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ABSTRACT

In order to study the theory and practice of collaborative writing, a three-stage research project was initiated. The first stage of research involved a questionnaire sent to 200 randomly selected members of six major professional associations. On a separate sheet accompanying the first questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether they would consider participating in the second stage of the research, a more open-ended and detailed questionnaire designed to more fully identify a spectrum of collaborative writing forms and strategies. This second survey was sent to 12 selected members of each of the six professional associations. The last stage of research involved on-site case studies with between four and six respondents who regularly write as part of a team or group. This part of the research has not been completed. Results of the research thus far have revealed three problematic areas: (1) the concept of writing, especially authorship; (2) the lack of a vocabulary to describe what people do when they write; and (3) affective responses to group writing. These results confirm the hypotheses that collaborative writing is a well-established phenomenon among major professions, and that writing, rather than being a solitary act, is one that is essentially and naturally collaborative. (DF)

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RESEARCH ON CO- AND GROUP AUTHORSHIP IN THE PROFESSIONS
A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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We are pleased to be a part of this panel on collaborative writing, for we believe that the questions which people like Karen LeFevre, Ken Bruffee, Barbara Nodine, and Elaine Maimon are asking today about the nature of collaborative writing and its potential impact on our understanding of writing as a cognitive and social act hold important theoretical and pedagogical consequences for our discipline. Our own interest in collaborative writing grew directly out of our experiences as co-authors--friends who found it both natural and fruitful to work together on projects of shared interest. We were unprepared, then, when a number of our colleagues indicated that they viewed our collaboration as unusual, surprising, and even impossible. (Surely you don't *really* write together," several exclaimed.) These colleagues thought of collaboration only in terms of team research, where the role of each member is clearly defined and limited, and the final manuscript often written by a single member of the team. Furthermore, given their assumptions about the nature of authorship, originality, and authority for texts, collaborative

writing in the humanities seemed inherently suspect, if not impossible.

Our surprise at our colleagues' responses to our writing caused us to formulate a series of questions about the nature and extent of co- and group authorship in professional or real-world writing. At first our questions were relatively obvious ones. How often and in what situations do co- and group authorship occur? What specific features distinguish the processes of co- and group-authorship from those of an individual writing alone? What is the potential impact of technologies such as the computer on co- and group- authorship? (See our article, "Why Write . . . Together?" in *Rhetoric Review* 1[January 1983], 150-157, for an early formulation of these questions.)

As we thought about collaborative writing and talked with people who wrote as part of teams or groups, however, we came to see that answers to these and other questions, though useful and informative, were just a first step. An analysis of the feasibility and efficiency of co- and group- authorship will be of little consequence, for instance, unless it addresses the powerful assumption, one particularly dominant in the humanities, of the link between individual genius, "originality," authorship, and authority for a text. Similarly, analyses of the role of co- and group-authorship which fail carefully to consider the social context in which such writing occurs--the influence of established institutional review procedures, for instance--may distort or oversimplify. Finally, we realized that we could not separate an interest in the nature, incidence, and significance of co- and group-authorship from a concern for the ethical issues involved.

Underlying all these questions was our growing recognition

dichotomy between current models of the composing process and methods of teaching writing, almost all of which assume single authorhsip, and the actual situations students will face upon graduation, many of which may well require co- or group-authorship. This recognition gave a sense of urgency to our investigations. Consequently, in 1983 we applied for a FIPSE-sponsored Shaughnessy Scholars grant to study the theory and practice of co- and group-writing.

Our research project, which is still in progress, comprises three interrelated stages, only one of which is at present complete. Hence, our remarks today should be regarded as tentative at best. The first stage of our research involved designing a questionnaire to survey 200 randomly selected members of six major professional associations (The American Psychological Association, the American Consulting Engineers Council, the American Institute of Chemists, the International City Management Association, the Professional Services Management Association, and the Society for Technical Communication) to determine the frequency, types, and occasions of collaborative writing in these six associations. Our final rate of response for this survey was just under fifty percent, and we have recently analyzed its results.

On a separate sheet accompanying this first questionnaire we asked respondents to indicate whether they would consider participating in the next stage of our research, a more open-ended and detailed questionnaire designed to more fully identify a spectrum of collaborative writing forms and strategies. We have sent this survey to twelve members of each of our six professional associations. We chose these seventy-two individuals because they are representative of a range of collaborative writing situations;

we are currently analyzing their responses. The last stage of our research, which we expect to be the most fruitful and richest in its implications for teachers of writing, involves on-site case studies with between four and six respondents who regularly write as part of a team or group. We hope to complete these case studies by the end of this academic year and will report the overall results of our research in a monograph to be written late this summer.

As is perhaps already clear, ours is a fairly ambitious research design, especially for two people at institutions four hundred miles apart, each of whom has only fifty percent released time to devote to our project, which is itself supported by a relatively small budget. But though we have sometimes been daunted by the task we have set ourselves, the suggestiveness of our preliminary analyses (and even when completed, our results will be preliminary at best) have encouraged us. In determining how best to share these results with you today, it seemed most useful, given our time constraints, to focus on those areas which our first survey indicated were most suggestive and in need of further clarification.

Our own research and experience had led us early on to identify the concept of writing, and especially of authorship, as one particularly problematic area. We can report, at this relatively early stage in our investigation, that the responses to our initial survey confirmed the problematic nature of this concept and, in fact, confounded the problem. To our surprise, respondents clung to the notion of writing as a solitary activity in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. More specifically, respondents in every field most often answered the

question "Please indicate the percentage of the time you spend in writing activities that is spent writing alone or as part of a team or group" by saying that they wrote alone between 75% AND 85% of the time. A full 60% of these same respondents, however, contradicted themselves by answer a series of later questions in ways which revealed that they often wrote as part of a team or group. One resondent from the American Institute of Chemists, for instance, reported that he wrote 100% of the time by himself and then, in response to an open-ended question, confided that every one of his publications had been co-authored. This seeming anomaly is, of course, easily accounted for in one way: respondents think of writing almost exclusively as the *physical* act of putting pen to paper and hence they visualize themselves as writing "alone" when, in fact, they are most often collaborating on the mental and procedural activities which precede and co-occur with the act of writing, as well as on the construction of the text. But in another way, the responses to these questions suggested to us that the concept of authorship is even more problematic than we had anticipated. Preliminary results in several fields, for instance, suggest that many professionals regularly make use of in-house materials, and that they may use such materials verbatim in something they are writing without acknowledging or documenting their use of this "silent" co-author's work. Indeed, in a number of instances, the authorship of such in-house materials is unknown. When we add to this use of unacknowledged materials the assistance provided by what one respondent referred to as "idea men" and changes made--again silently--by various technical and legal reviewers, the concept of authorship becomes increasingly fuzzy. We believe that the concept will in fact be made even more

problematic by the proliferation of information data bases which may, in fact, finally force us to re-examine our definition of authorship in the same ways that they are forcing us to re-examine our definition of copyright laws. We hope that our research will clarify the questions we need to ask in such a re-examination, even though it may not provide us with readymade answers. More immediately, we hope that we may be able to design curricular models which would broaden the conception of writing so that the term need no longer be primarily associated with an isolated, solitary act and which would build in a more flexible and realistic definition of authorship.

A second problematic area which our research revealed is the lack of a vocabulary to describe what people do when they write collaboratively. We first encountered this problem in writing the title of our grant proposal: what should we call the phenomenon we hoped to study? The term "collaborative writing," which in many ways was most appealing to us, is most often associated with the kind of peer-group response techniques developed by our respondent, Ken Bruffee. Hence, we ultimately found it necessary to qualify it with the extremely clumsy "co- and group authorship" and, even then, we ended up having to defne and illustrate the phrase carefully in order to avoid confusion. In spite of our difficulty with the term "collaborative writing," we are very much indebted to the research on collaborative learning and to studies of professional writing such as those of Odell and Goswami and Faigley and Miller. Once the problem of a title term was solved, however, we faced a much more difficult problem in designing our first survey questionnaire, as we tried to elicit information about what we finally agreed to call "organizational patterns," plans used by

groups to assign duties for completing a project. After extensive piloting and revising, we managed to describe seven such patterns, of which the following are examples:

A. Team or group plans and outlines. Each member drafts a a part. Team or group compiles the parts and revises the whole.

B. One person plans and writes draft. This draft is submitted to one or more persons who revise the draft without consulting the writer of the first draft.

C. One member assigns writing tasks. Each member carries out individual tasks. One member compiles the parts and revises the whole.

Responses to our first questionnaire indicate that such "patterns" are used frequently, though no one seems to have a name for them. Some respondents, in fact, told us that they realized they were following such pre-established "organizational patterns" only after completing our survey, demonstrating in the most vivid way that what we do not have a name for we simply do not recognize. Other respondents, particularly in the technical writers' group, indicated that having such a pattern was indispensable to success and that following an "ineffective" pattern would produce "disastrous results." Our preliminary findings, then, suggest that procedural strategies or patterns are very important in collaborative writing, and that naming and defining these practices will enable us to think about them in ways that have neretofore been unavailable to us. In addition, we hope to identify which patterns are most likely to be effective in a given situation and hence to draw conclusions that will have significant pedagogical implications. While it would be premature to draw such conclusions now, it seems likely to us that teachers of writing may well want to introduce students to various ways of organizing a group-authored project and let them experiment with this process.

A third extremely problematic area emerging from our initial research has to do with affective responses to group writing. Put most briefly, we are realizing that a complex set of largely unidentified or unrecognized variables creates general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with both the processes and products of group writing. On our initial survey, responses to our questions about organizational patterns elicited, almost incidentally, information about the frustrations some group writers felt. As a result, our second questionnaire attempts to define these frustrations more clearly and to gather additional information about affective concerns by asking questions such as "which of the group-writing activities do you find most rewarding (or most frustrating) and why?" Our comments in this area today must necessarily be very cautious. Nevertheless, we have tentatively identified a number of variables which seem related to the degree of satisfaction experienced by those who typically write with one or more people. These include:

1. the degree of control the writer has over his or her text;

2. the way credit (either direct as in a name on a title page or indirect as in a means of advancement within an organization) is assigned;

3. the ability to respond to others who may modify a writer's text;

4. an agreed-upon procedure for resolving disputes among co-authors;

5. the amount of flexibility tolerated in using pre-established organizational patterns or standardized formats;

6. the number and kind of bureaucratic constraints (such as deadlines, length requirements, etc.) imposed on the writer;

7. the status of the project within the organization.

Again, we hope our eventual findings will help us establish what we might, not too facetiously, refer to as a "satisfaction index" and a "frustration index" and elaborate on these in ways that should be helpful to those already writing on the job in groups as well as to teachers of writing who want to better prepare their students for co- and group writing experiences.

These problematic areas represent the issues related to group writing that were most clearly illuminated by the responses to our initial survey and that we hope further to clarify in the second and third stages of our research. We should not, however, leave you with the idea that this initial questionnaire identified only problematic areas or areas of contention. On at least two major points, our results are both conclusive and highly gratifying to teachers of writing. First, our hypothesis that co- and group writing is a widespread and well-established phenomenon among major professions has been clearly confirmed. Of 530 respondents to our initial questionnaire, 87% reported that they sometimes wrote as part of a team or group. The extent of this collaboration is perhaps best indicated by participants' responses to a question which asked them to "indicate how frequently, in general, you work on the following types of writing, distinguishing between writing done alone and with one or more persons." We listed thirteen types of writing, from letters and lecture notes to reports, proposals, and books. Although the frequency of response varied from type to type, some participants indicated that they very often, often, or occasionally worked on each type of writing with one or more persons.

Fourty-two percent of those we surveyed occasionally wrote short reports with one or more persons, for instance, while 17%

often and 4% very often wrote short reports collaboratively. Twenty-nine percent of our respondents occasionally wrote professional articles and essays as part of a team or group, with 9% often and 2% very often writing these forms with one or more persons. Somewhat to our surprise, the frequencies for several types of writing varied little according to whether survey respondents worked on them alone or collaboratively. Our results indicate, for example, that our survey participants were almost as likely occasionally or often to write books or monographs collaboratively as they were to do so alone. The same held true for proposals for contracts and grants, case studies, user manuals, and long reports. (The percentage of difference between the frequency of writing alone and with one or more persons for these types varied from 0 to 5%.) Finally, we can report that 59% of those who had participated in co- or group writing projects indicated that they found such collaboration to be "productive" (45%) or "very productive" (14%).

Secondly, our results speak eloquently to the significant role writing plays in all of the organizations we studied. On the average, respondents in all six fields reported that almost 50% of their professional time is spent in some kind of writing activity. Moreover, to our surprise and delight, 98% of all respondents indicated that effective writing is "very important" or "important" to the successful execution of their job. Many went on to elaborate on this importance in notes to us, some of which contained passionate pleas for help and for better training in writing. Such results are gratifying to us as researchers because they suggest that our interest in co- and group authorship is justified. Much more importantly, however, the results should be

gratifying to every teacher of writing because they graphically demonstrate what we have been "professing" for so long: that writing allows us to know, understand, and act on our worlds in unique ways; that through writing, in fact, we most often create these worlds. And finally, our results strongly suggest that this creation is least often an isolated, solitary act created ex nihilo, and most often a communal, consensual act, one that is essentially and naturally collaborative.

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