated. When people write alone, they make countless simple and complex writerly decisions *tacitly*, instinctively--without articulating the reasons for them (for example, to start with this idea, or to move that point later in the paper, or to change a word or phrase to modify the voice or the relationship to the reader). And that's as it should be: tacit decisions are quicker and the writer is going by feel, by ear. As Polanyi reminds us, our tacit knowledge always outstrips our conscious and articulate knowledge. But the process of writing with someone else forces us to put many these decisions into words. If I say to my partner, "Let's start with this point," I usually have to say why--especially if I am proposing a change. And if my partner disagrees with me, he or she will naturally give reasons for the resistance. In short the process of collaborative writing forces students to become more conscious and articulate about rhetorical decision making.

What I find under-represented in our professional literature about collaborative writing are the *problems*. First, collaborative writing is difficult and often unpleasant. When I used to force students to write essays in pairs or groups, at least half of them would say at the end that it was the worst experience of the semester. And when I gave them the choice, relatively few took it. Collaborative writing may be jolly and social, but it takes a long time and leads to disagreements. Is there anyone who has not vowed never again to engage in a piece of committee writing?

Second, the writing that results from collaboration is often pretty bad. It is likely to be bland because the parties have to agree and they can only agree on lowest-common-denominator thinking. And there is often a dead, "committee" voice--no energy or presence. The surest proof of the existence of God is the King James translation of the Bible: only divine intervention could have permitted a committee to produce such wonderful prose.

Third, the collaborative process often silences weaker, minority, or marginal voices. The assertive and entitled tend to carry the day. Whenever there is a need for consensus in group work, there is great danger of silencing weaker voices (see Clarke and Ede; Trimbur).

In order to deal with this perplexity--that collaborative writing is at once so valuable, so important, and yet so problematic--I've come to use the *collage* in order to introduce collaboration in writing. The term "collage" was originally applied to visual art, but most of us are familiar with written collages: single texts that consist of multiple and somewhat disconnected fragments. A description of the collage first appeared in the pages of this journal (as *Freshman English News*) when Winston Weathers published "The Grammars of Style: New Options in Composition." I like to define the collage by sharing the simple directions I give to students for producing one:

- Produce or gather as much of your writing on your topic as you can. Go fast, don't worry. Freewriting is a good method. Take thoughts in any order. (Option: add fragments of writing by others.)
- Go through what you have and choose the best or potentially best bits--freely cutting to create long and short sections.
- Revise what you have, mostly by cutting, not rewriting. Cut paragraphs and sentences; cut phrases and words. It's amazing what is possible with just cutting.
- Figure out a pleasing order for the bits: perhaps logical, more likely intuitive and associative--maybe even random.

For more about the collage, see my "Collage: Your Cheatin' Art"--and also the first workshop in Elbow and Belanoff.

Just as the solo collage serves as a bridge to the writing of regular essays, the collaborative collage serves as a bridge to full collaboration. But like the solo collage, the collaborative collage is valuable in its own right. It can be as nice to stand on the bridge as on the other shore.

The procedure for creating a collaborative collage is so easy and simple that it will make some people nervous. Let me lay out the directions I give to pairs or small groups working together:

- Individually, write as much as you can about the topic. Write your own thoughts. It's fine to use rough, exploratory writing. Try to exploit the insights, language, and energy that come from moving fast and getting caught up in your thinking and feeling.
- There is an alternative first step you can use if you prefer. Each person writes for ten or fifteen minutes--however he or she wants to start. Then people switch papers for the next piece of writing so that what is written is some kind of response to what the first person wrote. And so on. This method adds more of the quality of dialogue--thought answering thought. But by the same token, it can reduce the amount of sheer diversity in the collage, because the writers are more in touch with each other. In the first, nondialogical method, writers might well be in entirely different ball parks--which can be a genuine advantage.
- Individually, go back over what you yourself have written and choose the bits and sections you like most. Some might be a page or more, others very short. Choose at least twice as much material as you'll need for your contribution to the finished collage. Clean them up enough to share, but there's no need to spend too much time on the job.

- Together in your pair or group, read your individual pieces to each other. (Or share them through silent reading.)
- Together, agree on which pieces should be chosen for your collaborative collage. (Ground rule: no fair leaving anyone out--or letting anyone dominate the final version.)
- Together, give some feedback and suggestions in response to those pieces you have chosen. But there's no need for agreement in your responses. Just let everyone throw in their two cents. (You'll also have to agree on whether the final revising and polishing of bits should be done by the original authors or by means of trading pieces with each other.)
- Together, decide on a sequence for all the pieces you've chosen.
- Together, as part of this discussion about sequence, you may well decide you need some new pieces. Good new ideas might have come up in discussion; or you might realize that something important is missing.
- Individually, write any necessary new pieces; and revise and polish the chosen pieces.
- Together, look at what you have produced and decide whether to call it finished or to carry on with more work: for example, re-ordering of parts; revising of parts; writing new parts. This decision is collaborative, but further work can be individual.

Note that some of these tasks require agreement, but many do not. That is, there is genuine collaboration going on here--but only to a limited degree. This makes it much easier on participants than full collaboration and gives them a good bridge from individual work to group work. That is, participants *don't* have to agree on their ideas, thinking, conclusion, or thesis. They *don't* have to agree on language, wording, or phrasing. There are none of those awful tippy-toe discussions or time wasting arguments about how to phrase something. Nor about the voice or tone. At every moment, individuals are entirely in charge of every piece with respect to thinking, wording, and voice--though of course these decisions are often influenced by comments and feedback from others.

Yet genuine collaboration is also going on--in fact two levels of collaboration:

- Weak collaboration*: members read their writing to each other and give and receive individual responses from each other, and thereby *influence* each others' thinking and writing; this collaboration has a substantive effect on the final outcome. Yet this degree of collaboration is easy and nonstressful because participants don't have to agree.
- Strong collaboration*: participants have to agree on which blips to use; they have to agree on what order to put them in; they have to agree on who does the revising; they have to agree on whether more revising is needed or whether to call it finished. Strong collaboration is harder because it requires agreement or consensus. But the scope of what people have to agree on is pretty limited.

Thus the collaborative collage speaks to the first problem of collaboration: difficulty or unpleasantness. But can it deal with the other two problems--weak or bland writing and the stifling of minority ideas and voices? Obviously, it can.

The collaborative collage invites all participants to stay in entirely charge of their own writing, and as a result the final product is richer and more complex than most collaborative writing. (Even if members decide to revise each others' pieces, single individuals are in charge of thinking and language at any given moment.) The final product contains multiple points of view, multiple voices, multiple styles--and as a result more tension and energy. Minority ideas and thinking have not been left out. In a collage, contrasts are a benefit, a source of energy that stimulates thinking in readers. The collaborative collage is a gathering of pieces each written from an "I" point of view--for the sake of a "we" enterprise.

The process I've described so far usually results in an *open* collage--a collage with multiple and conflicting points of view. If the students need to produce a *focused* collage, they must carry their partial collaboration a few steps further. They needn't leave out any of the conflicting material, but they need to spend additional time discussing the thinking in their open collage and find a way to agree on a conclusion or at least a common point of view. And then they need to write, add, arrange, or revise bits--again not taking away any of the contradictory material--in order to make the whole collage end up saying or implying their collaborative conclusion or point of view. They can even stop short of full agreement if they can agree on where they disagree and articulate that meta-agreement--further spelling out the implications of the various views and explaining what would need to be decided in order to settle their disagreement. But it's important for students to realize that even though they reach ultimate agreement on a conclusion or point of view, the focused collage still can and really ought to contain wildly divergent and contradictory pieces.

### **Learning to Make Space for Other Voices**

Let me briefly suggest three additional methods for helping solo writers begin to get comfortable collaborating with other writers. These activities can serve as a bridge or introduction even to the mild collaboration I've already described.

(1) The student writes a draft alone, but then shares that draft with one or more others and invites them to write out some of their own thoughts in response: new thoughts on the topic itself or thoughts about what the writer has said--perhaps even how it was said. These responses go to the original writer who then gets to incorporate some passages from them into his or her piece. The writer can put these passages in quotation marks, or in a different type face, or even in a separate column running alongside the writer's own text. Thus the single writer stays in complete charge of his or her text--but incorporates the voice of others.

(2) The student is writing about a topic while also doing lots of reading or interviewing about it. The student is asked to produce not a conventional, research or documented essay, but a collage that contains extensive and extended quotations from the reading or interviews. Again, the interjected material might be in long block quotations, in separate type-faces, or in a parallel column or two. The goal here is to help students "place" their own thoughts and voices--in authoritative dialogue with the voices of others, especially of published writers. That is, this procedure can help prevent two common problems in research or documented essays by students: (a) essays where the writer says almost nothing and merely wholesales the ideas and voices of others; (b) essays where the writer brings in nothing but perfunctory "quotes" to back up what is essentially his or her own monologue.

(3) Students work in pairs (or trios) and start by writing a “real time” dialogue: they simply pass a sheet of paper back and forth to each other so each can write a response to the previous turn. (The process is even easier in an on-line classroom.) If they want to avoid one writer having to wait while the other one is writing, they can even get two dialogues going on two different topics. This procedure can seem odd and artificial at first, but students get comfortable pretty quickly if we help them see that they are simply putting on paper what they do naturally and comfortably in spoken conversation. They usually benefit from being encouraged to let the dialogue go where it wants to go, even if it wanders. It’s a voyage of thinking and discovery. Then the students read over what they have created, and they collaborate on revising it into a satisfying and coherent dialogue. This doesn’t mean the organization or sequence of ideas has to be neat and tidy. Think about Plato! Thus the students have to agree about what the main line or direction should be, which parts to keep and discard, and how to arrange or rearrange. But they each get to revise their own contributions.

These three processes help students get used to making good texts out of multiple thoughts and voices.

### **Using the Collaborative Collage as a Bridge Back to Better Solo Writing**

I like to use the collaborative collage to guide students not only toward better full collaboration, but also toward better solo writing. That is, the experience of writing and sharing collaborative collages--and seeing the unexpected virtues of them can help students learn to get into their solo pieces some qualities that are rare and precious in writing: conflicting ideas, multiple points of view, perplexity, tension, and complexity of structure. The larger principle of learning that operates here (as articulated by Vygotsky and Mead) is that we eventually learn to do by ourselves what we first learned to do socially in interaction with others. We internalize the social process.

That is, much *solo* writing suffers from the same weakness that is found in much collaborative writing. Many student writers, feeling a pressure always to have a clear “thesis,” end up settling for the lowest-common-denominator point that the various parts of the self can agree on. They are tempted to stop writing when they feel perplexed or come across conflicting feelings and ideas--nervously sweeping complications under the rug. Students have somehow been led to think that writing should always “flow”--a favorite word of praise--and thus that the texture should be seamless. They don’t realize the pleasure and energy that comes from *bumps*. In truth, most good solo writing represents a single writer having some internal dialogue with herself--having more than one point of view and using more than one voice. Writing needs the drama of thinking and the performance of voices.

All these virtues can be summed up in the catchword that we’ve taken from Bakhtin’s mouth: “dialogic.” Fair enough. But it’s fruitful to encourage some notes of overt *dialogue* into solo writing: passages where the writer actually breaks out into a different voice and point of view. It’s not hard to create such passages by using launching pads like these: “Notice the complications we must consider, however, when we listen to the thoughts of someone who disagrees: ‘ . . . .’” Or, “There are some serious objections, however, to what I have just been saying: ‘ . . . .’” Or, “But wait a minute. Let’s look at this issue from a contrasting point of view:

‘ . . . .’” In each case, the writer can carry on for a paragraph or longer speaking in a different voice from a different point of view. Of course it’s hard to get full rhetorical control over multiple voices and points of view, but even when students don’t handle the richness and complexity so well, they almost always gain powerful benefits to their thinking. (Teachers have often found ways to give better grades to papers that fall down--when their downfall stems from the attempt to deal with complex thinking--than to seamless papers that settle for simple, obvious thinking.)

I’m fascinated by the literal ability to talk to oneself--to give voice to the multiple views and consciousnesses that inhabit us. The ability to have thoughtful dialogues with oneself may be one of the most important goals of schooling. It is surely the mark of educated or developed persons to be able to engage in thinking and dialogue when there are no others around who are interested in their topic or interested in talking to them. One of the biggest difficulties for adolescents in particular, is that they feel so vulnerable to their peers and therefore find it hard to delve very far into issues or feelings or points of view that their peers ignore or scorn as weird. One of the main things I want to teach my students is that they can pursue their ideas even when they feel alone and can’t get others to listen.

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To sum up. My goal in this teaching activity is not just to make collaborative writing easier and more inviting, but also more complex and conflicted. And in the end, the more lasting goal may be to get richer thinking and more voices into solo writing as well.\*

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\*This essay is based on a paper I gave at a session on the collage that I organized at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1992. Since that time I’ve discussed it with countless people and gotten helpful feedback--for which I am grateful.

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