Chapter 4
Engaging in Virtual Collaborative Writing: Issues, Obstacles, and Strategies

Patti G. Wojahn
New Mexico State University, USA

Kristin A. Blicharz
IBM Corp., USA

Stephanie K. Taylor
IBM Corp., USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors discuss factors useful for virtual collaborators to consider when initiating a new writing project. They identify the importance of and challenges common to getting to know others through virtual means. They then address issues associated with establishing expectations and protocols for the collaborative processes to be used for a given project. They do so by drawing from the literature on and their own experiences with virtual collaborative writing, as well as from communication logs and survey responses gathered from a small pilot study conducted in 2007. This pilot study focused on behavior and perceptions related to multiple types of communicative tools for interacting in daily workplace practice. They argue that behaviors, perceptions, expectations, and previous practice can all inform rules of engagement that can benefit teams working in virtual contexts. Time spent planning for the collaboration by defining common goals, rules, and guidelines in early stages of a virtual project can improve the collaborative experience: subsequent efficiency; role, task, and deadline delineations; and group satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

I learned two weeks ago that I have a new manager who works in another part of the country. Talk about needing to interact and create identity “out there”...
every day with people in four different locations... It can get confusing. (A collaborating writer)

For many people, collaborative writing projects are a daily workplace reality, as are collaborative projects that include writers working at remote locations. Members of writing teams large and small interact with colleagues across the globe using such tools as instant messaging (IM), videoconferencing, e-mail, and phone. Collaborating writers now intermittently switch between typing and talking orally in their communications through newer technologies that combine the affordances of screen-sharing, IM, and embedded voice-over-Internet software. They distribute drafts, files, images, and notes through shared databases and content management software. They share professional and personal information with people whom they have never met in person and likely never will. They experience frustration and enjoy successes together and remotely.

When beginning to work on a virtual collaborative writing team, what factors should be considered? In this chapter, we address some of the issues and strategies that can be critical to new groups of virtual collaborative writers. These issues and strategies speak directly to the need to develop a culture of collaboration and to establish trust among writers, which are the first and third principles that ground this book as discussed in Chapter 1. We draw from the literature on and our own experiences with virtual collaborative writing. We also draw in part from a small pilot study conducted in 2001 that focused on three writers working for high-technology firms at three different locations. On specific days, the participants kept logs of every type of interaction they initiated or took part in, noting the nature and purpose of each interaction, its duration, the parties taking part in the conversation, and the medium used to communicate. Participants also responded at length to questions about their remote interactions and the communication tools used to support them. Using these pieces as a backdrop, we address issues related to unifying remote individuals into a team of writers working on a shared project.

Although some people believe that writing collaboratively makes writing easier, we argue that writing collaboratively requires additional care, coordination, and cooperation and can substantially complicate the writing process. In general, when writers attempt to arrive at a shared understanding of what needs to be said in a piece and how to say it, communication problems and other difficulties seem inevitable (Kraut, et al., 1988). Difficulties can occur as team members try to convey their ideas, agree on goals and purposes, share personal knowledge or perspectives to arrive at common understandings, coordinate individual and shared perspectives, use both individual and collective contributions, and then guide all of the distributed writing to a unified end (Bond & Gasser, 1988). Given such factors, writing collaboratively is not easy to do—even when collaborators are colocated, sitting next to one another in an office (Fleming, Kaufer, Werner, & Sinsheimer-Weeks, 1993). Collaborative writing can be even more challenging when colleagues write and interact in virtual environments.

Communicating online in general can be a difficult endeavor. Virtual communication makes some aspects of communication more difficult, introduces new issues, and mitigates if not reduces others (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Virtual teaming on collaborative writing projects, we argue, does the same. We know much about teaming and small group work processes from theory, research, and practice (see, for example, McGrath, 1984; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999; Gouran & Hirokawa, 2003; Salas, Priest, Stagl, Sims, & Burke, 2006; Klein, DiazGranados, Salas, Le, Burke, Lyons, & Goodwin, 2009). We know far less about the implications of teaming and small group processes when collaborators write solely or primarily online.