

TECH·nique 16

Collaborative Writing

Cross-reference hashtags: #shreddoc, #wiki

What Is It?

When students think and compose together, they often “share the pen.” Grisham (1989) wrote about the benefits and drawbacks of writing for her students. Cooperative learning structures in the classroom (compare Johnson et al., 1994) can assist teachers to provide essential components such as positive interdependence, productive interactions, and personal responsibilities to the group. Given a goal (such as a writing task), the group must come together to compose the product. During the process, they discuss the topic, approaches, knowledge required, and the writing components to complete the task. When we add technology, students no longer share a pen, but they do share a computer.

Why Is It Important?

When students work collaboratively, the outcomes can often be good, but what is equally important is the process that students go through when they work together toward a learning outcome (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Johnson et al., 1994). In our secondary classrooms, it is important to establish a culture of learning and a sense that every individual may contribute to the learning community. Teachers and students can work together to achieve this. An important part of this is knowing your students (sometimes 150 of them in a day) and demonstrating not only your knowledge but your willingness to inquire with them on important new topics.

Shared documents and websites allow multiple users to revise and edit a single document or page. These include wikis, Google Docs, and Office Live. Most shared documents include a feature that archives earlier versions of the document. This is helpful because if an earlier idea that was edited out is later found to be useful, there is no need to retype the text. Rather, just choose the earlier version from the “his-

tory” menu and restore what had appeared before. Moreover, student writers can work from home, from the library, and from the classroom on one common written product.

As students work together they discuss and think about the topic of learning, reading resources, and writing to learn. Increasingly, students will join a workforce where they collaborate with others using collaborative writing tools. As they do, they will come to new understandings about how written work is created. When one student writes something and another joins in editing the work of the original author, the effect can be disconcerting, at first. However, the power of collaborative writing lies in the ability to build ideas together, write your own thoughts, edit someone else’s ideas, and know that at any time the author can revert to an earlier version. Additional examples of a shared document, such as Google Docs, can be found in Technique 6.

How Will Technology Help?

Writing tasks are easier on the computer and when students share the keyboarding and the composing, the task becomes even easier and more motivating. It is simpler to revise and edit the group’s writing—and discussion of the revisions and editing can help students build knowledge that they may apply to individual writing products. In addition, the secondary teacher may have anywhere from 70 to 150 students per day. If they are writing in groups, you can divide the number of papers you must read by four (the optimum number for a collaborative writing team). Publication and dissemination of the students’ work is also simpler. It can be posted to a website or included in an electronic file that may be accessed by others. In fact, the teacher may assign groups to assess each other’s writing projects, thus deepening their knowledge about a given topic. Work products may be preserved from year to year as models for the next group of students.

What Do I Do?

Google Docs can add to our repertoire of resources for teaching. A form of cloud computing, Google Docs are repositories for documents that are collaboratively written. When chair of the Technology Committee for the International Reading Association (IRA), one of the authors led a committee to revise the IRA’s Position Statement on New Literacies (IRA, 2009). It was the first time that most of the participants had used Google Docs. It was set up by the chair of the committee and other members were invited by e-mail. These participants spanned the United States and there was a member from Great Britain as well. Each of the participants could make changes to the document and a record of the contributions could be seen by all. The Position Statement reflected the best efforts of the committee without the committee having to meet. Both authors of this book and a third colleague used

Google Docs to organize a special themed edition of a journal (Cernohous, Wolsey, & Grisham, 2010). It is easy to use and free. So teachers may have students work in teams to create documents for their content classes that can then be downloaded and shared with others via a link to the classroom webpage or in an e-mail to the teacher.

Another resource that we have used is a free program called TypeWithMe (<http://typewith.me>). Two students can be sitting at separate computers typing on the same document—a real example of collaborative writing. Of course, they may also be doing this from home. We suggest you try out Google Docs and/or TypeWithMe with partner teachers or other friends and examine the possibilities for writing in your class.

Differentiation Possibilities

Product

There are several types of shared documents and collaborative work environments. In some cases, students might choose a wiki or a shared document such as a Google Doc after considering the nature of the final product, the learning outcomes, and the strengths of each type of collaborative writing media. Because these formats have different strengths and limitations, there are implications for process, as well.

“Real-Time” Teaching: Example

Gina Girlando teaches middle school language arts. She uses Wikispaces to help students find and organize their resources. At the same time, students also publish a Wikispace that others may view. Gina describes the project here.

“Real-Time” Teaching by Gina Girlando, Sparta School District, Sparta, New Jersey

To promote the writing in my language arts class, students are given the task to develop an online research paper on the Harlem Renaissance. The purpose of the assignment is for students to research a selected topic from the Harlem Renaissance and display their knowledge through writing a collaborative research paper within a group of four. The categories for research include music, art, history, and literature of the time period.

Using Wikispace makes their research paper a live document. This means that the group always has access to the page, allowing them to edit and revise as much as they choose. This gives the students the sense that the page represents them as a whole, and they must work together to be sure their spelling, punctuation, grammar, information, and so on is correct. Because they are aware that other people are viewing their work, I have found that students take much more pride in their work,

and often are very careful to watch what other group members are changing on the page.

While this may seem a simple collaborative writing task, this project is far from an ordinary research paper. Students are required to embed media clips, pictures, podcasting, and slide shows on their wiki page to support their information (Figure 16.1). This has been an extremely useful feature, as it provides an opportunity to identify and organize their information through visual and written expression. Once students have completed their research paper, they must teach their information to the rest of the class. Students will be creative in designing a lesson that will have the students participate in an activity to exemplify their knowledge of the information presented. Such lessons in the past have included art auctions, dance-offs, sing-alongs, poetry night, and news broadcasting.

Wikispace has served as a useful tool as it allowed students to work collaboratively from any computer. With the issue of time during the school day, students are given the opportunity to work at any time with their group. The history tab feature (Figure 16.2; students' names are hidden) is also a tremendously helpful tool, as it allows the teacher to view who has been working on specific sections. With students always concerned about their partners' efforts, they are more comfortable knowing that I am able to see the interaction, as well as their work at any given time.

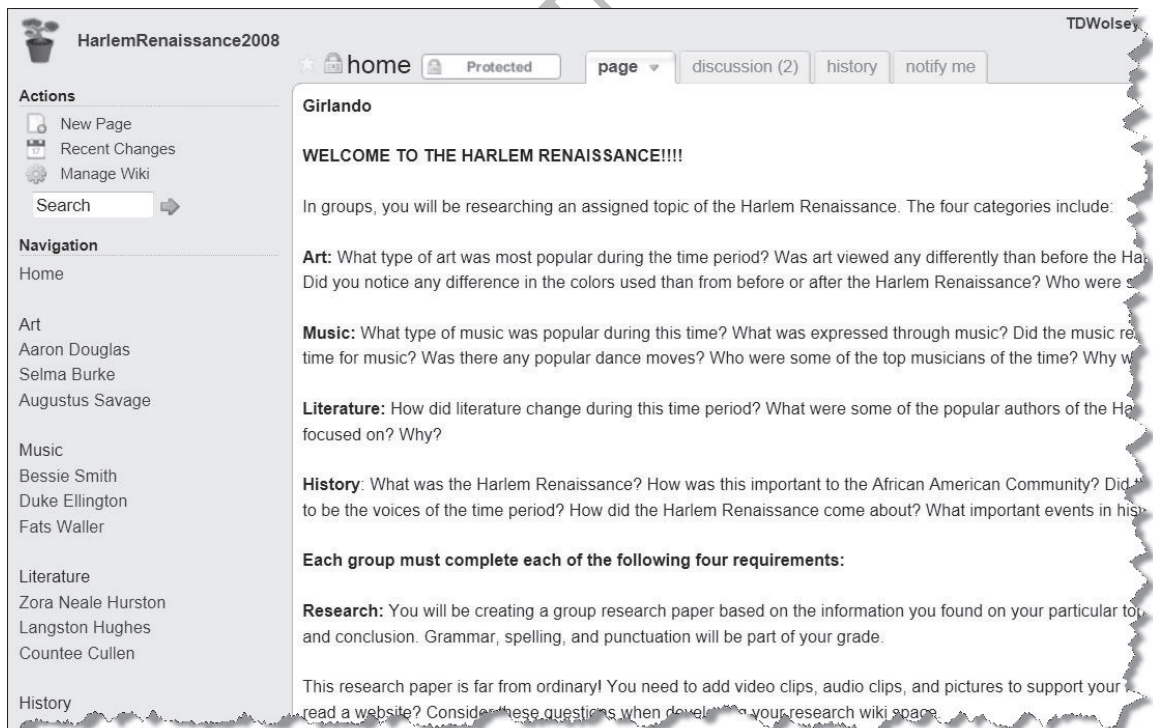


FIGURE 16.1. Gina Girlando’s wiki project home page. *Wikispaces.com* is copyright 2011 by Tangent LLC. Reprinted by permission.

Date	Compare	Author
Feb 5, 2008 3:35 pm	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Sd
Feb 5, 2008 1:54 pm	<input type="button" value="select"/>	pai
Feb 5, 2008 7:19 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	ZA
Feb 5, 2008 7:13 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	ZA
Feb 5, 2008 7:04 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Da
Feb 5, 2008 7:03 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	ZA
Feb 5, 2008 7:01 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	pai
Feb 5, 2008 6:54 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	ZA
Feb 5, 2008 6:48 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	pai
Feb 5, 2008 6:39 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	ZA
Feb 5, 2008 6:36 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Da
Feb 4, 2008 5:43 pm	<input type="button" value="select"/>	pai
Feb 4, 2008 2:09 pm	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Da
Feb 4, 2008 12:18 pm	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Sd
Feb 4, 2008 7:39 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	ZA
Feb 4, 2008 7:10 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Sd
Feb 4, 2008 7:09 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	pai
Feb 4, 2008 7:07 am	<input type="button" value="select"/>	Da

FIGURE 16.2. Ms. Girlando’s wiki showing user history (names blocked out). *Wikispaces.com* is copyright 2011 by Tangient LLC. Reprinted by permission.

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