
Reviewed by Sean R. Maddox, California Polytechnic State University

I scratched my head in confusion as the last students filed out of my classroom, unable to understand what had just taken place. I thought the collaborative learning unit on Rhetorical appeals I developed was pedagogically sound. I asked students, with my assistance, to break down how political advertisements use different rhetorical appeals, asked them in groups to craft their own political platforms and advertisements then present them to the class. Finally, we held a vote to see which new political advertisement was most successful in persuading their audience by discussing the rhetorical appeals used. But my initial enthusiasm and confidence quickly faded, as each class became disengaged, quickly rushing through the activity and moving on to non-related matters despite my continual questioning and engagement in the group process. The presentations, not showing complexity and integration of class material, reflected this non-critical thought process and lack luster performance. I racked my brain to try to figure out what happened. But, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't pin point the possible factor that led to the activity's failure, as other group activities had been successful. I, once again, began to question the effectiveness of collaborative learning.

It was a few days later, sitting on my patio drinking a cup of hot coffee and reading Kathleen M. Hunzer’s collection, Collaborative Learning and Writing: Essays on Using Small Groups in Teaching English and Composition, I found many of the same questions I had about my collaborative learning activities being asked. How do I choose groups? How do I setup assignments specifically for collaborative learning? What pedagogical considerations do I need to make? How do I insure labor is fair and equitable between group members? But, unlike books and essays which only provide a very narrow lens through which to view collaborative learning, Hunzer provides us with “a practical sourcebook that answers these questions” and “provides us helpful advice” through an in depth collection of varied and crucial theory on the use of collaborative learning in classrooms (3-4). To accomplish this task, Hunzer breaks up the collection into five sections, each one based on answering a common question surrounding the use of collaborative learning within classrooms.

The first part, consisting of four essays, tries to answer the question “why [are] collaborative learning and peer review . . . important”? (3). The section begins with Jason Wirtz’s article “Writing Courses Live and Die by the Quality of Peer Review,” which provides a general overview of
why we should peer review in our classrooms by exemplifying the positive benefits associated with successful peer reviewing, from providing students with the support of a writers community to teaching them about audience awareness to showing them there is no “right” answer. To insure successful implementation of peer review, he also addresses the most common reasons peer reviewing “wants to fail” and clearly articulates the instructor’s role in the peer reviewing process (9).

What Wirtz’s article lacks in peer review classroom implementation, the other three essays of the first section undeniably make up for it, starting with Anthony Edgington’s article “Bringing New Perspectives to a Common Practice: A Plan for Peer Review.” Edgington provides a thorough outline for implementing a traditional peer review activity from the very first preparation stages to the final instructor responses and includes sample worksheets, activities, and questions for fellow instructors to consider. Catherine Kalish, Heinert, and Pilmaier explain in detail the implementation of the non-traditional peer-tutorial method of peer review in their article, “Reinventing Peer Review Using Writing Center Techniques: Teaching Students to Use Peer-tutorial Methodology.” Jacob Stratmen, in “It’s just too nicey-nicey around here: Teaching Dissensus in Research and Collaborative Groups,” discusses the use and importance of dissensus within research groups and collaborative learning, an area highly lacking in research since John Trimbur’s initial call for dissensus. The four articles, which make up the first section, provide readers with an array of well thought out and critical answers on why and how we should use collaborative learning and peer reviewing within our classrooms.

The second part, composed of three essays, tries to provide an answer to what is probably the most asked question concerning collaborative learning: “How do I best select groups in my classes?” (3). The first essay “Increasing Participation and Accountability in Group Production of Text through Speed Interviews” examines the use of speed interviews, a common business and dating practice, in choosing collaborative learning groups within classrooms. Mialisa Moline provides detailed explanations, theory, diagrams, and examples on the use of speed interviewing for instructors to consider. On the other hand, Kathleen Hunzer’s article “Connecting Writing Process with Personality: Creating Long-Lasting Trust Circles in Writing Classes” offers a far more personal approach to group formation through the matching of students based on their personalities and provides examples from her own students and classes for instructors to consider. Mialisa Moline, in her essay “Forming Peer Critique Groups Through Personality Preferences,” explores the use of personality tests, like the Myer-Briggs Type Indicator, to help select student group members. This includes a breakdown of suggested personality type combinations for different activities and stages of writing. No matter your classroom or student make up, this section provides any concerned instructor a multitude of ways to form groups no matter the demands of their students and classes.
In the third part, Hunzer explores the use of collaborative learning within electronic environments and tries to answer the question of how to successfully implement collaborative learning within these types of new and quickly evolving classroom environments. Starting with a general overview of collaborative learning within digital environments, Cindy Tekobbe’s, Yazmin Lazcano-Pry’s, and Duane Roen’s article “Collaborative Learning and Writing in Digital Environments,” provides a theoretical basis for the benefits and concerns of using digital environments within collaborative learning activities and explores the different technologies available for setting up a digital collaborative learning environment. Kelly Shea, Donna Evens and Ben S. Bunting, Jr., and Cheryl Melkun, on the other hand, go into detailed explanations, in their respective essays, on the implementation of specific digital technologies within a class, from the use of course management systems for peer response (Shea) to Google Docs for collaborative writing (Evans, Bunting) to the use of web conferencing for online collaboration (Melkun). No matter your technological preference, Hunzer, through the essays she selects, provides an array of in depth and well thought out options when it comes to the use of collaborative learning within digital environments.

In order to provide a “practical source book,” Hunzer focuses the fourth section on examining if “collaborative learning and writing work in all writing classrooms” (4). Although this question, in theory, would be impossible to answer considering the ever changing social nature of any classroom, the three essays of this section center on the implementation and use of collaborative learning and writing within different course types. Randi Browning allows us a look into her use of collaborative learning within her business writing classrooms—in order to replicate real-world collaborative experiences—and in the process provides course design material to actual in-class implementation. Through in class examples and assessments, Florence Bacbac dives into her own Business Communication courses to explore and demonstrate the use, advantages, and disadvantages of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for student collaboration during the writing process. And Kara Alexander shows how team projects can be implemented within writing classrooms in ways that mitigate many of the common problems instructors often face. Unlike the other sections, the question Hunzer sets out to answer here isn’t clearly answered. Instead, we’re provided with practical examples of how different instructors tackled this question themselves, and, in the process, provided ways to find our own answer for our own courses.

To round out her “practical sourcebook” on collaborative learning, Hunzer examines if “special populations benefit from collaborative activities” in her fifth and final part. Because this area of study within collaborative learning theory is still not thoroughly researched, this section consists of only two essays, Robb Mccollum’s “Working Together Towards Greatness: The Cumulative Writing Model and English Language Learners” and Kathleen Hunzer’s essay “Anxiety Disorders and the Collaborative Classroom.” Mccollum examines the use of a cumulative writing model (CWM), in which
students continually repeat the research writing process multiple times over a course, to teach students, especially ESL students, the language of academic writing. McCallum includes a theoretical base for cumulative writing models with examples, activities, and figures. Hunzer deconstructs the conflicting nature between students with anxiety disorders and collaborative learning environments, which tend to exacerbate them. She provides a thoughtful discussion of the differing anxiety disorders our students may have, the problems they can manifest, and possible ways to approach the collaborative learning environment in order to mitigate these problems.

In structuring the collection around some of the most common questions and concerns any instructor familiar with collaborative learning would have, Hunzer successfully provides a practical sourcebook “to make this amazingly productive pedagogy work smoothly and effectively” (4). By the time I finished the book, it became clear the mistakes I made within my own collaborative learning activity. I failed to make collaborative learning the central focus of my course, relied on a random and uncritical group selection process, didn’t emphasize the importance of collaboration enough, and, as a result, the majority of my classes didn’t always see the importance of working together. Hunzer’s collection provided me with a multitude of pragmatic ways to answer my questions and implement collaborative learning in my classrooms, and for any instructor who uses collaborative learning within their course, or is curious in doing so, I strongly recommend Collaborative Learning and Writing: Essays on Using Small Groups in Teaching English and Composition.

Grover Beach, CA

Work Cited