Grading Students’ Collaborative Writing Projects

This monograph has provided ways for professors and students to be engaged in evaluating collaborative writing products and processes during the writing endeavor. Such evaluation is called formative evaluation. Now I address the second form of evaluation, summative evaluation. Both formative and summative evaluation overlap and depend on each other, so all that I have said in the previous chapters about evaluating leads to and is intertwined with what I say in this chapter about summative evaluation. To discuss summative evaluation, I address fairness and professional judgment, the problem of cheating, rubrics, and methods of assigning grades. (For professors interested in an extended treatment of grading writing, see Speck, 2000.)

Fairness

The power structure of the classroom is such that professors possess virtually all the formal authority and power. Professors have the authority to determine what materials students will be assigned; how the day-to-day class activities will be managed; how much students will be allowed to participate in the class by asking questions, engaging in group activities, and voicing their opinions about class management issues; how and when students will be evaluated; and who conducts the evaluations. Professors are very powerful people, and the checks and balances on their power are slight. Beyond generic institutional rules and guidelines about professorial behavior in the class, professors are not encumbered by explicit standards that require them to use their power in ways that help students learn. The lack of such explicit standards is probably derived...
from the belief that professors are professionals and should know how to use their power in the interest of student learning. Indeed, the lack of explicit standards beyond generic institutional rules and guidelines puts the onus for the rightful use of power on professors’ shoulders. As professionals, professors have the responsibility to use their power wisely in the interests of promoting effective student learning.

I argued in the first chapter that professors can use their authority responsibly by engaging students in collaborative writing projects of various sorts, because collaborative writing, a subset of collaborative learning, has the potential to put the burden of learning on students’ shoulders. Students are put in a position to assume authority as writers to make critical decisions about writing quality. Students also are asked to make decisions and to take responsibility by working effectively with others. And students are given the guidance they need to make responsible decisions. When professors give students such guidance, professors are using their authority and power responsibly so that students can be active learners, those who assume both authority and responsibility for their education. Thus, when professors delegate responsibility and give students the tools they need to be responsible in their use of authority, professors are equalizing the power structure of the classroom. In equalizing that power structure, I contend that professors are promoting a fair classroom.

The word fair is abstract, so a person could argue that fairness is a matter of one’s perspective. Although I agree that fairness certainly does depend, in part, on a person’s particular vantage point, I suggest that fairness must be grounded in more than perception. It must be grounded in the responsible use of power. In terms of evaluation of collaborative writing, fairness is grounded in the professor’s inclusion of students in the evaluative decision-making process. I consider the inclusion of students in that process as fair, because the thrust of education is to prepare students to use knowledge in the service of the public good. Students cannot become effective evaluators of writing by merely being passive recipients of the results of professors’ evaluations. When a student receives a paper that has been evaluated by a professor, professors should not assume that the student has the ability to unravel the process the professor used to make that evaluation. In fact, literature on the grading
of student writing suggests that students not only evaluate writing using different criteria from those professors use but also misinterpret the criteria professors say that they use in evaluating writing (Newkirk, 1984a, 1984b). Yet the mismatch between students’ perceptions of criteria for evaluating writing and professors’ perceptions should not be surprising—if professors have not taken the time to explain how and why they evaluate the way they do. In other words, when professors assume that students interpret evaluative criteria the way professors interpret that criteria and then downgrade students for their misapplication of the criteria (as witnessed by low-quality writing projects), professors are not being fair. They are abusing their power, and students generally have little recourse to such abuses of professorial power, which makes the professorial abuse doubly unfair. How can this double jeopardy be changed to equitable—that is, fair—treatment of students?

First, as I have stressed throughout this volume, professors need to delegate authority so that students do have opportunities to learn how to evaluate writing effectively. One implication of this statement in terms of summative evaluation is that professors can include students in determining the grade for a collaborative project.

Second, professors need to promote the intertwining of the entire writing process and evaluation. Evaluation does not begin when professors collect final drafts and begin the laborious task of marking those drafts to arrive at a grade. Evaluation begins with the writing assignment, because in that assignment professors provide students with criteria the professor will use to arrive at a summative assessment.

Third, professors need to manage the writing process so that evaluation is intertwined with it. Thus, professors need to use peer critiques, formal and informal professor-student conferences, in-class examination of representative papers, and so on so that students learn to apply the evaluative criteria to writing.

Fourth, professors need to unveil some of the mysteries of professional judgment while maintaining the irreducible mystery of professional judgment (Speck, 1998c). In other words, professors can provide students with opportunities to understand how professional judgment operates, what criteria can be applied, and how decisions about quality are made and in these ways show
students that summative evaluation is not the mystery they thought it was. At the same time, professors must maintain that experience, taste, and talent to judge are part of the evaluative mix and are not capable of being reduced to neat categories. Much of the evaluative process can be examined, taught, and replicated, but part of that process remains mysterious, because professional judgment depends on the unique capabilities of particular judges.

The Problem of Cheating

Both students and professors often consider cheating a significant problem in collaborative writing projects. The problem of cheating in collaborative writing projects is really a problem of assessment, because the central issue concerning cheating, for students, is how to get the grade they deserve and, for professors, how to give individual students in a collaborative group the grade he or she deserves. The problem of cheating has two parts.

The first part is an ethical question about collaboration. “In principle,” a person might ask, “isn’t collaboration a form of cheating because individual work cannot be separated?” At the foundation of this question is a view of individualistic effort as the supreme effort. If a person does not do his or her work, he or she is cheating somehow. This view of work fits well with the practices of education. Students are tested individually, and in high-stakes tests (such as the SAT) multiple safeguards are put in place to ensure that the Jerome Neggled who signed up for the test is the same Jerome Neggled who took the test. That way the Jerome Neggled who received a very high score for the test is the same Jerome Neggled who was offered a scholarship to a prestigious university. Admissions officials at such universities say, “Jerome Neggled, as an individual, is the person we want to attend our institution. We’re not offering a scholarship to his parents [who helped him with his math homework], his buddy [who explained a particularly difficult concept in physics so that Jerome could understand it], or his teachers [who evidently had little to do with Jerome’s academic success]. We’re offering the scholarship to JEROME.” Obviously, Jerome has very clear boundaries as a person, and the relationship between Jerome and all those who advised, supported, encouraged, taught, and admonished him is not acknowledged. In the end,
Jerome alone is responsible for his success. And Jerome’s scores on educational tests prove that Jerome has the ability to be independently successful in other educational endeavors.

Certainly I do not believe what you have just read, and most people would find qualms with my stress on Jerome’s independence. Even people who give scholarships to people like Jerome would say that Jerome’s background (his home, school, and social life) had a demonstrable impact on Jerome’s test scores. And I have never heard anyone say that a person like Jerome was cheating when he got “legitimate” help with his academic studies. If, however, Jerome violated academic standards, such as using unauthorized notes during an examination, virtually everyone would accuse Jerome of cheating. So it only stands to reason that when Jerome works in a group and is expected to be a team player in the group, he is not able to demonstrate individual achievement completely distinguished from group achievement. Jerome as an individual is somehow swallowed up in the group, and Jerome’s reward for being able to perform as an individual is confused with the group’s reward for the group’s performance. For some, this swallowing of the individual into the group is an ethical dilemma, because they stress individualism at the expense of cooperation.

My response to this supposed ethical dilemma is twofold. First, the dilemma as I have stated it is imbalanced. Although groups comprise individuals, they are more than individuals. To stress individualism in group work is to negate group integrity. Just as Jerome did not lose his identity when his parents helped him with the math homework, so Jerome remains an individual in a group—but to be successful in the group, he needs to be part of the group. To stress Jerome’s individuality at the expense of group integrity is to say, in essence, that individuals are better than groups, which is an absurd statement when you consider biologically how humans are created. Nevertheless, those who raise questions about the relationship between individual and group identity help us focus on an issue that is important. How fair is it for individuals like Jerome to suffer because the group of which Jerome is a member produces poor quality documents? Conversely, how fair is it for Jerome and others in the group to carry the deadweight of a group member who is not pulling his or her share of the load?

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The second part of the issue of cheating is a practical question about assessment of effort, and I submit that this practical question is not entirely separable from the first part of the issue about cheating; indeed, it is part and parcel of everyday life. The second part is really an attempt to deal with the ethical perspective of the first part. That is, if professors should prize individual effort over group effort, how can they reward individual effort? The assumption of both parts of the cheating issue is that the individual is primary, the group secondary. As I show momentarily, professors have developed grading schemes based on the perceived need to reward both individuals and groups.

Ultimately, however, I think that the ethical dilemma of collaboration is so pervasive in our culture that a proposal to separate individuals within groups from the groups themselves reflects a cultural schizophrenia. In our culture, individualism is prized, and slogans such as “be all you can be” capture the spirit of individualism that so pervades the thinking of Americans. At the same time, insufficient attention is paid to the extensive support any one person needs to achieve success in most of life’s endeavors. In the movie industry, the stars’ names are blazoned on the theater’s marquee, and not until the end of the movie when all the film credits are given does the audience, on its way out of the theater, realize how many hands were needed to put so few in the limelight. Likewise, the president of a university could not possibly do his or her job if janitors, maintenance people, professors, students, administrators of various stripes, and secretaries did not do their jobs. The examples of complex support systems that are needed for a person of prominence to achieve and maintain that position of prominence are legion. We in this country really have a false notion of individuality in that our notion is often divorced from the reality of work in everyday life. A piano tuner can have a tremendous impact on the quality of a concert pianist’s performance, but most people in this country think in concert pianist categories, with little regard for the categories of piano tuner, piano maker, piano seller, and piano mover—all of which have significant implications for piano players.

Frankly, the relationship of individual to group and group to individual is complex. My purpose in discussing these relationships and the issue of cheating that is often raised in relationship to collaborative writing is to suggest that fairness is not served well when group-individual relationships are seen from
an imbalanced perspective. I tend to hold to the integrity of the group, and in teaching collaborative writing, my priority is to help the group create a document that will represent the group, not individuals in the group—which does not mean that traces in the document (for instance, graphics produced by a particularly gifted student) should not bring particular attention to an individual’s efforts. It does mean, however, that the group project as a whole is the focus of summative evaluation, and if the group has marshaled its resources well to produce a document that has a clear purpose and is persuasive for the specified audience, no one has cheated anyone else in the group. If an individual or individuals in the group did not pull their weight in creating the document, however, they do not deserve full credit for the document. They cheated both themselves and the group, and they should be held accountable for their lack of responsibility. Is that not a fair distinction to make between individual and group responsibility?

Rubrics

As noted, fairness in evaluation requires that professors make explicit at the beginning of the collaborative writing assignment the criteria that will be used for summative evaluation. Those same criteria should be used to evaluate the project as it is developed during the writing process, so students should have access to the criteria at the outset of the project. A rubric, a scoring guide that clearly delineates criteria and corresponding rating values to evaluate students’ performance, is an excellent way to provide students with evaluative criteria. The example in Figure 7 is a modified version of a rubric I presented to a writing class.

I have just noted that professors should make evaluative criteria clear at the outset of a writing project; however, I also think it necessary for professors to allow students to be involved in establishing evaluative criteria, so I take the liberty of waiting until the first draft of a project is due to engage students in revising a rubric I provide when I introduce the assignment. I ask students to help me modify the rubric for three reasons. One, I want students to consider what really counts when their writing undergoes summative evaluation. The sample rubric I give them has categories similar to the categories
### FIGURE 7
*Sample Rubric for a Collaborative Writing Assignment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories/Point Value</th>
<th>Evaluations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Organization—25 Points (*circle points of weakness*)
- Theme is clearly stated and developed.
- Text of paper flows.

#### Content—45 Points (*circle points of weakness*)
- Reader understands both sides of the issue because the authors provide adequate details.
- Reader has a greater appreciation of the complexity of the issue than he or she did before reading the paper.
- Reader fully understands the issue after reading the paper and has no questions about the issue.
- Paper has required number of sources.
- Sources are used effectively.

#### Usage/Mechanics—30 Points (*circle points of weakness*)
- Authors use correct grammar.
- Paper has no run-ons or comma splices.
- Authors can use fragments if they are clearly understood to be intentional.
- Punctuation is correct.
- Capitalization is correct.
- Spelling is correct.
- Sources are cited correctly (either MLA or APA format).

Comments:
listed in Figure 7, but I ask them to give me insights about whether the categories are adequate (should one or two be eliminated or another category added), whether the descriptions of the categories are adequate, and whether the point value for each category needs to be adjusted. My intention is to engage students in considering evaluative criteria. Two, I ask students to be engaged in modifying the rubric because I want students to feel ownership for the criteria. I want them to have a say in how their writing will be evaluated. Three, I ask students to join with me in evaluating the rubric because I get lots of goodwill points. Students are quite amazed that a professor would actually let them help make decisions about how their papers are graded. It appears that my invitation to them to be actively involved in making decisions about grading criteria is unheard of. But students like to be included. They like to be treated as adults who are capable of adding value to the class and have the authority to make decisions directly affecting their grade.

The rubric in Figure 7 combines two evaluative concepts. One, criteria and point values are transparent. Two, evaluation is a matter of corporate decision making. Writers, peers, and professor have a say in the final grade, as the columns marked Self, Peer, and Teacher suggest. The weight given to each participant in summative evaluation can vary. For instance, “self” can be worth 25 percent of the final grade, “peer” another 25 percent, and “teacher” 50 percent. Or the professor can make self and peer grades advisory only. The chief value of a rubric is its power to make summative evaluative criteria transparent. Whether professors add to that transparency the authority for writers and peers to participate in summative evaluation is a matter for each professor to determine. Because the rubric represents criteria that will be used during formative evaluation so that students can meet the expectations of summative evaluation, professors need to engage students in using the rubric throughout the writing process. For instance, professors can ask students to complete copies of the rubric during peer evaluation.
Methods of Assigning Grades

Although a rubric can be considered a method of assigning grades, I have separated rubrics from the question of how to address the issue of group and individual grades. Thus, this section focuses on three methods professors can use to determine the relationship between group and individual effort in collaborative writing projects. I preface these three methods with comments about ways groups can divide the writing task among themselves, because the way a group (or professor) determines who writes what has an impact on methods of summative evaluation.

Groups can divide the writing in three ways: (1) one person does the bulk of the writing, but the other group members provide drafts of sections, references, and comments about the draft the one person is creating; (2) each person in the group writes a section of the paper and then one or more persons in the group edit the combined sections to give the paper consistency; (3) the entire group writes as a group, with half the group members writing together during the early stages of the writing process and, at a certain point, the other half taking over and completing the writing task. The way groups are made up affects how easily individual writing tasks can be separated from the group effort and, in turn, how easily individual efforts can be specified during summative evaluation. Professors can use the following methods during summative evaluation:

Professors can divide grades in parts. One grade is for the final project, the other for the individual’s part in the final project. Beard, Rymer, and Williams (1989) divide a student’s grade into three parts. Fifty percent of the grade is allotted to the group report, 25 percent to the student’s oral interaction with other group members, and the last 25 percent to the student’s individual section of the final document. In addition, professors could include data from students’ peer evaluations and self-evaluations to determine the final grade. Bosley (1990) also divides the final grade into two parts: a group grade based on the final project and an individual grade based on the student’s participation in the group. Bosley refers to task sheets students maintain during the collaborative process to gain insight into their participation in the group. Morgan, Allen, and Atkinson (1989) use a similar method.
Professors can cograde with students. Siders (1983), for instance, provides grading sheets that show how he uses teacher, student, and peer input to determine final grades. Evidence in the literature suggests that students, when trained, can grade as well as professors (Marcoulides and Simkin, 1991, 1995). Ney (1980) also endorses student-graded papers but includes grades for the quality of students’ peer grading responses.

Professors can give group grades for group projects and individual grades for individual projects. Under this method, professors give all students in the group one grade based on the quality of the final project. Professors may adjust the grade down for students who have not done their share of the work as evidenced by peer evaluations. Professors also include individual writing assignments. Three reasons can be advanced for this method. First, not all students do their best work in a collaborative writing group, and such students should be given opportunities to do their best work. Professors in disciplines that give privilege of place to the single-author monograph or journal article are probably sympathetic to students who prefer to write individual papers. Second, a student’s grade for a course should reflect the student’s ability to function in a variety of roles. One of those roles can be membership in a collaborative writing group, but such membership should not preclude other roles, such as individual effort as demonstrated in a single-author writing assignment. Third, a purpose of education is to prepare citizens to interact successfully in the larger social order—indeed, the world social order—and collaborative writing assignments can promote that purpose. But another purpose of education is to encourage individual creativity and inquisitiveness that can be satisfied by following one’s own star. Neither purpose should override the other.

Professors can give group members the exclusive right to supply final grades for projects. Barbour (1990) uses a method in which each member of a group grades the other members.

Professors can delay the grade. When grading a group’s written project, I collect the final projects and mark them. Then I return the ungraded projects to the groups. Students were expecting grades, so they are surprised, but I tell them that I did not have a chance to look at their best work and give them advice about revision until I reviewed their presentation copies. I note
that the groups may not want to or have time to revise. Because I had not informed them of my intentions, a group may not have time to continue working on the project. If a group decides not to revise, group members can return their project to me and I will grade it. I cannot remember a time when a group did not take time to revise the marked paper I returned to the group members. Generally, students express appreciation for the opportunity to revise what they thought was their final draft because I pointed out problems and made suggestions that escaped their peers. Philosophically, I delay giving a final grade because I want students to act upon my comments, and if I connect those comments to a grade, there is no incentive to revise, unless, of course, I would consider giving better grades for revision efforts. But I do not want to do that. I am not interested in having students revise for incremental increases in their grades. I want them to revise with the primary intention of improving their writing and the secondary intention of improving their grade.

Conclusion

This chapter is limited to specific issues related to grading collaborative writing; however, much more can be said about grading student writing, and I invite professors who are interested in a fuller view of how to grade students’ writing to consult Speck (2000).