COURSE DESCRIPTION

English 4090, Collaborative Writing at Work, is a course I have taught twice; this essay focuses on the most recent time, Spring 2006. The course is a senior-level elective designed to reinforce students’ existing knowledge of professional writing and to teach students how to apply that knowledge effectively in collaborative contexts. Students complete both individual and group assignments, mostly the latter. The major group project asks students to create a company that is sending a group of employees overseas. As part of this project, students prepare a mission statement describing their company, a proposal explaining the rationale for choosing a particular country, a research review evaluating sources about that country, a progress report, a brochure introducing the country to employees being sent there, and an oral presentation briefing those employees. Students also read and discuss articles about group process and collaboration, creating a theoretical base they can use both in the class and in their professional lives.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Kean University is a public metropolitan university located in Union, New Jersey, approximately thirty minutes from New York City. Its mission, according to the undergraduate catalog, is to prepare students “to think critically and creatively; to adapt to changing social, economic, and technological environments; and to serve as active and contributing members of their communities” (4). Approximately 13,000 undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom commute, make up the student body. In Fall 2005, about half were classified in
a minority group (Fact). Tuition and fees for in-state students in Spring 2006 were $3,750.00, and approximately sixty percent of the student body receives some sort of financial aid (Tuition; Financial). The full-time faculty numbers 384, with a large contingent of part-time faculty (Fact). Kean is best known for teacher education, with Elementary Education the largest major on campus and Early Childhood Education the fourth largest (Fact). State law requires Education majors to select a second major in a content area. Many choose English.

The English major contains four options. The standard option and two teacher-certification options (one for secondary education and one for teachers of students with disabilities) emphasize literature. Elementary and Early Childhood Education majors can choose either the standard or the writing option. Students fulfilling the writing option take the following required courses: the history and theory of writing, advanced composition, writing about literature, a Shakespeare survey, an introduction to grammar and linguistics, and a capstone seminar. Most of the courses in the writing option are electives: students must take eight, two in literature and six in writing. This flexibility gives students the opportunity to tailor their course of study to meet their interests.

Collaborative Writing at Work most obviously benefits those students interested in professional writing. The course gives them more practice with writing in professional genres, helping them learn how to prepare those documents effectively when working with a group. Since the course is usually offered in the evening, it tends to attract working students who want to advance their careers. Education majors, particularly those fulfilling the writing option, also take ENG 4090. The course benefits these students by introducing them to theories and issues related to group process; these future educators can use that information to decide how to use groups in their pedagogy.

Theoretical Background

The course proposal for ENG 4090 lists three objectives: “to review and reinforce the principles and practices of writing on the job,” “to demonstrate that working as a team to develop and produce a useable project makes members more tolerant and respectful of the opinions of others,” and “to convince students that . . . the more important the document is to an organization, the more likely it will be produced by collaboration” (2). The final objective is borne out by research in workplace writing. Lester Faigley and Thomas P. Miller surveyed 200 college-educated businesspeople and found that approximately 74 percent of their sample worked in groups to complete at least a quarter of all writing tasks their jobs required (567). Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford’s wider-ranging survey (which included about 700 people from seven different professional organizations) found similar results; roughly 87 percent of their sample spent time writing in a group (60). Essentially, students who plan to enter business and technical fields need to learn how to work in groups.
Ede and Lunsford also state that 61 percent of their respondents felt that their education did not adequately prepare them for collaborative writing (59). While most business and technical writing textbooks contain advice and assignments on collaborative writing, such material usually cannot be the center of an introductory course. This type of class usually does not have time to cover collaborative writing as thoroughly as traditional business genres, especially if students have little experience with them. Collaborative Writing at Work assumes students already know how to prepare common types of business documents. The class spends most of its time learning strategies for preparing those documents in a collaborative context. Usually, this means students spend about half of each class working in their groups. The course, in other words, emphasizes interpersonal processes over learning new genres.

While ENG 4090 gives students plenty of chances to collaborate, those chances occur in the controlled, contained world of a classroom. I try carefully to design the collaborative groups, working to combine students with complementary skills, matching blocks of free time, and corresponding work styles. Also, most students are of basically the same social rank. However, most collaboration in the professional world is not as leveled or controlled. Students will have to work with people of varying social backgrounds, with widely different work styles, or with many other differences. To prepare for these complications, students need to learn the principles that affect collaboration. We read articles on group process, group conflict, authorship, modes of collaboration (focusing on Ede and Lunsford’s hierarchical and dialogic modes), computers and collaboration, and collaboration and difference (with an emphasis on gender). Most of these articles come from academic journals, and their ideas can be hard for even experienced undergraduates to process. To help, at least one person writes a reaction memo that summarizes and responds to the article, ending with questions to prompt class discussion. I hope students become self-aware collaborators through the discussion, recognizing the factors that influence collaboration and responding to them as they work with any group to which they belong.

Students also become self-aware collaborators through the course’s reflective elements. Students keep process logs where they describe and reflect on their experiences working with their group. The log “encourages group members to think about and write about the interaction process, how it influences their written products, and how they can improve their communication skills” (Goldstein 24). In addition, students respond in process logs to assigned prompts, most of which explore ideas raised in the theoretical readings. One prompt, connected to a reading on authorship, asked students to explain how they personally defined authorship and how that definition differed from the one their group seemed to have adopted. Other prompts are strictly reflective, asking students to look back at a specific task the group completed and evaluate it—or discuss what they learned from the experience. Through these prompts and the other log entries, students have the chance to learn “a full range of collaborative strategies” (Lay 5).
Besides encouraging reflection, process logs are an important means of assessment, a frequently-mentioned concern in publications on teaching collaborative writing. Dennis H. Barbour considers grading collaborative texts a bigger “ethical dilemma” than grading of single-author texts (33-34). John D. Beard and his collaborators state that a possible problem occurs when teachers use a “procedure that grades students based only by output—the group-written product—and ignores individual contributions to the group process” (30). If group process is not evaluated, students may be less involved in it, thus missing the point of a collaborative assignment. Through the logs, instructors gain a “glimpse into the processes groups use to plan and write their documents, allowing [them] to give credit where credit is due—to fairly evaluate the process” (Morgan et al., “Evaluating” 84). My evaluation of the logs follows the criteria outlined by Meg Morgan and her collaborators; I look at “the completeness and substantive nature of the content” in entries (85). Students submit the log at the semester’s midpoint. I offer feedback on the entries and assign a tentative grade. The final grade is recorded when students submit the final log at the end of the semester.

In addition to balancing process and product when grading collaborative work, instructors must consider fairness. The simplest definition of fairness, and the one most commonly held by my students, is one in which everyone receives credit for the work they do. Collaborative projects can allow weaker or lazier students to earn higher grades than they deserve. Students forced to take up the slack could cry unfairness, and their instructor may not be able to ease their fears. No matter how conscientious a teacher is, he or she cannot observe every group all the time, which can make their judgments invalid. Peer evaluation is one way to respond to these concerns. Richard Freeman and Roger Lewis argue that group members are in the “best position to make judgments [about their peers’ involvement in the group] and [have] the most information on which to draw” (292). Many other sources on peer evaluation agree. Peer evaluation, as well as the process log, “helps students realize that they share accountability for their own performance and for the performance of their group members” (Morgan et al., “Collaborative” 25).

I integrate peer evaluation into the course through both informal and formal means. One of the first process log prompts asks students to describe their initial impressions of their group. Later prompts ask them to revisit those impressions, describing how they were confirmed or changed. Students also write two informal group assessments, adapted from an assignment in Kitty Locker’s Business and Administrative Communication (257). These assessments are informal because only the writer earns the grade from this assignment, instead of the writer grading his or her peers. Students start the memo by objectively describing the group’s work; then, they evaluate their peers’ performance. The first group assessment, done at the course’s midpoint, is written in memo format and submitted only to me. The second is an email sent to me and the whole group. The privacy of the first group assessment enables me to subtly help groups without disrupting the tentative web of trust that should be growing among the group members. By the second group
assessment, the groups should know each other well enough for criticism not to hurt the group’s cohesion.

The informal evaluations prepare students for the formal peer evaluations, where they grade each other’s performance and the grade counts. I used to distribute a multiple-criteria set of scales (which seems to be the standard approach in published sources), but I asked students in my Spring 2006 class to give their peers a numeric grade and to write a paragraph justifying the score. The justification gives me a better sense of the students’ reasoning, something a ranking scale does not record. It also allows me to see if the evaluation is being unfairly influenced by personality conflicts. If it is, I can adjust the score. The formal peer evaluation occurs twice. The first is near the semester’s midpoint, approximately two weeks after the first group assessment. I summarize the feedback for each student, asking the students to talk with their groups about any concerns their peers raised. The second evaluation occurs during the last class. I average the evaluations together to determine the final score.

Although the course’s focus is collaborative writing, students still need to refine their individual writing skills. The reaction memos, group assessments, and shorter homework assignments give them this chance. These assignments also help me ensure “that my final assessment of a student’s performance [is] reflected accurately through the final grade,” instead of a student using his or her group members to disguise a lack of involvement in the course (Barbour 34).

**Reflection**

Overall, the Spring 2006 course seems to have been a good learning experience for the students. From my vantage point, they produced quality documents and grew in their writing abilities through both collaborative and individual assignments. The groups also appeared to work together effectively, though it took one group much longer to cohere than the other. In a final process log entry, the students reported that they better understood how to collaborate and why collaboration is an important professional skill. The following comment is typical:

I have not ever had so much collaborative work over such an extended period of time as I have this semester. This gave me the opportunity to work with four strangers on a number of projects. I feel that although this class was about writing projects, the experience gained from working with others can be used in other social circumstances in everyday life. Working with other people is a give-and-take process, which is how the world operates.

This response emphasizes the interpersonal aspects of the course. Another student made a similar point, focusing on the differences in status that can make up a group: “Collaboration is hard. I could end up dealing with people who are not at the same
level as me, be it higher or lower and I still need to constantly search for a common road in the group.” This writer ended his log by stating, “Collaborative writing is fun,” a sentiment the rest of the students seemed to share.

While the students made the groups work, we all felt they were too large. The Spring 2006 class contained two groups with five students in each. This size made it difficult for everyone in a group to meet together outside of class. The size may have also prevented one group from cohering as quickly as it could have. When a couple of students commented on the size of the groups, I explained that circumstances forced it. I originally created three groups of four students. A couple of hours before the groups were to be announced, I learned two students had dropped the course. Both were in the same group. Because of the time crunch and other deadlines that day, I moved the remaining two students into other groups instead of redesigning all the groups. I feel lucky the groups worked as well as they did. In the future, I will attempt to develop a backup set of groups that shift students around while still combining people with similar schedules and complementary skills. Of course, this plan may not work, given the overloaded schedules of many Kean students and my own inability to predict who might drop a course. However, a back-up plan may limit the impact of panicked, last-minute changes.

Computers can allow students to work together without meeting physically, but the Spring 2006 class rarely used this approach. Our attempt to meet purely online was a disaster. For this class, students were supposed to post a draft of their research review to a WebCT discussion board, and the other group would workshop it. One group posted their draft on time; the other group not only lacked a complete draft but also failed to contact each other in time to prepare anything. Two members of the group without a draft sent me panicked emails, but I was attending a conference in another state, too far away to be of much help. As might be expected, process logs written by students in both groups said computerized collaboration was not useful.

I asked the group that did not post a draft to reflect on what happened, using the group’s WebCT discussion board. Three students did. All agreed that the group worked together well in class, but their communication outside of class was weak. They were also having to deal with a group member who had missed many classes and was not the best participant when present. The problems associated with their research review, combined with having to reflect afterward, seemed to benefit the group. They strengthened their communication and produced a very strong brochure and oral presentation. As one member wrote in his process log: “My group probably could have gotten more organized earlier in the semester, but at all is better than not at all. We really lashed the proverbial horse, and our group moved fast during these last few weeks. Our PowerPoint is done, our brochure is essentially finished, and our group is finally filling in the roles needed to take ourselves [instead] of just blaming each other.”

The problems all the students encountered working online probably came from my not adequately preparing them. Many of Kean’s students possess
minimal digital literacy outside of social networking sites. Almost every semester, several students in my first-year composition classes claim to have never sent an email attachment; a few cannot make Word automatically double-space lines of text. I assumed that the juniors and seniors in ENG 4090 had learned more about computers than my first-year students. We did practice using Word’s commenting function. We also read about the process of circulating a document for electronic commenting, but we did not practice doing so. Students used the commenting features and then sent the document straight to me. The next time I teach the course, I plan to have students cycle a document among multiple people, each contributing different revisions. We can then discuss how to keep different versions of a file straight, how to communicate effectively in electronic environments, and other aspects of collaborating by computer. We will also spend more time using WebCT for collaboration, including assignments designed to give groups a chance to work out problems with the technology in class and increase their comfort level.

Increasing student technology use could allow for another change to the course: more frequent reviews of the process logs. The logs provide valuable feedback on how students perceive the course—as well as help the students and me evaluate how the groups function (Morgan et al., “Collaborative” 23; Goldstein 24). Adding more process log checks, however, increases the workload of an already intense course. One compromise would be to create individual discussion topics on WebCT and have students keep their logs there. I could easily skim new posts throughout the semester, offering feedback as needed. This approach would also allow the class to probe issues that students raise in their logs throughout the semester, not just after the midpoint check.

Finally, I want to continue updating and adding to the theoretical readings as new issues related to collaboration are discussed in published research. I would particularly like to find more detailed sources on collaboration and difference. In Spring 2007, I used Mary Lay’s “Interpersonal Conflict in Collaborative Writing: What We Can Learn from Gender Studies.” It presents an extremely comprehensive analysis of how gender differences can affect collaboration, but it says less about other forms of difference, such as ethnicity or status. An article that discusses a wider range of differences would help prepare students for the varied cultural backgrounds and other differences they will encounter in the business world.

**Conclusion**

Through its focus on the theoretical aspects of collaboration, ENG 4090 fills a gap in students’ preparation to become professional writers. They can take their knowledge of professional writing and apply it to the group-writing contexts they will encounter on the job. My hope is that they will not join the 61 percent of Ede and Lunsford’s sample who felt unprepared for collaborating at work.6
Notes

1 Martha Thomas, of the Center for Business Communication at the University of South Carolina’s Darla Moore School of Business, gave me this assignment.

2 While this section focuses on the importance of collaboration in business contexts, there is a similar push for recognizing the importance of collaboration in academia. For more details, see Damrosch, Sullivan, and Arac, among others.

3 If necessary, I direct students to sections of our textbook, or we review topics based on the students’ needs.

4 For a more detailed discussion of how students who participate in collaborative projects tend to define fairness, see my article, “Avoiding the Black Dot: Fair Grading of Collaborative Writing.”

5 I would like to thank Charles Nelson and Sally Chandler for their feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. I would also like to thank the students who gave me permission to quote from their process logs.

Works Cited


Faigley, Lester, and Thomas Miller. “What We Learn from Writing on the Job.” College English 44.6 (1982): 557-69.


ENGLISH 4090: COLLABORATIVE WRITING AT WORK

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND POLICIES

Collaborative writing, the creation of one document by multiple authors, is an important part of most professionals’ lives. Surveys conducted by researchers Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford found that 87 percent of respondents spent part of their time working in groups. Ede and Lunsford also state that 61 percent of their respondents felt their education failed to adequately prepare them to write collaboratively. This course aims to meet that need, providing you with the theory and practice needed to create effective documents as part of a group. You will be placed in a group with 2-3 other students and asked to create a series of documents for various professional situations. We will also discuss theoretical articles on collaborative writing and group process, giving you the information needed to adapt to most group situations.

I designed this course under the assumption that students have fulfilled the prerequisites: College Composition (ENG 1030, 1031/1032, or 1033/1034), and either Business and Professional (ENG 3090) or Technical (ENG 3091) Writing. While we will review some of the concepts covered in those courses, I will not reteach them. Please talk with me as soon as possible if you are concerned about your ability to complete the work required for this course. Because this course emphasizes group work, please let me know if you plan to drop the course, so I can make any changes to the groups that are necessary.

REQUIRED TEXTS AND MATERIALS

- Readings on reserve in the library (some may need to be photocopied and brought to class).
- A computer disc—IBM format (bring to every class). You can also use a flash drive or similar storage device.
- An email account (Kean gives you one for free; you can also get an account with a different provider).
- Professional dress for your oral presentation (needed for last class):
  - For men, this means a dark suit, white shirt, conservative tie, and dark shoes.
  - For women, this means a dark suit (either a dress or pants) and dark shoes.
ASSIGNMENTS

Your final grade will be based on the cumulative point total you earn completing assignments in the following categories. The exact number of points in each category and the overall total for the course may change as the semester develops.

**Short Documents**—*(80 points)* These assignments will ask you to create one- to two-page documents in response to specific situations. Some, you will write as an individual; others, with your group. The specific assignments, and their total possible points, are:

- Introductory memo (individual) 0
- Reaction memo (individual; see memo on this assignment for more details) 10
- WebCT scavenger hunt (individual or collaborative) 5
- In-class project one: evaluating proposals (collaborative) 10
- Group assessment memo (individual) 10
- In-class project two: visuals (collaborative) 20
- Persuasive letter (collaborative) 20
- Group assessment email (individual) 10

**Relocation Project**—*(120 points)* This project involves the creation of several collaboratively written documents in response to a set of interconnected situations. The total possible points for each are:

- Mission Statement 10
- Proposal 10
- Informal report evaluating sources for the brochure 20
- Progress report 10
- Brochure 50
- Oral presentation 20

See the memo given out during the first class for more information on this assignment.

**Process Log**—*(100 points)* Good writers are consciously reflective: they think about what they have done, evaluate how effective their rhetorical choices were, and speculate on different approaches they could take in a similar situation. This reflection is doubly important when working with a group. Not only does a writer have to be aware of his or her own writing process, but he or she must figure out a way to make that process work with the processes of their colleagues. As a result, you will keep a log of what you do as well as your thoughts about how your group is working. See the memo on this assignment for more information.
**Peer Evaluation**—(100 points) Because this course focuses on collaborative writing, your ability to work in a group is essential, and you will be evaluated on it. While I will stay involved in your group’s work, I will not know each member’s level of participation as well as each of you will. You will have the opportunity to review (and be reviewed by) each member of your group at least twice this semester, in addition to the group assessments you will write.

**Class Participation**—(100 points) I hope this class will become a community of writers, providing praise for good writing, suggestions for pieces that aren’t working as well as they could, and support through the difficulties that are part of writing. As a result, I expect everyone to be present, attentive, polite, and involved in all aspects of the class.

**FINAL GRADE**

Your final grade will be calculated by adding the points you earn and dividing that sum by the total possible points you could have earned. I will convert the percentage to a letter grade using this chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100-95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>94-90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>89-87%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>86-83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>82-80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>79-76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>75-72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>71-61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>60% and lower</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**REVISION**

In the professional world, a successful document is rarely created after just one attempt. You will write a draft and give it to your supervisor, who will request (read: demand) revisions, which you will try to make. This cycle may repeat several times. To model this, you and/or your group can revise up to three graded documents of your choice (excluding the introductory memo, WebCT scavenger hunt, persuasive letter, brochure, and any document submitted more than two days after the due date) for a higher grade. You can revise each of these documents up to four times.

The first revision of any document is due no later than one week after I return the original. I will record the higher grade (whether original or revision[s]) as the final grade. Revisions will not be accepted after Week 14.

I will offer suggestions for revisions with every assignment. I also expect you to think of your own revision plans. You must let me know whether or not your group helps you revise. Everyone who works on a revision will earn the changed grade for it.

[The policies section of the syllabus also contained information on the attendance policy, submitting work, using WebCT, and academic dishonesty]
### SCHEDULE

**Week 1**  
Course introduction. Personal introduction. Overview of major assignments. Introductory memo.

**HW:**  

**Week 2**  

**HW:**  

**Week 3**  

**HW:**  
Read “Substantive Conflict in a Cooperative Context: A Way to Improve the Collaborative Planning of Workplace Documents” by Rebecca Burnett (on reserve; reaction memo assignment) *(Source: Technical Communication 38.4 [1991]: 532-39).*

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1 In general, students were told to only read as much of Alred’s book as necessary to remind themselves of the principles of professional writing, though I did require them to look more carefully at some sections.

**Week 4**

Proposals. Group conflict. Work on mission statement

**HW:**
Finish mission statement. Read material to prepare for in-class project one (given out in class).

**Week 5**

Mission statement due. In-class project one: evaluating proposals. Time to work on proposal. Group assessment memo discussed.

**HW:**
Prepare draft of proposal for workshop. Finish group assessment memo. Read “The Concept of Authorship: Explorations and (Dis)Closures” by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (on reserve; reaction memo assignment) (Source: *Singular Texts: Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* p. 72-102).

**Week 6**


**HW:**

**Week 7**


**HW:**

**Week 8**


**HW:**
Work on source report. Send copy to other group by deadline set by class.
Week 9  Class will meet on WebCT. Workshop source report. Work on revisions for source report.


HW:  Prepare for in-class project two.

Week 11  In-class project two: visuals. Time to work on progress report.


HW:  Send group assessment email to me. Prepare draft of persuasive letter. Read in Alred “Brochures” (p. 58-62), “Presentations” (p. 396-405)


Week 14  Persuasive letter due. Workshop brochure. Sign up for oral presentations. Collaborative writing in business situations revisited. Catch-up/Workday. Revisions will not be accepted after this date.

HW:  Prepare for oral presentation. Finish brochure.