Chapter 26
Scaffolding Agency and Responsibility in Cloud-Based Collaborative Writing

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ABSTRACT

Although most students regularly interact online for social reasons, many are uncomfortable collaborating for academic work, even work utilizing familiar cloud technology. Because collaborative writing in digital spaces is becoming commonplace in work and academic environments, composition teachers must help students to recognize their individual agency within group work and to develop strategies for a shared writing process. How can we scaffold online writing experiences so that our students' ability to collaborate emerges as a strategic and still-developing part of the learning process? In this chapter we discuss strategies for scaffolding a collaborative writing process using Google Docs in the composition classroom. We describe four sample activities appropriate for undergraduate writing courses: anonymous invention, group annotated bibliographies, group agendas and project plans, and peer review. We suggest best practices for developing individual agency and shared responsibility for group writing in the cloud.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2013 editorial for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* David Helfand challenged the individualized model of higher education:

The brains of today's undergraduates—a product of a million years of hominid evolution—are instinctively collaborative, innately cooperative, and structurally wired for small-group interaction mediated by language and an awareness of the intentionality of others. What might happen if we structured our educational system to take advantage of these natural attributes?

As undergraduate writing instructors, we ask a similar question when we consider how we might transform our pedagogy to engage with the collaborative writing our students are already doing online. But how can teachers scaffold "interaction mediated by language and an awareness of the intentionality of others" toward learning? And how can cloud technology be best utilized toward knowledge building? Collaboration, regardless of its instinctive or innate relationship to the human mind, is difficult and takes practice. Collaboration, like writing, is an activity that must be taught, learned, and practiced, not just required.

Background Information

As teachers we are accustomed to the collective groan that often follows an announcement about an upcoming group project. We believe such resistance is indicative of a widespread frustration among students: they are expected to work together, to create collaboratively, but often have not learned the tools necessary to make such work positive as well as productive. This situation can be compounded when collaboration occurs via digital spaces for two reasons. First, students are being asked not only to collaborate but also to use online tools in new ways, thus increasing the amount there is to learn.[1] Second, cloud technology is marketed as necessarily collaborative, which can mask the need to provide instruction in appropriate ways to collaborate within such spaces.

The frustration our students have expressed in connection with collaborative assignments has led us to question how we can scaffold experiences that will help our students thrive in cloud collaboration and in writing classrooms. How can we scaffold online writing experiences so that our students' instinctive ability to collaborate emerges as a strategic and still-developing part of the learning process? How might we use cloud technology to help students identify and reflect on the specific decisions and attitudes that contributed to a collaborative experience? We hope to encourage careful attention to these broad questions by focusing here on a single, fundamental aspect of collaborative writing: fostering a sense of individual student agency and shared responsibility. This chapter offers practical suggestions for cloud-based activities that identify, develop, and nourish individual contribution to group collaboration. We believe these activities can be adapted for use in first-year writing, writing across the curriculum, and professional writing classrooms.

Student Responsibility in Collaboration

Building off the work of Haring-Smith (1994), Kittle and Hicks (2009) identified collaboration in the writing classroom as a process requiring co-authorship and a sense of shared responsibility for a text. They write that:

Genuine collaboration involves a number of tasks beyond simply getting along and adding one part: giving ideas and feedback, creating content, debating the merits of an overall argument for the paper, writing and revising a particular section, researching information for that section, sharing one's writing by raising questions for peers about content and style, editing all parts of the document, taking a risk as a writer by sharing all of this publicly, and encouraging one's group members to engage in all of these tasks. In short, when a collaborative writing group produces a text, its members share full responsibility for the final product. (p. 527)

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