Writing Together: The Importance of Collaboration and Teamwork in Technical Communication

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Introduction

This essay addresses the ever-increasing importance of teamwork and collaboration within the field of modern technical communication. The rising popularity of group work in the professional sphere is discussed, followed by an examination of the reasons and theories driving this trend. A description of the actual methods and means of collaboration, along with associated benefits, is also given. These issues are tied together through comparison and analysis to my own experiences as a student, currently enrolled in Seneca College's TECC technical communication program.

The Prevalence of Collaboration

Before delving into the intricacies of collaboration and teamwork in the field of technical communication, the question may be posed as to why this is an important or relevant area of study. The answer lies in recent research, which shows a dramatic trend towards emphasis on collaboration and teamwork in the modern workplace of technical communicators.

In 2005, a large-scale survey was undertaken to determine core competencies for technical communicators. The surveyors noted that:

> *In overall ranking, the two most important competencies for technical communicators ...*
> *are both collaborative skills. All respondents ranked the ability to collaborate with*

subject-matter experts as the most essential skill for technical communicators. The second most important skill, in overall ranking, is the ability to collaborate with coworkers. Other important collaborative competencies are the ability to conduct problem-solving interviews, to address communication conflicts in groups, and to conduct on-site interviews and observations for user and task analysis (contextual inquiry). (Rainey, Turner, & Dayton, 2005)

STC fellow James Conklin succinctly describes the modern trend reshaping technical communication:

Whereas technical communicators used to focus their efforts largely on the creation of communication products (including a variety of texts such as manuals, online help systems, training courses, and so forth), they are now focusing increasingly on interpersonal communication processes and forums (such as information gathering forums, requirements definition sessions, and stakeholder consultation processes). (Conklin, 2007)

Conklin goes on to explain that many modern businesses are currently employing cross-functional teams (CFTs) for the purpose of document creation. Technical writers work in diverse and fluid groups of individuals spanning entire organizations. Conklin argues that the role of the technical communicator is evolving from simply taking dictation and translating information from SME's and other specialists, to actually spearheading document creation and acting as "ambassadors" for individual projects. Technical communicators are assembling teams specifically for the purpose of document creation, attributing roles within these groups, setting timelines and agendas, and negotiating the flow of information within their teams. The actual writing of the document is even, in some cases, relegated to an outside party, with the technical communicator overseeing the work and editing of the final product (Conklin, 2007).

The emphasis on social interaction and, more specifically, interdisciplinary discussion and information management is somewhat limited in Seneca's TECC program. While the curriculum includes a substantial amount of group work, the majority falls under the banner of what has been termed *shared-document collaboration* with other students in the TECC program. Shared-document authorship is defined as: "working together throughout the planning, drafting, and

revising activities of a single document" (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987). Exceptions to this limitation do exist however.

In the case of the TCN 701 *User Task and Analysis Report*, the student is required to interview a professional working in an unfamiliar field. Through this personal interview, the student must determine, define and analyze the interviewees' daily tasks. This information is then transcribed by the student in a technical-style task report. This project closely resembles a real-world scenario involving consultation with an SME.

The TCN 700 *User Guide Project* requires student teams to work collaboratively with outside organizations. The teams must create a professional-grade user guide for a chosen aspect of the organization's work, in conjunction with the specifics outlined by the given organization. The *User Guide Project* is perhaps the closest that TECC students come to working on a CFT. They are required to participate in managerial duties, including the delegation of work according to specialization and preference of the team members, as well as the creation of a timeline via a *Document Plan* component. Students are also required to interact with the outside organizations personally, engaging in information requisition and negotiation of terms for the document creation.

From a personal standpoint, I was somewhat dismayed to learn that the trend in modern technical communication is moving away from independent creation of text and towards the "conflict-ridden world of CFTs", where I will be required to "confidently negotiate with representatives of other disciplines" (Conklin, 2007). Social negotiation and team management are not areas which I consider to be my strengths. However, the variety of work and potential for relocation and advancement within the corporate sphere afforded by this emerging, managerial-type role is somewhat enticing. As Janis Forman has suggested:

> *Those who may start out as professional writers valued for their rhetorical expertise can take on roles and responsibilities that far exceed (their original designation). With adequate understanding of organizational strategy, such individuals can become corporate storytellers seated at the right hand of the CEO, as is the case at companies like Accenture and FedEx. (Forman, 2004)*

Aside from the possibility of personal career advancement via collaboration and teamwork, there must exist some strategy or rationale behind the trend. In the next section, I analyze the reasoning behind the current trend and the traditional theory behind collaborative writing in technical communication.

Reasons for Collaborating

Much of the current academic literature concerning collaborative processes in technical communication refers back to Kenneth Bruffee's landmark essay, *Collaborative Learning and The 'Conversation of Mankind'*, published in 1984. In order to fully appreciate Bruffee's argument, we may start with the author's description of what he considers to be a principal yet misguided concept held by most writers:

> *(Writing), we have been led to believe, is a solitary (affair), and the vitality of (writing) lies in the talents and endeavors of each of us as individuals. What we call discussion is more often than not an adversarial activity pitting individual against individual in an effort to assert "will to power over the text," if not over each other. If we look at what we do instead of what we say, we discover that we think of knowledge as something we acquire and wield as individuals relative to each other, not something we generate and maintain in company with and in dependency upon each other. (Bruffee, 1984)*

Bruffee goes on to explain the fallacy inherent to the concept of individual authorship and the independent generation of knowledge. He states that, "knowledge is an artifact created by a community of knowledgeable peers constituted by the language of that community", and that, "learning is a social and not an individual process" (Bruffee, 1984). Furthermore, he suggests that:

> *Writing always has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation ... To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively - that is, we must learn to converse well. (Bruffee, 1984)*

If Bruffee is correct in his assumptions about the inherently collaborative nature of writing and the creation of knowledge, we may ask why the discipline has seemingly evolved in this way, and whether or not it is advantageous to us as technical writers.

In their 1987 study of collaborative writing groups, Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, and Snow found that writers unanimously agreed that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the cost - the cost consisting mainly of lengthy amounts of time spent collaborating and the sacrifice of individual ego for the good of the group. The authors reported that their subject groups were generally "very satisfied" with the collaborative process and that, "they stated that the documents they produced were definitely better than those any one of them could have produced alone" (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987).

In the same study, Allen et al note what they believe to be a crucial benefit of collaborative writing – conflict. They describe the groups functioning as a "first-line audience", in which "members often discussed problems in the document that they thought intended readers might perceive later, trying to clear those problems up in advance". Such discussions inevitably lead to heated debates. Respondents reported that "people are willing to challenge things that are very dear to you, even if it becomes personally hurtful". The authors concluded that "conflict contributed to (the groups') creativity and to the quality (of their work)". They noted that, "failure to allow for the development and expression of opposing views within the group could produce such defective decision making that the overall value of group effort was lost". Furthermore, they suggest that "a group's effectiveness may depend upon its ability to preserve various viewpoints" (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987). This echoes Bruffee's assertion that, "abnormal discourse sniffs out stale, unproductive knowledge and challenges its authority, that is, the authority of the community which that knowledge constitutes" (Bruffee, 1984).

In my experience thus far with Seneca's TECC program, conflict in group work has not played a central role in the creative process. Perhaps it is because there is a very clear, common goal set before us – that is to appeal to the professor and achieve a high grade – that we, as students, can so easily and politely reach a consensus. Certainly there have been moments of tactless and insensitive discussion during time-stressed brainstorming sessions, but I have yet to witness a full-blown argument amongst my classmates. This may all change, however, with the upcoming *Technology Debates* scheduled for TCN 705.

Having discussed the reasons for, and benefits of, collaboration in technical communication, we may now question the actual methods and structure of the collaborative activity itself. This is the topic of discussion in the next section of this essay.

Common Methods of Collaboration

Collaborative methods of writing were first, thoroughly examined in 1990, by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, in their book entitled *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). The methods discussed can be generally classified into three types, listed from the least collaborative in nature to the most: contextual, hierarchical, and group-based. *Contextual* collaboration is defined as, "using genres, templates, and existing documents to aid in writing a new document" (Jones, 2006). *Hierarchical* collaboration is described as "carefully, and often rigidly, structured, driven by highly specific goals, and carried out by people playing clearly defined and delimited roles" (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). Group collaboration is defined as "involving a collection of people who largely plan, draft, and revise together" (Jones, 2006). These three categories are highly complex and nuanced. A full explanation of each falls beyond the scope of my essay. In defense of this omission, it has been said that the categories are somewhat outdated and in need of reconsideration (Jones, 2006). Additionally, it has been noted that most modern organizations are moving towards a so-called horizontal structure in terms of document creation (as discussed earlier, with respect to CFTs). For this reason, a discussion of group-based collaboration, specifically, is most relevant in the given context.

Building from Ede and Lunsford's definition of group collaboration, Allen et al define three specific approaches to collaborative writing in groups (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987). Each approach offers distinct advantages. The first is dubbed *labor intensive*, and is defined as, "enlisting a number of people in performing a large task within a limited time period". This is also referred to as the "divide and conquer approach". The second is termed *specialization* and described as, "groups formed in order to draw on multiple areas of expertise". The third and final approach is called *synthesis*. It is described as, "groups formed to meld divergent perspectives into a solution acceptable to the whole group or to an outside group … the

task includes as one of its primary goals the melding of divergent perspectives" (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore, & Snow, 1987).

From personal experience, I can say that Seneca's TECC program does definitively benefit from the diverse perspectives and experiences brought together by its student body. In this sense, I think the class benefits most from the *synthesis*-style form of collaboration. It is perhaps a sign of wisdom that TECC is exclusively a graduate program, and that admission is granted to students with a wide variety of backgrounds and training.

Conclusion

With this essay, I have outlined the importance of collaboration in the field of modern technical communication. I have discussed the ever-increasing rate at which the professional sphere is employing group tactics and CFTs in the document creation process. I have explained the fundamental theory concerning the importance, and seeming inevitability of, collaboration in professional writing. And finally, I have detailed several of the most common methods of group-based collaborative writing and highlighted their intrinsic benefits. Hopefully this essay has shed some light on the merit of training oneself in the art of social dynamics in preparation for a career in technical communication, such as I am currently engaged in via Seneca's TECC program.

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