Examining Collaborative Writing through the Lens of a Pentad

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On two separate occasions, once in 2009 and again in 2010, Tom Buttery authored articles that appeared in the SRATE Journal which focused on the importance of writing for professional publication. In the first, Organizational Paradigm, Buttery focused on the motivation for writing, organizing a manuscript, and conducting the literature review. In the second, he emphasized the writing process and focused on the importance of organization and editing for publication. In keeping with Buttery’s tradition of writing as a systematic process, the purpose of this article is to build upon his foundation of good writing strategies and examine one approach to mastering the task of article submission—collaboration in the writing process.

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As a means to organize the collaborative writing process, the authors will rely upon a critical technique called dramatism, developed by Kenneth Burke. Essentially, Burke believed that issues of motivation could be addressed using five questions which he coined a pentad. These questions guide the purpose behind the action: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. The use of these questions has also been likened to the journalistic approach of the 5 W’s: who, what, where, when, and why. Using the pentad to describe collaborative writing, the process may be characterized structurally. In the “act”, the writer attempts to describe or explain the action which also references the “what.” The concept of “scene” focuses on the background of the event or the “where” and “when” of the process.
“Agent” emphasizes the “who” that is involved in the event; “agency” focuses on the means or instruments that are used (which incorporates the “how”). Finally, “purpose” focuses on the motivation, or the “why” for the action.

*Act, or “The What”*

Collaborative writing is hardly a new concept. Theorists abound who have long supported the notion that writing should be a social learning process. Vygotsky (1962) purported that language increases in meaning when it is shared. Similarly, one of the eminent scholars of social learning theory, Bakhtin (1981) gives power to the interactions between and among individuals and, as a result, increased learning occurs. In an article on graduate students’ collaborative writing efforts, Ens, Boyd, Matczuk and Nickerson (2011) state “Capitalizing on the dialogic nature of language, engagement with others in the process of writing creates intentional opportunities for developing relationships and generating knowledge” (p.64). Collaborative work can be seen in most disciplines. Team building activities abound in the workplace and support the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Jones, Jones, and Murk (2012) said it best, “To collaborate is truly like 2 Plus 2 Equals 6 (Synergy)” (p. 91).

Another feature of collaboration may be increased pleasure in the process. Instead of focusing on the end goal (“I must get this done so I can get published!”), the process of collaboration should provide its own extraneous benefits. The collaborative opportunity to learn from each other, to spend time together, to share the thrill of victory when the process is complete—these should be as important as the final product.

*Scene, or “The When and Where”*

The “when” is important to the act of writing, in that in order to be successful, attention must be given to a consistent, regular time. Otherwise, procrastination and other demands rob a person of the ability to attend to writing. Key to the success of collaborative is the importance of a regular time. Humans are creatures of habit. Like any other activity—exercise, yoga, diet—discipline is the key to long term progress and success. Buttery (2010) recommends building in writing time as a regular part of a person’s schedule.

Research shows that writing in shorter spurts in a very systematic way is more productive than building large blocks of time. First, most individuals today do not have the time to break away for a morning or an afternoon and do nothing but write for publication. Short bursts of time are more realistic and more productive. With long blocks of time, writers frequently waste a lot of time “nesting” (get that cup of tea, set the lights and the temperature of the room, clean off the workspace, gather materials, review the last session’s production). All of those activities are counterproductive. Writing should be likened to a series of short sprints rather than a marathon. Rather, a better scenario is to build one hour per week into the routine and stick to it. Set the timer, and at the end of that hour, bring the process to closure. Felder and Brent, 2008, state, “Dedicate short and frequent periods of time to your major writing projects.” However, even after the hour is over, the participants will subconsciously still be processing the information and benefits will continue. Further, with a consistent meeting appointment, time will not be wasted doing the “prep.” Instead time will be better spent focusing on the task of writing.

Just as critical as the “when” is the “where” and, in this instance, two references to “where” refer both to where the writers work and where the document will be published. Meeting location is important. Do you need to change the environment in order to increase productivity? Do you need to move away from the distractions and interruptions of the office? Perhaps setting a regular meeting time at the local coffee shop that offers free Wi-Fi would be a good solution.
Also, consideration should be given to “where”
the document will be housed. Identification of
a place and sticking with it can keep a group
organized. Writing collaboratively tends to get
messy--hard to keep up with multiple documents,
who said what, iterations of the document,
emails, notes, etc. Wright, Burnham, and Hooper
(2012) report it is important to stay organized to
promote efficiency and effectiveness. In today’s
technology-driven world, there are many options
and tools available for research and writing.
Determine which tools will be used and making
sure the tools are available and accessible for
everyone can facilitate open communication and
ownership (Jones, Jones, & Murk, 2012; Wright,
Burnham, & Hooper, 2012).

Identifying the “where” of the final
publication is also important. Another benefit of
collaboration is that more venues for which the
research may and could be shared are presented.
By collaborating with colleagues from different
disciplines, the number of opportunities to publish
is, potentially, doubled.

Agent, or “The Who”

Selecting writing partners can be as simple
as collaborating with the colleague next door
or as complex as identifying individuals from
multiple locations who share a passion for a
topic. On occasion, the partnership may be a
familial one. Writing teams of spouses, father-
son, mother-daughter, for example, are often
created. As mentioned earlier, one of the benefits
of collaborative writing is “getting” to spend
time with individuals we love and admire, and
the benefit of publication is an intended by-
product of the relationship. That “someone”
may be a person with whom you have much in
common or little. Depending on the motivation
to write, the individual or individuals you select
may dictate the writing partner. Identifying
someone who shares similar goals is one means;
likewise, identifying someone who possesses
complementary traits. Working with professionals
from various disciplines can enhance projects
as well contribute new connections and ideas
to the literature. Buttery (2010) adds that, in
collaboration, “consider the ability to translate
from one discipline to another” (pg. 1).

Once a writing partner is selected, it is
important to maximize the strengths of both
partners in order to gain the most productivity.
Delegate tasks and identify roles as the process
a group discussion at the beginning of the project
to determine roles and responsibilities. It is also
an opportunity to determine the strengths each
individual brings to the project.

Agency, or “The How”

While this section on agency could focus
on a myriad of side topics about writing--how
information should be gleaned, how writing
should occur, how the editing process should
work, to name a few--the focus on this article
is on the process of collaborative writing itself.
Therefore, the “how” is focused on the process.
How does one perform collaborative writing:
consistently, respectfully, and purposefully? By
performing the task with consistency, success
will be achieved. By performing the task with
respect, all parties will benefit mutually. And, by
performing the task with purpose, the goal will be
met. Elbow (1973), an early expert on the process
of writing, explains “how” collaborative writing
works in simplest terms: “Two heads are better
than one because two heads can make conflicting
material interact better than one head usually can.
It’s why brainstorming works. I say something.
You give a response and it constitutes some
restructuring or reorienting of what I said. Then I
see something new on the basis of your restricting
and so I, in turn, can restructure what I first said”
(p. 50).
Purpose, or “The Why”

The “why” is the easy part—productivity, accountability. The concept of “practice what we preach” is an overworked expression but is apropos in this setting. In higher education, we encourage, if not require, group projects in classes—why not embrace the concept? People do not operate in silos; neither should we expect people to make writing a solitary process. Social learning theorists espouse the idea of interaction increasing learning for all involved. The same should be true in the writing process.

In summary, publication in higher education is paramount to survival. However, the writing process, as Buttery so clearly and eloquently illustrates in his articles, should not be the roadblock that prevents graduate students and new professors from surviving and even thriving in their professional journals. And, to build upon his suppositions, collaboration as a means to that end—publication—is a powerful tool that can and should be encouraged. The benefits truly are greater than the sum of the parts. Buttery purports that writing provides the opportunity to acquire and polish skills as well as gain knowledge about ideas in the field. Collaboration enhances that process and can and should make it enjoyable!

References


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