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ABSTRACT

Writing instructors who would like to move beyond the collaboration provided by workshops and peer-response groups might consider asking groups of students to write a collage together. According to Peter Elbow, a collage "consists not of a single perfectly connected train of explicit thinking or narrative but rather of fragments: arranged how shall we say?--poetically? intuitively? randomly? Without transitions or connectives...the collage invites (readers) to create actively out of their own consciousness." A college instructor asked her students to use the collage form to respond to the fractured, multivoiced narrative of William Faulkner's novel, "As I Lay Dying." If the assignment worked, however, it did so because it was preceded by several in-class creative assignments, in which students wrote in a stream-of-consciousness style. Of the six groups involved in the Faulkner assignment, two groups provided character studies, one group analyzed the phases of the journey, one group took the characters into the future, and another group analyzed characters via imagined psychotherapy sessions. All but one of the finished collages included writing modelled in the style and vernacular of the Faulkner characters. In evaluations, students were very positive about the experience, though there were a few who fell away from their groups. Mixed results suggest that these projects must be closely monitored. (TB)

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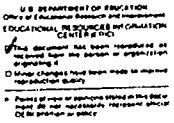

Furthering the Collaborative Collage

Although I had always called my classroom collaborative, until 1992 I had never asked my students to coauthor a text. By then I wanted to move beyond the collaboration afforded by workshops and peer-response groups, but I did not know how to create an assignment that my students and I would both be comfortable with.

I knew what I didn't want: I didn't want my students to submit a "single-voiced" text, a project dominated by one vision and, perhaps, one person. And I didn't want an assignment that countered objectives implicit in my teaching: an emphasis on process, voice, creative thinking, and an openness to possibility.

I wanted a project that would make the writing process a social process, one in which the dialectical tools already at work in the classroom -- brainstorming, critical inquiry, exchange of ideas -- would be manifested, even legitimized, in a coauthored text. I wanted to shake things up: asking students to negotiate a text (and then to analyze it) would force them to make the explicit the choices inherent in writing, and open those choices to investigation.

In a March 1992 4Cs presentation Peter Elbow outlined his experiments with collaborative collage, and indeed he seemed to be outlining the form and the collaborative

framework that I was already searching for. Enthusiasm prompted me to move quickly to implement that assignment in my own classroom. In the remainder of this paper I will describe my experience with the collaborative collage. I will define my assignment and provide student assessment. By doing so I hope to outline the ways that assignment met my criteria for a successful project. I will also describe some results I had not anticipated.

The Collaborative Collage:

In Writing With Power (1981) Elbow had defined the collage as both a cut and paste method of revision, and as an innovative form for essay writing. "A collage," he wrote, "consists not of a single perfectly connected train of explicit thinking or narrative but rather of *fragments*: arranged how shall we say?--poetically? intuitively? randomly? Without transitions or connectives....the collage invites (readers) to create actively out of their own consciousness the vision which organizes those fragments" (148).

In a 1992 4Cs session, Elbow added to that equation with the collaborative collage.

Elbow's collaborative collage seems to answer many critics who charge that he has perpetuated the romantic myth of "the writer alone in the garret." In their thorough study of collaborative writing in the professions, Singular Texts, Plural Authors, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford question

the "Elbow groups," they have found across the country, groups of writers who gather not to write together but to respond to an individual's text and voice. Ede and Lunsford fault Elbow for privileging the voice and vision of the individual, and for, perhaps, ignoring the reality of the socially constructed text -- as indeed the texts resulting from the Elbow response groups may be.

But as a fiction writer, I had always sided with Elbow. I also privilege the development of an individual's voice, and I credit many Elbow-inspired writing activities with leading my students away from the five paragraph theme and closer to real discovery through writing. Elbow's collage therefore provided me with a collaborative assignment: a multivoiced project.

Collaborative Collage in Response to Faulkner:

My first challenge was explaining my proposed assignment to the class. In "Designing Assignments that Foster Collaboration," an essay from her book, Peer Response Groups in Action, Karen Spear notes, "Teachers who organize their work around collaborative principles find it nearly impossible to reduce their assignments to a series of one-liners...Assignments in collaborative writing classes are quite literally, 'designed' -- sculpted from the clay that's available in a particular classroom at a particular time and place" (55). I hope it's not dodging to say that it is difficult to neatly explain my own assignment here. But

simply put, I asked students in a first-year literature class to respond to the fractured, multivoiced narrative of Faulkner's novel, As I Lay Dying with their own "fractured" collaborative collage.

I would not have been able to implement this assignment if groundwork for this creative, collaborative effort was not already in place. In "The Delicate Fabric of Collaboration," Heather Brunjes warns that "process pedagogy cannot be practiced successfully under authoritarian product-centered conditions" (22). If my assignment worked it is because it followed other creative in-class writing activities. For example, one day, in response to student resistance to the novel, I had each class member write a page-long, stream of consciousness sentence, in which they both explained and explored their confusion and their questions. Upon reading these sentences aloud, we were all surprised to find that the quality of that free writing was high, and that the students had neatly explained many fundamental tensions in the novel while exploring their own confusion.

Despite somewhat vague instructions, groups formed and the projects began to take shape. Of the six groups, two groups provided character studies, one group analyzed the phases of the journey, one group took the characters into the future, and another group analyzed the characters via imagined psychotherapy sessions. All but one of the six

groups included sections of writing modelled in the style and vernacular of the characters.

Despite the ambitiousness and the creativity of the projects, I ultimately found that the final products of the collaborative work were not as interesting as the individual essays that each student wrote to assess the work. Lad Tobin has found something similar with collaborative projects. In "Collaboration: The Case for Coauthored, Dialogic, Nonlinear Texts," a chapter from Writing Relationships, he finds that with a batch of collaborative essays, he did not receive "a coauthored essay that was as weak as the poorest individually composed essay," nor as "good as the very best individual essays" (135). He is far from troubled by that outcome, however. Ultimately, says Tobin, students who produce coauthored texts exhibit a "reluctant pride in the process and product" (136). "By developing more productive relationships with one another," he says, "they are also developing more productive relationships with written texts." (139).

Ede and Lunsford find that in the professions the dialogic mode of collaboration is not as prevalent as a hierarchical model, but when in operation, "the process of articulating goals is often as important as the goals themselves, and sometimes even more important" (133). And of particular interest for the collaborative collage assignment, Ede and Lunsford find that in dialogic models of collaboration, participants "generally value the creative

tension inherent in multivoiced, multivalent ventures" (133).

For Ede and Lunsford, a successfully designed collaborative project must allow for peer and self-evaluation, and must call on students to analyze the group processes that contributed to the overall success or failure of the project. Karen Spears finds that this articulation is a natural component of the collaborative classroom. "What is distinctive about writing assignments in collaborative classes is the context," she writes. "Writing, talking about writing, and writing about the talking are what the class is about" (51).

Student Assessment:

My students responded well to analyzing their own work, examining their group dynamics and detailing their means of selecting topics, finding focus, experimenting with language and revising. Says Brian, "Our group seemed to work together well. For instance, it was through debate that we came up with the unique idea of continuing the story" (Brian Peterson).

Matthew explains how his original idea was altered by interaction with the group. He writes, "I specifically suggested that we create a portrayal of Jewel, splitting the group up to cover various sides of him. But upon discussion of this, we decided that we should do the project on Addie,

and attempt to explain how her personality and ideas influenced the other characters."

Matthew explains that at first he was both excited and a bit troubled by the idea, due to a flimsy focus. "How we would tackle this project remained somewhat of a problem throughout our first meeting," he writes, "but we finally decided that our focus would be to explain her motivations in life and the way in which she thought of and interacted with her different children. After much discussion and some help (from you), we decided that we would split the analysis of Addie into five parts...with all of the parts having a direct relationship to one another."

Matthew's group achieved this through two analyses of her actions, a letter to Addie, and sequences using stream of consciousness: one about Addie and the other, written by Matthew himself, expressing Addie's own point of view. By the end of the project Matthew finds that the writing delivered the desired impact. He notes, "I suggested that we might want to write a conclusion for the paper, but we all decided that my stream of consciousness from Addie's point of view would be a good way to finish the paper, in a way answering Donna's letter and also leaving the reader with a strong impression of how unusual Addie really was" (Matthew Fitzpatrick).

Anne, whose collage had "filled in the gaps" about the experiences and motivations of Vardaman Bundren, felt excited when group members ratified her idea for the

project. She writes, "So many different things went into making this paper work that at times it was slightly overwhelming. But the first of these challenges was getting started. This entailed getting a better understanding of the text before we chose a theme because there still remained...some questions about the characters, their roles and what the actual events in the story were...It was exciting when our group agreed to use Vardaman as our subject" (Anne Hipskind). Later Anne writes, "It was uncomfortable and seemed rather risky to turn in a paper in the voice of Vardaman. His grammar is awful and his thoughts scattered, but we, as a group, came to realize that this was very important."

Rob writes, "We agreed upon taking a creative approach. Each one of us would actually be Vardaman, and use his own voice in order to show more of himself to the reader...our paper shows why Vardaman does what he does; it brings out his true motives." And later, "As I worked through the rough draft, I began to feel like Darl was my big brother."

Fascination and empathy toward Vardaman ultimately determined word choice for these writers. Mike asks, "What words would he use? Why would he use this instead of something else...A lot of my ideas came from the book but that was because Faulkner wrote a chapter on Vardaman's feelings towards Addie's death, and I couldn't overlook that. I had to stay parallel to Faulkner's writing or else it wouldn't seem realistic."

And in describing how his group winnowed the rough draft and also provided connectives, Mike writes: "My group met three times outside of class and when we first met, we noticed how similar our writings were, not only in grammar but in our ideas. Because of this I needed to take out some of my writings or else our paper would seem repetitive. And if you notice, we started each piece by repeating the last line of the previous one. This keeps the reader on the same wavelength and it helps blend everything in with each other" (Mike Dullea).

Other students saw how this unorthodox assignment had implications for more traditional essays. Judithe, for whom English is her third language, says, "When you write sometimes the paragraphs are not always in their proper place and you have to rearrange everything and establish a coherent structure for that piece of writing: meaning you have to cut and edit bits of pieces to make the writing simpler, but powerful. Doing this project...helped me to see and come to grip(s) with myself when a paper that I write is not together."

Student assessments of the collaborative collage reflected an engagement with ideas and openness to writing options. That project was successful enough for me to continue assigning collaborative collage in both literature classes and writing workshops. Results were not uniformly positive, however. Ultimately, there was some failure: a few students fell away from their groups. Proponents of

collaborative work must take this into account--if there is some inevitable failure, are we actually collaborating to air failures publicly (through that self and peer evaluation) and to displace students from our classes? Such concerns have led me to more strictly monitor all collaborative projects, and to sometimes favor the quick in-class collage project over the one or two week student-controlled collage. And another unexpected result was the exceptionally competitive "team spirit" that prompted students to respond cruelly rather than critically when I led them through our usual peer review.

But ultimately, strong student response led me to continue with the collaborative collage. Many students professed this assignment to be their year-long favorite. Stan's comment was typical: "Overall," he wrote, "I am not just satisfied, I am proud of our group effort." And I was particularly pleased with the students' exchanges about writing and literature, and with the way the architecture of their writing and revising strategies became apparent in their process pieces. If their collages were imperfect, I began to think of their process pieces as the "flying buttresses" that provided fascinating and necessary support.

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