Improving team projects through collaborative writing exercises

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Great importance is given these days for students and employees to be able to work successfully in teams. As written reports play an important role in the communication of results, we would logically expect there to be a large body of research on collaborative writing. Instead, while working in collaboration has received much attention (e.g., what makes for good teamwork, how to build cohesive teams, how to handle conflicts among team members), collaborative writing has not. This may be the result of thinking that if a team works well together in other ways, that good collaborative writing will naturally come about. Or, perhaps collaborative writing has not been viewed as important because researchers have assumed that the individual team members will write sections individually and then collaboration will factor into the final stage to smooth out the wrinkles in the text. No matter the reason, there seems to be a certain dearth of didactic materials focusing on an integrated process of collaborative writing.

This was my conclusion after conducting a review of the literature to compare the techniques we use with those of others who integrate collaborative writing in their teaching. One of the most comprehensive treatments of the topic seems to be Speck (2002); he touches on the need to train students in such aspects as understanding that writing is not a linear process, in working in groups, in learning to handle conflicts, in understanding assessment procedures and providing useful feedback to peers, in understanding leadership models and in meeting expectations, to mention a few. We cover many of the same issues with comparable assessment instruments.

When it comes to the type of writing aims and assignments, however, differences in our approaches become clear. Our training of writing is coupled with several ancillary skills, such as critical reading, and is integrated into “content” courses on Portuguese and Brazilian studies. We have no dedicated writing course in our program; rather, we do have four courses which require a team project as the exam, or part thereof. Consequently, all of our writing exercises are focused on the production of academic papers, as opposed to creative or biographical writing. In the first semester we train the students to write critical response papers by breaking down the process into various stages: skimming vs scanning for information (critical reading), followed by the identification of concepts, theories and arguments. By the second half of the semester the students are writing critical response papers, first as individual writers and then with a partner. In following semesters they work in teams to produce joint research papers, while simultaneously be required to take a reflexive approach to their work and keep individual logbooks on their learning, collaborative and research processes. In the fourth semester we have organized a problem-based team project course in which become consultants to companies which sign on as business partners for the semester. The companies set a problem for our students to work on in teams, with an aim to laying out the problem and proposing solutions. They present this in a business report which is sent to the company (after approval), in addition to the joint academic team project and individual logbooks.

Currently our third-semester students are experimenting with a new approach to the collaborative process within their course on “Debates and voices in Portuguese society.” This is one of the courses requiring a joint research project and individual logbooks. In previous years we have asked that the students write in a collaborative fashion, but have not integrated specific training techniques to foster the collaborative production of the text. Our experience has been that the less successful projects are those in which the students may engage in collaborative editing but provide little evidence that true collaboration has taken place. Often they have simply assigned a section of the paper to a team member, waiting until the section has been completed before discussing its content.
Abstract

This semester I am trying out a two-pronged approach. I have separated the elements of a research paper into their component parts (problem formulation and introduction, theoretical chapter, methodological chapter, discussion chapter, conclusions/summary chapter) and am treating each as a separate genre to be mastered. We use some, but limited, class time to discuss how these sections can be viewed as individual genres, and have the students attempt to pull together features that distinguish each. The second aspect of this approach is to provide time in our “project work hour” for them to discuss not only what each member of the group might produce for the paper, but to work through (i.e., negotiate) the content of each section, before it is written.

My focus in the presentation will be on this semester’s experiment and the relationship of these exercises to others in our program.

Reference cited