

## Teaching Collaboration: From "Divide and Conquer" to "More than the Sum of its Parts"

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### Author Biography

Andy Frazee, PhD, is the Associate Director of the Writing and Communication Program at Georgia Tech, overseeing the teaching and faculty development of 35 Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellows. In addition to research examining writing program administration, higher education, and faculty development, he is a publishing poet and scholar of postmodern and contemporary poetry.

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### Introduction

I've assigned group projects in almost every class I have taught. For years I assumed that students *knew* how to collaborate. Of course, that's not the case. Rather, they often divide the "group" assignment into parts; these parts are completed by individual students and then brought back together into a "group" deliverable. Call it the divide-and-conquer method.

But we presumably assign group projects because, at least in part, we want students to learn something about working with others. We want students to practice *collaboration* rather than *teamwork*. What's the difference? Barkley, Major, and Cross (2014), in *Collaborative Learning Techniques*, indicate that "crucial to collaborative learning is co-laboring.... In collaborative learning, all participants in the group must engage actively in working together toward the stated objectives." Teamwork may or may not be collaborative, as we see with divide-and-conquer group projects. Collaboration, on the other hand, is more than the sum of its parts. It leads to ideas that are only possible through multiple people thinking together—that is, co-laboring.

However, students have spent years, from elementary school onward, practicing divide-and-conquer teamwork. How do we go about teaching them collaboration? I offer the following activity as an easy way to incorporate collaboration education into a course.

### Goal of the Activity

In using the following activity, I want students to understand collaboration as a "more than the sum of its parts" activity.

### Planning the Activity

This activity involves some planning since its effectiveness rests on being tied with a current collaborative assignment. Doing so makes the stakes meaningful and real.

The collaborative assignment itself can be any number of things, but it should be something that is big or complex enough that it requires multiple minds co-laboring together. For my English 1102 course, the assignment is a website that collects instances of electronic literature (<https://collection.eliterature.org/>), analyzes that e-literature, and provides a collaboratively-written introduction to the collection.

I usually introduce collaborative concepts the first day that teams have been formed. I assign a short essay by Rebecca Burnett and Elizabeth Wardle (2020) that discusses three kinds of conflict in collaborative situations: procedural, affective, and substantive. I like this reading because it challenges students' conceptions of conflict as necessarily negative. In this model, the goal of collaboration is substantive conflict: disagreements based on the real substance of the task at hand. Procedural conflict (about how the task is

accomplished) and affective conflict (based on individual personalities, biases, or stereotypes) are to be recognized, avoided, or otherwise dealt with. While I don't think that teaching collaboration necessarily requires Burnett and Wardle's article, having some kind of framework makes the idea of collaboration as a skill to be practiced more explicit.

### **Facilitating the Activity in Class**

In class I first ask students to write about the kinds of conflicts they have experienced in teams; in discussing their reflections, I connect Burnett and Wardle's framework to their own experiences.

After priming students' memories of collaboration, I ask the teams to sit together, introduce themselves, and complete a brief task. This task should be a part of the overall collaborative assignment—a task that is meaningful and necessary. For example, for my e-literature website assignment, I ask students to discuss the works of e-literature they might want to include on their website. Groups generally discuss for 10-15 minutes. I then ask students to individually reflect on the process of collaboration: How did they go about completing the task?

Finally—and this is where everything comes together—I ask each group to share the process they undertook to complete the task. Generally, each group has a slightly different process. In facilitating the discussion, I connect the group's activities to Burnett and Wardle's framework of conflicts, focusing on substantive conflict and how the groups discussed conflicting ideas about what to include in their e-literature website. I also look specifically for instances in which the groups develop new ideas through their discussion. Pointing out that Student A wouldn't have come up with an idea without building off of what Student B and C said is a great example of the power of collaboration.

After the activity is complete, I assign a collaboration plan. In this document, the group discusses each member's role as well as their protocol for managing conflict. How will the group emphasize substantive, rather than procedural or affective, conflict? The goal of the plan is for students to move from understanding collaboration in class to practicing it in their project.

### **Reflection**

Over the years, I have seen a lot of lightbulbs going off in the heads of students who suddenly understand the real value of collaboration. I have seen students integrating the activity's lessons into our ongoing discussions about collaboration, and I have seen groups practice co-laboring during in-class group work and workshop sessions. In their course evaluations, students even indicate that the group work is the best part of the class. Through this activity, students know that a better model of group interaction exists and have a sense of what that model involves.

The divide-and-conquer model is strong. Going forward, I plan on including more frequent collaboration check-ins with students as well as a summative collaboration reflection that asks students to discuss the ways the group mediated conflict. I also plan on incorporating further collaborative practice into classwork, always returning to the idea of co-laboring. With these additions, I hope to keep the promise of collaboration at the forefront of their group interactions.

### **References**

Barkley, Elizabeth F, Claire Howell Major, and K. Patricia Cross (2014). *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Burnett, Rebecca E. and Elizabeth Wardle (2020). "Collaborating Cooperatively: Tips for terrific team projects." *WOVENText: Georgia Tech's Writer/Designer 2020-2021*. Plymouth, MI: Macmillan Learning Curriculum Solutions.