Chapter 2
Frameworks for Talking about Virtual Collaborative Writing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on various rhetorical, media-based, social presence–based, activity-based, and systems-based frameworks for understanding virtual collaborative writing. Such theoretical understanding is helpful to bridging the gap between those who study virtual collaborative writing to develop theories of the practice and those who draw on theory to develop effective practices.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides information to help readers understand how virtual collaborative writing has been theorized so that readers can make informed decisions about what tools they may use, how roles may be assigned, and what processes they may use in specific situations. To this end, it addresses some issues relevant to bridging the gap between theory and practice—academic scholars and business-based writing practitioners—and the theories that ground some of the conceptions of virtual collaborative writing as discussed in this book.

In Chapter 1, we identified definitions of collaborative writing and principles associated with collaborative writing in virtual settings. We also acknowledged that virtual collaborative writing can occur in a variety of ways in terms of the tools that writers can use and the processes teams choose to use to produce a given text. As teams try to ascertain the best tools and approaches to use for their particular writing situations, they need to consider a number of factors that can influence the efficiency of virtual collaborative writing. Researchers have
studied these factors, using real workplace projects as their case studies and surveying practitioners about their perceptions of certain dynamics in their collaborative writing. From this research, a body of literature exists concerning the issues of media choice, roles of team members, and approaches to writing. Theories drawn from these studies can inform decisions that project managers and those who participate in virtual collaborative writing projects generally face.

It is important to note that the language and terminology discussed in this chapter’s literature review may not always match that of Chapter 1, but that many of the concepts are similar and will be identified as related. These theories are interdisciplinary and, as a result, the writers may not be using the same term for a similar concept given different perspectives from different disciplines. Much as Table 1 in Chapter 1 provided a general understanding concerning how certain tools can facilitate collaboration relative to presence awareness, degree of synchronicity, hybridity, and interactivity, this chapter reviews the theories most pertinent to discussing virtual collaborative writing. Indeed, some of the theories described in this chapter contribute to a discussion of information in that same table. For example, elements pertaining to presence awareness have been discussed in this literature using the term social presence theory, and dynamics associated with interactivity have been discussed using the term media richness theory.

**A Gap between Theory and Practice**

Much as professional writers learn general skills through formal education, educators try to learn about specific practices and problems that professional writers experience in order to inform pedagogy and to refine instruction, helping students become well prepared for their workplaces (see Chapter 18). As the editors discussed in the Introduction to this book, academics and business writers need to support each other, to write to and with each other, to explore practice from a theoretical standpoint, and to explore theory from the position of practice. Therefore, differences between what academic professionals and practitioners value are woven into the very essence of this book. Some of our contributors are academics, while others are practitioners; however, some work within both settings and their tend to blend the perspectives. Miller (1989) linked research findings associated with technical writing workplace practices with those of rhetorical education; she acknowledged: “We seem, that is, uncertain about where to locate norms, about whether the definition of ‘good writing’ is to be derived from academic knowledge or nonacademic practices” (p. 15). She observed a perceived gulf between the instruction that teachers tend to provide and what actually happens in business writing practice, seeing a “discrepancy between practices that are supposed to be effective and those that are actually preferred and accepted” (p. 15).

Research into workplace writing practices contributes to new directions in writing instruction. Miller explained this link between workplace practice and writing education: “Understanding practical rhetoric as a matter of conduct rather than of production, as a matter of arguing in a prudent way toward the good of the community rather than of constructing texts, should provide some new perspectives for teachers of technical writing and developers of courses and programs in technical communication” (p. 23). For example, it was through such research that scholars and teachers learned the importance of providing students with opportunities to experience collaborative writing situations in their educational settings—to give students practice with the kinds of writing they likely would experience in the workplace. Now, educators who plan to teach business writing or technical writing courses regularly read the research of collaborative writing dynamics. Finally, Miller asserted that research into workplace practices informs new directions in education: “We [the academy] ought not, in other words, simply
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