COMPUTER SUPPORTED COOPERATIVE WORK

Mike Sharples (Ed.)

Computer Supported Collaborative Writing

计算机支持的协同写作

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Introduction

M. Sharples

1.1 The Collaborative Tradition

Collaborative writing is nothing new. The description below is from the introduction to a book published in 1911:

> Every page, however, has been debated and passed by the three of us. Our usual method has been, first to pick up a subject that interested us, perhaps a subject we had been talking about for a long while, then to discuss it and argue over it, ashore and afloat, in company and by ourselves, till we came to our joint conclusion. Then on a rough day, in a set-to discussion, I would take down notes, which frequently amounted in length to more than half the finished article. From the notes I would make a rough draft, which, after more discussion, would be re-written, and again, after revision, typewritten. We would go through the printer's proofs together and finally, after reading the matter in print, we have once more revised it for book publication. Collaboration could not be more thorough. (Reynolds, et al. 1911, p. x)

The book, *Seems So! A Working-class View of Politics*, was written by an academic working closely with two fishermen. What makes it unusual, now as then, is its insight into the sharing of ideas and feelings as part of writing, and also its open celebration of joint authorship, as a means of recording the authentic voice of English working men:

> Thus, the three of us have done together, as well as we could, what neither of us separately could have done at all – which, surely, is the essence of collaboration. (Reynolds et al. 1911, p. xii)

To gain from such a close collaboration each writer has to offer up ideas and experiences and has to be willing to accept the identity and consensus of the group. It can bring the rewards of creating a text which transcends the identity and knowledge of any single contributor, but at the cost of hard

work to overcome conflict, to coordinate the activities and to arrive at a shared understanding. Reynolds, in his own introduction to *Seems So!*, says that "every page was debated and passed by the three of us".

If the work is intended for publication then co-authorship may well not be worth the effort. Disincentives include the refusal of some universities to accept co-authored works in review for promotion, the omission of all but the first author in citations, and the difficulty for joint authors of fiction to fit into the whirl of book signings and publicity appearances. Ede and Lunsford (1990) offer as an example of co-authored fiction a novel, *The Whole Family*, published in 1908 by twelve authors including Henry James; although it is a unique exercise in collaborative literature, the novel gains no mention in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. We work in a culture which values individual responsibility for ideas and which promotes the ideal of the lone author struggling for self-expression. It is not surprising that (apart from scientific literature where research requires team effort) joint authorship is rare.

Far more widespread than acknowledged co-authorship is the practice of loose, informal collaboration: the sharing of ideas and opinions, supportive but critical reading of drafts, emotional support during the dark days of writer's block. Behind the imprint of a single author there lies a complex web of friends, colleagues and unacknowledged influences. Couture and Rymer (1991) differentiate between *group writing*, in which all or part of a document is jointly authored, and *interactive writing*, where the writer depends on a degree of interaction with colleagues at some point during the process of writing. This interaction may lead directly to text, as when a discussion in the pub or common room offers a writer new ideas or a new line of argument. Or it may come indirectly, from a circle of friends and the culture of the work-place. All writing is interactive in the sense that it arises out of an author's interactions with the surrounding world of talk, correspondence and activity.

Intellectuals have traditionally used written correspondence as a source of ideas and inspiration. The collected letters of Charles Darwin fill seven volumes and the foreword to the first volume notes that:

> These letters place him in his social and intellectual contexts and clarify the extensive scientific network of which he was a part. The nature of his work and his poor health left him more than usually dependent upon correspondence in carrying out his investigations. (Burkhardt and Smith 1985, p. xv)

The inspiration of correspondence may not always be benign and abstracted. In *Six Studies in Quarrelling*, Brome (1958) picks out some delicious feuds conducted by letter among George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Hilaire Belloc and others.

Authors of fiction have formed into literary groups for mutual support and as a safe haven from which to sail out and challenge the literary establishment. The most celebrated of these was the Bloomsbury Group, but

others included the friendship of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott and De Quincey, and the circle of Keats, Percy and Mary Shelley, Byron and others. In some cases the influence of informal groups on writing can be subtle but quite direct. In her introduction to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley wrote:

> But it proved a wet uncongenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house ... "We will each write a ghost story", said Lord Byron, and his proposition was acceded to ... At first I thought but of a few pages – of a short tale, but Shelley urged me to develope the idea at greater length. I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely one train of feeling to my husband, and yet but for his incitement it would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world. (Shelley 1985, p. 52–56)

1.2 New Ways of Working Together

The distinction between loose, informal collaboration in private and single authorship or formal co-authorship in public has been crumbling for some years. The growth of interdisciplinary studies, of international research projects, of team-based news reporting, of distributed work groups within large companies, of consortia to carry out pre-competitive product development, have all exerted political and organizational pressures on writers to be seen to be collaborating.

These writing groups often consist of people who rarely meet face-to-face and who come from widely differing cultures and organizations, yet they are expected to collaborate closely, and to tight schedules. For example, to gain funds from the ESPRIT European research initiative, a consortium must consist of partners in three or more different countries and be able to make revisions and write technical addenda to a proposal within days. An ESPRIT proposal, running to around 100 pages, must be jointly written and agreed by all the partners. There is no time for leisurely academic discussions or the painstaking work of scientific cooperation. The tools for this new high-speed semi-formal collaborative writing are the telephone, the fax and the computer.

At first sight, computers seem merely to extend the traditional means of collaboration: electronic mail (email) substitutes for letter writing, computer conferencing substitutes for meetings, shared databases stand in for filing systems and libraries. But each of these systems offers new ways of working and blurs the boundary between informal and formal collaboration.

The speed with which computer-based messages can be formed and transmitted means that email and bulletin boards are often used for informal discourse. They enable unstructured interest groups to form, exchanging knowledge and opinions rapidly across national boundaries; much of the academic debate about the possibility of "cold fusion", for example, was conducted over email. Studies of email discussion (Siegel et