



Time to Write

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Collaboration as Creation, Replication, and Action

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Across the Curriculum

Why have students work and write collaboratively? What's important about collaborating? And what can we learn from talking about what happens when others collaborate?

Here at UW, faculty and TAs integrate collaborative work into their curricula in various ways. For example, many assign peer review by getting students to think and talk critically about peers' writing. Many employ group work and value the merits of using small group discussions in class. Further, many think about writing "as a process" during which students' critical thinking skills can be honed by talking and listening to others.

The activity of collaboration is one of the major intellectual foci of contemporary theory in the field of Composition and Rhetoric. And, indeed, the field has "gotten the word out" that collaboration can enhance learning in the classroom. Certainly, this is made evident by a quick glance at UW's General Education requirements for Comm-A and Comm-B classes. But what are the theoretical underpinnings for putting collaboration into practice? And how can learning about the research on collaboration shape what we do in the classroom?

The principle of collaboration hinges on the premise that speaking and writing are socially constructed activities. In "Discourse in the Novel," Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argued that, ever since there was a second human on earth, it has been virtually impossible for anyone to claim singular ownership of words or ideas. Scholarship on collaboration, particularly social-constructionist theory,



Just a few titles by contributors to the field of
Composition & Rhetoric

emerged in response to both the Romantic vision of the inspired writer working alone as s/he cultivated great ideas and the capitalistic view that individuals' ideas are their own lucrative property. So, although only one by-line appears on this article, its "author" has been undeniably shaped by other texts, voices, and utterances.

Since collaboration is inevitable (though rarely made explicit in authorship, particularly in the humanities), many compositionists and rhetoricians talk about the social quality of language use by studying genre (types of spoken or written discourse) and discourse communities (sites where certain discourse occurs).

Genre: The Linchpin

In popular discourse, we usually talk about genre as a way of organizing and sorting: there's the *film noir* genre, the genre of early-1980s punk rock. But it's also possible to think about genre as the textual or spoken embodiment of collaboration.

Studying genre in this way makes possible several kinds of conversations. First, talking about a genre's features allows theorists to

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see how the current knowledge in the genre became authorized. Second, studying the features of a genre predicts how future iterations of knowledge may get shaped (or constrained). And further, thinking about genre as the embodiment of social activity makes it possible to envision and characterize the kinds of audiences genres are meant for and the kinds of responses genres invite.

Rhetorician Carolyn Miller has contributed to this final conversation in a particular and forceful way by defining genre as "a social action" that should be studied not for its form but for the "action it is used to accomplish." Miller elaborates by defining a genre as "a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence [that] motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent" (163). Miller's definition, elaborated by Charles Bazerman and others, helps show how the concept of genre is shaped and perpetuated by collaborative activities.

As a way to imagine how genre is shaped by collaboration, think of Borges' case of the Chinese encyclopedia made famous by Foucault in his introduction to *The Order of Things*: Foucault remembers laughing out loud at Borges' citation of a passage in an old Chinese encyclopedia in which animals are defined as "(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed" or "(d) sucking pigs" or "(f) fabulous" and so on (xv). In this example, the genre of the encyclopedia entry collaborated on and reified by a particular community leads to an act of classification that results in a system of thought empowered in ways completely different from, say, the system of animal classification in a biology textbook or in *World Book* encyclopedia. Genre works to form what David Jolliffe terms "a kind of linchpin in an intellectual community's processes of generating and disseminating knowledge."

Discourse Communities: The Locale

If genre works as a linchpin, then discourse communities operate as precise sites where we can locate and observe collaboration at work. Examples of dis-

course communities here at UW-Madison are the members of the physics department or the staff of the Morgridge Center for Public Service; each has its own kind of "shop talk," its own ongoing conversation. M. Jimmie Killingsworth defines discourse communities as "site[s] or social group[s] defined by special kinds of speech and writing, the boundaries and character of which are determined by the communicative practices as well as the social sentiments, shared norms, and cul-

“. . . thinking about genre as the embodiment of social activity makes it possible to envision and characterize the kinds of audiences genres are meant for and the kinds of responses genres invite.”

tural values of the members" (194).

Genres are, in a sense, *owned* by particular discourse communities. Participants in discourse communities collaborate to create and replicate genres, and the characteristics of those genres signal what a particular discourse community values, considers normal, and labels ideologically sound. (While "belonging to the Emperor" was an ideologically sound classification for the old Chinese encyclopedia, it wouldn't fly for a discourse community of biologists.)

So, studying the ways in which discourse communities replicate and enable genres can teach us how groups (professions, disciplines—any sort of regime) create, organize and maintain power. In his work on studying particular professional discourse communities, Charles Bazerman has memorably pointed out that as "professions increasingly form the framework of modern existence, their texts set the terms of our lives" (4).

The more we can work to identify how our worlds are collaboratively fashioned and re-fashioned by genres and the communities in which genres operate, the more clearly we understand where we've

been and where we're heading.

Typically, those teachers whose classrooms have been influenced by the scholarship in Composition and Rhetoric implement collaborative principles by encouraging small-group talk about course concepts; requiring students to co-author papers; facilitating peer review of student drafts; and, more recently, having electronic discussions via email or programs like *WebCT* or *Common Space*. Almost always, professors and TAs report that techniques such as these reap positive results.

But in addition to these traditional techniques, why not consider asking your students to *think* about the principle of collaboration by examining the discourse of the field they're studying? For example, you might ask your students to do an archaeological dig of their own to examine how certain collaborative activities have aided your field's knowledge as it emerges, evolves—or constrains, and empowers. (And be sure to let us know what they—and you—discover.)

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Meet Melissa Tedrowe, Writing Center Faculty Associate

Bonnie Smith, Assistant Director of Writing Across the Curriculum

Melissa Tedrowe, the newest academic staff member of the Writing Center, couldn't have a more hectic—and happy—December. On the thirteenth, she takes a couple of days off from the Writing Center's busiest time of the year to go back to the University of Illinois to defend her dissertation, *Kinship and Collectivity in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*. But for the rest of the month, she will be continuing her work in the Writing Center she's come to love.

Melissa's two main areas of responsibility are teaching, which involves working one-on-one with Writing Center students, and administrative duties, which consist of helping with the daily logistics that make the Writing Center run smoothly and efficiently. But in addition to these primary responsibilities, Melissa teaches several of the short-term Writing Center classes, mentors Writing Fellows, helps with the Online Writing Center, and serves as the liaison to the Undergraduate Research Scholars and McNair Scholars.

Melissa began getting interested in writ-



Melissa Tedrowe: Assistant Faculty Associate, Literary Scholar, Devoted Teacher, Soccer Star, Badger.

ing center teaching while she was working on her Master's at the University of Vermont. During her first teaching stint in Vermont's English 1 program, Melissa found the program's mandatory teacher-student conferences were what thrilled her most about teaching. In conferences, Melissa saw students make their most dramatic leaps and strides, so she began to volunteer in Vermont's Writing Center, an informal group of TAs and students working from tables in the university library. When she went on to work on her

Ph.D. at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Melissa knew she wanted writing center teaching to be part of her academic life, so she applied to work in the more formal center there. After one impressive semester, she was named the Assistant Director of the UI Writer's Workshop.

The UW Writing Center impresses Melissa for many reasons. She considers the staff to have broad talents, and she finds the material resources of our center—including our main and satellite locations, library, computer classroom, database—second to none. Pedagogically, Melissa always tries to remain mindful of the philosophy that writing is a process. Additionally, she tries to remember that “a writer can never be disengaged from other facets of life. The students I work with are people too—I strive to keep that in mind.”

Look for Melissa on the soccer field or at Badger games; she's quickly become quite a fan. And, don't let the word get too far south, but she even plans to root for the basketball Badgers when they play Illinois after the New Year.

*Mark your calendars. . .
Spring training for new Comm-B TAs
will be held on
Monday & Tuesday, January 14 & 15, 2002
from 9 AM - 12:15 PM!
Registration is required.
For more information or to register, contact
Brad Hughes, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum,
at bthughes@facstaff.wisc.edu, 3-3823.*

ESTABLISHING EXPLICIT GRADING CRITERIA FOR PAPERS

Nancy Langston & Steve Kantrowitz

Many faculty and TAs consider putting grades on writing—and explaining the rationale behind those grades—one of the hardest aspects of teaching. One way to deal with this difficulty is to establish for yourself and for your students precisely what you mean when you brand a paper with that “A” or that “C.”

The following grading criteria were originally written by Nancy Langston, a professor in the Institute for Environmental Studies. The criteria start with course-specific definitions of structure, analysis, style, and originality, and they follow by explaining what those criteria mean in letter-grades. Here, they are in a form history professor Steve Kantrowitz uses in his classes on the Civil War for an assignment in which students analyze a primary narrative.

We will grade your papers on the following criteria:

1. STRUCTURE:

Begin your paper with a brief description of the narrative, or a brief episode from it that suggests or illustrates your thesis. Give your thesis statement, which is a concise statement of your central argument. Then build your argument in a series of well-structured paragraphs. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence, and 3 to 5 sentences that clearly support that topic sentence. Each paragraph should explain ONE idea, not 3 or 4. Each paragraph should have a clear connection to the ONE idea, not 3 or 4. Pay attention to transitions! Each paragraph should have a clear connection to the next. End with a strong conclusion that explains what your thesis tells us about the era of the Civil War.

2. ANALYSIS:

Remember that each paragraph should advance your argument. Support your thesis with evidence from your narrative, always remembering to explain what that evidence means. Where necessary, provide context from other course material, but don't lean too heavily on textbooks or lectures. Your analysis should offer specific insights into aspects of this history that other course materials describe in general terms; it may also suggest how your evidence challenges other historian's analyses. Without trying to make too broad a claim

about the entire Civil War, show how your narrator's experience of change tells us something interesting and important about the era.

3. STYLE:

Clarity comes from knowing what you mean and saying it plainly. Don't try to write like a writer—write like a person who wants to be understood. We will reward clear, active, powerful writing. PLEASE do not use the passive voice. Do not start sentences with “It is. . .,” “There is. . .” or “There are. . .” Use active verbs. Revise your paper to remove wordiness, redundancy, passive voice, and inactive verbs. Make sure that your grammar and spelling are correct. Careless errors, especially run-ons and comma splices, WILL lower your grade.

- *This is an example of BAD writing:* “There were changes in southern society during the war that made southerners turn their anti-government beliefs against the south.”
- *This is an example of BETTER writing:* “Many white southerners interpreted wartime taxation and conscription as the same sort of interference with southern ‘domestic relations’ that the Confederacy founders had promised to prevent.”

What's the difference? In the first sentence, “There were changes” is in the passive voice and offers no specifics. What sort of changes occurred, and in what context? The passive voice allows you to evade these questions, but specificity and context are essential to good history. “Southerners” is too general; the group in question consists of many (but not all) white southerners. “Anti-government beliefs” and “the south” also lacks precision. White southerners tended to resist some forms of political authority, but not others; this dynamic shaped both the Confederate state (which was not the same thing as “the south”) and the emerging opposition to that state's policies.

4. ORIGINALITY:

Although you can get a good grade (a B) for a paper based on arguments presented in lectures or readings, “A” papers must offer more original insights and arguments. We strongly encourage you to think for yourselves, building on evidence and arguments from the course but pushing your insights further than what we cover in lectures.

EXPLICIT GRADING CRITERIA, CONT.

THE SUPERIOR PAPER (A)

Structure: Your thesis is clear, insightful, original, sophisticated, even exciting. All ideas in the paper flow logically; your argument is identifiable, reasonable, and sound. You have excellent transitions. Your paragraphs have solid topic sentences, and each sentence clearly relates to that topic sentence. Your conclusion is persuasive.

Analysis: You support every point with at least one example from your primary sources. You integrate quoted material into your sentences well. Your analysis is fresh and exciting, posing new ways to think of the material.

Style: Your sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and citations are excellent. You have NO run-on sentences or comma splices. Your writing style is lively, active, and interesting. You use active verbs, and do not use the passive voice. You are not wordy or redundant.

Originality: Your arguments show a great deal of independent insight and originality.

THE VERY GOOD PAPER (AB)

Structure: Your thesis is clear, insightful, and original. Your argument flows logically and is sound. You may have a few unclear transitions. You end with a strong conclusion.

Analysis: You give examples to support most points, and you integrate quotations into sentences. Your analysis is clear and logical, and even makes sense.

Style: Your sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and citations are good. You have no more than one run-on sentence or comma-splice. Your writing style is solid and clear. You use active verbs and do not use the passive voice. You are not wordy or redundant.

Originality: Your arguments show independent thought.

THE GOOD PAPER (B)

Structure: Your thesis is clear, but may not be insightful, original, or easily identified. Your argument is generally clear and appropriate, although it may wander occasionally. You may have a few unclear transitions, or paragraphs without strong topic sentences. You may end without much of a conclusion.

Analysis: You give evidence to support most points, but some evidence may appear where inappropriate. Your argument usually makes sense, although some gaps in logic may exist.

Style: Your writing style is clear, but not always lively, active, or interesting. You sometimes use the passive voice. You may become wordy or redundant. Your sentence structure, grammar, and spelling are strong despite occasional lapses.

Originality: You do a solid job of synthesizing course material but do not develop your own insights or conclusions.

THE BORDERLINE PAPER (BC)

Structure: Your thesis may be unclear, vague, or unoriginal, and it may provide little structure for the paper. Your paper may wander, with few transitions, few topic sentences, and little logic. Your paragraphs may not be organized coherently.

Analysis: You give examples to support some but not all points. Your points often lack supporting evidence, or else you use evidence inappropriately, often because there may be no clear point. Your quotations may be poorly integrated into sentences. You may give a quote, but then fail to analyze it or show how it supports your argument. Your logic may fail, or your argument may be unclear. Your ending may dwindle off without a conclusion.

Style: Your writing style is not always clear, active, or interesting. You use the passive voice, or become wordy or redundant. You have repeated problems in sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, citation style, or spelling. You may have several run-on sentences or comma splices.

Originality: You do a fair job of synthesizing course material but do not develop your own insights or conclusions.

THE "NEEDS HELP" PAPER (C)

Structure: Your thesis is difficult to identify, or it may be a bland restatement of an obvious point. Your structure may be unclear, often because your thesis is weak or non-existent. Your transitions are confusing and unclear. Your paragraphs show little structure. The paper is a loose collection of statements, rather than a cohesive argument.

Analysis: Your examples are few or weak. You fail to support statements, and the evidence you give is poorly analyzed, poorly integrated into the paper, or simply incorrect. Your argument may be impossible to identify. Ideas may not flow at all, often because there is no argument to support.

Style: Your writing style has problems in sentence structure, grammar, and diction. You have frequent major errors in citation style, punctuation, and spelling. You may have many run-on sentences and comma splices.

Originality: You do a confusing or poor job synthesizing material presented in lectures and sections, and you do not develop your own insights or conclusions.

THE BAD PAPER (D OR F)

A bad paper shows minimal/ lack of effort or comprehension. The arguments are very difficult to understand owing to major problems with mechanics, structure, and analysis. The paper has no identifiable thesis, or an incompetent thesis. It's difficult to tell that you've come to class.



Teaching Tips

“Students' papers almost always improve when students have the benefit of your comments on preliminary drafts. But there are situations when it just isn't possible to read every draft from every student on every assignment. In cases like that, I make drafts due on a certain day but *don't* collect them. Beforehand, however, I have asked one or two students to submit their drafts to me. I make photocopies of those, with names removed, and, as a class, we read and comment on them together. (Alternately, you can use an overhead projector and transparencies.) This is obviously helpful to the writers of the drafts under discussion, but I think it's helpful to the other students as well. I tell them early on that I expect everyone to volunteer at least once during the semester for this activity.”

- Professor David Fleming, Department of English

Teaching Tips is a feature of *Time to Write* in which we highlight tricks of the writing-teacher trade. If you have a tip you've found particularly successful and would like to share, please email Bonnie Smith (bonniesmith@facstaff.wisc.edu).

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