When Interests Collide: Collaboration and Demolition

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When Ken Kesey’s creative writing class had its co-authored novel, *Caverns*, published by Viking Press in 1990, Kesey became the envy of creative writing teachers everywhere. Not only did the publication reflect favorably on Kesey as a teacher, but it also seemed to endorse the potential for fiction to be co-authored and for co-authorship to be used successfully in teaching fiction-writing. Even more surprising, Kesey seems to have accomplished this feat with minimal interpersonal conflict. My experiences in using co-authorship to teach creative writing, however, suggest that co-authorship may not be as useful a pedagogical tool as Kesey’s experience indicates.

Co-authorship presents special demands on collaboration beyond those normally associated with peer-group work. Yet, researchers in collaboration frequently blur the distinction between co-authorship and collaboration. John Trimbur (“Collaborative Learning” 635; “Consensus” 602), for instance, includes co-authorship under the larger umbrella of collaborative learning, but focuses primarily on peer critiquing and problem-solving. Some analyses of co-authorship can be found in studies of non-academic writing (see Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller; Weber). It’s interesting, however, that, aside from Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller’s article, even the essays in Odell and Goswami’s *Writing in Nonacademic Settings*, as well as Greg Myers’ *Writing Biology*, largely ignore co-authorship.

Collaborative learning places special demands on the collaborators to establish clear goals and methods, but it also requires building significant trust. Lunsford and Ede, for instance, discuss their successful collaboration within the context of a deep personal and professional commitment to their projects and to each other (“Why Write... Together” 150-1). However, establishing such trust becomes more complicated when students must negotiate the conflicting demands of teacher, peers, and assignment. I would like to suggest that the pressure of these demands may in some cases make co-authorship very inefficient.

Nevertheless, the conflict arising out of students’ attempts at co-authorship can provide valuable insight into the kinds of conflict underlying any kind of collaboration. It will be instructive, therefore, to
consider conflict in co-authorship within the context of what we know about conflict in larger collaborative contexts.

It has been helpful to think about these demands in terms of a model suggested by Bill Karis, who recalls hearing a government official glibly compare collaboration to driving a car. In one model, each of the car’s four occupants has a steering wheel and each fights for control. In the other model, one person has a steering wheel and the other three “collaborate” with the driver in reaching the destination. Obviously, the speaker meant the second to be preferable (113). While, as Karis points out, this model over-simplifies and distorts, it is suggestive.

In fact, proponents of collaboration often write as though reaching a destination efficiently is inevitable, and conflict serves only to expedite the trip. Psychologist Charlan Jeanne Nemeth, for instance, argues that those holding minority opinions are more likely to explore alternatives than those holding majority opinions (23). Similarly, Karis identifies “the competition which leads to cooperation” (120), a competition that expands a group’s vision to provide a multiplicity of voices.

For some, the trip serves as an occasion to experience productive tension. John Trimbur, in calling for a consensus of dissensus, writes that he is “less interested in students achieving consensus . . . as in their using consensus as a critical instrument to open gaps in the conversation through which differences may emerge” (614). The value of collaboration for Trimbur lies in the ubiquitous characteristics of conflict which point toward, but do not necessarily anticipate, an imagined consensus. Similarly, Peter Elbow believes that some conflict in group work may help develop personal writing skills. His teacherless class “brings out the maximum differences but asks you not to fight things out or settle on the truth” (110-11). For Trimbur and Elbow prompt arrival at the destination doesn’t seem to matter nearly as much as the lively discussion along the way.

Those who focus on the ideological implications of collaboration are likely to be as preoccupied with the nature of the power struggle as with the quality of the product. Greg Myers describes a tension between an awareness “that one’s course is part of an ideological structure” and a belief that “one can resist this structure” (“Reality” 169). Thus, for Myers, efficiency in reaching the destination must be tempered by a recognition that driving a car is in itself a political act.

Conflict, however, isn’t always productive, and the intricate maze of the students’ predilections, interests, and abilities make successful collaboration more complex than these automobile metaphors imply. On the one hand, students face considerable pressure to reach consensus. Teachers apply leverage through grades, course expectations, group monitor-
ing, and personal expectations. Peers apply leverage through expectations that all group members be active, responsible, and productive.

On the other hand, interpersonal difficulties, including gender conflicts, ability levels, skills, goals, and even differences in values all threaten consensus. Whether or not conflict will actually undermine co-authorship depends on the maturity and social chemistry of the group, on the nature of the collaborative project, and on decisions made by the instructor to interfere or not to interfere in the process.

I would like to suggest three other, more destructive models which collaborative groups may resemble. In car one, the occupants minimize conflict at the expense of reaching their destination expediently. In this model the driver willingly follows the advice of the collaborators, no matter how ill-considered. The driver might even suggest that each take a turn driving, although half of them have no idea how to get to the destination.

In car two, they reach their destination but experience devastating personal consequences. In this model the collaborators are all back-seat drivers in the worst sense, sometimes wringing the driver’s neck, sometimes screaming in her ear. Perhaps the front-seat passenger has negotiated her own agreement with the driver and seeks to help by clubbing those in the back seat. The driver probably does know how to reach the destination, and in all likelihood they will get there long before those in car number one, although they will never speak to each other again.

In car three, the driver, and maybe the front-seat passenger, exasperated that those in the back refuse to help, perhaps because they have been ignored in the past, perhaps because they were slipped a Mickey Finn, decides to sabotage the whole effort. While the others sleep, he drives the car off the roadway and into the nearest ravine in order to teach them a lesson.

The painfulness of collaboration, and the tenuous relationship between contribution and production, was illustrated to me recently when I asked students in my Descriptive-Narrative Writing class to co-author short stories. I got the idea when several publications, including the Chronicle (McMillen), the Whole Earth Review (Forester; Kesey), and later College English (Knox-Quinn) covered Kesey’s successful foray into co-authored fiction.

Kesey was not the first to attempt a collaborative novel, although he may have been the most successful. At the turn of the century a group of writers including William Dean Howells, Henry James, Mary E. Wilkens Freeman, Edith Wyatt and others attempted to write a novel for serialization in Harper's Bazaar. The conflict erupting among these writers mirrored those I would observe in my class. The project was beset by conflicting schedules, demands, and whims. The authors who wrote badly, like Wyatt, were chastised and threatened with being edited out.
Those who wrote well wanted to take control. Henry James finally suggested that he finish the novel by himself (Bendixen 28).

When I brought the articles on Kesey’s experiment into my class, the students unanimously opted for a collaborative fiction-writing assignment. I asked them to keep individual journals, told them that I would do the same, and requested that all drafts be completed on a word processor (the Macintosh micro-lab is just across the hall from the classroom). They were ecstatic.

I had every reason to expect good results from the collaboration. Descriptive-Narrative Writing, a 300-level elective, had bright and interested students who knew each other and who had worked collaboratively in other courses. Throughout the semester they had read each others’ drafts in pairs and in groups. Furthermore, they had all taken the college’s year-long freshman seminar in which they had considerable experience in peer-critiquing. Many had also participated in co-authored projects in other courses in the department.

Since writing a single story among fifteen people would be too cumbersome, we divided the class into three groups, each of which would write a separate collaborative story over a four-week period. The final stories were to be read orally. One-third of their grade would be assigned on the basis of their journals; one-third on their individual revisions (all revisions had to be handed in); and one-third on the quality of the final stories.

We decided that at least the first drafts of the stories would be written in-class on a single day. Each team would need to decide on plot and characterization and to divide the story up into five or six parts. From that point on, each student, after consulting with the group, would be responsible for one formal revision to be handed in. In the final two weeks teams could revise however they saw fit. Students were free to collaborate with each other or with me, but they needed to discuss these collaborations in their journals.

The three groups were formed of like-minded people. Everyone was polled confidentially, and teams were selected on the basis of personal preferences. Excerpts from the journals—the students’ and my own—are reproduced below along with a narrative of the process. Here’s what happened:

Monday, March 5:

Today the teams planned their stories. They seemed to want me to stay in the background. All three teams came up with names for their groups: “Jack Grace,” “Murder One,” and “Write Corner.”

“At first I loved this idea. I’ll try anything Kesey tries first.”
Becky, “Jack Grace”
"Jack Grace," comprising five women, seemed to get off to a fast start. They decided to write about an attractive lesbian, Eve, traveling to meet an old college friend who doesn’t know that Eve is gay. They weren’t sure whether or not she would actually arrive. In retrospect it’s clear that their interpersonal conflicts began on the first day.

"My main problem was the idea of the story in the first place. I thought we were joking." Susan, "Jack Grace"

"We did not even jointly decide even the idea of the story together. We began meeting and then I realized we already had a topic." Mindy, "Jack Grace"

"Murder One" comprised four men and two women. They settled on a detective story about a man who arranges a blind contract for the murder of his wife. When the husband is tried for the murder, the hitman, by chance, sits on the jury. The two women in this group didn’t initially seem to be participating in the discussion.

"Write Corner," comprising five women and one man, talked about focusing on a young girl who visits her grandfather. Early on, their ideas seemed pretty sketchy and tentative.

**Wednesday, March 7:**

Today I brought in nine questions about characterization taken from an article in *The Writer* (Gardiner). The first few questions concerned character motivation. These were pretty easy, but when I got to details of character and plot, all groups except "Murder One" recognized they needed to make major decisions about their stories. So far the collaboration appeared to be working as well as expected.

**Friday, March 9**

The groups wrote their first drafts today. Each group adopted a very different strategy:

"Write Corner" worked quietly in the classroom; the other two groups worked in the Mac lab. Each member of "Jack Grace" sat quietly typing in front of her own Mac. Every now and then someone would ask a question from across the room: "What color hair does she have?" They seemed to be working very seriously.

The members of "Murder One" all sat around a single terminal and brain-stormed while one member logged in their ideas. Their interaction seemed lighthearted and animated.
Monday, March 12:

A number of students were uncertain about how much they were obligated to revise. I could tell from our discussions that some were afraid to do more than make minor stylistic changes while others wanted to take over the whole story but felt guilty doing so. Occasionally, students overcame their reticence and made wholesale revision, often to the chagrin of the others.

"I want this to be real life, without stereotypes or cliches. It has to be sincere to work. I wonder how much to do on my own and what to add, and I want to get group input, but we can't wait around every time. Besides, I was inspired." Annie, "Jack Grace"

Nevertheless, I encouraged them to make global revisions, especially after group discussion.

"I'm looking over my revisions again. I don't want to re-write everyone's section, not right off the bat. I think that may be too aggressive too soon. Honestly, I want to re-write the whole thing." Becky, "Jack Grace"

"Trying to smooth out the distinctions [is] hard because none of us want[s] to offend anyone else by changing what they write." Megan, "Write Corner"

My desire to have them revise globally was further compromised by their reluctance to accept ownership of a story they no longer believed in.

"Revised my section of "Jack Grace." We agreed to try to insert some 'thoughts' of Eve into the story. I found this difficult in a sense because it made me deal more with the homosexual aspect of the story." Cindy, "Jack Grace"

Cindy's discomfort at writing about a lesbian would prejudice her entire experience of the collaboration.

Monday, March 26:

In order to help them find a single voice, I asked them to give a brief, oral biographical sketch of their authors, including the author's name, as though they were going to send the stories out for publication. They also decided that it would be helpful to know the writer's age, sexual experience, dining preferences, and wart locations.

When class began, however, the members of "Jack Grace," instead of presenting a report, argued publicly about the identity of their writer. There was so little consensus that they asked to delay their report until
Wednesday. "Murder One" seemed at first to be more cohesive. Ernie reported that their author, a male, was a lecher, although the extent of his philandering was a point of contention. The women in the group remained silent, as though not quite acquiescing to the description. "Write Corner's" story, we were told, was written by a completely conventional, unpublished housewife who has lived a perfect, if sheltered, existence and who wanted to celebrate her own mother in the story.

Several members of "Jack Grace" were quick to blame their troubles on the strong-armed tactics of Annie and Becky:

"When it came time to report on our author, none of Amy, Susan [sic], or my input was used. Therefore, "Jack Grace" became the fictional creation of Annie and Becky. Tension continues to mount." Cindy, "Jack Grace"

Annie and Becky, in turn, seemed motivated in part by a commitment to the story:

"I want this to be real life—not sappy and not sentimental. We need to have more detail and more believable things. And our author—she is a real person, not a stereotype, not areckloose [sic] weirdo. She is conservative and human. I don't want her off the wall, reading socially conscious authors who take these great stands on things. Is this strange to get so serious over a fictional person? This is the first thing that I have ever worked on that I want to be right and that I believe can be good. I have strong feelings on this story. Typing some of the changes into [the last revision] killed me. It just is not right. Ugh." Annie, "Jack Grace"

Annie, caught between interpersonal relationships and the project, made a few concessions to the group and then charged head-long into her own revisions. Both she and Becky seemed motivated less by an impending grade than by the strong personal stake they had developed in the story.

**Tuesday, March 27:**

This morning I met privately with the members of "Jack Grace." They initially talked about problems of "polishing," "slips of narrating," "choppiness" and "over-generalization." One person said it "doesn't sound real." Their differences became more apparent when they talked about the identity of "Jack Grace." Cindy said she should be a "Laura Ashley woman." Becky wanted her to be an "ordinary woman." They couldn't decide whether or not she was a lesbian or whether she wrote
from personal experience, in response to a general sexual ambivalence, or because she wanted to write a pot-boiler. A more fundamental issue turned out to be whether she would write a story that treated lesbians sympathetically. The team agreed that that had to be decided before they could go any further.

Then they identified the problems of finding a common voice. Amy said that it was really difficult to write psychologically, like Becky. She described her own writing as more “on the surface.” Becky said that she didn’t write like the others either. I suggested that they needed to learn how to write like “Jack Grace,” not Becky and Mindy and Annie. They agreed and arranged to meet again in the afternoon. At last, this group seemed to be coming together.

“We met with Stay—nothing was accomplished. I hear Susan and Amy are angry because I supposedly am trying to run the whole thing. Funny . . . but I’ve been trying to keep my mouth shut.” Becky, “Jack Grace”

The members of “Jack Grace” seemed to be really disturbed this morning by their inability to come to conclusions about their persona. They were also taking the whole experience very personally, especially Annie.

“Perhaps Becky and I made a mistake with taking charge of who “Jack Grace” is, but actually I am not too concerned about that. We had to establish who she was and no decisions were being made. I am afraid some toes were stepped on. All in the name of great literature I suppose.” Annie, “Jack Grace”

In the afternoon I met with Sandra, Bill, and Rusty of “Murder One.” Paul, Lucy, and Ernie were absent. They don’t seem to have been doing a lot of reading of each others’ drafts. The story still has no ending and is very confusing (although at first they claimed it was pretty good). Sandra said she was just going to take control, despite Ernie and Paul.

**Wednesday, March 28:**

When the groups met in class today, I asked them to take one section of their story, any section, and, without consulting the others in their group, re-write it in the voice of the author. After they had a chance to write for about 25 minutes, I put them back in their teams to read aloud what they had just written and try to come to a consensus on the best voice for their author.
“The most difficult thing about the group is finding one voice.” Susan, “Jack Grace”

Friday, March 30:
Trouble erupted today. Becky caught me before class and told me that “Jack Grace” had broken into two irreconcilable camps. By the time I got to class the group sat together sullenly. I started the other two groups revising their stories, then turned my attention to “Jack Grace.”

I suggested we go into the seminar room next door to talk privately. Once in the room I was told that there were major personal conflicts among the members. There were five different voices, I was told, and no one was willing to give hers up. Mindy said that, although the in-class assignment to write in the voice of their author helped, once they got back to their rooms they began writing as Annie and Becky and Cindy and Susan. Mindy suggested that maybe they should start writing collaboratively—all five in the same room, like Ken Kesey’s class. They agreed that that was the only way to complete the story.

I left the group to work through their differences and followed Cindy into the Mac lab. She sat in front of a terminal, blankly typing in her changes. While our meeting just now had helped, she said, they were not going to get anything accomplished until I left the room. She said that she and Susan and Mindy were pitted against Becky and Annie and that finishing the story collaboratively would be “pure hell.”

Meanwhile, the other groups had come into the lab to work. “Murder One” gathered around a single terminal, Ernie pacing the room in a long trench coat, like Columbo, inventing names for jurors. They seemed to have finally jelled as a group, but when I read their journals, I found a quite different story.

“There was no cohesiveness in “Murder One.” Only the males would consult on how the story was going; they never let the serious students see any changes.” Sandra, “Murder One”

“There were two or three group members who could have cared less. Maybe, since Ernie, Paul and I selected the plot, characters, setting, and most of the detail, others in our group thought of the story as ‘our baby’ and didn’t want to partake or interfere with the fun we were having.” Rusty, “Murder One”

“It wasn’t long before I came to despise being around some of my fellow group members.” Lucy, “Murder One”

Wednesday, April 18:
Today the stories were read orally. “Jack Grace,” despite their interpersonal conflicts, seemed relatively pleased with the outcome, as
did "Write Corner." Then Ernie got up to read "Murder One." At first the story seemed to proceed predictably from anticipation, to the murder in all its grizzly detail, to the trial, although very little seemed to have been revised from the earlier drafts. Then, at the moment of revelation, came an explosion—"KABOOM"—destroying not only the evidence, but the courtroom, the characters and, in essence, the entire story.

The students all sat with their mouths open. Even members of "Murder One" seemed stunned.

"The 'final' reading of our 'group' short story was just as much a surprise to me as it was to the rest of the class who was hearing it for the first time." Lucy, "Murder One"

In his journal Ernie explains the ending:

"Panic began to set in when Paul and I realized that this story had boiled down to a two man effort, or so it readily appeared. On the night before we were to read the story, Paul and I were panicking in the Mac lab at a quarter to eleven. We concocted the idea to destroy the courthouse with a terrorist bomb."

In a later entry he explained the sabotage in more detail:

"Because it was only Paul and I in the end, we hoped to teach the other members a lesson, by shocking them into realizing how completely the story had changed, for they showed no participative effort, and appeared not to care for what we were trying to accomplish. Whether this worked or not, the look on the others' faces was priceless.... Sir, team stories are bad news." Ernie, "Murder One"

Monday, April 30:

Today the final graded stories were handed back to the teams. "Jack Grace," after all the feathers settled, seemed generally pleased with the results as was "Write Corner." However, I gave "Murder One's" story a C (this was actually a bit generous). The final draft was not only poorly detailed, but it had so many surface errors that it seemed as though it hadn't even been proofread.

When Sandra saw the comments and the grade she was outraged. She began pointing at my marginal comments: "The point of view changes here," she read. "Who corrected that problem? You intentionally ignored my changes! It's not funny, Ernie." For a moment I thought
I might have to separate them physically. When I dismissed the class, no one moved.

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This project was compromised by a series of difficulties arising from three different quarters: the students' intra- and interpersonal conflicts, my role as instructor, and the nature of the project itself. Evidence of intrapersonal conflict came in students' awareness of their dual roles as peers and students. Their journals indicate that when they revised globally, they usually felt unsettled about appropriating the text, and when they revised locally, they felt as though the resulting product was not really theirs:

"After getting a final copy of the story ... I felt jilted because there was only a small part of me in it. The only part that I contributed seemed to be the grammatical corrections." Nancy, "Write Corner"

These journal entries reveal a constant struggle to find the proper balance between appropriating texts and making surface changes. On the one hand, collaborators are likely to say, "I'm afraid the others won't like it if I change too much." On the other hand, they'll say, "This is going nowhere. I've got to step in and take control." The former decision compromises the text but spares the friends; the latter often (but not always) improves the text but stirs the wasp nest. Researchers in group dynamics have found that role conflicts such as this place significant pressure on individuals that may not be easily resolved (Brett; Pondy; Thomas; Katz and Kahn). As Michael Roloff explains, "conflict in groupwork is pervasive" (515).

Ironically, rather than leading toward de-centralization of power, in this project collaboration yielded new, more destructive hierarchies based on gender, skill-level, and perceived commitment to the project. To use Lunsford and Ede's terms, "hierarchic" collaboration replaced "dialogic" collaboration (Singular Texts/Plural Authors 133).

The most serious disruption was the marginalization of women in "Murder 1." The men seized control of the story and were subsequently offended when the women refused to join the "team." The women, on the other hand, felt ostracized from the beginning. As Sandra wrote in her journal,

Lucy and I were never treated as equals. We were always reminded of our sex (like we didn't know). [The men] were very unwilling to give us the disk to make corrections; and when we did make corrections, the males did not approve of them.
The metaphors of hierarchy and web, which Carol Gilligan believes govern men's and women's moral understanding (62), can also be used to describe the conflicting expectations in this group. The women felt that the breakdown of connections between group members effectively silenced their voices in the conversation. The men saw the problem as a breakdown of teamwork ("They showed no participative effort"). This difference is consistent with Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler's observations about men's and women's styles of learning, that men are more comfortable with "authoritarian educational settings" while women function better in "settings where learning is a communal activity shared fairly equally by students and teacher" (56). When the women resisted this structure, they were first ignored and then humiliated, most graphically through the violence of the ending, an act anticipated in Gilligan's conviction that hierarchical moral ordering contains the "potential for violence" (32).

However, even in a group comprised entirely of women, "Jack Grace," a clearly identifiable hierarchy arose between those who thought they could write best and those who acceded power grudgingly to the first group. Only "Write Corner" seemed to find consensus without a damaging hierarchical structure, although it didn't help them to produce an innovative story.

Second, the groups tended to exhibit the symptoms of what Jewell and Reitz call "immaturity." Newly formed groups are often uncertain of the assets and liabilities of group members (their own included), uncertain of the group's objectives, tend to form cliques, conflict with group leadership, and are uncertain about the group's operating structure (13-14). "Jack Grace" and "Murder One" displayed all of these characteristics. Most poignant was the inability of the members of "Jack Grace" to decide whether their lesbian character should be treated sympathetically. Some members of the group initially went along with the fun without comprehending the significance of their decisions. A year after the project several of the members of "Jack Grace" still didn't speak to each other.

My role as a teacher also affected the relationships within groups. While I tried to give them as much leeway as possible, I intervened frequently to help them negotiate interpersonal conflicts and distribution of tasks, and to provide in-draft written and oral responses. Yet I knew that I remained on the periphery of their groups. To make matters worse, in retrospect it's clear that I didn't always read their conflict very accurately. When I perceived my intrusions to be warranted and effective, the students were as likely as not to perceive them as well-meaning but useless.
We know very little about what makes a teacher’s intervention appropriate or effective. On the one hand, the teacher has an obligation, as Kenneth Bruffee has written, “to try to help students negotiate the rocks and shoals of social relations that may interfere with their getting on with their work together” (645). On the other hand, intervention “[takes] away the power of individuals to find a solution” (O’Reiley 142). Knowing when and how to provide help, then, becomes largely a matter of guesswork. Kesey’s success in the classroom might well have come as much from his relatively heavy-handed presence (he demanded 50% of the vote) as it did from the process itself. As Kesey succinctly puts it, “nothing hampers creativity like too many cooks” (Knox-Quinn 309).

Another source of conflict came from the nature of the project. Creative writing probably tests the limits of collaboration more than expository writing, especially in requiring a single voice. Readers expect from fiction a clear, unified, voice that they do not necessarily expect or get from non-fiction. Wallace Stevens’ observation that “there can be no poetry without the personality of the poet” (46) is equally true for fiction. For Stevens, poetry results from an egotism that eludes definition. Although establishing a clear, singular voice in expository writing can be problematic as well (Forman and Katsky 30), creative writers are given considerably less latitude. They do not have the luxury of announcing, as do Lunsford and Ede, that their plurality of voice represents the plurality of themselves as authors in opposition to the singular text (Singular Texts/Plural Authors 142).

The project thus challenges the notion that fiction writing can or ought to be a collaborative endeavor. Fiction-writing doesn’t seem to allow students to produce better products in groups than they can individually, Kesey’s experience notwithstanding. But why should this be so? Richard Rorty’s distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” discourse provides a clue. These terms, generalized from Thomas Kuhn’s distinction between “normal” and “revolutionary” science (Kuhn), offer ways to account for the unpredictable turns in socially constructed knowledge. For Rorty abnormal discourse “can be anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution, and there is no discipline which describes it, any more than there is a discipline devoted to the study of the unpredictable, or of ‘creativity’” (320). For Bruffee abnormal discourse “sniffs out stale, unproductive knowledge and challenges its authority” (648).

The concept of abnormal discourse allows Rorty and Bruffee to account for the influence of individual genius on a community. Even those who reject the notion of abnormal discourse, either because it undermines the notion of genius (Stewart “Collaborative Learning and Composition” 63) or because it continues to support the status quo
(Trimbur, "Consensus" 609), recognize that the production of some kinds of discourse stubbornly remains a solitary activity. Fiction is a kind of abnormal discourse, and when it is co-authored, both front- and back-seat drivers engage in a quest for the fresh and interesting. Successful collaborations in abnormal discourse, say, Duke Ellington’s collaborations with Billy Strayhorn, require not only mutual respect, but a very clear idea of what the final product should sound like.

Co-authorship does not appear to be a very effective pedagogy for teaching creative writing because taking control of the text away from the writer undermines the goal of making students more perceptive and skillful fiction-writers. Co-authorship might work in brief in-class exercises, but using workshop and peer-group pedagogy will likely be far more effective. Reither and Vipond’s suggestion that co-authoring "helps students experience the frustrations of cooperation but also the joys" (864) might well underplay the frustration and overplay the joys. Successful academic collaborators (Lunsford and Ede; Flower and Hayes; Knoblauch and Brannon) require a level of sophistication and commitment not easily transferred to the classroom, and the success of these teams does not mean that classroom co-authorship is either possible or desirable.

Although I have been careful not to make more claims than the evidence suggests, this study does have implications beyond creative writing projects. Only part of the difficulty described here can be attributed to the unique qualities of creative writing. The other sources of dissonance—gender, role, and value conflict, differences in ability and commitment level, and the instructor’s guidance and/or intervention—may influence any kind of co-authored project. The critical issue of co-authorship is the negotiation for control of a text, whether one writes a short story, a scholarly article, or a technical document. Sometimes these negotiations will lead to knowledge-making, but they are just as likely to unravel and disrupt the collaborative process whether they take place in business writing classes, literature classes, or freshman composition. Theoretically, co-authored projects ought to benefit from the varying strengths and weaknesses of project members; practically, collaborative authors must negotiate the obstacles of personal differences, and these negotiations may not succeed. Geoffrey Cross has observed destructive hierarchical relationships in corporate collaboration (196). Even scientific collaborations, as Trimbur and Braun have shown, may "be embedded in hierarchical social structures and produce monopolies of expertise and differential access to prestige and credit" (34).

Unfortunately, proponents of collaboration have been much too quick to laud its benefits and much too slow to acknowledge its weaknesses. Mark Hurlbert, for instance, writes that collaboration is "socially
valuable and personally significant” because students “form interpersonal relations” in a “non-competitive environment” (168). McNenny and Roen begin their recent article by citing a few “horror stories” of scholarly collaboration and then conclude by likening collaboration to a “marriage” where each participant needs to “respect each other,” to be “committed to the project,” and “to carry his or her share of the load” (305). Such blithe generalizations trivialize the social forces which may undermine specific collaborative projects and make arguments for successful collaboration seem like responses to personal or political agendas.

In this project consensus was compromised at every turn. The only group that achieved consensus at all did not produce the best story. For the group that fought over basic values consensus was not possible, and for the group that experienced gender-related conflicts, consensus seemed irrelevant.

Still, this project yielded some positive outcomes. A number of students talked about learning from others how to develop themes and craft the story. One said that the best part of the experience was finding a new best friend. But the potential of collaboration to test friendships and strain classroom morale is inescapable. In highly complex collaborative writing contexts, success depends on a great deal of maturity, mutual respect, and compromise. Even mature students working with their friends may not be able to function effectively in groups. In any case, we need to learn more about why certain projects work and others do not.

We also need to know more about the effect of personal writing styles, habits, and abilities on group successes. Donald Stewart, in his 1988 Rhetoric Review article and in his recent comment in College English, argues that some of the limits of collaboration come from the personalities of the writers themselves. As he succinctly puts it, “it will work with certain students in certain contexts. It most certainly will not work with a number of students in a number of contexts” (“Collaborative Learning and Composition” 80). Others have suggested that limits arise from different composing styles. As Jim Corder says, “Why should we imagine that any one conceptualization of writing would serve us all? We are too various and lovely for single visions to hold us” (12).

In this project collaboration valorized the efforts of those controlling the wheel and repressed the others. When the silence of those in the backseat threatened the voice of those in the front seat, the result was a remarkable example of group-immolation. The complexity of collaboration allows it to support as well as subvert authority within the group, give voice to students and silence them, improve final products and destroy them. When we make claims about co-authorship based only on political empowerment or pedagogical exigency, we tacitly ignore the
Works Cited


