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Collaboration: Talk. Trust. Write

Mark Letcher, Kristen Turner, Meredith Donovan, Leah Zuidema, Cathy Fleischer, Nicole Sieben, Jim Fredrickson, Laraine Wallowitz, and, Sarah Andrew-Vaughn

We have long recognized English classrooms, at all levels, as sites ripe for collaborative activity among students; when students read, write, and learn together, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the work we do as professionals in the field. In writing, collaboration can be vital. Collaborative writing often leads to projects that are richer and more complex than those produced by individuals, potentially engaging multiple audiences in broader conversations. However, collaboration can also present its own particular set of challenges, ranging from the practical (How do authors find each other and determine publication avenues?) to the more theoretical (Is the negotiation of power an inherent part of the collaborative process, and if so, how can it be successfully managed?)

With these issues in mind, the Conference on English Education’s Commission on Writing Teacher Education sponsored a roundtable session at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English, in Las Vegas, NV. Titled “Igniting Our Professional Work Through Collaboration,” the session gathered pairs of collaborative writers from across varying teaching contexts, with the shared purpose of discussing and examining the nature and challenges of their work together. Collaborative groups represented in the session included teacher educator and classroom teacher (Cathy and Sarah), professor and graduate student (Kristen and Jeta), and teacher educators across teaching contexts (Jim and Leah, Laraine and Nicole). As the session concluded, and the roundtable discussions extended into the hallway, some of the participants arrived at the idea of capturing their conversations in writing. Focused on the idea that effective and productive collaboration often follows a recursive cycle of “talk, trust, write,” the following sections expand on how successful collaborators manage the multiple issues of composing, both individually and together. To our original triad, we have also added “teach,” acknowledging the vital fact that our actions as collaborative writers can, and often do, carry implications for our own teaching.

Talk

Writing in the Global parking lot: Talk as a vehicle for gaining trust, writing drafts and teaching what we do (Sarah Andrew-Vaughn and Cathy Fleischer)

The story of our collaboration begins in talk.

Cathy and her English education colleagues at Eastern Michigan University were looking for a high school teacher to teach one section of a required pre-service undergraduate course called “Writing for Writing Teachers.” Sarah—a high school English teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and veteran of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project Summer Institute—was fired up by her professional experiences and excited about the opportunity to teach the course, and Cathy—who had not yet met Sarah—was asked to serve as her mentor. And so the two of us decided to meet for coffee to talk about the class. What we didn’t yet realize was that our initial meeting would lead to what’s become a productive and long-standing collaboration, a collaboration that quite literally has changed both of our lives.

At that coffee date, we talked about our teaching, our beliefs about literacy, and our classroom practices, and as we talked, we learned from each other: Sarah shared with Cathy specifics about her approaches to teaching English in a diverse high school; Cathy provided Sarah with new ways of thinking about research-based practices. Most immediately, Cathy talked about a project she used in her version of Writing for Writing Teachers—what she called the Unfamiliar Genre Project. In this project, pre-service teachers were asked to learn about a genre that they found uncomfortable, unfamiliar, or just plain hard. The goal was to have English majors—secure in their abilities as readers and writers—to experience the kinds of discomfort that many of their future students might experience when asked to write in their future classes.

Intrigued by teaching this project as part of the college course, Sarah immediately embraced the idea and then extended it—thinking about how this project might connect to her teaching of high school students. How could she better help her students really understand genre? Could the unfamiliar genre study—with its focus on individual study of genre—help?

And so we talked, and our collaboration began in earnest. Cathy’s pre-service teachers and Sarah’s high school students became penpals, sharing drafts of writing as Sarah began exploring the Unfamiliar Genre Project in her classroom. During the conversations, we each brought our expertise - Cathy, articles about genre and genre theory; Sarah, her experiences in the classroom. And we kept talking about how the theory and the practice might interweave.

Our collaboration took a new direction when Sarah decided to respond to a call from English Journal about research and
She drafted an article about the Unfamiliar Genre Project. Taking on this project alone, Sarah realized, upon finishing the draft, that she had neglected to talk to Cathy before writing it. As Cathy says:

"Talk with your mentor and trust! I was worried, What would Cathy think of what I’d done? Would she want me to submit it? I needed to do what I had skipped: talk with her. That phone call went better than I could have hoped. Yes, she would look at the article. Yes, she would work quickly given that English Journal’s deadline was in just three days."

We returned to the basis of our collaboration—we talked (quickly!) about the draft that Sarah had written, and we began to unravel what we had become our emerging collaborative writing process: one of us taking the lead by drafting a first pass and the other responding (orally and in writing) by asking questions, making suggestions, and engaging in vital interplay; the arrest and benumbing of communication." (p. 32). For Dewey and for us, authentic, honest talk was the only meaningful, beneficial collaboration between individuals. He said, in “the give and take of participation... conformity is the absence of vital interplay; the arrest and benumbing of communication” (p. 42). For Dewey and for us, honest talk was the only way to build a more balanced relationship. This balance, achieved through trust, allowed us to move from teacher to student to collaborative partners.

"When Jeta began working for Kristen as a first year doctoral student, she fumbled through the language of qualitative research and trusted blindly through her first data coding project. She spent anxious hours figuring out specific tasks, such as how to code data that涠ome students did not want to speak about—a day when Sarah fumbled through her first global issues, trying to write a chapter that she was taking the lead on—Cathy pulled out her tape recorder and encouraged Sarah to “Just talk through what you want to say.” Sarah needed the reminder that sometimes we can’t write the piece in our mind’s eye. Sometimes we must just begin; the record, followed by transcription, became a perfect first draft for the section that Sarah now found easier to complete."

"As we kept talking, we returned to one of the realizations we’d had at the beginning of our writing collaboration: while our writing might at certain points be more Sarah-led or Cathy-led, the ideas underlying it were shared ones, ideas that we could not have learned in both process and product, and Kristen took time and effort to guide her entry into the world of academia. As we worked through tasks together, building Jeta’s knowledge of qualitative coding software and interrater reliability, we also built trust. New projects brought new tasks, such as field work and transcribing, and with each step, we learned each other’s work ethic, skills, and communication patterns. These actions all helped build trust in our partner."

"To move forward, we had to take risks, to experiment with each other, to be willing to make mistakes, and (even worse) to be willing to make mistakes in front of one another. When Jeta first sent her draft of the paper to Kristen and the research team, she accepted a certain professional and even personal vulnerability. It is a risk for others to read your words, to know your skills, to know your thoughts, and evaluate those. Sharing our writing and taking these risks has been an integral part of our pathway to collaboration. As her doctoral advisor, Kristen reads Jeta’s writing all the time, and to that end, she asked for feedback from Jeta before submitting her master’s thesis. This gave and take of feedback and critique, though scary at times, is how we built value, trust, and respect for each other’s perspectives. These trials shaped our collaboration and solidified the trust we had in each other."

Trust cannot be achieved without talk, action, and trial, and through these recursive phases our collaboration has blossomed. From that moment four years ago, when Jeta entered Kristen’s office, two novices have become two colleagues who talk, share, and write together - from their individual perspectives, across the desk.

Write

"Forming Partnerships and Writing Identities (Nicole Sieben and Laraine Wallerite)"

Just like Cathy and Sarah, and Kristen and Jeta, our collaboration began in talking, taking action, and trusting. As critical feminist pedagogues, we found that our mutual interests and goals in research, teaching, and learning led to fruitful teaching, presenting, and writing collaborations. When Nicole was a master’s student, Laraine was her professor for five courses. During one course, Laraine allowed Nicole the chance to plan a lesson with her on preconceived notions of feminism. As a preservive

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teacher, it was a powerful experience for Nicole to talk through the metacognitive process of planning and writing a lesson with an experienced educator. As it turned out, the lesson was a success in that everyone was engaged and eager to share perspectives on our position statement. From this first, low-stakes collaborative experience, Laraine and Nicole realized the potential success that their collaborations could have. We believe that this brief writing and lesson planning exercise was an important part of our establishment of trust in each other as writing partners and co-authors.

“After talk and trust, it was time to write!” Once we had collaborated on a short writing activity, we were able to engage in larger research and writing projects together. Deciding who should begin the writing was our starting point. On our first publication, Laraine took the initial lead, since it was initially her project, and she had invited Nicole to write with her as part of Nicole’s final assignment in her master’s seminar. Laraine suggested splitting up the task 50:50. She wrote the introduction, and Nicole wrote the conclusion. Every time, we split responsibilities because we thought it was the fairest way to proceed. Initially, writing was a means of talking—through each other’s writing, edit and revise for one another using track changes in Microsoft Word, and then we would meet to talk about the draft. Together, we researched, wrote, revised, and edited each other’s work on influential women in the labor movement until we—our editors—were satisfied with the product we created. For this publication, we wrote in a singular voice, taking care to ensure that our piece sounded unified. From this writing project, Nicole learned experientially about editing, deadlines, researching, and formatting for publication.

A year after our first publication, as a high school teacher with a master’s degree completed, Nicole still kept in touch with Laraine as she had been, and still is, an extremely influential mentor in her life. When we learned of the call for manuscripts for a special issue of the *English Journal* on teaching gender and sexuality in secondary schools, we decided to collaborate and create a double voice article. After conferencing, we realized that it might be more effective to layer the article using two voices to illustrate the effects that a graduate class on gender and sexuality could have on a teacher’s classroom. For this piece, we decided to maintain our individual voices as writers but to share our mutual perspective about the importance of teaching queer theory in secondary classrooms and in English education programs. With this shared vision, we detailed our inclusive teaching practices at the college and secondary levels respectively. This is the article that resulted in our 2010 Edwin M. Hopkins Award.

The success that we have experienced in writing together has come from a multitude of factors. When we originally discovered our mutual pedagogical interests, Nicole was Laraine’s student at their university. Based on our discussions during class discussions and advising sessions, we quickly discovered that we shared a mutual vision of teaching for social justice, particularly with respect to issues of gender and sexuality. Thus, our collaborative writings so far have been grounded in critical theory, feminist theory, and other advanced methodologies. As well as that, Laraine and I have created curricular frameworks and recommendations for secondary English language arts teachers to use in their classrooms.

We also respect each other as writers, thinkers, teachers, and researchers. Neither of us clings desperately to our egos. We welcome feedback from each other and are open to recommendations for changes and edits. As scholars in English education, we value intellectual property rights and realize that discussing first authorship roles is important when setting out on a collaborative research and writing project. Laraine took the lead on the first publication and was first author; however, Nicole took the lead on the second publication and was first author on that piece. Ultimately, we felt that we had both contributed to both publications equally and therefore alternated first authorship roles. We believe that this discussion of authorship and sharing credit is important in maintaining a collaborative relationship.

In addition, we are loyal to deadlines and make sure to update each other on progress as we are making along the way. While writing deadlines are important to maintain, we realize that as teachers sometimes our students have needs that require us to revise our writing schedules. With our students and our writing as equally important priorities, we maintain constant communication with one another so if an event necessitates our immediate attention, we are able to adjust.

We are still supportive of each other’s individual work in various ways. While Nicole is completing her dissertation at another university, Laraine has provided sound advice as a friend and mentor about the process and has remained a supportive collaborator. Nicole has always expressed interest in the work I am doing during Nicole’s college and graduate school years. Laraine’s writing and social justice teaching methods in literacy education has been influential in Nicole’s dissertation work and curricular choices. Nicole’s students often read Laraine’s and other texts that spark important conversations and collaborations in Nicole’s classes. As a collaborative team, we have modeled the benefits of collaboration for our students and often encourage our students at the university where we teach to find those powerful partnerships and pursue them to create alliances. As well as that, writing is an identity building skill (Lavelle, 2009) and writing collaboratively also contributes to our individual and collective identities as scholars. The people who we choose to write with become a piece of our writing histories, and we become a part of theirs. Therefore, choosing the right collaborations are important.

Since writing can be a strenuous process—one that takes a great deal of time, commitment, and energy—we also feel that celebrating the small victories along the way is important in motivating us to forge forward. During our writing collaborations, we make sure to self-consequate. Whether we treat ourselves to dinner or a show in the city, we make the time to reward our proximal needs. Celebrating the small victories along the way is important in motivating us to forge forward. During our writing collaborations, we make sure to self-consequate. Whether we treat ourselves to dinner or a show in the city, we make the time to reward our proximal needs. Whether we treat ourselves to dinner or a show in the city, we make the time to reward our proximal needs.

**Collaborative Writing helps writers in our courses better understand the writing process, specifically how it can be a distinct and individual process. In our own collaboration, we see this at play. Often, we find ourselves talking to one another as a way to find the things we might want to say in a piece. Yet, we approach these moments quite differently. For example, one of us might open up a Google Doc and start throwing down words and ideas. The other might need to do more reading. We might need to clear other things off our plates or we might work for just a handful of minutes as we only have a set amount of time in our day to work.**

These differences in writing processes play out in our classes when we teach writers or future teachers of writers. One of our takeaways is that we want our students to better understand their own writing processes and practices and, at the same time, to learn how others approach the act of writing differently. We want to open up space—not only to talk about content in our pieces or about the final products we create, but also to talk about our stories as writers: what are our goals? what obstacles do we face? what resources, including others, could help us overcome these obstacles? how do I see the process and how is that different than my collaborator’s view? We ask these kinds of questions of our students, and we are able to share from our own experiences, because we take the time to ask ourselves these questions as we work together.

**Collaborative Writers Teaching Collaborative Writing: Lessons Learned (Jim Fredriksen and Leah Zuidema)**

When the two of us reflect together on our experiences with collaboration, we notice some unique aspects of the goals and situation of our partnership, yet we also see many connections with the ideas shared so far. Unlike the other pairs in this article, ours is a long-distance collaboration: when we were both beginning professors, we agreed to be thinking partners who would check in once a week. The arrangement was: every Wednesday, or the day closest to Wednesday, either Nicole or Laraine would email the other a short reflection on one of our collaborative writing projects. They would then meet to talk about the project via Skype or Google Hangout. Meetings allow us to think aloud together while also drafting, revising, and editing in our shared online tools, which include VoiceThread conversations, Dropbox folders, and DeDosse data analysis tools. We have become writing partners who compose teaching materials, teacher-research studies, conference presentations, and manuscripts together, but we’ve found that talk still takes as much or more of our time as putting ideas into words on the screen.

Though the projects and modes of collaboration have changed over time, the goal of learning together has stayed the same. We share anecdotes from our work and make meaning of them; we raise questions that surface assumptions about learning, teaching, and writing; we challenge each other’s assumptions, practices, and interpretations of ideas. In short, we take an inquiry stance toward our work, and as others have already said so well, we’ve learned that there is a reciprocal relationship: to risk meaningful inquiry requires trust, and trust fosters meaningful inquiry. We aren’t “just” writing. We are learning together, and we are learning how to learn and write together.

**Teaching Together**

Our inquiry has consistently included a focus on teaching writing. One unanticipated outcome of our own collaboration (and of our attempts to have our students engage in cross-institutional collaboration) is that we’ve also learned a few things from these experiences and conversations that are useful for teaching our students to be effective collaborative writers (and teachers of collaborative writing). Although others have made the point that writing teachers should be writers themselves (e.g., Gillespie, 1991; Kittle, 2008; McIntee, 1998; Mohr et al., 2004; Romano, 1991), we want to extend the idea. As we see it, teachers of collaborative writing should be collaborative writers ourselves. Our reasoning is simple: writing together influences the way that we teach students to write together. To make our case, we share here a few of the lessons about teaching collaborative writing that we’ve learned by doing collaborative writing.

1. **Writing well together requires talk about process.** Collaborative writing helps writers in our courses better understand the writing process, specifically how it can be a distinct and individual process. In our own collaboration, we see this at play. Often, we find ourselves talking to one another as a way to find the things we might want to say in a piece. Yet, we approach these moments quite differently. For example, one of us might open up a Google Doc and start throwing down words and ideas. The other might need to do more reading. We might need to clear other things off our plates or we might work for just a handful of minutes as we only have a set amount of time in our day to work.

2. **Writing well together requires rhetorical attention.** Collaborative writing helps writers in our courses understand rhetorical principles. One such rhetorical principle might be, “Move your reader from what is familiar to what is unfamiliar, from what is known to the reader to what is unknown to the reader.” In our own writing process, we sometimes do not consider the audience, especially early on. Usually, we’re simply trying to figure out our own claim, how our evidence supports it, and how it’s all tied together to what comes before. Yet, there is a point when we do consider the audience, and it’s usually after we have a good start on where we might want to head. Of course, collaborative writing—when we write individually, too, however, our collaboration means that we must talk and, importantly, listen to ourselves. Our conversation around a central task—the pull and pull of talking...
and of listening and of writing - means that we can check our own assumptions about what we’re writing, about what we’re trying to say when we write, and about what we want our audience to consider. As collaborative writers, we find that we need to return to time and again to questions of genre, audience, purpose, and situation. And as teachers of writing collaboration, we find that students need support in developing these same kinds of rhetorical sensitivities—and in doing so with a partner. Like us, they need time, space, and permission to spend at least as much time in talking as in putting words on a page.

3. Writing well together may be messy. We know some collaborators who divide the work into sections, and one person takes the lead here and the other takes the lead there. Occasionally that happens for us, but our most generative and satisfying collaborations happen when we work through a section together, testing what we mean against what we write. We do that through the lens of moving from what we think our audience is coming to our text knowing and believing, and then moving them to new insights. This movement, of course, takes place at the whole text level, at the section level, and even at the sentence level. Collaboration helps us as we generate ideas, but also as we refine them. A rhetorical principle helps to move our conversations forward in a focused and shared way. This informs our teaching in many ways, but mostly it’s because this approach is pedagogical: we’re trying to teach our readers, and to understand our students’ knowledge and abilities. Put another way, we find our collaborative writing to be analogous to that draft). Collaboration, we think, helps writers discover insights they wouldn’t otherwise make on their own. When we collaborate, we often find ourselves speaking to the other person while that person takes notes. These are often brainstorming moments, and later, that draft). Collaboration helps us as we generate ideas, but also as we refine them. A rhetorical principle helps to move our conversations forward in a focused and shared way. This informs our teaching in many ways, but mostly it’s because this approach is pedagogical: we’re trying to teach our readers, and to understand our students’ knowledge and abilities. Put another way, we find our collaborative writing to be analogous to that draft). Collaboration, we think, helps writers discover insights they wouldn’t otherwise make on their own. When we collaborate, we often find ourselves speaking to the other person while that person takes notes. These are often brainstorming moments, and later, when the speaker looks at the notes, an insight not considered beforehand rises into view. That is, the collaboration helps us learn how to listen to our own selves, because someone else is listening to us and consequently helps us pay attention to our own words.

When our students—who often see writing as a one-shot demonstration of proving what they know—begin to collaborate, they are forced to work with new and different ideas. Differences and even conflicts arise. We don’t shy away from them. In fact, we come just short of celebrating them, because we believe these conflicts are the whole point of working with another person: how does someone see a situation differently than you? How can you come to consensus? How might you synthesize your ideas or approach? This kind of conflict is often an internal one when writers work alone, and it can be the thing that prevents some students from committing to an idea. In other words, sometimes students have conflicting ideas and aren’t quite sure how to move forward to the first sentence of a piece. Other times they have an idea and never question it - never see how others might read it differently than what they imagine. Collaboration can provide a space and an opportunity to practice identifying and navigating more than one idea.

4. Writing well together is a creative act. Collaborative writing helps students see that writing is not simply an act of demonstrating what one knows: it’s also a way to discover those ideas. We see this play out in several ways. We often work with students who believe that they have to know what they want to write before they put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboards. We want them to begin to recognize that writing can be one way to discover (e.g., when a writer writes an initial draft and discovers the thesis at the very end of that draft). Collaboration, we think, helps writers discover insights they wouldn’t otherwise make on their own. When we collaborate, we often find ourselves speaking to the other person while that person takes notes. These are often brainstorming moments, and later, when the speaker looks at the notes, an insight not considered beforehand rises into view. That is, the collaboration helps us learn how to listen to our own selves, because someone else is listening to us and consequently helps us pay attention to our own words.

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5. Writing well together is a choice. An important lesson from our collaboration is that we collaborate by choice and we’re generally interested in the same goals. That is, we value the same kind of relationship and goals for our work together. This raises questions for us about teaching collaborative writing. How can we ensure that our students have significant learning experiences with collaborative writing—essentially requiring that they participate—while also allowing them the freedom to make the kinds of choices that are essential to writing well together? How can we provide them with both the opportunities and the skills to build collaborative partnerships around shared goals and practices? We have more questions than answers on this front, but our own experiences with collaboration lead us to believe it is important for us to keep negotiating these dilemmas. For us, collaborating as partners in inquiry about our teaching evolved into a way to also be partners in scholarship and writing. Unexpectedly, our work together has also become a resource for thinking about how best to help students collaborate as thinking partners, scholars, and writers. We wouldn’t have it any other way.

Conclusion: Successful Collaboration is about Relationships

It was apparent during the NCTE session, as we feel it is in this piece, that at the heart of every successful collaboration is a successful relationship. The authors represented above have negotiated issues of power (such as the student-teacher relationship), institutional differences, and geographic distance. Above all, they have valued the relationships that form the core of their writing partnerships. Throughout the NCTE session conversations, those relationships were consistently mentioned above all else, and we feel that as with any relationship, trust can emerge.

Laraine and Nicole, as keynote speakers at the session, presented attendees with a tip sheet for collaborative writing, which we have collaboratively revised. We share these tips with other writers, with the understanding that a true collaboration will begin with talk in an effort to build trust.

Tips for Writing Collaboratively:

Let go of egos.
Be honest about what you do and do not know.
Respect co-writer’s expertise.
Allow co-writers to be mentors.
Decide on double voice or unified voice.
Establish authorship roles.
Maintain deadlines.
Self-consequence as a team.
Use technology as an aid for editing, meeting virtually, and researching collaboratively.
Maintain a sense of humor and seriousness in harmony.
Recognize the power and possibility of writing with other people.

Works Cited


About the Authors

The authors presented a version of this article at the 2012 NCTE National Convention in the CEE (Conference on English Education) sponsored concurrent session “Igniting our Professional work through Collaboration.”