

Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners
for Lifewide Writing

*Edited by Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore,
and Paula Rosinski*

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

©2022 by Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski. This work is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](#) license.

Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bleakney, Julia | Moore, Jessie L. | Rosinski, Paula

Title: Writing Beyond the University / Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski

Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2022] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022945867 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-08-5 | ISBN (PBK) 978-1-951414-09-2 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa5>

Subjects: LCSH: English language – Rhetoric – Study and teaching | Business writing

Classification: LCC PE1404.W75 2022 | DDC 808.066

CHAPTER 1

COLLABORATION AS WAYFINDING IN ALUMNI'S POST-GRADUATE WRITING EXPERIENCES

Karen Lunsford, *University of California, Santa Barbara, United States*

Carl Whithaus, *University of California, Davis, United States*

Jonathan Alexander, *University of California, Irvine, United States*

In this chapter we draw upon a pilot study of twenty-two University of California alumni from our three different campuses to consider how post-collegiates orient themselves to different forms of collaboration, both intentionally and serendipitously. In particular, following Ken Bruffee's famous assertion that "collaborative learning models how knowledge is generated" (1984, 647), we examine the learning about their own writing development these participants engage in as they work with others in and across professional, personal, and civic contexts after graduation. We have in mind Xiqiao Wang's (2019) attention to the ways in which the failure to meet particular goals creates opportunities for improvisation. Similarly, Clay Spinuzzi's (2015) research examines how contingent, ever-changing forms of teamwork open up more fluid ways for writers to learn from one another. In this account, we likewise foreground the exploratory, unanticipated, and often contingent forms of collaborative writing our participants engage in as they—and those they collaborate with—imagine, define, and create goals for shared writing that are grounded in reflections on their own practice.

Building upon the approaches articulated by Bruffee (1984), Wang (2019), and Spinuzzi (2015), we analyze our participants' discussion of collaboration through the framework of *wayfinding*—the

conceptual way in which we map participants' awareness of ongoing writing development through a range of intentional and accidental encounters, processes, and experiences (Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus 2020). Over the course of our research, participants have talked to us about their creative writing, their social media, their community writing, their civic writing, and all of these are as (if not more) significant to the ongoing development of their knowledges about writing than the more school-based literacies that have (typically) been described and considered by transfer writing scholars. So, while we can track the transformation of knowledges across domains, we also want to map complex and unexpected sources of writing knowledges and ability laminated by (1) the choices writers make over the course of their lives, (2) the varied signposts that orient them along their paths, and (3) the shifting identities they take on as writers. Interestingly, participants often use experiences of collaboration as vectors of wayfinding; that is, they offer descriptions of collaboration that consider personal interactions and self-discovery alongside external (e.g., workplace-driven) goals. They also report on forms of collaboration characterized more by serendipity and idiosyncratic practices. In this chapter, we focus on this simultaneous intentional *and* accidental working *across* professional, personal, and communal forms of writing.

Orienting Our Research on Collaboration

Researchers in writing studies, as well as in education, information studies, and other disciplines, have been studying collaboration for some time. Here, we want to reflect on how such research on workplace collaboration often has been oriented towards identifying the distinct roles and processes needed to compose final products, or deliverables. This impulse has both research and pedagogical implications: in the face of the diverse contexts, media, and communities in which collaborative writing may take place, researchers have sought to identify common practices that might then be taken as models. For example, in the frequently cited "Building a Taxonomy and Nomenclature of Collaborative

Writing to Improve Interdisciplinary Research and Practice,” Paul Benjamin Lowry, Aaron Curtis, and Michelle René Lowry point out that “CW [Collaborative Writing] researchers and practitioners do not even agree on a common term for CW” (2004, 72), and then go on to identify common terms and strategies through which multi-author writing takes place. Recognizing that partners in collaborative work might occupy different “roles” (such as writer, consultant, editor, team leader, reviewer) (88), Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry also identify common strategies and activities that writers working together engage in. They contend that collaborative writing, unlike single-author writing, is dependent on “multiple authors” and “group dynamics”; they argue, in part, that “(a) Single-author writing involves the minimum activities of planning, drafting, and revising; (b) CW extends on single-author writing by involving multiple parties and the minimum activities of planning, drafting, and revising” (72). The authors’ comments on writing *activities* are particularly important, as we have been focused on the communicative activities of our participants. The scholars identify brainstorming, outlining, drafting, reviewing, revising, and copyediting as common collaborative writing activities (82). They do not dictate a sequence of activities, but rather emphasize the shared, recursive nature of these specific activities across collaborators occupying different (and sometimes shifting) roles.

Some of our participants have described writing activities, as well as roles, that can be discussed productively using taxonomies such as Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry’s. Five participants have identified themselves as having different experiences with marketing, and they each describe people in different roles (e.g., managers, lawyers, other copywriters) with whom they must collaborate to create, for example, a successful social media campaign. Yet our attention has been drawn even more to participants who speak less to existing taxonomies—which overlap, as noted, with more curricular and school-based knowledges about writing—and speak more to idiosyncratic, unexpected, and even accidental practices that generate different knowledges about writing after graduation. Our alumni’s

collaborations seem more akin to the informal kinds of peer-to-peer writing groups that Anne Ruggles Gere (1987) noted and the often temporary workplace writing groups that Clay Spinuzzi (2015) has studied. What Gere identified in institutional contexts and Spinuzzi in the workplace, we have been seeing in post-collegiate writing ecologies, where alumni are finding their way toward different practices and knowledges about writing. We have described the experiences leading to such post-graduation knowledges—both the more well sign-posted and the more serendipitous—as *wayfinding* (Alexander, Lunsford, Whithaus 2020). For us, wayfinding helps account for exploratory writing practices that draw upon previously acquired knowledge about and experience with school-based forms of writing, but also those that orient writers, sometimes unexpectedly, to new writing knowledges and practices that frequently cross communicative contexts.

We analyze here participants' experiences with and descriptions of collaborative writing. Our accounts come from a three-year, IRB-approved pilot study in which twenty-two alumni from our three campuses, recruited through email listservs, participated in focus group interviews. Each interview lasted 30–60 minutes, and only the audio was recorded and transcribed. In this chapter, the quotations from the focus group interviews were lightly edited for clarity. Although we did not systematically collect demographic information in the pilot, we can say that our participants reflected the racial/ethnic/cultural diversity, professions, and geographic distribution of UC alumni. All participants were alumni who had earned a bachelor's degree within the past three to ten years; their names in our reports are pseudonyms.

We focus on three participants whose conversation drew our attention to the fluid experience of collaboration itself. Participants across the focus groups commented on outcome-oriented forms of collaboration within specific workplaces, as goal-oriented models might suggest. However, while reflecting on their ongoing learning about writing, our participants also focused on the contingent and emotionally charged forms of collaboration that cut across their

experiences in different contexts. This fluidity across contexts, and the emotional motivations that accompany emerging roles and goals for a collaboration, are not fully accounted for in, say, pedagogical practices that assign students specific roles in group work. Moreover, even though research has frequently studied emotions and “group dynamics” in deliberate collaborations—whether role-based as in Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry, or extremely fluid as in Spinuzzi—less attention has been paid to whether and how individuals see themselves within collaborations at all, and thus how they orient their collective writing activities and what they learn about writing as a result. Our participants’ data call for new ways to describe the often serendipitous nature of collaborative work.

To capture the fluid ways that writers work with one another, we have identified two different axes that emerged from our analysis of the transcripts: the first describes how the collaboration came about (i.e., whether it was intentional or serendipitous collaboration) and the second maps the alum’s stance or orientation towards collaboration (i.e., ranging from defining a task as collaborative to insisting the writing task was not a collaboration and relied on individual effort). Both of these ways of describing collaboration seem to operate on a spectrum, rather than as an on-off binary.

Intentional and Serendipitous Collaboration

Describing the ambiguities between intentional and serendipitous collaboration, Jasmine talked about working as a script writer for reality TV:

For my job, I will typically have to write VO [voice over] for something. But I also have to write suggested bites for our cast members. Reality TV is real, sort of. But, so you have to think in their voice, and you have to craft the questions in a way where you are still getting the answer that you want, but not in a way where they feel like they are not getting a say.

The task of script writing for a reality TV show is complex, because the questions and sound bites are suggestions. They are acts where the writer, Jasmine, is creating a script, but this script is really a draft that the reality TV personality will improvise from. The art of writing, the art of collaborating in this case, is creating “in their voice.” Jasmine emphasizes crafting questions so that the writer is directing the reality TV personality, but also providing them enough space where they “get a say.” This balance highlights the way in which her reality TV show script writing runs toward the serendipitous point on the intentional-to-serendipitous spectrum of collaboration. As a writer, Jasmine is intentional—dramatically so—about drawing out a particular response that fits with where the producer would like the show to go. However, her script is both in tension with and in collaboration with the reality TV personalities who need to have their “say” for the writing, for the show, to work.

Jasmine explores this idea of collaboration existing along an intentional-to-serendipitous spectrum: “When you suggest something for [the reality TV personalities] to say, they want to feel like it’s in their voice so that they are not feeling like you’re putting words in their mouth.” She points to a show she worked on about a year ago, noting that “It was about a family with quintuplet daughters. The episode was about the girls’ fourth birthday and so the parents are updating us on how each of the girls are doing. But they’re just like, ‘I don’t know, tell me how my daughters are doing.’” After sharing this example with us, Jasmine explained, “So it’s about getting them to say what we see and what they see but in words they would use, I guess.” For Jasmine, as a writer working on reality TV, this collaborative writing is more fluid than most of the writing described in the research literature. Jasmine as the writer, the TV reality personalities, and the producers are all learning from one another as they work on the episodes. This writing, this voicing, is collaborative, but in a way that exceeds team-based document creation. There is distinct intention in what Jasmine creates as a script writer, but the end product, the dialogue on the reality

TV show, slides away from her intention toward the serendipitous voicings of the reality TV personalities.

Tom, a member of a different focus group, described a more intentional form of collaboration. When asked about “something that you wrote that was meaningful,” Tom recalled a “biography of my dad’s dad.” He noted that it started as an assignment in college: “We had to write a thousand [word] narrative piece about just someone,” but it evolved into “a more concrete biographical story,” because of conversations with his father and a trove of photographs of his grandfather. In this passage, Tom discusses how he and his dad collaborated:

So that kind of involved writing a basic first draft from what I remember hearing from my dad and remember seeing in photos, and then interviewing my dad over Skype about, to help fill in the holes and make sure the things I’d written out were correct. I think I might have sent what I had written to him to look over just to make sure everything was accurate so far. And then refining it based on what he said.

Tom, as the primary writer, builds a text through interviews and confirms the accuracy of his piece with his subject. In this creative writing activity, Tom is not emphasizing empirical accuracy, but rather a felt sense of accuracy, a fidelity to his father’s emotional recollections. Tom describes this collaborative process:

And so I kind of took the stories I heard from my dad about him and things that I had seen in old photos about his dad, and tried to turn it into a thousand-word biography that utilized as much kind of creative writing as I could, or kind of lyrical writing almost, as I could.

Tom’s writing is a collaboration within his family, a reach across generations to preserve the memory of his grandfather. It was based on an interview with his father, but it was not a single-session interview; rather, Tom describes a recursive process that involves

a conversation, the sharing of photographs, and then follow-up conversations. Tom's work with his father is intentional, but it is also the crafting of a story with another person to reflect the interviewee's emotional memories.

Jasmine's experiences as a script writer for reality TV and Tom's experiences shaping the biography of his grandfather reflect the ways in which collaborative writing and storytelling reach beyond models of team-based document creation. Both alumni rely more on serendipity to find their way toward meaningful writing experiences. Considering their writing processes as collaborations requires us to adjust how we think about collaborative writing—particularly how both intent *and* serendipity, a key dimension of wayfinding, function in the same instance. Jasmine intends to write for the reality TV personality and bring the show towards the point the producers aim for, but she needs to craft space for the serendipitous, the real-time play, of the reality TV format. For Tom, the project begins as an intentional writing activity for a course, but unexpectedly spills over into his life after college. As a writer, he becomes interested in his grandfather's story and, in particular, in his conversations with his father. He returns to the work, to the biography, and develops it to recount, to represent, his father's emotional state and connections with his father. That act is a collaboration that relies on Tom's intent to craft a biography, but also includes elements of serendipity that range from conversational moments to the sharing of photographs. Both cases show us how collaboration can become a rich experience of wayfinding, combining both intention and serendipity.

(Not) Collaborative Interactions

The fluid, sometimes serendipitous nature of writing with others, as described by our participants, meant that they were not always certain they were engaged in collaborative writing. When asked about which writing was the most meaningful to them, or about what conversations with others they had had about writing, participants raised different scenarios in which they were uncertain about how to describe precisely their interactive writing, leading

them to muse aloud. To what extent does an audience's response to a stand-up comedy routine equal working with those audience members? How should one characterize one's role in authorship upon being surprised to find that an offhand social media post has become the center of collective action? This uncertainty about what counts as collaboration was amplified when participants equated collaboration with school-oriented definitions. When we asked Francine about what conversations she had had about writing with family members, friends, and coworkers, she initially responded, "I don't feel like I've done a lot of writing collaborative projects in my adult life, I feel like that was much more of a high school scene kind of a thing, which I definitely did a lot of." In this response, Francine dismisses the frequent project-oriented, school group work as not having much to do with the forms of collaboration she has done as an adult.

In contrast to her own high school experiences, Francine describes a two-year, multimodal, and multigenerational classroom activity that she organized as a high school teacher:

I think it was my first year teaching, and I had this obnoxious child who was making an argument that, "Oh, that's not how the real world works. In the real world, I can get away with this." Or whatever. And I was like, "Oh, girl, oh, man." . . . I was going to curate all of my friends, from their adult lives: Could you just write about, what is . . . the craziest transitions, things you learned from high school and then when you hit the adult world, basically. . . . And I put their faces and [artifacts] to generally identify them with their quotes, and I pasted them all around the room. . . . It was like some team building day and I made my kids go around and read them. And then for ones that stood out to them, that they had reactions to, I made them write responses on little sticky notes and stick them over.

Despite the multiple possible forms of collaboration she mentions in her account—from asking friends to provide commentary, to asking students to think about team building, to having students respond back to the photos and posters stuck about the room—Francine initially describes herself as not having “done a lot of writing collaborative projects in my adult life.” Perhaps, as a teacher, she does not initially define herself as collaborating with students on a project. In her account, she first identifies the collaboration with the adult friends who provided the quotations she transformed into classroom materials.

But Francine’s initial reluctance to identify her work as a collaborative writing project shifts as she reassesses the nature of collaboration, while musing aloud with us and her focus group members. She realizes that, rather than working together to create an artifact as a high-school project group would do, her students and friends work together to generate new possibilities for future identities and actions:

It was amazing how useful [this classroom activity] was. And I took photos of the post-its that my kids had written to my friends and then sent those to them too. Like these are what the kids said about what you said, they really appreciated it. And I think of that as a very collaborative project, because . . . it was so great for me and affirming to me. It was really helpful for my students, to see people that looked like them, but older . . . and affirm for them that things are going to be okay even if they’re going to be terrible. And then it was affirming for my friends who got these kind of comments back from like the next generation of kids. So I feel like it was kind of a weird three-way collaboration between my students and my friends and me. But it was great. I loved doing it. I learned a lot. I think my kids did too.

Responding to our follow-up question about what she has learned, Francine offers the following:

I think the biggest thing that I learned . . . was that I am not the best person to say some things. . . . It would mean nothing to some of my children, for me to say, some piece of wisdom like, you're going . . . to follow your dreams, take some really flippant comment like that. But when it comes from someone who's like a Chicana badass woman in her photos, like her standing in front of a fighter jet, and she's like in chemistry, for my young women of color in a very niche science academy, her saying it is huge. Like it's a much bigger deal, and means much more to them. And they ask more questions than they would ever have done to me. It was humbling and useful for me to realize that like, hey, maybe part of your job as a teacher isn't to give the wisdom, but to just point them at it.

The aim of this collaboration is not a specific written product, but to represent multiple futures and subject positions to her students, a way of making visible what it means, for example, for a Chicana to be successful in STEM. Working with her friends and colleagues, Francine literally provides signposts (in the form of handmade posters and sticky notes posted around the classroom) to assist students in finding their way towards future potential selves. Moreover, again in keeping with wayfinding, her students amplify those potential pathways by writing back to the adults. The learning in this case is a “three-way” street, among adults and students, with Francine in particular learning more about different forms of writing, of the powers of authorship, and a new understanding of what it is to be a teacher.

Implications and Conclusion

What are the implications of our research for the classroom and for writing programs, as well as future research? In “Tracing

Connections and Disconnects: Reading, Writing, and Digital Literacies across Contexts,” Xiqiao Wang (2019) offers an in-depth study of a multilingual, transnational student’s literacy practices in a variety of contexts, both academic and personal. Wang’s particular contribution lies in a focus on “disconnection,” or the moments when literacies fail to meet particular needs, a failure requiring further reflection, refinement, and even creativity and improvisation. Wang ultimately argues that “it is with increased exposure to texts, explicit instruction, and collaborative discovery that students learn to recognize texts as accomplishing rhetorical action, fulfilling purpose, and embodying modes of disciplinary inquiry across contexts” (581). Our research into post-collegiate collaborative writing experiences reinforces Wang’s understanding of the importance of encountering disconnection while being open to serendipitous possibilities. Focusing more classroom attention on collaboration itself as a form of serendipity—not just as a from-the-get-go goal-oriented and role-assigning practice—might attune writers to the many different ways collaboration takes shape in the “real world.”

In talking with students about collaborative writing, instructors should not simply focus on “group work,” in which students are assigned roles for finishing a research project. Rather, remind students of the serendipitous ways in which writing with others can develop over time—often with significant emotional investment and relationship-building that is fluid. Further, talk with students about the ways in which creative work and multimodal work might *also* inform professional work, although their aims may not be to develop a specific artifact, but to develop opportunities, pathways, new ways of thinking, and experiences. Such classroom practices might be augmented by curricular shifts at the programmatic level. We concur with Francine that what is needed are resources and models that illustrate a wide range of writing with others, all framed as potential pathways forward.

Beyond the work that a single instructor can do with students in a course, writing program directors might think about how they could establish opportunities for students to participate in

collaborative writing work across curricular and co-curricular experiences, especially when “roles” in collaboration are more fluid and less concrete. Writing programs might create workshops led by faculty who research and write collaboratively. Having faculty who work in interdisciplinary contexts develop workshops could leverage students’ engagement with complex, multidisciplinary problems—especially if faculty also highlight how they draw upon their own extracurricular experiences to develop solutions. Program directors and other university administrators can likewise support writers’ development for writing beyond the university, furthering what we used to call “lifelong learning” about writing, particularly when writers need to learn to look for unexpected opportunities to write and to write with one another. To facilitate such learning, as well as to aid self-reflection about ongoing writing development, program directors could encourage graduating students to form their own writing groups and to seek out each other as writing partners, either for professional, personal, or civic projects. Inviting students to work across the artificial boundaries of discipline or major on projects that are of mutual interest can initially model how such groups might work. Finally, creating spaces for graduating students to form connections with alumni (and perhaps return to campus to talk about their own experiences) can demonstrate for students how writers continue to work with others to find their way toward powerful writing across multiple contexts.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our graduate team for their coding, their insights, and their engagement with the research data: Tymoteusz Chajdas, Valentina Fahler, Somer Levine, and Elica Sue. Their work was supported by a UC Santa Barbara Academic Senate Faculty grant.

References

- Alexander, Jonathan, Karen Lunsford, and Carl Whithaus. 2020. "Toward Wayfinding: A Metaphor for Understanding Writing Experiences." *Written Communication* 37 (1): 104–131.
- Bruffee, Kenneth A. 1984. "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English* 46 (7): 635–52.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. 1987. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Lowry, Paul Benjamin, Aaron Curtis, and Michelle René Lowry. 2004. "Building a Taxonomy and Nomenclature of Collaborative Writing to Improve Interdisciplinary Research and Practice." *The Journal of Business Communication* 41 (1): 66–99.
- Spinuzzi, Clay. 2015. *All Edge: Inside the New Workplace Networks*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wang, Xiqiao. 2019. "Tracing Connections and Disconnects: Reading, Writing, and Digital Literacies across Contexts." *College Composition and Communication* 70 (4): 560–89.