

Methods of Discovery: A Guide to Research W

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Chapter 9: Research and Writing Through Collaboration

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Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to collaborative research and writing. In the past, you may have been discouraged from collaborative work in the past. Institutional constraints and habits often dictate that we work on our research and writing individually. The traditional academic culture often sees the ability of a writer and researcher to work alone as the sign of intellectual maturity and discipline. While it is certainly true that a lot of writers work individually and while it is certainly true that being able to conduct a research project on your own remains an important ability, both in and outside of the academia, in recent years collaboration between writers have become increasingly more common and encouraged by employers and publishers. In my field of study, rhetoric and composition, for example, it is very common for two or three authors to collaborate on books, book chapters, and journals articles, In natural sciences, almost every research and writing project is collaborative. In professional writing, staffs of whole companies and organizations often produce collaborative research and writing, coordinating their efforts at every stage of the process, from invention and research to peer feedback and editing.

The chapter begins with a definition of collaborative research and writing. Understanding what collaboration is and what it is not is important because beginning writers often misunderstand the nature of true collaboration mistaking simple exchange of ideas for it. The chapter will then outline the reasons for collaboration. Important approaches and methods of collaboration, including some practical suggestions on how to complete collaborative projects, will be discussed next. In the closing pages of the chapters student writers who participated in collaborative writing and research will share their views and advice on collaboration.

Definition of Collaborative Research and Writing

The very basic definition of collaboration in writing is creation of a text written by several authors. This much we all know and understand. However, in order to understand the meaning of true collaboration in research writing, it is necessary to go deeper than this surface definition. It is necessary to think about and understand what kinds of processes, negotiations, and activities are involved when a group of writers sets out to create a truly collaborative research-based text.

Researchers Cindy Moore and Peggy O'Neill define collaborative research and writing as collective endeavors where many people work on the same project and, at the end, have collective ownership of the final product. According to this definition, when collaborating with others, a writer does not merely take someone else's work and appropriates it as his or her own. Instead, the work is co-authored, with every member of the team having completed one or several parts of the task.

The feeling of "mutual ownership" of the final product is very important. Ensuring such mutual ownership requires every member of team to participate actively and contribute to every stage and elements of the research and writing process. Such a definition of collaboration means that participants do not simply divide labor into small parts and then

collate the results of everyone's work into one final product. Although division of specific responsibilities is normal and practical during some stages of collaborative writing and research, in order for the project to be truly collaborative, it is important that every member of the team be aware of and have a say in the whole research and writing endeavor rather than just in one of its aspects. Only by following this approach will all the members of the research and writing group feel that mutual ownership of their projects.

As a writing student, you may be used to sharing your ideas with others in class. But true collaboration is goal-oriented. In order for a research project to be truly collaborative, it is not sufficient that several people get together and exchange some ideas. It is essential that all members of the team put these ideas to some use and create something using them. The end goal of every collaborative writing project is the creation of a co-authored text, not just generation of ideas, however interesting and valuable they might be.

To illustrate how true collaboration in research and writing should work, consider an example of two collaborative groups. Both groups have been asked to study a problem on their college campus and to propose a solution to the problem based on their research. Both groups have about four weeks to complete their projects, and both groups will need to use both primary and secondary research methods and sources. In addition to interviewing and surveying other students and faculty on their campus, they will also need to consult published sources, such as books, journals, and websites. The two groups decide to fulfill the project in two distinctly different ways:

 Group 1

Meets in class on the first day of the project. Members of the group exchange some ideas, decide on the subject, and divide the labor. One member gets charged with creating and conducting the surveys and interviews. Another member is responsible for secondary research. A third member will write the draft of the paper. The fourth member who is good at grammar and proofreading will be the "editor" making sure that the final version of the paper is grammatically correct. Two weeks into the research project, the members of the group responsible for research submit their results to the writer who then produces the rough draft. Notice that while the researchers were working on collecting data, the other two members of the group were not doing much, just waiting for the results to come in. Once the research data was submitted to the writer of the group, the three other members became idle—both researchers who have fulfilled their task and the editor who still waits for his turn. Once the draft of the paper has been written, the editor goes to work while the three other members of the team remain idle.

 Group 2

Just like the first group, Group 2 met on the first day of the project to decide on the subject of their research. Unlike the first group, however, all four members were involved in generating ideas for the project, in conducting both primary and secondary research, and in the writing of the paper. They designed the survey and interview questions together; they all searched the library and the Internet for appropriate secondary sources; they all contributed to the first draft of the paper and the revisions. Finally, they all contributed to the editing and proofreading stage of the project.

It is easy to see the members of which group will have a deeper ownership of the final product. The members of Group 1 probably knew how to do their job rather well. They may have been excellent researchers, writers, and editors. But because their group decided to split the responsibilities too narrowly and too early in the project, each of them ended up knowing only one part of the whole work, seeing only one part of the picture. By contrast, the members of the second group stayed abreast of the whole project, from the beginning to end. If Moore and O'Neill are correct in their definition of true collaboration, the second group fulfilled that definition much more adequately than the first one.

<A> Why Collaborate?

In order to collaborate successfully, it is necessary not only to know and apply sound collaboration strategies, but also to understand why, as a writer and researcher, you are collaborating with others and what benefits collaboration has to offer to you and your colleagues.

 Collaboration Confirms the Social Nature of Research Writing

The most fundamental reason to collaborate is that collaboration, as a process and as an activity, confirms and social, conversational nature of research and writing. As you have read in the chapters of this book dedicated to rhetoric and reading, writing is a social process whose aim is not only to communicate existing knowledge but to make new one. Writers never work alone. Instead, they participate in an on-going exchange of ideas and theories.

Through collaboration, writers contribute to humankind's knowledge about important facts, ideas, and theories. Author Kenneth Bruffee has called this ongoing exchange of ideas a "conversation of mankind". According to Bruffee and others who agree with him, new knowledge becomes accepted by societies only when many people collaborate to create it.

 Collaboration Skills are Valued by Professionals

The benefits of collaborative research and writing have been recognized not only by academics but also by other professionals. In the corporate and government worlds, more written documents are researched and produced collaboratively. Employers look not only for competent writers, but also for writers who can work in teams. Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede, who studied collaboration on writing projects among members of a construction firm concluded that those professionals used a variety of collaborative techniques because they recognized that complex writing projects could not be done alone.

Technical writers also produce most of their writing collaboratively. Moreover, they collaborate not only among themselves, but also with engineers, designers, and other professionals involved in the creation of a product or service. This collaboration usually results in instruction manuals and other written documents that help us operate anything from household appliances to complex industrial machinery.

Collaboration is also highly valued by academics. For instance, when an academic department in your university wants to introduce a new course to the curriculum or develop a new program of study, the documents proposing the changes will likely be written by name people and taken through several drafts and feedback sessions.

 Collaboration Promotes Diversity of Thought

Collaboration allows you to share your ideas with others and be exposed to their ideas. In the academic and professional worlds, such diversity of ideas and viewpoints is highly valued, and people who are able to understand and synthesize multiple viewpoints are considered valuable team members. This exchange of divergent views is likely to result in more interesting texts which take into account multiple perspective and points of view.

Because members of a writing team may have diverse views on the same subject, collaborative projects usually force us to negotiate with others. Such diversity of opinions, ideas, and approaches does not prevent the collaboration from succeeding. Instead, it can create grounds for a richer and more life-like discussion and a richer and more sophisticated text. In other words, members of a collaborative team do not have to be carbon copies of one another, agreeing on everything from the topic of research to methods of data analysis and writing, from the start. By negotiating all these aspects of the project with one another, they come closer to real life writing situation and real-life arguments.

 Collaborative Writing Can Effect Positive Change

Collaborative research and writing can help you effect change in your local community. By recognizing, studying, and proposing solutions to local problems, writers can produce real and tangible effects on their campuses, in their cities and towns, and even in their states and countries. When this happens, writing and research become means of not simply arguing or reporting but of improving the condition of people in your community.

Of course, it is possible for a writer working alone to effect social change. However, when a group of writers pull their resources together by conducting collaborative research and creating a co-authored document that argues for change, their argument becomes stronger and more likely to change minds. Later on in this chapter, we will discuss how collaborative research projects can help you and your colleagues effect change in your community.

 Exploration Activity: Analyzing Collaboration in Academic Disciplines

The purpose of this activity is to learn about the role collaboration plays in the writing and research of academic professionals in different disciplines. Working with two or three other students, conduct one of the following:

1. Interview a professor (or professors) in an academic department of your college or university about the role of collaboration in research and writing in his or her discipline.
2. Search for and study written works by academic professionals in which they discuss their collaboration.

Whichever method you choose (or are assigned by your instructor), here are some areas to consider and questions to ask:

1. What is the overall role and frequency of collaborative research and writing in the discipline?
2. What kinds of collaborative processes do professionals in that discipline conduct?
3. How do they negotiate disagreements and different perspectives?
4. How do they “get the writing done?” For example, does every member of the team produce a rough draft that is then discussed by the whole group or is every member of the team responsible for a part of the writing?

At the end of your study, produce a written report of your findings.

<A> Strategies for Collaboration

In this section of the chapter, you are offered several practical strategies for creating successful collaborative research projects. These strategies are not absolute rules, but guidelines. Remember that as an active and critical researcher and writer, you are responsible for matching the right strategy and approach to the particular research and writing project.

 Strategy 1: Involve Every Member of the Group in the Project Early On

This strategy is a practical implementation of the first reason to conduct collaborative research that we discussed earlier in the chapter. Involving every member of the team into the project early on will allow the whole group to begin developing a sense of participation and a sense of ownership over both the process of research and the finished product.

To achieve this, make sure every member of the group understand the assignment completely and fully. In order to ensue this, read and discuss the assignment together as early as possible. It is extremely important for all members of the group to have the same understanding of the goals, intended audience, and required research methods (if any) of the project. Note that having such an understanding of the project parameters is different from agreeing on what the final paper is going to say. That will have to be negotiated later on in the project. To achieve such an understanding, meet as a group early on in the project, perhaps during a class session. Involve everyone in the conversation and take extra care that no one feels left out of the discussion and no one’s opinions and ideas are discounted out of hand.

 Develop a Collaborative Group’s Charter

Such a charter is an agreement among all members of a research and writing group to fulfill certain obligations. Besides serving as a reminder to participate in the group's activities equally, a group's charter can be helpful in identifying each team member's strengths and what they can contribute to the team. If your group decides to develop such a charter or if your teacher asks for one, here are some types of information that can be included into the document:

- List the names and contact information of all group members
- Write a brief description of the project your group will work on and state the project's goals
- Identify and list specific strengths of each team member. For instance, if you are creating a collaborative website, someone in your group may be an experienced web designer while another member may be an experienced editor, and so on.
- Decide on the specific stages of the project (brainstorming and invention, revision, editing, etc. and on the roles of each team member at every stage)
- Make sure every member of the group understand and agrees to the terms of the charter.
- If required, share your charter with other groups or your instructor.

 Strategy 2: Invent Together

Collaborative invention can be a powerful strategy to find and claim ownership of a research topic. Use a variety of invention techniques, from free-writing and brainstorming to listing and mind-mapping. Your instructor may also ask all the collaborative teams in the class to share their topics and create a list which would include every group's topic. If that is the case, then you will want to pay attention to the topics proposed by other members of the class and pay attention to those case where it makes sense to pull ideas together.

 Strategy 3: Research Together

As we have mentioned earlier, it is crucial that each member of the team be actively involved in every stage of the project. Research is no exception. Collaborative research techniques include conducting primary research, such as surveys, interviews, and so on, together as well as library and Internet searches. It is also crucial that members of the team meet regularly to discuss the results of their research. After all, as you know, research as a social and recursive process, whose progress and results will, in large, depend on the steps taken by the researchers themselves.

Your teacher may ask you to do one or all of the following:

- Collaboratively find sources for your research topic
- Become "experts" on certain parts and collections of the campus library
- Work together to evaluate the credibility and usefulness of research sources

<C> Research Activity:

Working individually, find several primary and secondary research sources pertaining to your project. Then meet as a team to discuss and compare them. Pay particular attention to the variety of approaches, research methods, and conclusions that these sources represent. Working together, you may want to produce a synthesis of all the sources and evaluate ways in which the sources will help you complete your research project. Remember that since this is a collaborative project, all members of the group must negotiate for their ideas and opinions to be factored into the final decision or final product.

 Strategy 4: Draft and Revise Together

Ideally, you will want to work on the text together, as a group. For reasons that have been already mentioned, it is important that every member of the group participates in every stage of the drafting and revision process. For this work to succeed, it is important that group members trust in each other's ability to work as a team member. Therefore, many writing teachers prefer to assign group projects later on in the semester when students are used to each other's learning, writing, and research styles and have had a chance to work together in

peer response and peer editing groups. Your group can use the following strategies for collaborative writing and revising. Many professional writers who work collaboratively use these strategies:

- One of the group members starts a rough draft and circulates it (either via e-mail or in print) to other members.
- The other members of the group read the draft and add material to it independently of each other. At this point, it is important to understand that you are “growing” your paper, that you are pulling resources together. Therefore, don’t worry about the final shape of the paper or even that different groups members add diverse or even contradictory material to the draft.
- After every members of the group has had a chance to add to the draft, circulate all the versions to all the members of the group and read them carefully.
- Set up a meeting to discuss the direction (or directions) of the paper and decide what to do next. At this point, you will likely need to negotiate what to include and what to exclude, what to revise further and what to leave as it. The experience may feel slightly overwhelming, even chaotic, but it is through such conversations and negotiations that collaborative texts are born. Make sure that as a result of the meeting, you as a group decide on further revisions.
- Assuming that all members of the group agree on the direction of the project, you can now work in a more concerted fashion to develop your project.

Alternatively, you may decide to write separate parts of the paper individually. If you decide to do that, keep in mind that in order for the project to stay truly collaborative, you will need to share what you have written with other group members and to make sure that you as a group have a common vision of the project and its direction. Thus, compiling parts of a draft written by different group members is not merely a mechanical process of pasting paragraphs together. Instead, it is, again, a process of negotiating meaning and opinions.

 Strategy 5: Use Each Other’s Strengths

As I mentioned earlier, in order for collaborative projects to succeed, it is essential for every members of the team to participate in it at every stage. However, in many cases, it is useful and even necessary to establish some system of division of labor and assign specific responsibilities to specific team members. For example, when I ask my students to create electronic portfolios on the web, I realize that many of them may be new to web writing. I also know that there are usually at least several students in the class who have either built a website or two before or are willing to learn how to do it and teach others. I ask such students to be the “tech support” persons for each group. The important thing is that they do not build the website by themselves while other members of the group relax. Instead, all members of the group work on parts of the project while the “tech support” person provides technical assistance to them as needed. The same strategy can be applied to other kinds of research projects and writing tasks.

 Strategy 6: Seek and Offer Feedback and Advice

As you work on your project with the other members of your group, you will have many opportunities to exchange ideas and opinions. However, it is also important that you talk to other teams of writers in the class. Such interaction will allow you not only to find out about the topics they are researching but also to learn more about their research, writing, and communication strategies. Your teacher may ask your group to discuss the progress of your project with another group or groups.

 Strategy 7: Take Charge of Troubleshooting

One of the biggest concerns of inexperienced writers when they begin working on a group project is that one or more members of the team will not do their share of the work and rely on others to complete the project. This fear stems from the fact that many inexperienced

writers have never before worked on collaborative projects. They also may not feel motivated by the project and invested in it enough to spend the time and energy such work requires. As a result, some writers decide to do the bare minimum (or even less) and are satisfied with just a passing grade at the end. As a collaborative writer, you can do certain things to prevent this from happening:

- Involve everyone early on.
- If one members of the group “falls off the radar screen,” if he or she does not answer e-mails and phone calls or does not come to class, you as a group can talk to that person about the importance of participating in the project.
- If problems continue, let your teacher know immediately. Your teacher will discuss the problem with the student and may be able to reassign him or her to another group.

 Strategy 8: Manage Your Time Wisely

Group projects may seem time consuming and overwhelming even if you are allowed adequate time to complete the. To manage the project, follow these strategies:

- Exchange e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and other contact information as soon as you know who your group mates will be.
- Set up a schedule of meetings or dates when you would exchange drafts by e-mail
- In consultation with your instructor, decide on “benchmark” dates and stages of your project. For example, you may decide when to have various stages of research complete, when you have the first draft written, and so on.
- Be pro-active: it is your project and you are responsible for its success. Talk to your instructor as often as needed. Ask questions, seek advice, and share ideas.

<A> Evaluation of Collaborative Projects

How will your collaborative project be evaluated by your teacher? Since most students are used writing individual papers and receiving individual grades for them, understanding how collaborative projects can be evaluated can be difficult for them.

Of course, the final decision in how to evaluate your collaborative writing will be made by your teacher. However, some principles of grading collaborative writing projects have been developed and agreed upon by many writing instructors, and here are some of them.

 The Whole Group Gets the Same Grade.

This approach to grading is based on the desire to approximate writing in the classroom to the writing in the “real” world, such as in professional environments as much as possible. Therefore, the measure of your success as a group of collaborators is how effective, engaging, and creative the text which you create is. Assigning the same grade to all participants in the project is not collective punishment. Instead, it is stressing the fact that as writers who collectively created and collectively “own” your text, you are also collectively evaluated by your readers.

 Group Members Receive Individual Grades

Alternatively, the members of a collaborative group may receive individual grades. In this case, the teacher may be guided by the accompanying documents which you may be required to submit and which are described in detail below.

 You are Asked to Explain each Group Member’s Role in the Project.

Some teachers ask students in a collaborative project group to write a brief (one to two pages) memo accompanying the paper itself and explaining in detail the roles of each members in the project. By reading the commentary alongside the paper, the teacher will be able to determine each group member’s more or less exact contribution to the project. Writing such a memo may also help you, the writer, to re-evaluate and reflect upon your writing process as a whole

and your contribution to the project in particular.

 You May be Given a "Process" Grade as a Part of your Overall Grade.

If your class is relatively small and if you are spending considerable time (at least several weeks) on your collaborative project, your teacher may decide to conduct regular observations of the work of your group and draw his or her own conclusions about who is contributing to the project and how. If this is the case, a good practice would be for the teacher to conduct regular conferences or review sessions with each group to let them know of any concerns that the teacher may have. Your teacher may also schedule every group to give regular progress reports to the rest of the class in order to make sure that all the projects progress smoothly and to ensure an exchange of ideas among groups.

 You May be Asked to Keep Individual Writing Journals or Logs.

The purpose of such logs is similar to that of group reviews or conferences. They are a way for the teacher to ensure the proper progress of the project. Additionally, they are useful for student writers because they allow them to record and reflect on their progress, thus making them more aware of their research and writing processes.

<A> Tools for Electronic Collaboration

The Internet has allowed many people to collaborate on projects across great distances and different time zones. It is not uncommon for a team of writers who live thousands of miles away to successfully collaborate on complex projects using one or several of the electronic collaboration tools listed and explained below. These tools can be used in face-to-face writing classes that meet on a campus as well as in online courses where all communications take place over the Internet. In face-to-face classes, these tools can be useful for extending the class discussions and collaborative projects beyond the classroom time and to allow students to work more efficiently after school hours.

This section offers you some basic principles of using electronic collaboration tools. To learn more about their use and the technologies that will allow you to set them up, consult Appendix 1--Additional Resources for Students and Teachers.

 Discussion Boards

Electronic Discussion Boards are community spaces that allow interested users to exchange ideas and collaborate on project. If your writing class has a website, chances are that it also has a discussion board where your teacher may ask you to post responses to readings, paper drafts, and other materials. When using discussion boards for collaborative projects, follow these strategies:

- Although there are no rules about the best length of a discussion forum message, we tend to read and respond better to messages that are two to three paragraphs in length. If your ideas cannot be discussed in such a short space, you can post the rest later or develop them in a longer essay.
- Use specific and descriptive subject lines for your posts. Make sure the subject line reflects the content of your post. For example, if you have a question for your group mates, instead of simply writing "Question" in the subject line, say what the question is about.
- When you join a collaborative group, you become a member of a writing community. As such, you are responsible for involving others in the collaborative process. Take note on who is not participating and try to understand why. You may need to change the content of your messages or your style to get them to participate.
- If the project your group is collaborating on allows experimentation with different writing styles, an electronic discussion forum can become a place for such experimentation. Accept what is written by others. And be willing not only to critique but also to praise their writing.

Expect the same from your classmates. At the same time, gauge what is being said against the overall goals of the writing project you are working on.

- Take your collaborators' posts seriously. Assume that they have posted them because they want to contribute to the project. Respond to them if you expect responses to your own postings.
- Remember that a discussion board is a place for dialog. No one should have an upper hand in these dialogs and no one should impose their opinion on everyone else. When you feel that you have the final answer to the problem that is being discussed, consider the fact that other participants may have something else to say in response to your message. Expect other people in the discussion to reply to your posts and take their replies seriously, as signals for further discussion.
- Don't "Post and Run." The spontaneous nature of electronic discussion boards may sometimes prompt us to post messages which are not well thought through and may puzzle or even offend other participants. If a controversial issue is under discussion and other people are likely to disagree with your opinion on it, be prepared to respond to such disagreements. If your message has prompted several of your classmates to respond, it is a good thing even if they disagree with you. Remember that a discussion board is for dialog and keep talking.
- Ask other team members for feedback. Discussion boards are excellent places to test your ideas and plans for writing. If you have an idea for a paper but are not sure whether it will work well, in addition to asking your teacher about it (he or she will be able to read it off the discussion board anyway), consider posting it on the discussion board and asking for specific comments on it. Be specific in defining the kinds of feedback you want from your audience. Instead of saying "I have this idea for the paper, what do you think?" ask "Is my topic specific enough?" "What kinds of research do I need to do?," and other concrete questions.
- Use the discussion board to review drafts. Many boards allow the posting of file attachments, in which case all members of the collaborative group can read the draft and offer their revision suggestions. If attachments are not allowed, you may decide to copy and paste the text of the draft into the body of the message and comment on it.
- Back up your posts. Your post may not stay on the discussion board forever: the teacher may choose to archive the discussion board, the server may go down, the post may be accidentally deleted, etc. Copy the text that you have written on the discussion board and paste it into a word-processor. After that, save it on your computer for future use.

 Weblogs

Oxford English Dictionary defines a weblog as "A frequently updated web site consisting of personal observations, excerpts from other sources, etc., typically run by a single person, and usually with hyperlinks to other sites; an online journal or diary." Weblogs, also known as "blogs" have exploded in popularity in recent years. Weblogs can be individual or community-based. Individual weblogs are, basically, personal journals online. Community weblogs are powerful tools for electronic collaboration. Often, they are vibrant communities of writers and researchers all of whom contribute new content on a regular basis.

Weblogs are also becoming increasingly popular in writing classes. Most often, they are used with the following purposes

- For finding, sharing, and reviewing research sources, particularly online sources. Typically, one contributor posts links to the sites he or she considers interesting and relevant to the project and others review the sites and comment on them.
- For inventing. Group members may post lists of ideas for projects inviting others to review and comment on them.
- For reviewing of drafts. Some writers post complete drafts on their weblogs and invite others to comment on them.
- For publication of your work and making connections with like-minded writers. Weblogs devoted to related topics are often linked to one another on the Internet. This allows people

interested in the same topics and issues as you to contact your group and perhaps even collaborate with it.

 Wikis

Wikis are collaborative writing environments that allow multiple users to work on creating a text or a series of texts, with few or no restrictions. Most wiki sites are accessible like any other Internet sites and usually do not require any specialized software or knowledge. Most have extensive help sections designed to orient new users.

Wikis are gaining popularity not only in education, to allow students to collaborate on various writing projects, but also in corporate communication. An increasing number of companies prefer wikis to e-mail and other electronic forms of communication when it comes to collaborative projects. When working on a project in a wiki environment, every member of the writing group can add contribute to the project by adding, changing, or deleting text. A history of all changes is kept in order to keep track of revisions. For a list of wiki spaces on the Internet available to you, see Appendix 1 at the end of the book.

Perhaps the most famous wiki site on the Internet is the Wikipedia, found at www.wikipedia.org. Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia to which anyone can contribute. A relatively new project which is also gaining popularity is Wikibooks (www.wikibooks.org). The purpose of Wikibooks is to create a collection of collaboratively written manuals and textbooks on a vast variety of subjects. As with every wiki environment, any Internet user can contribute to any of the texts currently on the Wikibooks site or start a new project.

When using wikis for collaboration in a classroom environment, try to follow these guidelines:

- Remember that you are not the sole author of the text. Respect the changes and additions made by other team members.
- Keep track of all changes as a team. Wiki sites usually allow you to see the history of every document and to see who made the changes
- When you make changes, let others in your group know what you have done and why. That way, everyone stays on the same page about the project's progress.
- If you publish your wiki text online, be aware that anyone can access and change it. This may or may not be desirable. Some wiki sites allow you to protect your work with a password.
- Sites like Wikipedia and Wikibooks which have a lot of users have created expansive lists of editorial policies and other standards they want their contributors to follow. Be sure to study those policies before beginning to write.

<A> One Collaborative Project: A Case Study

In this section of the chapter, I would like to share results of a collaborative research project undertaken by four students in a first-year writing class, which I taught in the fall of 2003 at James Madison University. The section consists of the description of the assignment given to the students and a summary of their answers to questions about their collaboration.

 Assignment: Collaborative Problem Study and Proposal

<C> Purpose

Writing is often a catalyst of change. By constructing rhetorically effective and engaging researched arguments, writers can and should change their audience's minds about important issues and effect change for the better. This collaborative assignment asks you to identify some problem on campus or in the local community, study it through primary and secondary research, and propose a solution to it. You will work in groups of 3 or 4 to complete this assignment. It is crucial that every group member contributes to the project equally since everyone in the group will receive the same grade for the project. The required length of the final paper is at least ten pages.

<C> Audience

Your audience is skeptical but not hostile. Your task in the project is to persuade them to solve the problem through the means that you are proposing. Your proposal has to be viable and reasonable.

<C> Stages of the Project

This project will consist of two parts. First, your group needs to identify a problem on campus or in the local community and study it through primary research. You are required to either interview relevant people or survey the people affected by the problem. Then study secondary sources pertaining to the problem and explain how the problem on JMU campus or in the Harrisonburg community fits into a larger context. In the second part of the project, propose a solution to the problem which you have just studied. At the end of the project, each group will present results of their studies and the proposals to the rest of the class. During presentation, incorporate visuals either by making a series of Powerpoint slides or by some other means familiar to you. In consultation with your instructor, you are encouraged to conduct a similar project studying a problem on your campus or in the local community and proposing a solution to it.

 One Collaborative Group's Research Process

Three students from the class, Allison Burrow, Jennifer Chapman, and Mark Simmers, conducted a study of the policies governing the distribution of the Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP), also known as "the morning after" pill on James Madison University campus. To give readers a context of the study, in the spring of 2003, responding from pressure from state legislature as well as state's representatives in the US Congress, JMU's Board of Visitors suspended the sales of emergency contraception drugs to students by the campus health center. The decision created an uproar on campus with students holding rallies and marches protesting it and the campus newspaper *The Breeze* publishing numerous articles about the new regulation. Thus, by beginning their project, these three writers joined a heated public debate on campus and in the local community.

In the paper, these writers make a case for a re-introduction of the Emergency Contraceptive Pill to the campus Health Center. The paper argues that such a move would provide the best and the safest method of emergency contraception to students. In order to develop their argument, Allison, Jennifer, and Mark had to research the legal, moral, and ethical aspects of contraception, study the positions of state and federal legislators on the issue, and conduct an on-campus survey of student attitudes towards the problem.

Below, the authors of the project share their impressions of and advice on collaborative research and writing.

<C> About the Choice of Topic

"We wanted to choose a topic that was interesting and relevant to the local community. There was a debate going on both on campus and in town about the emergency contraception pill, so we thought it would be interesting to write about it. Mark stated that the project prompted him to vote in Congressional elections that year."

<C> On Research Methods and Results

"We started out by conducting primary research. We created a survey consisting of 6 questions and surveyed 50 freshmen trying to find out what they knew about the ECP." We also contacted a staff member at the campus health center for information on the ECP distribution program. However, when we went to interview her, she was not there. The interview had to be rescheduled and was eventually conducted later on.

During our survey we found out that many people did not know what the ECP did and how it

worked, so they were basing their conclusions on incomplete information. Therefore, an important part of our project was to try and explain the mechanism behind the pill to our readers.

Mark e-mailed the legislator who had started the anti-ECP campaign. The legislator wrote back some time later restating his anti-ECP views and claiming that taking the pill equaled abortion. Our secondary research methods included web searches to find out how the issue was dealt with in other universities.”

<C> On the Writing Process

“We divided the research tasks, but regularly met to discuss the progress of the project. The first draft was written pretty quickly, and then the group met to discuss the directions for revision. There were few or no disagreements as to where the paper needs to go next.”

<C> Advice for Other Collaborating Writers

- Choose a topic that you will be interested in researching and writing about.
- Allow time for primary research; contact interview and survey subjects early on in the project even if you plan on doing the interview later.
- Develop a working relationship with your group mates. It helps to work with the same people throughout the semester. That way, when the big group project comes around, you know that you can work with this group well.

<A> Conclusions

Collaborative research and writing can provide you with a powerful tool for learning, communicating, and effecting change. It has both theoretical and practical value. On the one hand, collaborating with others will expose you to new ideas and styles, thus making you a better writer. On a more practical level, learning how to collaborate with others will transform you into a team player and help you get things done more effectively and quickly.

It is important to approach every collaborative writing assignment the same way you would approach any other project—actively, creatively, and with enthusiasm. Many different skills go into a successful collaborative research project. You do not only have to be a conscientious and competent reader and writer, but you also need to have good communication and, sometimes, trouble-shooting skills. Collaborative writers need to be willing both to talk and to listen.

Sometimes they need to take charge of the project to put their team back on track.

Collaboration is about hearing and combining multiple ideas, voices, and styles into a single rhetorically effective text. In life, agreement is achieved through negotiation and that is why collaborative writing is an important life skill.

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