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AN INQUIRY INTO THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION

Pauline Gordon Adams
Emma Shore Thornton

This study, a tentative and preliminary exploration of how two or more people write together, began as a very small dinghy cast upon what turns out to be a very wide sea. Soon after articles we had written together appeared and were read or heard, we noticed something quite surprising. Raised eyebrows, quasi-queries, explicit questions. "How do you work together?" "Who does what?" "How do you ever get cohesion?" "How do you reconcile differences?" At first, these reactions took us aback. Had the article's substance been so flimsy as to have been completely blown before the wind? Then it hit us. We had thought only of the product; the audience had been intrigued by the collaborative process.

To learn more, we prepared a questionnaire to discover the motivations, satisfactions, dissatisfactions, and the working arrangements of others.* By its very nature, however, a questionnaire, no matter how seriously and carefully answered, omits much of the rapport or dissonance that respondents feel as they work together with others.

The questionnaire, then, became our tool for gathering the revealing details of the process of collaboration as experienced by thirty-five published writers. Of the thirty-five, only one, a novelist, was a non-academic. Thirty-two were almost evenly divided among economists, historians, and professors of English with the economists having a slight edge. There was a sociologist and a chemist in

addition to the novelist. As to sex, there were twenty-six men and nine women. To achieve as much openness as possible, we pledged privacy and confidentiality; we wanted the respondents to feel unthreatened. Furthermore, we chose to interview the respondents personally, the interviewer scribbling responses to the questionnaire. In six cases, we mailed the questionnaire to respondents who lived elsewhere.

The questionnaire, itself, was composed of items divided into four separate sections:

- I. The initiation of the collaboration,
- II. The process,
- III. The results,
- IV. The respondent's evaluation of process and product.

A summary of the responses to the thirty-six questions posed is as follows.

To begin with we asked, **"Why did the respondents begin collaborating?"** Ten believed they had an idea worth writing about but realized the project was too large to complete alone. Nine were stimulated by a seminar or by informal discussions with colleagues to pursue a specific issue. Nearly all of those in these two groups recognized the value of interacting minds. Three responded to the availability of grant money. Six responded to requests of a third party such as a textbook editor or an agency or a colleague setting up a project. In nearly all of the previously mentioned cases, the need to publish for professional advancement was implicit, if not always explicit. In every one of the twenty-eight cases above, the respondents considered the end product to be primary. The remaining seven were motivated more by the need to nurture a relationship, to alleviate loneliness, to achieve companionship. This last group appeared to be more concerned with the process than with the product.

*It is important to note that our interest lay in the process, not in the products. We made no attempt to evaluate the products. The fact that nearly all the products were published means that a professional assessment has already been made.

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The projects were initiated in sixteen instances by the respondents, in eleven instances by the respondent's collaborator. In addition, there were seven cases where the collaboration was initiated by a third, non-collaborating party (e.g. a publishing house editor, a department head, a senior professor, a grant administrator). Despite the apparent solidity of these figures, in many instances the respondents seemed vague as to who really had begun the process.

Expertise was clearly considered the most important component brought to the collaboration by all parties. This could have been anticipated. Nineteen respondents talked of the expertise they, themselves, brought; twenty-five respondents talked of the expertise brought by their partners. Eleven respondents spoke of the writing skills they, themselves, contributed, while only three mentioned writing as a collaborator's contribution. The concern about writing was more general than these numbers would indicate. In peripheral conversation throughout the interviews, writing came up again and again as something to be reckoned with. Respondents were concerned about poor, incomprehensible writing. Often they pinned their hopes on collaborators, or on the give and take of the collaborative process, or on an outside editor to make their work readable.

In general, collaboration imposed a structure on the time and energy of the partners, although nine claimed that it did not to any appreciable degree.

There were some interesting responses to the question, **"Who wrote what?"** One respondent said, "In my first collaborative effort we both tried to write each word together. It was unreal." Another expressed what was probably a more general feeling: "I try to forget about who did what after it's all over." Yet another dismissed the question saying, "Who wrote what is pretty arbitrary."

There was no consensus on how people worked together—separately or in each other's presence. Eighteen worked in each other's presence on revisions or on the creative generation of ideas or on other steps of the process, whereas eighteen said that they did not work in each other's presence. In fact, there were three who never met their collaborators face-to-face.

Eleven respondents met at a regular place and time; eighteen did not.

Revisions? "Revisions on revisions on revisions," said one who, by this answer spoke for everyone to some degree. Not a single respondent failed to recognize the importance of revisions. If there was unanimity on any single question, this was it.

Eight claimed that there were no differences to be resolved over content, organization, writing style, or conclusions. But for the great majority (twenty-one), differences were resolved by reaching a compromise.

"Which differences presented most problems?" To this there was a variety of answers, perhaps because the question was too open-ended, perhaps because of the great variety of collaborators and collaborations that constituted our sample. Nine listed content, seven listed style, five listed conclusions, three listed organization, one each listed title, "fine tuning of text," dedication, and footnotes.

From our sample, no patterns emerged as to what kind of collaboration worked best. A somewhat clearer pattern emerged from the question, **"Which collaboration worked least well?"** Eleven chose not to respond. Eight found personality clashes disruptive, though they did not specify the nature of the personality clash. But the majority of respondents spoke of problems other than personality conflicts. Ten talked of conflicting work patterns, different methodologies, differing interpretations of subject matter, and differing objectives. Seven deeply resented the fact that, as they viewed it, one or more of the partners failed to do a "fair" share of the work. In these latter two groups, to a greater or lesser degree, the respondents felt the lack of adequate leadership. Two observed that the physical distance between collaborators made communication difficult for them. One concluded that "too many collaborators were too many." One pointed to a long spell of hot weather as the culprit in a less successful collaboration.

"Which is more important in a collaborator, personality or expertise or similar points of view or dissimilar points of view?" To twenty-six people, personality was very important in collaboration. By personality respondents

seemed variously to mean tolerance of other viewpoints, tenacity, reliability, discipline, flexibility, a sense of humor. Twenty-five valued expertise. Ten believed dissimilar points of view were important. This dissimilarity, they believed, stimulated thought. Eight, on the other hand, believed that similar points of view were most important because these people gave greater priority to the achievement of coherence. Five spoke of the need for complementary abilities and only one stressed similar work habits.

"What personality characteristics did you find conducive to successful collaboration?" was the follow-up question. Designed to be open-ended, this question elicited responses which were diverse and meandering, difficult to classify. Twenty-one spoke of flexibility, openmindedness, openness to criticism, patience. Fifteen spoke of energizing characteristics such as a willingness to work, a cooperative spirit, an ability to be absorbed in a project, a commitment to excellence. Nine spoke of another cluster of desirable personality characteristics: sensitivity, congeniality, good naturedness, a sense of mutual respect. For five, a sense of humor was indispensable in a partner. Two focused on objectivity. One held out for honesty, another for the ability to listen.

The respondents were asked if there was a sense of loss or a sense of relief when a specific collaboration ended. Nineteen felt a sense of relief. Eleven felt a sense of loss. However, it is clear from the responses that the emotions at the end of a specific project were more complex than could be accounted for by a single statement of relief or loss. Some people had both a sense of loss and a sense of relief, if not simultaneously, then sequentially.

The next question posed was, **"If you have authored work alone as well as in collaboration, which process did you find more satisfactory? which product?"** As to the process, thirteen preferred collaboration, eight preferred working alone, twelve had no preference. As to the product, seven preferred the product of collaboration, eleven preferred the product of working alone, eleven had no preference.

The final question was also devised to be open-ended. **"If you had the opportunity to advise a potential collaborator, what advice would you give?"** The responses were as open-ended as the question, ranging from "know yourself" to "know your stuff" to "know your collaborator." Running through all the comments in reference to this question was the assumption of mutual respect as to expertise and judgment.

The single most repeated advice did not fall easily into one of the above three categories, yet it is related to all of them. That advice was to share the work equally and to know ahead of time each individual's responsibilities. A clear-cut understanding of the division of spoils and/or labor in advance was considered vital.

There was no doubt that the respondents looked back on the products of their collaborations with satisfaction. Thirty-three said so. Only one said no and one equivocated. Similarly, thirty-three enjoyed the experience as well as the product.

Twenty-nine found the experience rewarding. "Highly rewarding, educating; good forced feeding." Twenty found it productive. Eleven found it time consuming. Four found it destructive; four found it disappointing. To the question, **"Was the experience rewarding, disappointing, productive, destructive, time consuming?"**, perhaps one summed it all up best by saying, "Yes to all. Sometimes, good; sometimes ready to strangle collaborator. That really describes the human endeavor which is one of the problems."

IMPLICATIONS

Despite some drawbacks to the inquiry process, this exploration is informative. In sum,

1. It reveals an overall enthusiasm for the process on the part of those who have tried it. Economists and historians make up nearly an entire group of those who declare that collaboration is "the only way to go" because of the increasingly diverse nature of most disciplines. But not all the economists and historians believed that collaboration was "the only way to go." In general, those who have already embraced

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collaboration as their regular way of work are under fifty years of age.

2. The study reveals how highly people regard expertise, how much they recognize the need for revision and good writing, and how important a fair distribution of the work is to the harmony of the enterprise.

3. A dichotomy was uncovered in the course of this exploration. On the one hand, many respondents assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that to write alone is the ideal. The assertion of one's uniqueness and the integrity of one's own work are basic. One's own worth should result from one's own performance. On the other hand, many respondents recognized, also implicitly or explicitly, that because of personality differences (e.g. writing blocks, the need to discuss ideas with others, etc.), and/or academic discipline (e.g. the explosion of knowledge), and/or the market place (e.g. the attractive offerings of textbook editors, foundations, the government) that to write in collaboration has become today's reality. Some wondered if academic writing in isolation were not becoming an anachronism.

4. For many, the interview and/or questionnaire focusing on the process of collaboration set them on a voyage of self-discovery. At the start of the interview the respondent would try to answer the question in a matter-of-fact fashion. Because the interviewer did not insist that the respondent stick to answering the question, before long that question became memory's launch pad rather than an end in itself. This led to an increasing awareness of and perceptions about the collaborative experience.

5. The study confirms the obvious fact that publication as an essential for academic advancement is a great motivator. Publication requires writing. Writing requires work. Some people find writing alone is lonely and risky. Therefore, they seek collaboration as a means of fulfilling their requirements. To their surprise, in pushing for publication in cooperation with others, not only did they produce a product of which they are proud, but they found the process pleasurable.

6. The study reveals that to some, collaboration is a safety net, a sharing of responsibility, a way of coping with feelings of inadequacy. Yet, to others, collaboration is a way of not having to do the work they like the least, the "dog work," work they assume their partners may enjoy but they themselves are now beyond. To still others, collaboration brings the personal satisfaction gained from working closely with people. And there also are those who choose collaboration for its professional satisfactions.

7. The study also turned up some unexpected results. Though the questionnaires were anonymous, they were coded as to sex, academic discipline (economics, history, etc.), a personal or written interview, and age (over and under fifty). From this coding it is seen that:

A. There was no pattern of differences in the responses to the questions based on sex though several of the women alluded to their sex during the interview. None of the men did. Even in the choice of collaborative partners, no clear sex differential emerged. Women collaborated with men as often as with other women.

B. Differences did show up, however, on the basis of academic discipline. Collaboration as a normal mode of research and writing was most frequent for the economists, slightly less frequent for the historians, and less frequent for the professors of English. There were not enough people in the remaining disciplines to allow for any conclusions though according to the chemist's interview, collaborative research and writing is the prevailing mode in that and other scientific disciplines.

C. Like academic discipline (and unlike sex and the personal vs. written interview), age seemed to make a difference. The fifty year olds and over tended to place greater value on the process, rather than on the product. Though this may sound contradictory, those over fifty also seemed to be bothered more about not working alone, of not producing a single author work.

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