

Collaboration

Practices of Technical Communication

A textbook chapter for Dr. Tracy Bridgeford's classes



Definition

Collaboration is a process of knowledge building involves two or more people working toward a specified goal over an extended period of time. Collaboration grows out of tasks that are complex enough to require multiple perspectives and various areas of expertise. These tasks lead to the construction of meaning that aggregates into a domain of knowledge from which future practice draws.

Tasks for Collaboration

For collaborative situations to be considered valuable enough to commit significant time and energy to a project, its tasks need to be complex enough to require multiple perspectives and various areas of expertise such as problem-solving (identifying, analyzing, evaluating, assessing, and articulating), revising, editing, and correspondence by email, texting, phone, and perhaps from an old-fashioned perspective, face-to-face. These tasks involve much give-and-take, interest in others' ideas, and a good attitude.

The advantages of collaboration outweigh any disadvantages. Collaboration draws on a larger knowledge domain, provides better input about users because group members can act as audience members, improves communication among members who learn about each other's jobs and work methods, and enculturates employees more effectively. Of course, collaboration also takes more

time to complete a task because of group meetings or shared tasks. It can also lead to groupthink, enabling a lack of critical perspectives.

It is true, however, that collaboration can sometimes lack transitions, a single style, or careful editing. At times, workloads may also seem inequitable; some members may end up doing more or less work. If their roles in a project are small, members could lose motivation. Some groups also experience interpersonal conflict that, at times, cannot be avoided. Despite these possible disadvantages, I believe that collaborative work is valuable and well worth the effort not only because you will all be working in some kind of collaborative work in your future jobs but also because members who work with other people seem to create more creative, thoughtful, and interesting documents.

Guidelines for Collaboration

Collaboration is most valuable when members respect each others' time, work, and efforts. Members who try to control collaborative activities or insist on their methods and ideas often feel frustrated and discouraged, even angry. Certainly, groups can have fun while working, but if that fun interferes with productivity, members can grow to resent each other. We are all very busy people with jobs, families, and other work that also occupies our time and energy.

The guidelines below are categorized according to areas in collaborative spaces.

Behavior/Social Skills

- › Be considerate of other members.
- › Be willing to negotiate your ideas (if you are married to your ideas or your writing, you'll make it harder for others to contribute or listen to your ideas).
- › Be prepared.
- › Think about the task ahead of time.
- › Prepare notes about issues or concerns that the team needs to consider.
- › Prepare visuals and written drafts in advance of the meeting.
- › Demonstrate a positive, engaging attitude.
- › Be interested, even enthusiastic in face-to-face meetings and online.
- › Show up on time for meetings.
- › Finish tasks correctly, completely, and on time.
- › Maintain regular contact with team members.

Giving/Receiving Criticism

- › Listen actively to what others have to say (try to see it from their perspective, seek to understand, not control).
- › Give constructive criticism (don't seek to undermine others' sense of achievement and personal value).
- › Take criticism as it is intended, that is, with the intention of improving the communication, not as a personal vendetta.

Agree on Meeting Procedures

- › Explicitly make procedural decisions.
- › Agree on how you will work together as a team.
- › Define the task.
- › Set agendas for meetings.
- › Send summary notes after meetings.

Social Skills

- › Always act professionally (encourage each other to contribute; explicitly ask questions beyond content-questions about rhetorical elements).
- › Participate in open discussions.
- › Listen carefully and actively (questioning, paraphrasing, summarizing).
- › Assume appropriate roles (leadership, support).
- › Share information freely (don't hoard and don't wait for the writing/design to be perfect).
- › Focus discussions on the rhetorical elements associated with the project (situation/context, organization of information, purpose, content, support (explanatory material), audience, visual/textual balance, key points, design, and argument).

Interpersonal Skills

- › Appreciate different learning and working styles.
- › Build positive interpersonal relationships.
- › Understand different personalities.
- › Respect different social, political, religious, and cultural beliefs.

- › Tolerate what can be tolerated Expect positive attitudes.

Types of Conflict and Suggestions for Avoiding or Reducing Conflict

Affective Conflicts

- › Respect and try to understand differences in others.
- › Overcome or overlook annoyances.
- › Tolerate what can be tolerated.
- › Stay focused on the task, not on interpersonal distractions.
- › Be aware of your own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that might be a problem.

Procedural Conflicts

- › Make operational decisions that affect the what, when, and where of the team's work
- › Make functional decisions that affect the who, how, and why of a team's work.

Operational Decisions

- › Discuss time for meetings and meeting durations, schedules/deadlines, places for meetings.
- › Share agenda.
- › Agree on preparation.
- › Decide on keyboard control.

Functional Decisions

- › Explore leadership options.
- › Discuss individual roles.
- › Decide on decision making.
Discuss conflict resolution.
Discuss review control.
- › Determine evaluation.
- › Decide on authorship.

Substantive Conflicts

- › Focus on rhetorical elements.
- › Ask provocative questions.
- › Ask questions that focus on potential problems between various elements:

Regularly ask for collaborations, clarifications, and explanations.

Ask for reasons to support arguments.

Raise issues and ask questions that provoke feasible, reasonable alternatives.

Assume the role of devil's advocate.

Consider alternatives.

Voice disagreements (especially why you disagree).