Chapter 22
Collaborating Virtually to Develop This Book

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is to describe how the writers and editors of this book attempted to employ virtual collaborative writing strategies, including those described throughout this text, in the process of developing and writing this book. This discussion reflects on the processes the writers of this book used to write collaboratively in a virtual environment, as well as strategies and tools that facilitated or hindered their efforts. The discussion draws on the six principles underlying virtual collaborative writing to evaluate the experience of using technology to develop content collaboratively. In so doing, the writers present recommendations that workplace teams can use to manage virtual collaborative writing more effectively. This chapter provides practical examples of success and failure that can guide professionals committed to improving virtual collaborative writing in range of workplace environments. These experiences point to lessons for improving overall performance—whether teams are just forming, looking for ways to manage or plan collaborative writing projects, confused about making decisions virtually, or in search of standards and processes that enable virtual collaborative writing.

INTRODUCTION

A Vignette Continued

In August of 2008, IGI Global contacted Beth about writing a book about CMC technology and online communication, building on work that she and her son conducted for another IGI Global book. Because her son was working on his Ph.D. and could not participate, Beth asked Charlotte if she would be interested in such a project. Charlotte indicated that she could take on such a large project only if the topic were related to her full-time work at HP—virtual collaborative writing. Independently, Charlotte was researching the strategies needed for teams of writers to collaborate effectively in virtual
work environments. Beth was open to the idea and we wrote a proposal describing a project that would engage individuals from both industry and academia to help increase understanding among professionals interested in teaching and/or doing technical writing.

Once the proposal was accepted, we sent out requests for chapters and eventually had over 35 writers interested in the project. By December, it was clear that some individuals who expressed interest were less eager to take on the tasks of writing collaboratively because of other research interests or commitments. After we had phone conferences with all interested writers, close to 30 participants committed to the project. We also included our publisher’s editorial communications coordinator in the virtual experience to observe the process. She was given wiki access, which meant that she was notified automatically whenever writers posted something to the wiki and that she could read the drafted writing at any time. She also was included as an observer to the listserv. These open communications provided her with a clearer sense of our experiences and may have enabled IGI Global to be more flexible if we needed to adjust the timetable. In sum, over a roughly nine-month period, our writing team collaborated in one form or another and carried out discussions on a wiki both to advance our ideas and to reflect on our experiences.

Our primary goal for writing a book on the subject of virtual collaborative writing was not only to draw on the experiences and research of the book’s writers, but also to learn by doing—to gather practical experience within our own team about various approaches and technologies that support writing in this way. Even though it was apparent to us that our experience would not encapsulate the experiences of all virtual collaborative writing teams, we believed that any hands-on information that we collected would enable us to comment authentically on the challenges that emerge when writers collaborate virtually in the workplace.

As we prepared for our work on this book and established a writing team that would collaborate virtually, we wondered about others who may have undertaken such an experiment, though we were not aware of any. We did not presuppose that our pilot model of virtual collaborative writing would be unique or scientific in nature in terms of our findings. Rather, in undertaking such a pilot—trying to practice what we were studying and describing—we sought to deepen our understanding of what it means to create an integrated, distributed writing team, to share ownership of content, and to depend on others for contributions to an overall product. Being able to appreciate the experience of writing collaboratively in virtual environments has enabled us to cull important observations from our team’s feedback; thus, recommendations for virtual collaborative writing have emerged from our hard-earned experiences.

The Value in Reflecting on Our Work

The primary purpose of providing descriptive information about how we were able to collaborate successfully and unsuccessfully is to enable professionals in research and industry to draw on and extend the ideas presented here. In the information age, which emphasizes the global distribution and consumption of modular content, practitioners and researchers alike can uncover new ways of writing collaboratively in distributed workplace environments. Additionally, in keeping with the premise established in Chapter 1, writing teams need to investigate their own collaborative processes and uses of online technologies to understand more about improving their performance. Accordingly, we employ the training principles of investigation and reflection (Hewett and Ehmann, 2004; Ehmann Powers and Hewett, 2008) outlined in Chapter 1 to probe more fully about our own strengths and weaknesses as a collaborative writing team. This chapter also represents our enactment of the sixth principle of collaboration that grounds this book, measuring and tracking our success.