

## **A PRACTICAL TASK FOR IMPROVING BUSINESS WRITING THROUGH COLLABORATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the theory and the operation of a collaborative, learner-centered, multi-step writing task that I have used successfully in Taiwan for several years in teaching English business writing. The task would be helpful for business writing teachers seeking an innovative approach to encourage learner autonomy of the teacher, collaboration with classmates, and improvement of audience analysis in the writing process.

Writing is hard. Because I write and write more but the teacher still can't understand my idea. I think it's clear. Why don't they think?

This journal excerpt from my former composition student echoes the pain and frustration writers often experience when trying to communicate their ideas in ways that readers can understand. Helping students to write with the reader in mind, or to draft what Flower (1979) calls "reader-based prose" is probably one of the most challenging, difficult responsibilities a writing teacher faces. Developing reader-based prose requires writers to create in their papers a shared experience with readers using a language that all can understand. Reader-based prose is also desirable and challenging because it presents writing that is logically developed and centered on important ideas, "rather than a replay of the writer's discovery process," which would likely seem unclear to the reader (Flower, 1979:20). This is something that all writers have difficulty doing, particularly the less-experienced. Learning how to shift from writer to reader-based prose at some point in the composition process is an important step in becoming a good writer.

In this article I briefly discuss basic features of collaborative writing as a means to help students write reader-based prose. Later, I present a collaborative writing task and a classroom study that investigates the use of collaborative writing to help students draft reader-based prose. Afterwards, I offer a discussion of student assessments of this collaborative writing task. Finally, I present some suggestions for further classroom research.

The classroom study examines the effectiveness of a collaborative writing task that I developed to encourage reader-based prose in intermediate and advanced EFL composition classes at the International Trade Institute (ITI) of Hsin Chu, Taiwan. ITI is a graduate-level, two-year

international business and language school sponsored by the China External Trade Development Council. All of the 40 students of the study were enrolled in their first year in 1992 and were taking my course of Basic Business Writing.

### **What Is Collaborative Writing?**

Some writing teachers have recommended borrowing ideas from collaborative learning to help writing students do a better job of drafting reader-based prose (Bruffee, 1973). This is generally referred to as collaborative writing.

Collaborative writing encourages a teacher and students to share more equally in the responsibility for the learning process, including the operation and the final results of the composition class. Rather than limit classroom activities to teacher-centered lecturing and correcting, both students and the teacher work together as fellow writers in group writing activities, with each member of the class having the opportunity to learn about writing from others by sharing in the teaching of lessons and by discussing each other's work. Students become actively involved as they share their knowledge with others and receive feedback from many fellow writers, not only the teacher. They are also challenged to accept more responsibility for their own learning and to apply critical thinking in the analysis of writing. Probably one of the more common collaborative writing activities is the student peer review (editing) workshop, wherein students read a classmate's paper and offer comments about how to improve it, often providing remarks on a teacher-prepared form.

My own teaching experience with collaborative writing indicates that it can be a very powerful tool in helping students to learn how to draft reader-based prose. I agree with its many proponents who also claim that collaborative writing is fairly realistic, mirroring natural social relationships outside of the classroom (Bruffee, 1973), and preparing students for similar kinds of job-related writing experiences (Houston, 1990). It is credited as an effective tool to help integrate students into the academic community of writing (Agatucci, 1989), as a means to boost self-confidence in writing (Mittan, 1989), and as a way to reduce fear of participation in classroom discussions (Houston, 1990). It can teach students to be tolerant of other points of view (Trimbur, 1989) in a supportive, less hierarchical environment (Bruffee, 1973), and to improve the presentation of "more comprehensive ideas" (Houston, 1990). By having students work on in-class tasks that include writing but also overlap other language skill areas, it helps the teacher to identify for corrections weaknesses in all areas of the target language, including "reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking" (Mittan, 1989:211).

There are, however, four difficulties associated with collaborative writing. Student comments may be perceived by fellow students to be of limited value or even counterproductive (Mangelsdorf, 1992). Some students may view peer review not as a cooperative activity, but as "coercive" (Bryard, 1989). Other students may not like it because they may prefer teacher comments to peer comments (Davies & Omberg, 1987). Moreover, teachers comfortable with more traditional approaches are likely to experience trouble using collaborative writing, which relies more on student-centered, small-group activities. Even for a well-respected proponent like Kenneth Bruffee, developing a successful approach to teaching writing collaboratively may take "several years of wrestling" (1973, p.842). However, I have found that the following task taps immediately into the pedagogical strengths of collaborative writing while avoiding these four pitfalls.

## Applying Collaborative Writing: The *Personnel* Game

*Personnel* challenges students to roleplay a team of managers of a large chain of foreign fast-food restaurants who must select a local store manager from among five candidates, each with several undesirable aspects. Since none of the five is clearly better than the others, the students must negotiate with each other as small-group members to try to reach what Trimbur (1989) calls a "consensus." Later, they gain experience with reader-based prose by writing persuasive reports that consider the views and concerns of classmates.

To give the situation greater plausibility, I am careful to explain at the beginning of the game that the parent company's policies on pay and working hours for entry-level managers of local stores need to be revised, but that this will take some time and the need for a new local store manager is immediate. Therefore, one of the five available candidates must be selected.

In many ways this game is similar to interactive problem-solving activities generally associated with developing conversation skills, such as those found in *The Non-Stop Discussion Workbook* by Rooks (1981). However, *Personnel* is different because it combines conversation with collaborative writing activities to develop reader-based prose.

### Getting Started: Class Sessions 1 & 2

I begin the task by asking students to pick a fast-food restaurant in town and visit it for lunch or dinner before the next week's class, then write a journal entry describing their experiences and considering the characteristics of good fastfood restaurant employees. By ignoring potential objections from a reader in the beginning and by focusing first on the discovery of what they want to say, students are better able to develop what Flower (1979) calls "writer-based prose."

The next class session, I invite volunteers to read their journal descriptions aloud in class as we discuss the features of, and the good and bad points about, foreign fast-food outlets. I ask the students to identify what they perceive to be the qualities of an effective fast-food worker and a restaurant manager. We brainstorm about these, and we also review together important vocabulary about restaurants.

That same session I pass out a description of the game and of the five candidates for the position of store manager. (See the Appendix for an example.) We read it over, discussing any unfamiliar terms or ideas. I ask the students to draft for the next class session a memo report recommending to Butch's General Manager one of the five candidates for hire as the new store manager. Each must also bring three photocopies of his or her report. At this time, we review the basic conventions of a memo report, discussing some examples on an overhead projector (Swindle & Swindle, 1989).

### The First Debate: Class Session 3

Students begin the collaborative writing exercise by working in groups of three or four to discuss each others' papers. I generally use about 5 minutes of class time at the beginning of the hour to write on the blackboard the names of the students who support each of the candidates. Once this is done, I quickly assign students to discussion groups, making sure that each group will have different opinions represented. Students then exchange copies of groupmates' papers, allowing them to follow

along and ask questions or make comments as the authors read their texts aloud. After all the papers have been read, each group begins to discuss how to develop and weight appropriate criteria for selecting the best candidate.

At this stage, the beauty of the task begins to unfold. The five candidates are different and attract - or repel - different people in different ways. After having regularly used this task for 3 years, I have yet to see a small group reach a unanimous decision in less than one hour. If a particular group - for whatever reason - were to reach a speedy, unanimous decision, I would arrange for more debate by dividing up its members evenly among the remaining groups.

During the discussions, students struggle to understand the criteria (values) of others and to compare these with their own. As they discuss and debate these principles, they begin to experience the need to switch from writer-based to reader-based prose. What may have appeared to be a fairly simple choice at home by themselves and in their writer-based prose has now become more complicated under the scrutiny of a live and disagreeing readership.

Following the discussion period, I assign the writing of a group memo report, due the following class session, that explains the group's choice. Some groups may not reach a consensus, which is fine. These may focus on the majority's decision; however, members are instructed to acknowledge and to explain dissenting views.

#### **The Second Debate: Class Session 4**

When the students return to class having just completed their group reports, we begin the in-class debate, which continues to impress upon the students the importance of considering audience reaction as they prepare to revise their original papers into reader-based prose.

I randomly select two or three students to serve as the General Manager and his or her assistant(s); in effect, they become the judges. The rest of the group members take turns orally presenting their cases to the judges and other group members, asking questions of each other following each presentation. During this phase, students have numerous opportunities to hear multiple perspectives from a wider audience about the arguments presented in their group papers. After each group has presented, it becomes the judges' turn to reach a decision about which candidate appears most suitable. The announcement of the decision is usually delayed until the following class session, to give the judges time to reach an agreement and to develop a supporting oral explanation. If the judges do not reach a consensus, each reports separately.

#### **The Critique: Class Session 5**

After the judges present, I ask each student to revise as homework his or her first memo report, the personal draft written at the start, keeping in mind the information about audience reactions. These reports are due the next session.

#### **Student Assessments and Evidence of Improvement**

To determine opinions about the value of *Personnel*, I collected task assessments from 40 students. The questions on the task-assessments were as follows: (1) What did you learn from this activity?, (2) What did you like about it?, (3) What did you dislike about it?, and (4) What suggestions would you offer to improve it? I also collected writing samples and data about the amount of writing produced for each assignment.

*Personnel* offers traditional advantages commonly associated with collaborative writing to produce reader-based prose; however, it avoids the four associated problems.

By using the task, the value of receiving peer criticism becomes more apparent to students as they work toward creating reader-based prose. As they draft their own papers and listen to oral presentations of peers, they come to understand more deeply the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. The solution to the problem rests on establishing a set of thoughtful criteria for selecting a store manager, persuasively articulating these values to others, listening carefully to the views of others, logically applying criteria in an analysis of the candidates' qualifications, and selecting the one who fits the criteria best.

That peer reviews were very influential on the development of reader-based prose in student writing can be observed in the amount of writing done on each paper. The average (mean) amount of words was 231 for the first memo report, 585 for the group report, and 646 for the revision of the individual report. This growth in the amount of writing is one reflection of the greater complexity I also observed in student thought and writing resulting from peer reviews. Likewise, in the task assessments, many students expressed the same view: 26 commented about learning to think more of the needs of the audience and to plan arguments carefully. Wrote one, "I thought my first report was good. Then I heard what others said. Then I knew my ideas were too simple. They had to be changed."

As students open their reports to the scrutiny of peers who are attempting to reach a consensus, they begin to experience how their writing will directly affect many readers, not just the teacher. Remarks I heard about papers in the last small-group session included, "I don't understand what you mean. Can you say it another way?"

An additional indication of how student writing improves in this task can be seen in the differences between individual and collaborative-generated text. As students proceed through the stages of this assignment, their writing begins to shift from writer to reader-based prose. "Jill" (a pseudonym) wrote the following 46-word writer-based passage in her journal to describe her reasons for choosing Elmer, one of the five candidates:

I don't like any of them, but Elmer seems the best. He is a drunkard, but so what? At least he doesn't be rude, lazy, steal, or stink. I think his problem can change faster than the others. Besides, he tries to change himself. The others don't.

After Jill had listened to other students read their journal entries in class and had participated in our discussion of fast-food restaurants in Class Session 2, she realized that her support of Elmer - to be persuasive - needed further development. In addition, she recognized the need to be more systematic in her evaluations of the other four candidates. She later drafted the following 123-word report:

All candidates have their own problems, but Elmer is only one who realizes his problem and is willing to correct it; therefore, I recommend Elmer for this manager job. Alice knows the operation of the stores but she is difficult to work with and even worse is that

she is often rude to customers. Jane is lazy but his manager job requires long working hours. So I don't think she is suitable for this job. Bob's problem is dishonest and can't be trust. Butch's is a restaurant; therefore, cleanness is very important. But Tom is too careless on this area. For this reason, I don't recommend Tom for this job. After all considerations, I think Elmer is the best choice for this position.

During the group discussion of Class Session 3 and the in-class debate on Class Session 4, Jill's reasons for selecting Elmer and rejecting the others were strongly challenged by classmates, compelling her to reflect further. This resulted in a longer, more sophisticated final report that was handed in at the end of the task. Her final report, now just under 500 words long, began with the following reader-based prose to explain why she believed that Elmer should be given a shot at the management position:

To choose a good manager we should look for a man or woman who wants to improve himself, others and the company. He should be someone who knows through his tears how hard improvement is. I believe that Elmer understands this. Why? Because he already works hard for the company, recognizes his alcoholism and gets help and applies for the manager job at Butch's. If we chose Elmer now, we can get a new manager and encourage his improvement. This will make a good example of him to others in our company. So I recommend Elmer as Butch's Hsin Chu manager.

Jill then continued her report by systematically pointing out in reader-based prose how the other five candidates fail to show as much commitment to improvement as Elmer.

The task contains several safety measures to avoid becoming coercive of students. Small groups are not expected to reach unanimous decisions; rather, they are expected to fully consider each member's thinking, including the mention of dissenting views in group reports. To ensure a friendly atmosphere, I freely mingle with the groups, prepared to "step in" to prevent a member from taking abuse from peers.

Data from the assessments indicate that students did not see coercion as a problem. Only 3 expressed dislike for working in small groups, but without offering any specific reasons. Four claimed to dislike writing the group memo report. According to their comments, the group report appeared more time-consuming and difficult, because of having to take into consideration the views of other members. However, 5 specifically mentioned that a strength of the task was learning to cooperate. Wrote one student, "It made us to get along. We had to become flexible." Likewise, 10 mentioned that they felt free or encouraged to express their ideas openly.

The task motivates students to learn from each other, to value interaction with peers at least as much as they value working with the teacher. Because the descriptions of the invented candidates encourage probing a variety of work-related issues, such as honesty, company loyalty, employee rights, child care, sexual harassment, substance abuse, and personal hygiene, students gain experience in considering the objections of peers with opposing points of view in a fairly non-threatening atmosphere, then applying this knowledge as they draft reader-based prose. The task empowers the students themselves to accept the responsibility - and credit - for a beneficial learning experience.

Data from the assessments tend to confirm student appreciation and enjoyment of this collaborative writing task, indicating that students respected the input received from peers. Only a total of 10 negative comments were recorded, with most of these (7) reflected the desire not to write either the

group report or not to revise the memo report. According to one, "The game would be funnier if we didn't have to write anything." In contrast, many more comments were written in support. Among these, 12 students recommended retaining the existing form in the future and 10 requested that the class use more like it. Eight also mentioned that they could clearly see progress in their own writing as a result of the peer input. Several comments in the surveys reflecting pleasure, satisfaction, and surprise with learning through collaborative writing resembled this: "I think I learned more from the classmates than anyone else."

Implementing the task is fairly simple, enabling a writing teacher to begin using collaborative writing effectively to teach reader-based prose without first enduring "several years of wrestling." It is also adaptable for a variety of different situations. I chose to focus on the fast food industry because of its familiarity with the young people I teach and because of their pleasure in being able to simulate a business situation. Other industries or situations could be simulated, depending upon the interests of students and the ingenuity of the teacher. Instead of using brief written descriptions of each candidate, I have sometimes presented simulations using resumes photocopied from a resume writing handbook. This adds a little more realism to the activity for advanced students. Adaptations of conversation tasks presented by Rooks (1981) could also be used.

Likewise, the task is appropriate for different kinds of composition courses, not just for business writing. Personnel focuses on developing reader-based prose in argumentative writing, an important skill applicable to a variety of writing situations. In addition, students of all disciplines benefit from learning the conventions associated with the memo report, a common format.

### **Implications for Teaching and Research**

The literature is brimming with theoretical arguments from scholars of rhetoric and anecdotal evidence from classroom teachers promoting the value of collaborative writing and the need for reader-based prose. The results of this classroom research suggest that problems sometimes associated with collaborative writing - such as apathy toward peer review, coercion in small-group discussions, preference toward teacher feedback, and difficulty in implementation - can be avoided or at least limited if the activity is carefully structured and monitored within the context of a competitive, student-centered, simulation exercise.

Although having students critique each other's papers and fill out comments on teacher-prepared peer review sheets is fairly widespread, there is much more to collaborative writing than this. My guess is that there are probably many more effective and creative collaborative writing activities being used in classrooms to teach reader-based prose than are currently being shared in the literature. Probably none is best for all contexts. The challenge, therefore, is for classroom teachers as researchers to develop, systematically examine, and share the fruits of using different collaborative writing strategies in different classroom contexts.

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## APPENDIX

### Student Handout for *Personnel*

You are one of several store managers of a chain of American fast-food restaurants called "Butch's." Last week another store manager walked off the job, taking about \$200,000 in store profits with him. No one has seen him since. The District Manager has asked you and the other store managers to help find a replacement as soon as possible.

Butch's General Manager insists on paying beginning store managers at a low base salary and they must work about 70 hours a week, particularly in the first year of employment, which is seen as a trial period. Probably because of the low pay and long hours, few have applied for the position. Top management is considering a policy review to make the first year manager's position more attractive, but this will take time to develop and the Hsin Chu store needs a new manager immediately.



To assist in selecting the best available candidate, you have been asked to participate in a district meeting of the store managers and the central staff. A final recommendation must then be presented to Butch's General Manager. Be prepared to present your recommendations both orally and in writing. Some notes about the candidates are presented below:

1. Alice She is single, 31 years old, a high school graduate, and has worked at Butch's for two years. Although she understands the operation of the stores fairly well and is intelligent and reliable, she is considered by fellow employees to be difficult to work with and is often rude to customers.
2. Jane She is a high school graduate, 25, married, and the mother of two children, both of whom are attending elementary school. She is considered intelligent and pleasant to work with; however, fellow workers claim she is lazy. She often is absent during busy times at the restaurant so she can spend more time with her family. She is unwilling to work more than 35 hours a week, even during the busiest times of the year, which is in contrast to the policy of Butch's top management. Store managers are expected to work at least 60 to 70 hours each week in order to thoroughly supervise the operation of the store.
3. Bob He is a high school graduate, 26, and single. He has worked at Butch's for 18 months. He is liked by most of his fellow workers, who respect him as a hard worker and enjoy his fun-loving personality and good sense of humor; however, management suspects he is guilty of handing out free burgers to pretty girls who visit the store. Some of the female employees have also angrily complained that he is constantly asking them to go out on dates after work, even though they are not interested in him. It is also rumored that he periodically takes hamburgers from Butch's freezer and gives them to one of his girlfriends, whose father owns a local supermarket.
4. Elmer He is a high school dropout, 35 years old, and the single father of two children, ages 10 and 8. He is a quiet employee who has worked at Butch's for two years. He usually works hard when he shows up for work; unfortunately, he has a drinking problem and has recently been involved in several fights in local bars, which have resulted in his repeated arrest by the police. He is currently on probation and is undergoing treatment for alcoholism.
5. Tom He is single, 34 years old, and a high school graduate. He has three years of experience at Butch's and is generally respected as a hard worker and a fairly courteous employee; unfortunately, he seldom bathes, washes his hair, brushes his teeth, or shaves. In fact, he becomes angry when people suggest he smells. Because of this, he frequently stinks and customers and fellow workers alike are reluctant to be near him. A company manager once reprimanded him for consistently failing to wash his hands after using the bathroom during working hours.