

## Dilemmas in teaching collaborative writing

著者	Golliher Roberta
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## Dilemmas in Teaching Collaborative Writing: Cases from the ESL Classroom

Roberta Gollhofer

Group paper writing—also known as collaborative writing, shared document collaboration, or co-authoring—is a "natural form of cooperative learning," according to Chapman, Leonard, and Thomas. "Once students have experienced success with a co-authored paper," they claim, "writing an individual paper becomes easier" (1992, p. 46). Furthermore, according to Dam, Legenhausen, and Wolff, who emphasize the communication that must go on for students to write collaboratively, group writing is "an excellent interactional activity" (1990, p. 325).

Some researchers and educators, however, doubt whether group paper writing and indeed writing groups in general have their place in the ESL/EFL classroom. Allaei and Connor, for example, point out that students in ESL writing groups must overcome differences in language abilities, communication styles, politeness strategies, and beliefs about the conventions of "good" writing (1990).<sup>1</sup> Carson and Nelson (1994) worry about whether writing groups may inspire in-group/out-group behaviors (particularly where Asian students are included in groups in multicultural settings). However, Carson and Nelson aren't quite so concerned about collaborative writing groups—as opposed to peer editing or peer review groups—because the shared goals and shared product of any given collaborative writing group may lead the students involved to see all members of their group as an in-group. Still, as with any kind of project work, collaborative writing can be "difficult for the new teacher to manage," stymied by non-participatory or absent members, impeded by "differing student learning styles" or impaired because some students do not "know how to negotiate" or do not "choose to negotiate" (1993, p. 173). Because collaborative writing entails these and other difficulties along with its many potential benefits, it needs to be taught and evaluated carefully (Liang, 1998).

This is easier said than done, however. During the first semester that I assigned group papers, I administered both midterm and final course evaluations, along with a group paper assignment evaluation. I observed closely, and interviewed periodically, all of the members of one group in the class of a colleague, Phil Black, who was teaching the same assignments and syllabus. I asked students to submit time logs of work done on their group papers, and to choose from among multiple group participation evaluation schemes, and then to evaluate their own and their groupmates' participation. Despite these measures, I still found collaborative writing to be, as Reid puts it, "difficult...to manage" (1993, p. 173). I also felt I had only begun to grasp what the true dynamics of my class had been.

Nevertheless, I did succeed in evaluating the course thoroughly enough to redesign it in useful ways (Gollhofer, 1997). Admittedly, redesigning the course was a project with mostly local utility, but some of the issues uncovered in the process should be of more general interest—those issues that further problematize the teaching and evaluation of collaborative writing. Below, I discuss three categories of these issues in the context of the individual and group cases that brought them to my awareness. The categories are non-participation, student sensitivity, and authoritarian group leadership. All the cases described come from two sections of the aforementioned course, an ESL composition course that incorporated group paper writing, piloted at a large, Midwestern land grant university in the United States. The analysis of the issues draws on data I collected using case study methods from both my class and my colleague's.

Our classes included 24 students from 11 countries, in six groups of four students each. (See the appendix for a more detailed description of the students.) Over the semester, the groups concentrated their writing and research on single topics—two groups per topic. My original case study database on these students and this course was quite large; the data drawn upon for this analysis, however, includes only that listed in Table 1 on the following page.

## Case Study Database

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### Data from whole classes

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Research papers from each group  
 Research paper assignment evaluations from each student  
 Group participation evaluations from my students  
 Time logs of work done on the group paper from my students  
 Final essays in which my students discussed the changes over the semester in their attitudes toward writing  
 Notes from two interviews with my colleague Phil Black

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### Data from closely observed collaborative writing group

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Pre-, Mid-, and Post-class interviews  
 Observations and tapes of meetings  
 Record of meeting times, places, tasks accomplished, and group members in attendance

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Table 1

## Slacking: Not as Simple as It Might Seem

Slacking, or non-participation as Reid calls it, can indeed be a real problem in the teaching of group paper writing projects. Fortunately, during our pilot course, only one group out of the six seemed to manifest serious problems with slacking. In this group, two Korean male students were perceived by the other two group members as non-participatory. The "participatory" members were a Chinese female, Rue, and a Japanese male, Kozi.<sup>2</sup> I learned of the problems in a note appended to a group participation evaluation, a note written by Kozi. The "slacking" apparently caused Kozi and Rue a great deal of stress. I don't know to what extent the "slacking" involved in-group/out-group dynamics; I do find it notable, however, that in this conflict, both members of one pair of allies were of the same nationality (Korean). Moreover, this incident shows how the shared goals of a collaborative writing group may be insufficient, in and of themselves, to prevent in-group/out-group behavior.

Interestingly, the students' conflict was not evident in the students' product—both of the non-participants did produce significant portions of text for the paper. Kozi's note, however, claimed that the "slackers" had produced text fraught with plagiarism. This plagiarism had not been so evident to me: In the group's final product, Kozi and Rue appear to have edited it out (undoubtedly frustrating for them, but a sign that they had learned about plagiarism, and a far better exercise than my searching for plagiarism while grading). By implication, detecting slacking can be difficult, because good students may, simply by attending to the task of producing a good paper, cover up the evidence of the slacking. Fortunately in this case, Kozi did write to me about the problem, but he need not have. If circumstances had been different, I might never have known about it.

Another issue this case raises is the subjective nature of judging whether indeed slacking has occurred or is occurring. As a matter of fact, one of the two "slackers" in this group reported (on a time log of work done on the collaboratively written paper) that he had pulled an all-nighter to write his section.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, slacking does not mean just doing no work at all; the plagiarism and other aspects of this student's non-participation or non-involvement must have upset Rue and Kozi.

This entire incident points to the need for effective and multiple means of evaluating student participation in, and contribution to, collaborative writing groups. The time logs and group participation evaluations my students completed did help me understand what had gone on in the groups, so they're a good start. Ideally, though, means of ongoing evaluation need to be implemented if teachers hope to actually intercede in slacking. And as this incident points up, these means need to be sensitive to students' differing expectations of

themselves and other group members. Unfortunately, I doubt that many English teachers have the kind of time and energy that may be required if they are really going to diligently detect non-participation and effectively intercede in groups that have difficulties with it.

## **The Problem of the Sensitive Student**

Typically, teachers gauge individual student success in collaborative writing by the quality of students' contributions to group process and product, but this is not necessarily how I found students to define their success. I saw this discrepancy most clearly when examining another problem the pilot course brought to light: the problem of the sensitive student. Those whom I term "sensitive" students may make excellent contributions to both process and product—indeed their sensitivity may make possible these excellent contributions—but these students may still come out of their groups feeling very negative about their experiences.

Kozi, the student who had such difficulty in the group discussed in the previous section, seemed to fall into the "sensitive student" category. He was not the only sensitive student, however. Another student, Yan Fang, an ethnically Chinese Malaysian student, also seemed to fall in this category. Her difficulties with group writing arose even though there was no schism in her group comparable to that in Kozi's. Like Kozi, she experienced great stress despite her own excellent contributions to both process and product. (Her group's paper received an "A".) By the end of the semester, Yan Fang had the following to say about group work:

### *From her consensus research paper evaluation*

I do not like writing the consensus research paper. It was indeed a hard and time consuming difficult job....it was difficult to collaborate in a group of four people who were so different in opinions, way of thinkings and backgrounds. Moreover, our style in writing were different. We have long discussions in writing the final draft. Nevertheless we were all satisfied with the final written draft after all.

### *From a post-class interview*

Maybe we are not good in communication....sometimes I feel that my ideas are not understood by [other group members].

Usually, when I want to brought up something most ninety percent of the time I got something back in the opposite way...disagreement. I only tried to convince them...if my point was good enough to convince them.

Usually they do not take it seriously. I'm not sure what actually was...I feel that all of what I say they do not take it seriously and...it was not good enough to spend time on it....They brought out disagreement without waiting for me to explain in details.

Kozi always speak gently to me but not the people in my group. They talk in very loud voice. Sometimes I raised my voice in order to catch the attention but I do not like that.

The types of problems Yan Fang experienced are certainly related to students' differing communication styles, and thus to one of the aforementioned concerns of Allaei and Connor (1990). But while Allaei and Connor are concerned with styles that differ for cultural reasons, note that Yan Fang's style actually proved to have much in common with that of a student from an entirely different country, the Japanese student Kozi. Indeed, Yan Fang had a fellow Malaysian Chinese student in her own group, but as she reports and as I observed, her communication with him was much more strained than it was with Kozi! The crucial communication style differences in Yan Fang's group seemed to me to have more to do with gender than with culture—more to do with her being female in a group of men than with her group's being multicultural.

Once again we are presented with a case that defies simple definition. As quoted above, Yan Fang herself points out her willingness to "raise her voice." Likewise, I observed and taped many incidents that show her willingness to play devil's advocate. (Lay, who has written about gender and collaboration among native speakers of English, would probably call Yan Fang's communication style "androgynous" [1989].)<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, note that Yan

Fang's most successful collaboration in the course took place with Kozi, a male student (albeit, one whose communication style also fits Lay's "androgynous" category). This is why, for lack of a better term, I have chosen the label "sensitive" rather than "female" to describe the communication style of students who contribute in sensitive ways to the success of their group writing, yet who often develop negative feelings about group dynamics.

My interpretation of the dynamics in the early conflict-ridden meetings of Yan Fang's group is that while she was succeeding in introducing substantive conflict into her group's discussion, this conflict was not as productive as it might have been had her criticisms not been discounted. ("Substantive conflict" in groups "serves to defer consensus" on issues important to group paper quality. Engaging in substantive conflict, "collaborators have the opportunity to pose alternatives and voice explicit disagreements about both content and rhetorical elements" [Burnett, 1993, p. 144].)

Early on in Yan Fang's group, it seemed her attempts to engage in substantive conflict were perceived by the others as trouble-making. Partly, this could be overt sexism, but it could also be mere misunderstanding related to gender-related differences in communication styles. When critically questioning the others' reasoning, Yan Fang often left implied in her questions their implications for the writing of the group paper. Had she made more direct suggestions for the paper, I believe she might have been taken more seriously. Indirect evidence in support of this interpretation includes a taped and transcribed meeting segment in which Chunlai, the group leader, turns to me twice for clarification of Yan Fang's argument. Thus, while Yan Fang may have been attempting to avoid upping the conflict she perceived in her group by remaining indirect about her criticisms, she may have unwittingly set herself up for having her suggestions discounted.

Additionally, Yan Fang may have had a slower agenda for developing the group's argument than the others did. She discussed this herself in an interview in which she pointed out that, as an individual author, she prefers to write at length first and to revise and edit her lengthy first drafts into much more succinct final versions. This writing style could be related to the difficulties she had getting the group to listen to the details of her arguments during the shaping of the paper. Her groupmates, who were more interested in efficiency, seemed to want to hurry things along at precisely those times when she wanted to explore alternatives. In retrospect, I find it likely that Yan Fang, writing individually in her revision-intensive style, would have produced a paper superior to her group's final draft.

Ultimately, Yan Fang's case is another that, like Kozi's, emphasizes the importance of careful teacher scrutiny of collaborative writing projects. Because her group was quite successful at writing their paper, had I not been closely researching her class and writing group, the sort of problems she experienced could have remained largely invisible to me, as they might to any teacher.<sup>5</sup> And even if I hadn't completely overlooked her struggles, I might easily have just seen them as learning opportunities—which undoubtedly they were, but of a very challenging nature.<sup>6</sup> So, again, we have a case that both calls for and problematizes careful teaching of collaborative writing.

Indeed, the problems of the sensitive student beg questions that underlie the very evaluation of courses that include collaborative writing. When are students' problems "problems"? When can they be set aside? When do they constitute learning opportunities about writing and culture and self? My colleague Phil was less concerned than I was about the emotional difficulties of sensitive students, for he strongly held that one of his objectives was for students to learn "that collaboration is difficult" (personal communication, June 1995).

## Authoritarian Cooperation

On the flip side of problems for students that may not be problems from the teacher's perspective are problems for teachers that are not perceived as problems by students. A case in point occurred in a group in my class that I came to consider to have problems with domination by its unofficial leader. I took notice of this problem when listening to a tape of the students and when reading the *leader's* evaluation; evidence of it did not come out in the *other* group members' evaluations. In fact, two of them had very positive things to say about group work. To quote the final essay of one: "We had discussions on what, when, and how

we do for our essay. I also learn and enjoy the collaboration with someone who is from a different country. Our group work went perfectly."

Intervening to make an authoritarian group such as this one more egalitarian may not be at all simple. Just making the dominant member aware of his domination of the group is not the solution. The leader of this group, an adult male Puerto Rican student, had himself commented in his group paper assignment evaluation that he was troubled about whether he had been overly dominant and his groupmates overly silent. Clearly he saw the group dynamics as flawed. His take on his group's dynamics simply hadn't translated into improvement in them. Perhaps he didn't know how to take a less dominant role, or perhaps he felt an urgency to control the product which prevented him from relinquishing control of group process. Had he been better able to share power, however, I think the group's process would have included more substantive conflict, which in turn might have improved their paper. (Theirs was one of the papers with problems with naive argumentation.) I am left wondering if the other students in the group, who came from Hong Kong and Malaysia,<sup>7</sup> were not more comfortable with his authoritarian leadership than typical American students might have been. Or perhaps they were simply less likely to voice their dissatisfaction with his leadership. (His greater age may have figured into this.)

The apparent satisfaction of the less vocal members with the group, despite its non-egalitarian nature, would undoubtedly work against changes a teacher might encourage in its group process. On the positive side, however, the experience of this group does challenge Carson and Nelson's notion (1994) that Asian students are likely to have more difficulty with group dynamics than students from other parts of the world. Maybe they're just as likely to work well together as other students, but their cooperation will take unique forms. At any rate, successful cooperation undoubtedly means different things to students from different cultures, and our teaching of collaborative writing will need to take this into account. Our research will need to take this into account, too. It may be wise to challenge the assumption that other researchers and I have made that a high degree of egalitarianism is necessary to successful group process.<sup>8</sup> Even Reid (1993), when she talks about how some ESL/EFL students may not know how to negotiate or may not choose to negotiate, is unclear about whether she is critiquing these students' negotiating abilities or decision-making styles. Burnett's work (1993) showing a relationship between substantive conflict and group paper quality was done with native speakers of English. Ideally, this sort of research should be repeated with ESL and/or EFL students, so that we can learn to what extent authoritarian cooperation exists and how it succeeds or fails.

## Conclusion

Having taught and reflected upon this pilot course, I understand better that even when collaborative group dynamics are not overtly problematic, they can still be very complicated and sometimes downright paradoxical. The teaching of collaborative writing needs to take this complexity into account. Chunlai's responses to the first two questions on his group research paper evaluation sum up the primary paradox of collaborative writing very well. Answering "What did you like about writing the consensus research paper?", he replied, "the 'substantive conflict.'"<sup>9</sup> Responding to the next question, "What didn't you like?" he replied, "all the collaboration (an irony?)." In many respects, he hits the nail right on the head. In evaluating collaborative writing we must ask not just "Did the costs outweigh the benefits?" but "How much of the pain is necessary for the gain?" The latter question begs another: Just what sort of gains do we desire that students make?

Ultimately, researchers don't answer these questions—teachers and administrators do. Nonetheless, research can shed light upon what pains our students suffer and what gains they actually make during collaboration. This examination of the troublesome nature of slacking, the problem of the sensitive student, and the existence of authoritarian cooperation begins to get at the answers to these questions. Moreover, it suggests future research into collaborative writing in ESL/EFL contexts in the areas of group participation, communication styles, and leadership and decision-making styles. Ideally, much of this research would be classroom-based. Perhaps careful reflective teaching of collaborative projects, such as I have tried to

model, will do as much as anything to bring about new understandings of collaboration in the ESL/EFL classroom.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Allaei and Connor (1990) write mostly about how these differences can complicate peer editing groups, but the differences can be just as problematic, if not more so, in collaborative writing groups.

<sup>2</sup>Student names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup>As his teacher, I guess that he did do the work he reported. The all-nighter, of course, does not reflect carefully planned work, but work nonetheless.

<sup>4</sup>Discussion of the issues of gender, communication styles, and group work is largely missing from the L2 literature (though it's touched upon by Crismore, 1992).

<sup>5</sup>To Phil's mind, Yan Fang's was a very successful group, producing a paper which he would have considered of good quality even if it had been submitted to him in a second semester freshman composition course.

<sup>6</sup>Phil perceived "a struggle for power" in the group in which "some individuals felt that they had to give up [power] to get together enough to complete the paper." But, he said, "that's exactly what I wanted them to learn....They were used to taking control of their destinies as students and now they had to rely on someone else." Phil perceived them as having "recognized early on...that they were each individually strong students. They recognized their own individuality, their strong personalities" (personal communication, June 1995).

<sup>7</sup>One of the Malaysian students was ethnically Chinese, the other was Malay.

<sup>8</sup>Such an assumption is only thinly veiled in comments like the following from Johnson, Johnson and Smith, influential cooperative learning theorists: "The greater the positive interdependence within a learning group, the greater the likelihood of intellectual disagreement and conflict among group members. When members of a cooperative learning group become involved in a lesson, their different information, perceptions, opinions, reasoning processes, theories and conclusions will result in intellectual disagreement and conflict" (1991, p. 3:14).

<sup>9</sup>Phil had discussed the concept of "substantive conflict" with his class.

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### Appendix

Our students were 24 Iowa State University students who took English 101C—advanced composition for non-native speakers of English—during an eight-week summer semester. Sixteen were in my section and eight were in my colleague's. All but one were international undergraduate students ranging in age from 19 to 26. The exception was an adult student (over 30 years old) from Puerto Rico who was taking the course for professional purposes and to prepare himself for later graduate education.

Seventeen of the students had been in the United States for 1 year or less; four for 1-2 years; two for 3-4 years; and only one (the adult student) for more than 4 years. Upon entrance into the university, the international undergraduates' TOEFL scores had ranged from 507 to 607 (mean score: 540; median: 533). For placement purposes, they had all taken a timed, holistically scored essay test and had been determined to require either one or two semesters of ESL composition instruction (English 101B and/or English 101C) prior to mainstreaming into freshman composition. At least seven of our students had placed into English 101B prior to taking 101C, according to their self-reports.

At least two students who placed directly into 101C were attempting to simultaneously take their first semester of freshman composition at a local university. Two other students had taken at least one semester of freshman composition already at colleges or universities other than Iowa State (and another had audited a freshman composition class), but these students had still placed into ISU's pre-freshman composition ESL classes. Two more students had already taken a semester of ESL composition at another college. Eight students reported having taken intensive English courses in an Intensive English Program in the U.S.

Many of our students were ethnically Chinese—eleven total. Of these, one was from Hong Kong, one from the People's Republic of China, two from Taiwan, and seven from Malaysia. Two other students were Malaysian, but not ethnically Chinese—one was Malay and the other was ethnically a mix of Malay and Indian. Five students were South Korean, and four were Hispanic (one each from Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Costa Rica). One student came from Indonesia. Many of our students were multilingual.