Chapter 18
Preparing Writers for Virtual Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers practical strategies for instructors, trainers, and managers to use while preparing writers for virtual collaboration. It first considers various existing barriers to successful virtual collaboration, both in the writers’ individual preparation and in organizational structures within which they work. Next, the chapter offers a set of specific guidelines designed to prepare writers for virtual writing collaboration and to facilitate their work. In order to prepare writers for virtual collaboration, instructors and trainers must develop trust among members of virtual teams, carefully structure writing assignments, and design learning spaces that promote collaboration and interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to outline practical strategies that instructors, trainers, and managers could use to prepare writers for virtual collaboration. First, it considers various barriers to successful virtual collaboration. Then, it offers a set of specific guidelines designed to prepare writers for virtual writing collaboration and to facilitate their work.

A word about the scope of this chapter is in order. Most chapters in this volume offer methodology and advice from an industry perspective of virtual collaborative writing. No doubt, any instructor or trainer of writers will find such perspective useful and interesting. Clearly, understanding ways in which professional writers see and use writing on the job is important for any meaningful training of writers to occur. However, the opposite is true as well. Employers and on-the-job trainers of writers need to be aware of current teaching theories and practices in places where their future employees are being taught to write and to collaborate. Such places are writing and technical communication programs and departments in universities and colleges.

Much of the advice that this chapter provides is grounded in rhetorical and composition theory and
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practice (see Chapter 2). Some of the content of this chapter stems from my training and experience as an instructor in a university technical communication program. Therefore, the primary audience for this chapter is instructors of writing and technical communication who work at the college level, both in undergraduate and graduate programs. Such instructors are charged with instilling attitudes towards writing collaboration in their students, which then will transfer into the workplace. Managers and workplace trainers of writers comprise a secondary audience for this chapter. While they certainly will find foundational value in this chapter’s approach and guidance, they may have to adjust and supplement it depending on the realities of their particular organization and their training situation.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Readers need to be aware of barriers to effective collaboration before beginning the design and implementation of their virtual collaboration training programs. For a more extensive discussion of barriers to virtual collaboration, see Chapter 7.

Preparing writers for virtual writing collaboration begins with preparing them for writing collaboration in general. While there are strategies and techniques specific to virtual collaboration, the foundational competencies required of collaborating writers, whether face to face or virtually, overlap significantly. Removing ideological, organizational, and disciplinary barriers to collaboration is essential for training effective writing collaborators.

These barriers fall into three general categories:

- Writers’ resistance to ceding control of the text they perceive as “their own” to others;
- Organizational failure to recognize collaboratively produced works as valid and to reward collaborating writers; and
- Dominance in the workplace of software tools that make collaboration difficult, as well as writers’ unfamiliarity with the collaboration and productivity tools and methods available to them.

Writers’ Resistance to Ceding Control

Text ownership is a fundamental issue which may prevent writers from collaborating effectively. Writers who are accustomed to working alone or even in groups in which members split writing tasks into manageable and defined portions for which individuals take responsibility (we call these serial and parallel collaboration; see Chapters 1 and 6) likely will find it difficult to accept the notion of a mutually owned text. The idea of individual ownership can be difficult to release—at least in the beginning of writers’ collaboration experiences and until they are taught to see the process of collaboration differently. Many writers, especially beginning writers, may find it easier to cooperate (take responsibility serially or in parallel for parts of writing project which are then combined into a larger text) than to truly collectively collaborate, or write a text together in a recursive manner as described in Chapters 1 and 6. The reasons for writers’ unwillingness to cede control of a text and of the writing process are complex. They involve commonly held perceptions of writers and writing, the current reward and intellectual property system, and cultural and organizational norms, including assumptions of how writers work on the part of software companies that design electronic tools for writing.

The Notion of the Solitary Writer

Perhaps the most fundamental reason that resistance to successful collaborative writing should be examined and reconsidered is the notion that many writers hold that writing is a solitary and individualistic activity and the notion of the writer