

Collaborative writing

The term **collaborative writing** refers to projects where written works are created by multiple people together (*collaboratively*) rather than individually. Some projects are overseen by an editor or editorial team, but many grow without any oversight.

Practical approaches

In a true collaborative environment, each contributor has an almost equal ability to add, edit, and remove text. The writing process becomes a recursive task, where each change prompts others to make more changes. It is easier to do if the group has a specific end goal in mind, and harder if a goal is absent or vague.

A very good method of discussion and communication is essential, especially if disagreements arise.

Successful collaboration occurs when each participant [or stakeholder] is able to make a unique contribution toward achieving a common vision or goal statement. Supporting this common goal are objectives that have been generated by each of the participants. It is important for each participant to "feel" as though he or she has a significant contribution to make to the achievement of goals. It is also important that each participant be held accountable for contributing to the writing project. [Brown, C. A., 2007, East Carolina Universities]

Collaborative writing can lead to projects that are richer and more complex than those produced by individuals. Many learning communities include one or more collaborative assignments. However, writing with others also makes the writing task more complex.^[1]

Technical approaches

There are a number of different tools or processes used to streamline including:

1. File exchange via removable media (sneakernet) or email
2. File exchange via shared file server
3. Revision control software providing check-in/out
 - List of revision control software
4. Enterprise information portal, Content management system
 - SharePoint
5. Wikis or other online Group collaboration tools
 - MediaWiki
 - Wikiversity

Activities

- Project management
 - Document management system
 - Brainstorming software
 - Wiki technology
 - Report writing software
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Dimensions

- User access
- Accessibility
- Computer compatibility
- Collaborative features
- Workflow
- Revision control

Issues

Users may not be able to check the large datasource, and will enter in data more than once. This creates more content than needed. Also users may accidentally delete material. Without the correct access management system, this could occur.^[2] This also requires a constant internet connection, and a server that is always available. Users cannot always be online to access documents.^[3]

Collaboration is difficult face-to-face, but online it can be truly difficult. Groups have to deal with language and cultural barriers, time zone issues and overall communication issues.^[4] These challenges are inherent in teamwork. Teamwork suffers when the right people work on the wrong things at the wrong time, or when roles, expectations or responsibilities shift quickly and unexpectedly.^[5]

Expectation of content and User controls - Often, issues will come up when access to documents becomes a necessity and multiple people are contributing. It is imperative to have appropriate user access controls in place to ensure smooth transitions. Proper controls must exist that allow people to work on files either as a simultaneously shared or checked out document. User accounts need not be hierarchical but changes from all accounts should not run the risk of being overridden. Controls should be in place that allows user checkout capability or a 'sandbox' area where changes can then be merged. While providing an environment is important, establishing guidelines and the expectation of the type of content that will be submitted is equally important. Having a content editor to proof-read to maintain quality and ensure one coordinated voice should also be considered.

Cultural barriers that lead to communication issues – as the work force becomes more diverse, language and cultural differences must be taken into consideration to ensure a seamless assimilation into the group while still being respectful of others traditions. An organization must be proactive or risk misunderstandings that will hinder communication and create work-place issues.^[6]

Time-zone - It is always a challenge coordinating meetings with a disparate group of people who are all busy with other projects, it becomes more of an issue when trying to coordinate with those in different time-zones. When orchestrating meetings with those from different time zones, it is good to accommodate parties by compromising on schedules or using collaborative software that allow sessions to be recorded for later use.

Advantages

Using collaborative writing tools can provide substantial advantages to projects ranging from increased user commitment to easier, more effective and efficient work processes.

It is often the case that when users can directly contribute to an effort and feel that they've made a difference, they become more involved with and attached to the outcome of the project. The users then feel more comfortable contributing time, effort, and personal pride into the final product, resulting in a better final outcome.

In addition, collaborative writing tools have made it easier to design better work processes. These tools provide ways to monitor what users are contributing and when they contribute so managers can quickly verify that assigned work is being completed. Since these tools typically provide revision tracking, it has also made data sharing simpler. Users won't have to keep track of what version is the current working revision since the software has automated that.

Furthermore, because this software typically provides ways for users to chat in real time, projects can be completed faster because users don't have to wait for other users to respond by asynchronous means like email.

One more advantage is that since this software makes it easy for users to contribute from anywhere in the world, projects can benefit from the inclusion of perspectives from people all around the world.

Similar and related concepts

- coauthoring
- collaborative authorship
- collaborative editing
- collaborative fiction
- collaborative learning
- L2 collaborative writing
- cooperative writing
- group writing
- joint authoring
- massively distributed collaboration
- shared document collaboration
- team writing

Further reading

Ashton, Susanna M. *Collaborators in Literary America, 1870-1920*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

References

- [1] <http://classweb.gmu.edu/nccwg/collab.htm>
- [2] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1466909/>
- [3] <http://worldsci.net/paradox.pdf>
- [4] <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue2/walsh.html>
- [5] <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1466909/>
- [6] <http://www.charlotteworks.org/clbpositionpaper.pdf>

External links

- Analysing interactions during collaborative writing with the computer: an innovative methodology (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/staff/D.J.Wray/Articles/facct.html>)
- Wikibook on Collaborative Writing of LaTeX Documents (http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/LaTeX/Collaborative_Writing_of_LaTeX_Documents)
- - Cultural and Language Barriers In the Workplace (<http://www.charlotteworks.org/clbpositionpaper.pdf>)

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