Chapter 6

Case Study: A Collaborative of Content Designers and Developers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter features a case study of a collaborative project among a team of writers and a team of multimedia designers and examines their intersections. The chapter’s central question is: What does it take to enable collective collaboration in a virtual writing environment? The chapter is based on a study that found that building and strengthening social presence is integral to effective collaboration. The spoken and unspoken social contracts of working toward a common goal in a respectful environment are important. It also found that the technologies must be adoptable, adaptable, and they must enable anywhere/anytime collaboration. Therefore, collaboration using technologies is a complex process involving social presence, availability, and adaptation/adoption of technologies with the changing needs of the collaborative team.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on and exemplifies the three models of collaboration introduced in Chapter 1:

- **Serial collaboration** occurs when writers work on a product one after another. Each person works separately on a piece of the writing or the whole document. In turn, each writer performs a distinct function in the creation of the finished work, possibly in a distinct chronological or hierarchical order.
- **Parallel collaboration** occurs when writers work on different pieces of the same project simultaneously. Each writer works on one piece of the whole, usually based on a set of negotiated standards or requirements.
• **Collective collaboration** occurs when writers all work on the same piece of writing at the same time. Everyone works together on one piece of the work, or the whole work, with no segregation of ownership.

Additionally, this chapter illustrates the need for adhering to Principles 1 and 4 that ground this book (Chapter 1). First, it is necessary to develop a culture of collaboration for writing teams to work. Second, Principle 4 indicates that it is important to select and use the right tools and any of the three discussed models of collaboration in ways that serve both the project at hand and the people who undertake it.

The first two models listed above, serial and parallel collaboration, can be equated with cooperative work: something a little quicker and a little less messy than collective collaboration. In these collaborative settings, team members complete the project by dividing it into discrete parts and then splicing those parts into the agreed-upon framework. There are many contexts in which such features as the nature of project, time, personalities, and relationships make serial and parallel collaboration appropriate. However, collective collaboration, the focus of this chapter, can be more challenging to achieve. In collective collaboration writing projects, writers work simultaneously to create, revise, and edit the same text or project with the goal of creating a seamless, univocal product. Such collaboration may be difficult to embrace in business settings where the culture promotes and rewards competition among individuals and may recognize individual writers separately from the team. However, we believe that collective collaboration is desirable in virtual writing contexts because it can lead to more cohesive and higher quality products than other forms of collaboration.

Using the case study of a collaborative grant project to build interactive teaching modules, this chapter considers the following questions:

• What does it take to enable collective collaboration in a virtual writing environment?
• What are the characteristics of the collaborative team that enable strong collective collaborations?
• What are the characteristics of the technology that enable effective collective collaboration?

**BACKGROUND**

The multilayered collaboration discussed in this chapter was the result of a competitive grant awarded by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). This project produced 14 digitized modules, the purpose of which was to teach various strategies for improving their students’ reading comprehension to faculty who were not trained in reading instruction. The collaborative team consisted of faculty writers, graphic designers, instructional technologists, and programmers working in two separate teams that often intersected with one another. The first team of collaborators wrote the content for the modules. This team included four faculty members who taught a range of courses related to rhetoric, writing, and reading. The second team of collaborators created the multimedia elements of the modules to make them “work.” Finally, the third collaboration was between these two groups—the content writers and the technology designers—who collaborated to integrate the content and design in the modules. Bridging these two groups were the authors of this chapter and the principal investigators of the grant: Brunk-Chavez represented the content side, and Palsole represented the technology side of the project. To facilitate the virtual collaboration, the writers used PBWiki, the programmers and designers used Adobe® Buzzword®, and the entire team used Zoho™ Projects, an online service that enables work teams to plan, track,
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