

Collaborating Online: Digital Strategies for Group Work

by Anthony T. Atkins

This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 1, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom, and is published through Parlor Press.

The full volume and individual chapter downloads are available for free from the following sites:

- Writing Spaces: <http://writingspaces.org/essays>
- Parlor Press: <http://parlorpress.com/writingspaces>
- WAC Clearinghouse: <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/>

Print versions of the volume are available for purchase directly from Parlor Press and through other booksellers.

To learn about participating in the Writing Spaces project, visit the Writing Spaces website at <http://writingspaces.org/>.

This essay is available under a Creative Commons License subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. More information, such as the specific license being used, is available at the bottom of the first page of the chapter.

© 2010 by the respective author(s). For reprint rights and other permissions, contact the original author(s).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Writing spaces : readings on writing. Volume 1 / edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemliansky.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60235-184-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-60235-185-1

(adobe ebook)

1. College readers. 2. English language--Rhetoric. I. Lowe, Charles, 1965- II. Zemliansky, Pavel.

PE1417.W735 2010

808'.0427--dc22

2010019487

Collaborating Online: Digital Strategies for Group Work

Anthony T. Atkins

INTRODUCTION

Much of what you do in school, on the job, and in your everyday life involves the ability to work well with others.* Here, in college, your teachers will ask you to collaborate or work together in a number of ways. For example, you may be paired with one person to complete an in-class assignment, or you may be required to work with a group of three or four of your classmates to complete a semester-long project. Collaborative activities and assignments may occur in a number of your classes (English, Business, History, and Political Science to name a few). You may work with non-profit organizations, for instance, where you and your classmates develop a newsletter or brochure, or you may compose a grant to help a local organization build a park near your neighborhood. Group assignments like these require you and your group members to work efficiently, and require everyone to contribute to the project equally. Your teachers are looking for how well you can manage tasks, orchestrate togetherness, and demonstrate that everyone can work together productively to complete a project as a team or a group. Even though working in groups can be challenging,

* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License and is subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA. To view the Writing Spaces Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

the truth is that much of what you will do both here in college and on the job occurs as a group effort. Indeed, collaboration with others can be difficult. What follows are some productive technological alternatives to face-to-face collaboration. In this chapter of *Writing Spaces* you will learn more about:

- Assessing the project or task;
- Using technology to organize the project;
- Using technology to present the project.

ASSESSING THE PROJECT OR TASK

In this section we will consider the following questions:

- What does the project entail? What is its purpose?
- How long should the project take?
- How many group members are needed or required, and what should each one do?
- What will be each group member's role?

Teachers or employers request a number of tasks or projects that require collaborating with others. Sometimes group tasks can last for one hour, and sometimes group tasks can last for several months (and sometimes even years, depending on the nature of the project and its purpose). For example, in a classroom, you might be asked to complete a quick group project within the fifty minute class period, or you may be asked to complete a month-long group project. Projects in a classroom are usually completed for a grade, whereby projects completed for an employer or businesses are evaluated as part of your job performance. Once you and your group members have been assigned a specific project, it is important to have a meeting to assess the project and all of its facets or components, and so you can get to know your group members.

Consider, for example, a group project (we'll call this Project A) that requires four people to work together as a team to create a newsletter for a non-profit organization. You and your group members should begin by reviewing the components of the assignment and the project. Producing a newsletter can require designing a layout, conduct-

ing research, creating copy, gathering visuals, and collating, collecting, editing, and proofing the final product. In this type of scenario, the team will need to determine how best to delegate responsibilities to each member. For example, one person could design the layout and look of the newsletter, one or two people might be responsible for the research and content development, and another person on the team might manage the final production of the newsletter—including collating pieces and editing.

Once tasks are assigned and each group member knows her/his responsibilities, determine what technologies you and your group will need to facilitate the project collaboratively, and set deadlines for tasks. Deadlines and managing time is extremely important when working with groups. Make certain that everyone in the group is aware of deadlines and is confident that they can be met. It is not uncommon to fall behind schedule, but how you and your team members react to added challenges determines the success or failure of the project. Adjusting group duties and pitching in to help each other can reassert the team's to complete the task.

In addition to working with a team of other students, sometimes students work with teachers or professors on individual projects—like an honor's thesis or professor-driven independent projects. This example (we'll call it Project B) references three separate honors projects directed/guided by the same teacher. Three students selected a range of general topics for their honors projects. Over the course of one semester, the honors projects required that each student write a traditional research paper on their topic, and provide a "poster" presentation as well as a formal presentation to an audience in a classroom setting.¹

Part of the challenge of Project B is that the three students needed to read and respond to each other's projects, and the teacher needed to read and respond to each student's specific project as well. Because of the collaborative nature of Project B, the teacher and three students held an initial face-to-face meeting to determine tasks, roles, and collaboration spaces so that all members of the group could adjust their calendars and set deadlines. When individuals have a number of tasks or assignments that demand their attention, frequently meeting face-to-face is not conducive or productive. However, in the beginning of a collaborative task, such as Project B, it is extremely necessary to have a meeting so that a thorough assessment of the project and its require-

ments can be determined, which then provides useful information to the group for how to proceed.

Both Project A and B provide examples of ways that group work may be assigned in your classes. To be sure, there are a number of projects and ways that collaborative work is assigned and required by your teachers and your classes. Importantly, you should remember to assess the task, delegate responsibilities, and determine a timeframe (deadlines).

USING TECHNOLOGY TO ORGANIZE THE PROJECT

In this section, we will consider the following questions:

- Which technology will work best for a specific project?
- Should you use or do you need multimedia files and documents?
- What kind of editing and revising is required or needed?

Many free technologies are available to help organize collaborative projects. Because Web 2.0 technologies like wikis and Google Docs are so common, they lend themselves to easy use when collaborating with others. Using technologies to organize group work and projects can make group work more productive, alleviate problems with group members who are absent (or who do not participate), and cost nothing to use. They are also easily accessible. A collaborative technology like a wiki can help group members organize their contributions, respond to others' ideas, communicate with members of the group (easily forwarding links or electronic documents, for example), and facilitate a way to present the final group project to an audience. While there are a number of these technologies out there, wikis (like Wetpaint, PBWorks, or Wikispaces) and project management tools (like Google Docs) will serve as examples here of how to orchestrate a productive group work experience for you and your group members.

The most well-known wiki is Wikipedia. What makes Wikipedia intriguing is that all Wikipedia readers can edit most entries on the Wikipedia website.² This same concept is a shared characteristic among wikis. In short, it is what makes a wiki a wiki. Wikis, like many online free tools, often require a username and password. Everyone

registered on the site can create and share pages or add to already existing pages (just like editing an entry in Wikipedia) by writing text, uploading images, or linking to videos, images, text/articles, or to other websites. The beauty in this tool is that it is free and all you need is an Internet connection. Moreover, your group can use a wiki to make contributions to your group project without having to meet face-to-face.

Mashing in other collaborative technologies can further help you to create, organize, and present your group project. To enhance the productivity of your group work, you might also consider employing another digital tool: Google Docs. Google Docs, like wikis, allows users to create and share documents electronically removing the necessity for face-to-face meetings. Once you create an account via Google, you will have access to other features that Google has, like Google Docs, Google Talk, and Gmail to name a few³. The attractive feature of Google Docs, is that it allows you to create many of the same types of documents as Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint). So, a team member could write the first draft of a proposal using Google Docs and share the document with the team for easy editing online. Or you could all revise and edit the document simultaneously. A link to the document can also be included on your group wiki page for easy access. In fact, because Google Docs is so valuable and easy to use, even teachers and researchers are using it to collaborate on their own research projects.

In Projects A and B, the wiki serves as a “house,” meaning this is where all information for the projects will be stored. The pages in the wiki are created as separate “rooms” in the house. Each room (or page) will represent a task in the project. Once the wiki is created and all members create an account and join, each group member can create their own page within the wiki so that information concerning that task can be available and edited by all group members. To keep with the house metaphor, each member can create their own “space” or room and put in their room only the things they need. For example, in Project A, the wiki might have a page for the contents of the newsletter whereby a group member can keep the other members up-to-date on currently drafted articles or information, and provide a timeframe for when other information will be available. For project A, you might set-up a wiki this way:

1. Create three pages that correspond to the individual tasks. The three pages might be named: Newsletter Design, Newsletter Content, and Newsletter Production.
2. Each member of the group is responsible for a section and should post information pertaining to his or her task. This might include drafts of articles for the newsletter—as mentioned previously—sample or mock-up drafts of the design of the newsletter, or ideas pertaining to how the newsletter should be created.
3. Significantly, each member should contribute to the wiki in their specified area, or in their own room, but should also be visiting the other members' areas—or rooms—to provide helpful feedback and ideas as needed.



Figure 1. The wiki for Project A.

Similarly, Project B integrates wikis and Google Docs by following similar principles. For example, in Project B, each of the three students created their own page (room) within the wiki (house) that the teacher created for them. Each of their projects was located within the wiki, making it easy for the members of Project B to read and respond to each other's work (visit each other's rooms).

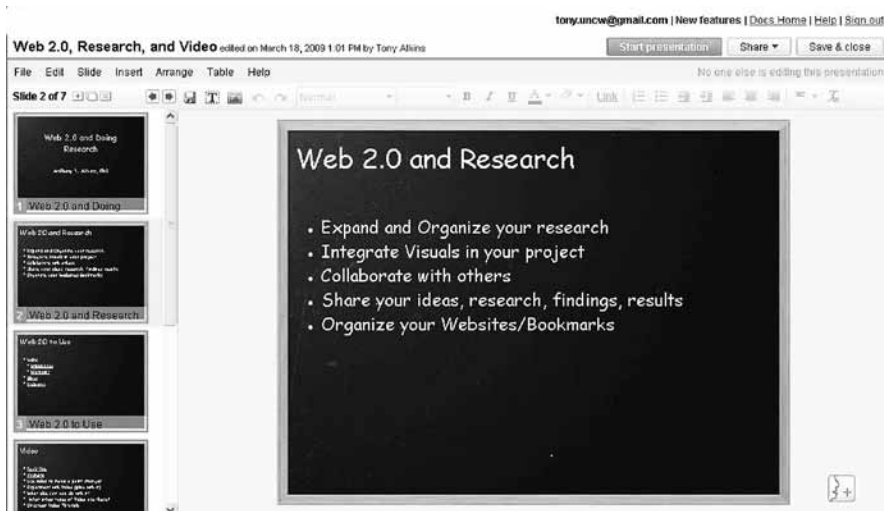


Figure 2. The wiki for Project B.

In Project B, all three students were expected to create their own projects, but were encouraged to collaborate with the other students working on individual projects for help with revising, brainstorming research questions, and finding articles or other multimedia files that could help another student. Working together was the best course of action because each group member had a detailed project that required a high quality product. The wiki allowed group members to post and share information with each other. Together, Project B group members felt that using a wiki would be the best technology to use for collaborating and sharing each others' work and progress.

How is using a wiki better or more helpful than simply meeting face-to-face? Aside from getting around schedule constraints trying to get all group members in the same room at the same time to work face-to-face, it also allows you and your group to always work in an electronic medium where all text, images, and links are saved at all times in one space, without having to trade files by email. All members have access to the same material from any location, and any group member can edit any of the documents at any time. Online collaboration also facilitates participation because group members who are often quiet in face-to-face meetings may feel less inhibited to participate or contrib-

ute to the project. You can also share the wiki with your teacher so she/he can see your progress as your group completes the project.

There are a number of ways to share documents on a wiki, but an easy option is to create your documents using Google Docs. For example, while some drafting can be done in a wiki, it is even easier to create a Google Doc, draft an article for the project, then simply link to it from the wiki, allowing all group members to see the link and edit if they choose to do so. Regardless of whether you use wikis or Google Docs, both also provide the added benefit of revision tracking, which keeps a record of all changes made to the document and by whom.

With each group project, you will want to determine the best technological tool to complete the task. In Projects A and B, a wiki and Google Docs seem to be the best tools for the purpose, but it should be noted that there are a number of many Internet communication and productivity tools available (blogs, Facebook, drop.io file sharing, and instant messaging are some other tools that could assist you), and each group should determine what works best for that particular group and that particular project. Questions you might think about when determining which tool to use are:

- Will documents need to be edited, revised, or otherwise changed?
- Will group members need to be able to upload multimedia files and documents, and if so, what kinds and how large are they?
- Will documents need to be shared with more than assigned group members?

Answering these questions can help you determine the best technological tool for the task.

Assessing your project and determining the technological tools that will help complete it are not the only challenges when it comes to group work. Simply working with your group members can be difficult. Some group members do not participate, lack motivation or desire, or simply leave the bulk of the work to other group members, making excuses along the way. “Is this a group grade?” you might ask after learning about a group project assigned in one of your classes. Why is this a common question? By far, the biggest complaint of group work from students is that some members do not contribute fairly, and then the students who do the work must share the grade with the person

who did very little. Certainly, teachers have come up with numerous ways to track work among students within a collaborative project like progress reports, end-of-project reflections, and asking group members to “grade” each other. These attempts at making sure all members of a group participate equally come with mixed results. However, using wikis or Google Docs, and inviting the teacher to review your group’s progress, gives your group and your instructor a permanent and visible record of the contributions each group member made.

Beyond using Web 2.0 technologies to help police non-contributing group members, using Web 2.0 tools can increase participation in your group by changing attitudes about group work. One of the reasons group projects can be successful is because group members can get excited by using a Web 2.0 technology to organize the project, and this has the potential to eliminate virtually all face-to-face meetings. Group members should decide on an exciting way to conduct and complete group work. Using a technology like a wiki, Google Docs, or a blog (or even a social networking site), can do more than excite group members about the project; it can also alleviate the problems associated with face-to-face discussion-based meetings and facilitate participation by all group members.

Once the project is complete, often you are asked to present the project to the class or to the group of people for whom you were working. As you will see in the next section, online digital tools can also help your group develop the presentation.

USING TECHNOLOGY FOR PRESENTATION

In this section we will consider the following questions:

- What type of presentation (or end product) is required?
- What tools will best help the group deliver a coherent presentation of the project?
- What technologies can help create the presentation?

Often, group work requires the presentation of the project to the class, teacher and/or people invested in the project. Presentations can take various forms. What kind of presentation you create is determined largely by the nature of the project itself. For example, if the group project you completed involved many numbers or statistics, you might

consider creating graphs and charts to display the statistics in an honest and visually appealing format. Web 2.0 technologies can aid in this part of the project, too. Let's look at the two projects described earlier.

Projects A and B required two types of presentations. Project A required the development of a newsletter. Certainly, the audience will want to see the completed newsletter, but your teacher, the non-profit organization, and/or your classmates will also want to see how you collected the information to write the content of the newsletter and the process your group went through to design the newsletter. For example, how did your group decide on the design and layout of the newsletter? To illustrate the work your group completed, consider the technologies you used to organize the project and your group. When you and your group members use Google Docs and a wiki to house and create a project, your information is readily available in electronic format. An easy way to illustrate what you have done is by showing the audience your group wiki pages (your house and the rooms) to help explain the decision-making process. Likewise, you and your group could also use Google Docs' presentation tool, which resembles Microsoft PowerPoint, to show and share more concretely the major points and ideas of the newsletter. Once you create a Google Doc presentation, you could link to it from your wiki (house), and email a link to the presentation to all audience members for easy reference. Additionally, your presentation is available from almost any location that has an Internet connection. You do not even have to carry a USB flash drive containing the presentation.

Project B, on the other hand, required a slightly different dynamic for group members because each group member had to present the project orally, as well as put together a poster that summarized the project as a whole. Like Project A, students could use Google Docs' presentation tool to develop the oral presentation because they had maintained their work in the wiki.

The posters were created by another software program that was also shared electronically among group members. While group members shared the posters via email, they also reviewed and edited each other's presentations by using Google Docs. Eventually, links to the posters were added to the wiki.

As you will discover in your own projects, creating presentations in Google Docs functions like a review system that allows you and your classmates to access the presentations from home, encourages group

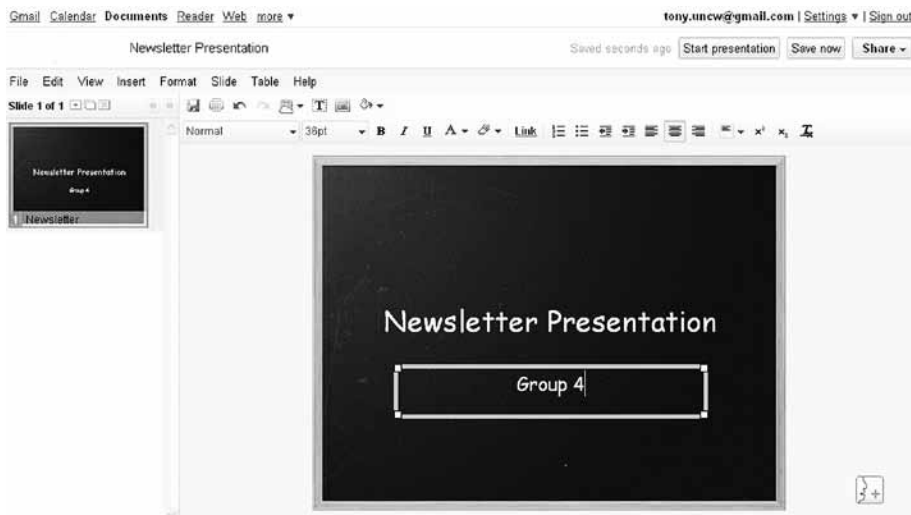


Figure 3. An example Google Doc presentation in edit mode.

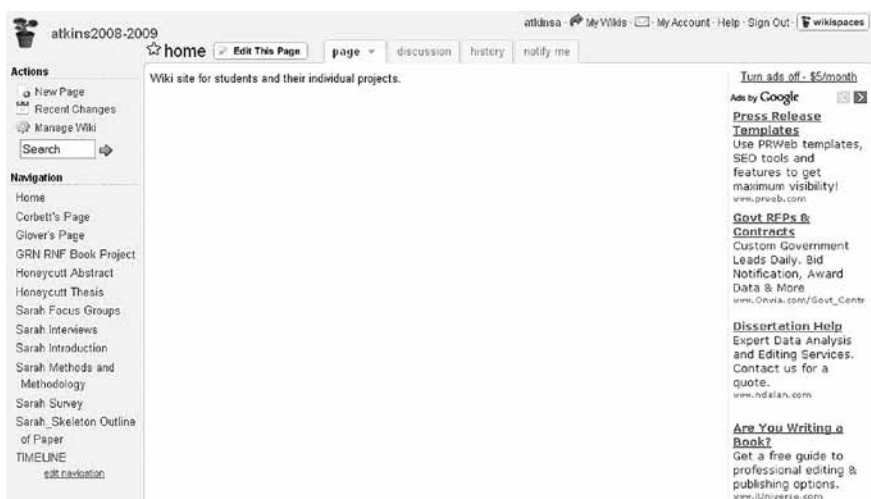


Figure 4. Project B's Google Doc presentation in edit mode.

members to participate, and increases the quality of work produced by the group. When presentations are meant to be interactive, having the project and presentation in an electronic format will allow others to participate in your project and further illustrate the time, work, and effort put into a specific project.

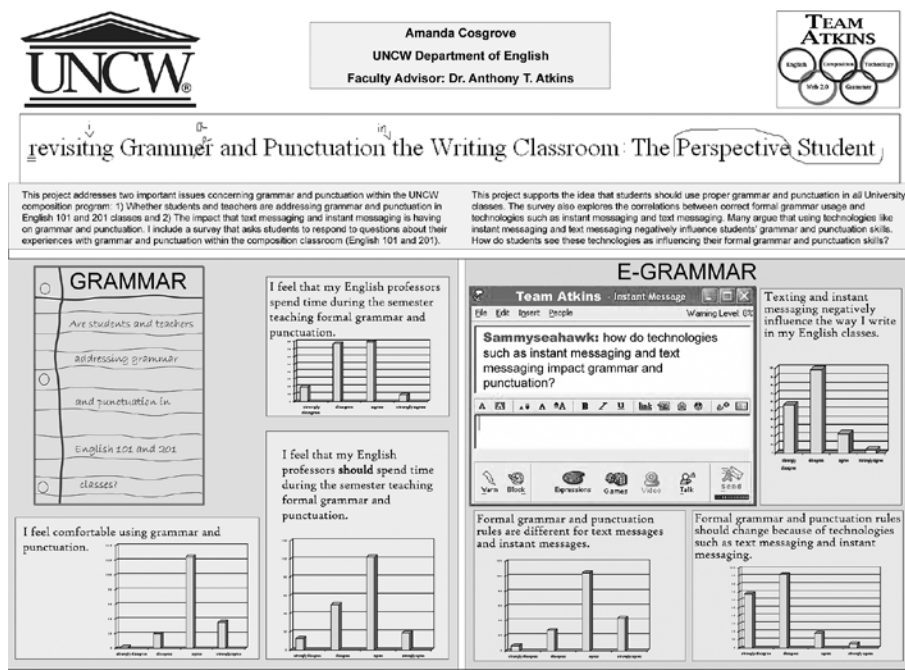


Figure 5. Final version of the poster. (© 2008 Amanda Cosgrove.)

REVIEW

Working in a collaborative environment can be tricky and certainly if group members decide not to contribute, it can become more challenging than it should be. There are a number of ways to improve the quality of group work. Assessing your project or what you have been asked to do is the first step in determining how best to proceed. Once groups have been formulated, having an initial group meeting is imperative. If your teacher does not provide time during class, you could meet face-to-face in the library, a coffee shop, or if you are taking the course as a distance or online course, hold a phone conference using a free service such as FreeConferenceCall.com, Skype, or talk online in a chat room. During this meeting, it is important to determine group member roles. What should each group member do to help facilitate the completion of a project? Remember to consider the following when getting ready for group work:

- What does the project entail? What is its purpose?
- How long should the project take?
- How many group members are needed or required and what should each one do?
- What technologies can help the group complete the project collaboratively?
- What is the best way to present the project?

The newsletter project (Project A), ended successfully. Using a wiki called Wikispaces, the group was able to post all content concerning the newsletter to the wiki for everyone to view and evaluate. Because all group members could follow the progress of the newsletter on the wiki, all group members were able to communicate and share information, manage their deadlines, and complete their tasks in a timely manner. The group could also share the wiki and other project information with the non-profit organization's stakeholders. Keeping the client organization up-to-date with the progress of the project is an important positive attribute to using Web 2.0 tools to develop collaborative projects. The presentation of the project included a Google Doc with links to pertinent material associated with how group member contributed directly to the project, which included research gathered about the organization and the adaptation of a logo/image. The group maintained a large house filled with rooms of information that was easy to manage, access, and use. Indeed, the work and contributions of group members, the full development of the project, and the end-product delivered are a direct result of employing Web 2.0 tools like wikis and Google Docs. When assigned a group task or group project, you should consider what free digital tools are available that can most help you and your group members organize the project.

DISCUSSION

1. Consider some of your previous experiences doing collaborative work. What important concepts in this essay would have been useful for your group to know? Why?
2. Think about what online tools (websites) you have used to communicate or share content. Would any of them be useful for doing collaborative work with a group? Why?

3. Create a Google Docs account (if you don't have one already). Experiment with it. Think about the individual work you do as a college student. How might Google Docs be useful to you for your non-group work?

NOTES

1. The students were required to create a poster for a presentation to faculty, and in this situation the students simply stood next to their poster and explained the project to those who chose to stop by and review them. The students were also required to provide a more formal presentation of their work in a classroom setting (where a computer and LCD projector could also be used).

2. Wikipedia controls the edits of some entries more than others; they also allow anonymous edits for some entries. Users should read the restrictions and limitations surrounding some Wikipedia entries.

3. For those who simply want access to Google Docs, they can create an account using a school email address. In other words, a full Google account is not necessary for access to Google Docs.