Chapter 7
Removing Barriers to Collaborating in Virtual Writing Projects

William Carney
Cameron University, USA

ABSTRACT
While there are some obvious rewards of virtual collaboration, technological, organizational, and psychosocial barriers to effective collaboration certainly exist. First, familiarity with the media used for collaboration and opportunities for practice are essential. Next, organizational concerns can hinder successful collaboration. Huws (2005) suggested that traditional face-to-face hierarchical organizations or even those with a degree of hybridity can subvert successful collaboration of any sort but also contain features that might enhance collaboration, if used correctly. Additionally, making work roles clearly defined and making the collaborative endeavor explicit and transparent can ensure positive outcomes. Finally, knowledge of the personality traits and values of the participants in a collaborative project is necessary for project managers. This chapter discusses these three potential barriers, provides examples from higher education and the U.S. Army, and discusses possible solutions.

INTRODUCTION
Higher education commonly uses graduate students as teaching assistants. They work with undergraduate students as one way to earn their tuition through graduate school. Some have never taught before they begin to teach first year college writers, and most of them, once trained and prepared for this work, leave their particular graduate institutions after only two to five years on the job. The system leads to an annual revolving door of new graduate assistants who become novice instructors.

In 2002, the First Year Writing Program administrators at Texas Tech University (Texas Tech) unveiled an innovative method for delivering writing instruction. TOPIC / ICON used locally written software to support what the developers and program administrators hoped would be more “objective” grading of undergraduate student writing; additionally, the software and new practices were intended...
to offer students more opportunities to practice writing. Specifically, the program attempted to address two challenges faced by first-year writing programs. First, TOPIC/ICON sought to address an increase in the number of incoming first year students who demonstrate varying degrees of writing preparation at the high school level and often even greater variations of English proficiency. Second, the program provided a response to the reality that providing writing instruction for these students increasingly becomes the responsibility of graduate students.

The TOPIC/ICON program addressed these instructional needs in a rather unique manner. Students submitted drafts anonymously online; two graduate student instructors then read and assessed the writing. Usually, both instructors provided commentary on the draft (although it was only mandatory that the first reader do so). In this way, instructors graded student writing without knowing the student’s identity. The program’s developers and administrators hoped that this practice would create more accurate and “objective” grading for students. Additionally, because instructors could grade and comment on a greater number of drafts than they could have under more traditional classroom settings, there was a clear expectation that through a “practice effect,” instructors would become more skilled (and faster) in grading and providing commentary for student writing.

Most importantly, the collaborative nature of TOPIC/ICON promised to make the process of grading more transparent for both student and instructor alike. The fact that second readers had access to the commentary of the first reader (although not to the numerical grade assigned by this reader) promised more uniform and useful commentary for the undergraduate students as well as a conduit for the transmission of grading skill from experienced-to-novice teaching assistants. Thus, the TOPIC/ICON program offered graduate instructors practice in the sort of “workplace writing” that is required in higher education by allowing instructors to collaborate on grading commentary, a written by-product of the grading process.

Sadly (but, perhaps, not so surprisingly), things did not go as planned. Rickly (2006) reported that TOPIC/ICON did meet many of its instructional goals, but the program itself was mired in controversy from its inception. Graduate teaching assistants were almost uniformly dissatisfied with the system. The transparency was perceived as surveillance, the anonymity was widely seen as “de-contextualizing” the student writing and allowing instructors to eschew responsibility, and the opportunities for collaborative writing of commentary were dismissed—in the words of one instructor—as “more meaningless work.” Although TOPIC/ICON was designed to be a “recursive” system (that is, feedback from users could lead to system modification), many instructors viewed the program as static and immovable and, thus, in many cases they refused to do any more than the minimum required of them. Here, the intentions of the First-Year Writing Program administrators could not readily overcome the perceptions of the graduate teaching assistants.

As the editors and contributors to this volume discuss throughout, collaborative writing increasingly occurs in virtual settings. While many of these settings involve the composition of documents across geographic regions, many times the virtual collaborative writing process occurs within the colocated space of an institutional or office setting. An exploration of these more localized settings enables collaborative writing managers and team members to understand and address those barriers to successful collaborative writing in virtual settings. Such understanding is essential to managing team dynamics for the greatest efficiency and efficacy.

This chapter explores four types of barriers to effective collaboration:

1. Those that arise from the media/technology used to facilitate collaboration (either as a
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