Collaborative Digital Writing

The Art of Writing Together
Using Technology

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The room is dark. I’m balancing my MacBook Pro on my lap. Everyone’s attention is focused on the rectangle of light thrown by the projector on the screen at the front of the room. The class and I pause, thinking of how to continue the piece we’ve been working on for several weeks. Without raising her hand someone says, “I don’t think that Joey is going to go outside when it’s dark. He’s not that brave.” Another student adds, “Well, he might go out if he has his dog with him. And his flashlight.” A third student says, “What if he goes out with his dog and it runs away? Then when he starts yelling for his dog, his flashlight goes out.”

“Yeah,” several students answer in unison. “Cool.” The class rustles appreciatively. They can visualize the situation as if it were happening to them.

“Okay,” I say, “that sounds great to me. So how do we put what you’ve just described into the dialog of the characters?”

“Well, first,” the first student says, “Joey’s got to say he hears a noise outside the house.”

My fourth grade class and I are writing a story. It could be just a text story written with a word processor. It could also be repurposed as an audio podcast. Adding photos and sound, we could turn it into a digital story. The choice of medium doesn’t matter very much to me, given my goals for students’ learning. What does matter is the process we’re using to write the story.
The process is one I’ve been developing with students over the last 10 or so years. I call it Collaborative Digital Writing.

Collaborative Digital Writing is (at least in the first phase) a whole class writing activity. Collaborative Digital Writing projects are complex projects that typically take weeks of relatively short but frequent periods to complete. The end result can be published traditionally (print), distributed by digital means, or be presented in a style similar to project-based learning demonstrations.

Technology plays a big part in making collaborative digital writing effective. It provides a shared user interface for the class to see and work on the writing. A computer projector or Smartboard is used to project the writing on a screen located where everyone can see it. I recommend that the teacher do the actual keyboarding. In an elementary setting, once students have sufficient typing skills, they may take a turn at it, although I seldom let students do this for the following reasons.

Students may believe that they can type as well as the teacher (if more slowly), but they may not know about such techniques as setting paragraph indentations, centering titles, spell checking, or dragging and dropping words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs to rearrangement them. In Collaborative Digital Writing, the teacher models not only the use of these techniques, but coaches students through neglected but important parts of the writing process.

What software is used? Any word processor will do, but when my students and I are writing fiction in the form of an audio play, we’ve discovered outliners to be very helpful. Specifically we’ve been using OmniOutliner to create scripts with pop-up menus displaying a list of the characters’ names for speaking parts, automatic line numbering, and check boxes (useful in recording podcast plays). Please see Figure 3.1.

Collaborative Digital Writing can be as simple as students collaborating on a word processing document, but the additional steps of turning these documents into podcasts, digital stories, digital graphic writing, or video increases the opportunities for students to recognize the need for revision. Collaborative digital writing projects provide many opportunities for students to see revision modeled and to participate in the process.

Revision is one of the most difficult things for a teacher to get across to students. Students believe that revising means to correct misspelled words and supply missing punctuation. Individually and on paper they are far more reluctant to change the order of paragraphs, rewrite awkward sentences, regroup sentences into different paragraphs, or ultimately rethink how their reader is going to react to their writing. One obstruction to revision is that students dread the labor of recopying their writing by hand. Elementary students especially are likely not to want to rewrite their sloppy copy. Many turn in work which has been extensively erased with words crammed into tiny spaces. The
Figure 3.1. The Collaborative Script, in Process

characters
- 1. Narrator
- 2. Natty
- 3. Marge
- 4. Oliver
- 5. Jane
- 6. Muffy
- 7. Bea
- 8. Bea
- 9. Bea
- 10. Oliver
- 11. Oliver
- 12. Oliver
- 13. Natty
- 14. Bea
- 15. Oliver
- 16. Blanche
- 17. Oliver
- 18. Bea
- 20. Natty
- 21. Oliver
- 22. Oliver
- 23. Natty
- 24. Bea
- 25. Blanche
- 26. Marge
- 27. Jane
- 28. Blanche
- 29. Natty
- 30. Jane
- 31. Oliver

what they say
- One afternoon the sky drew dark and rain began to fall.
- I wonder if school will be closed.
- Remember the floods we had last year?
- Yeah, we had to use our canoe to get food.
- We had to sleep over at our grandma's house.
- I hope the rain stops soon.
- You guess just have no sense of adventure.
- I hope the rain stops. I just bought lots of sun tanning products.
- Very funny.
- The principal voice is heard over the school intercom.
- Attention, students. I have an announcement to make. Because of the rain school is closing early today. We'll have a quick lunch and then the buses will pick you up and take you home.
- Whoopee!
- Great! Now what about my birthday party?
- Don't worry. You'll still be able to have your friends over.
- Getting out of school is a present.
- Not like having a birthday party. Besides, we'll have to make up the days later.
- I didn't think about that.
- Yep that's right. Now click on Binary Existence.
- I think this is going to be so much fun! I'm so excited!
- Oliver turn off the lights, now there is no talking when we enter Binary Existence. This way we are really in the world.
- But why can't talk? I like to talk.
- Well if you can't type fast then you're screwed.
- I can't type fast. My index finger is getting sore.
- We can go to Typing Island and you can practice.
- I already know how to type, where can I go?
- The possibilities are endless... let's go be in the eye of a tornado.
- I've always wondered what that would be like.
- A tornado can go up to 300 mph and be more than a mile across.
- I don't like tornadoes... my sun's trailer was picked up by one last year and dropped on Detroit. We never saw her again.
- Maybe she's in OZ and took out a witch and saved all the munchkins!
- I'm scared of the flying monkeys.

teacher can refuse the work and insist on the students turning in their best effort, but is likely to be met with complaint or flat out refusal.

Students suffer from what I call the "Clark Kent syndrome." In the Superman television series from the 1950s whenever Reporter Clark Kent was late in writing his story for the next edition of the Daily Planet (which was all the time because of his duties as a superhero), he typed it at superspeed, fingers blurring until he ripped the page from the carriage of his typewriter. Clark never had to stop and think what he was going to write next, never reread his writing, never changed anything once it had been typed. Maybe that's what makes Superman super. But we puny earthlings must reread, rethink, and especially, revise.
ELEMENTS OF COLLABORATIVE DIGITAL WRITING

In the first phase of collaborative digital writing the class as a whole is involved. In the second phase, students work asynchronously in small groups. That is, a small group of students work on recording audio, or taping, for example, while the rest of the class works on something else or is in another class, such as library or music. This allows a small group of students to be focused on a specific task. Any writing mode can be addressed, but I’ve used it primarily for writing scripts in fiction such as digital storytelling or podcasting plays. The following are important elements of collaborative digital writing:

- **Pitching ideas.** When a student has an idea to contribute, she must learn to sell it to the whole group. The idea might be incomplete or undeveloped, but she must persuade enough of her fellow students to incorporate her concept into the body of the work.

- **Engaging in leap frogging.** A dynamic is created when one student makes a suggestion and then another student inspired by the idea builds upon it. The process repeats itself until an endpoint is reached—one that a student working independently would never have achieved. This is a very powerful effect and should not be underrated. The following example based on a real conversation in our class will help illustrate.

  Student A: Let’s write a story about a model in Alaska.
  Student B: Yeah. One of those guys with long hair.
  Student C: And he has his photographer with him.
  Student B: The model guy gets sunburned though.
  Student A: In Alaska?
  Student B: Yeah, that’s what’s so weird. When he goes back to his hotel he stands in front of the mirror and begins to peel away the burnt skin. But it’s not burnt skin coming off. He discovers he’s wearing a rubber mask.

  (The rest of the class grunts with satisfaction at the twist.)
  Student B: What’s under the mask?
  Student A: That’s what we’ve got to figure out.

  Students working independently would unlikely have reached a plot rich with so many twists and turns.

- **Making friendly amendments.** Enthusiasm runs high when students are free to chime in their ideas. I usually don’t require students to raise their hands during this phase of the writing. I tell them it’s acceptable for them to say (not shout) their suggestion out loud, and I’ll hear them. If they keep it short, there’s rarely overlapping suggestions. When I hear a suggestion, I’ll repeat it aloud and ask students what they think.
They will either approve it or make what I call a "friendly amendment," a suggestion which retains the spirit of the original line, but extends or refines it in some way.

- **Pacing and meeting deadlines.** Collaborative digital writing projects work best with a deadline: a technology night at school, for example, a contest, a presentation for School Night at the Apple Store, or a technology showdown with another school. My experience has been that if there is no deadline, the project has greater chance of not being completed. Giving students a deadline drives them to work harder and smarter. Implicit in a deadline is audience: someone or some group other than the teacher is waiting to see what the students have done.

  Given a deadline, students have to judge what pieces in what order need to be completed by which dates on a timeline. Knowing when to work hard, when to ease off, and how much can be accomplished in a set amount of time are skills that students can't begin to learn early enough. Pacing is a skill that is the trademark of every successful adult.

- **Developing patience.** Collaborative digital writing projects are typically completed over weeks rather than days, and working with that timeframe requires and develops patience in students. They have to be able to visualize the end product and be satisfied with achieving it one step at a time.

- **Polishing the story.** One of the advantages of using technology in education is that students are able to give their finished project a much higher level of polish than they would had technology not been incorporated. Students' ideas often are more developed than their ability to produce them. Technology helps bring their finished project closer to their own vision of the concept. But polish means more than that. Polish also refers to taking care that details have been attended to: all i's dotted and t's crossed.

- **Completing a project.** For students the experience of working through a complex project from beginning to end is a more powerful learning experience than doing a series of disconnected assignments. Students experience a sense of mastery and accomplishment when they collectively direct a work through multiple stages over long periods of time. The accomplishment also draws them closer together as a group, a nice by-product of collaboration.

**THE TEACHER'S ROLES**

Many artists are leery of being too conscious of how they create for fear of disturbing the process. Teachers, on the other hand, not only focus on the process, but how to pass this process on to their students. The teacher’s part
in collaborative digital writing is a leadership role which blends elements of theater with the traditional teacher role.

• **Model and encourage revision.** With digital collaborative writing there are many opportunities for students to see revision modeled and to revise the work in progress. Students pick up very quickly that every word is subject to revision. It doesn’t make any difference who wrote it or why it was written in the first place. As the story grows, the words will need to change to strengthen the story, to make the students’ meaning clearer.

  Revisions are suggested at three points in the process: (1) at the beginning of each new session, as teacher and students reread what they’ve written thus far; (2) as the teacher types suggestions students are encouraged to make suggestions verbally without raising their hands; and (3) during try-outs, rehearsals, and as we’re recording spoken lines on the computer.

• **Provide and model organisation.** Collaborative digital writing projects require the management of hundreds of individual sound files, digital photos, and matching lines of dialog. If the project isn’t organized from the very beginning, it will grind to a halt. Students will feel frustrated and the teacher will find herself with a great deal of clean-up work.

• **Model rereading.** As the lines of the characters are entered onto the screen, the teacher backs up and rereads aloud what’s been written. This is done not only because the teacher will need to be reminded of what’s already been written, but more important to model to students that they too must stop, back up, and reread their original writing projects. Telling them to do that won’t change that behavior. Modeling that for students will make a change over time.

• **Play Devil’s advocate.** At any time during the process the teacher reserves the right to wrinkle his brow and say, “Um, I don’t get it. Remind me why your character says that.” If the student can’t justify the line, she may need to change it until it makes sense.

• **Model word processing formatting.** As I pointed out earlier, in an elementary setting, students aren’t typing the text as it’s being suggested. The teacher is (in upper grades a student with good keyboarding skill may be selected to take that role). When I write with the class using the overhead, I verbalize each step I’m using in formatting. I will say, for example, “Press return for a new line—shift for a capital J—single space between words,” almost as if I were talking out loud to myself. My intent is to teach the basics of word processing, but to slip them in casually.

• **Direct.** A good teacher is like a good director in that both wish to draw the best out of their people. The teacher gives praise and encouragement.
• *Merge ideas.* The teacher takes suggestions that students see as competitive or mutually exclusive and models how the ideas can be combined to make for a richer idea.

• *Establishing the phases of the project.* Sometimes the activities are whole group, sometimes they are small group.

• *Wrap up.* During the assembly of the final product when the students have taken the project as far as they can, some or all of the finishing work may be shouldered by the teacher.