8. Collaboration

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Definition and Background

Collaboration, to co-make or co-labor, refers to both the act and process of distributed design in technical communication, typically between two or more human actors, entities, or organizations, in response to an exigence or problem. While definitions and perspectives vary across professional and academic fields, collaboration may refer to the process of distributed meaning making and problem-solving, as well as the act of creating or designing a shared object, text, new understanding, event, or even relationship. As a method of distributed cooperation, collaboration may also include non-human agents such as computer programs, objects, environments, genres, and tools. At the intersection of design thinking and technical communication, collaboration can be understood as both an outcome of and method for design thinking processes. Because design thinking offers a framework for meta-disciplinary and meta-professional teamwork, collaborative design thinking "allows multi-professional teams to develop a mutual understanding due to its strong emphasis on team-based learning regarding both the problem and its potential solutions" (Lindberg et al., 2010). While there is a history of collaboration as discussed and practiced in pedagogical contexts (Ede & Lunsford, 1990; Holt, 2018), technical communication research has largely focused on collaboration as a practice of professional industry (Burnett & Duin, 1993; Reither & Vipond, 1989).

In design thinking, effective collaboration is (implicitly or explicitly) structured by roles, strategies, and processes. Well-defined and understood roles taken up by participants in a collaborative project aid in making explicit the expectations of collaboration. Roles may vary depending on the nature of the project and may shift within a project. In designing a collaborative multimodal project, for instance, collaborators may agree upon initial roles related to research, drafting, documentation, visual arrangement, and organization, and then shift or exchange those roles at a later point in the process. In ***usability*** research and ***user-centered design*** processes, collaboration manifests in researcher-user interactions, such as ***participatory design***. Strategies for effective collaboration may include:

1. agreeing upon clear expectations and goals;
2. identifying individual roles and responsibilities;
3. establishing shared values;
4. identifying the chronological and/or geographical parameters for work expectations, such as timetables or regularly scheduled meetings;

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5. utilizing generative methods of feedback for members;
6. promoting standardization for the product or outcome; and
7. agreeing upon any necessary protocols related to the production and execution of policy, governance, and resolution of conflict.

Design Application

Digital communication tools have expanded opportunities for all types of collaboration. One of the most well-known collaborative projects is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. As a case study of productive collaboration, Wikipedia is a representative case study because it has enabled and defined clear roles, structures, values, and expectations for contributors. The community has also put into place clear methods for feedback and communication between members and formulated clear guidelines and policies for resolving conflicts and creating policy regarding content and content creation. Wikipedia accomplishes much of this collaboration because it has enabled a new form of economic production, what is known as commons-based peer production (CBPP). In CBPP, collaborators work within a loose system of other editors (as well as non-human agents such as bots, policies, and the wiki platform) separated by both chronological and geographical distance. Despite this lack of organization around geographic and chronological parameters, the crowd-sourced model is successful because it enables self-involved motivation of multiple contributors over a long period of time (Benkler, 2002). Professional technical communicators, designers, and students should look to contemporary successful examples in order to understand the collaborative strategies and processes.

Pedagogical Integration

Processes of collaboration are extremely context dependent. Mike Sharples et al. (1993) identify three unique processes in collaborative writing projects: sequential, parallel, and reciprocal. In a sequential writing process, collaborators take turns contributing to a text before passing it to the next individual. This process allows writers to build on a work-in-progress and lends coherence to the text. In a parallel writing process, collaborators work on different sections simultaneously. Such a process takes less time but may require more editorial work to achieve coherence when the sections are combined. In the third process identified by Sharples et al., reciprocal writing, collaborators simultaneously work on a textual product through discussion, drafting, and revision. Depending on the level of experience of the collaborators, this process may be better suited to initial brainstorming and outlining.

Since design thinking advocates for collaborative problem-solving, students may be assigned team projects to exercise collaborative design and decision making (Wolfe, 2010). The scale of collaboration could range from paired students to

large class groups. When designing and deploying collaborative learning projects, instructors should identify the specific exigency (or motivation) for student collaboration and provide scaffolding to the collaboration process, such as Sharples et al.'s guidelines. Students should also be introduced to tools and technologies that can support their collaboration. Matt Barton and Karl Klint (2011) have demonstrated that digital platforms like Google Docs can be a viable shared space for student collaborations.

References and Recommended Readings

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