Opening Vignette

INSIGHTS INTO VIRTUAL COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Learning by Doing

Two writers—one primarily a scholar and the other primarily an industry-based technical writing manager—have been friends since they met in 1993 in graduate school. Beth worked on her PhD in English, with rhetoric and composition as her specialty, while Charlotte worked on her PhD in English, with rhetoric and the public life as her specialty. Over the years, they talked about collaborating on a book that would meld their linked rhetoric-based interests in online teaching and learning, writer training, and collaboration. In 2008, they finally embarked on a collaborative writing project that they hoped would enlighten them and others about the nature of collaboration in virtual, computer-mediated communication (CMC) writing settings.

They planned a book in which expert collaborative writers would contribute their knowledge and experiences. The writers would commit to the book project—providing parts of the whole as content writers and cross-pollinating the work by collaboratively editing and commenting upon each others’ content. When the call for chapters yielded a strong mix of topic expertise and commitment, Beth and Charlotte then committed to the writers in a manner that rarely happens in academic book development. Typically, writers are accepted provisionally and then judged by outside reviewers and the editors based on the promise (or lack thereof) in early drafts. There is little-to-no interaction among writers and even less assurance that, once they have met as part of the book’s team, they will be able to continue as collaborators throughout the book development process.

To simulate a more true-to-life workplace writing scenario, Beth and Charlotte promised writers that they would work with them throughout drafting and idea development, thus enabling the entire writing team to enjoy a sense of stability that would contribute to developing trust and relationship in a distributed writing setting. Although some writers dropped out of the project, no one was eliminated by the editors for weak early writing or content, and everyone had multiple chances to address how the content fit the whole book under development. Beth and Charlotte encouraged the entire writing team to comment on and edit each other’s content as it was distributed virtually, first on a wiki and later on a Web-based document workspace.

In essence, Beth, Charlotte, and the book’s other writers considered their collaboration to be an ideal case study of the paradigm shift that virtual collaborative writing requires—from that of ownership of a whole book to authorship of content parts that fit with and comprise the whole. Although chapters are attributed to various writers for practical reasons related to traditional ways of receiving credit in
the writers’ various workplace settings, everyone gave up the idea of sole ownership in an attempt to
discover the challenges of virtual collaborative writing through this book’s process. The very need to
be able to claim credit is one of those challenges of different value in various settings. Additionally,
their choices of CMC tools were determined by this collaboratively owned process, which highlighted
how challenging it is to find the best technologies and processes that work for any given virtual collabor-
atively written project. They used, among other tools, a collaborative wiki for initial topic and book
development, a shared online document storage space, phone conferencing, a dedicated listserv, e-mail,
and IM for interacting with each other and with the writing team as a whole.

This book tells that story, which—despite the writers’ backgrounds—is one that occasionally involves
extreme culture shock. The story is revealed both in individual chapters regarding virtual collaborative
writing and in Chapter 22, which details the team’s own successful and failed processes.

Beth L. Hewett
University of Maryland University College, USA

Charlotte Robidoux
Hewlett-Packard Corporation, USA