Ep. 032: Collaborative Writing

You don't need to be an English teacher to use collaborative writing to help your students learn. Claire (who happens to be an English teacher) and Jim (who happens to not be one) discuss how this style of group work translates across the disciplines. They explore how it can help students achieve deep and unique types of learning. Claire highlights different types of collaborative writing, their pros, and cons, and what it takes from an instructor's standpoint to encourage good group behavior. Plus, they dive into the mysteries of "Lamonica's Law."

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Transcript

JIM:	Hi there. I'm Jim.
CLAIRE:	And I'm Claire.
JIM:	Let's Talk Teaching
JIM:	Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching Learning and Technology here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. And joining me once again today, Dr. Claire Lamonica, our director. Hi, Claire.
CLAIRE:	Hi, Jim.
JIM:	How are you?
CLAIRE:	I'm great. You have you have new toy.
JIM:	We have new toys; we have invested a little bit, we saved our pennies all all fiscal year. And we scrounge together enough to get a little bit nicer in the way of audio setup, we are still experimenting with it a little bit. So if this episode hopefully sounds a little bit better, but we're it's a work in progress. But we wanted to talk today we didn't want to put it off, we wanted to get back in the in the saddle, as it were and kind of do a sort of follow up to our discussion recently about cooperation, because we actually ended up to talking a lot about collaboration and the differences between the two. And today we're going to talk about something that you have used a lot or that you have actually done workshops on a lot, which is this idea of using writing as as a collaborative learning experience for our students. So is this something that you have to be an English teacher to do?
CLAIRE:	Oh, no, as a matter of fact, it's, you know, collaborative writing is pervasive. Years ago, back in the 90s, there were some women, Angela Lanford and Lunsford and Lisa Ead who did some did some research on collaborative writing. And at that time, they found that 70% of all workplace writing was done collaboratively. I would bet that in the intervening years, much closer to 90%, or maybe even more of workplace writing is done collaboratively. And to one extent or another, I think technology has evolved to a

place where it's just so easy to do that. Sure, that so, um, you know, that's, that's one reason that people get interested in this is that it's, it's prevalence outside the academy. Sure. Another reason is, you know, collaborative writing is the norm in many disciplines. So not in mind, you know, in English, you know, you you're really better off if you're a sole an only writer, a sole writer, or sole author. Yeah. Or, or at least the first author Sure. Loves for the need actually, interestingly, worked and published together for many years, and they would alternate. So, for one article, it'd be Lunsford and Ead. And for the next article, it would be Ead and Lunsford. Oh, yeah, they were trying to make sure that they both sort of got equal credit, and in their, you know, in that discipline, that was important. But, you know, in the sciences, I mean, I all kinds of disciplines, that's the norm, you really publish with a number of writers together. And so that's another reason that I think, and you know, then they're just, there are logistical reasons, you know, people are like, hey, I can grade 25 papers, or I could grade five papers, right? I choose five. Yeah. So, um.

JIM: But in order to achieve that, you have to do some things ahead of time as you're planning the assignment, because it's not just a matter of saying, Alright, everyone, your group, I'll see you at the end of the semester with your final paper, right?

CLAIRE: Yes. To bring, write a paper together. Yeah, that's, you know, that's not, that's probably not gonna work very well.

JIM: It's right up there with smiling and saying, well, you're just gonna have to learn harder.

CLAIRE: Yeah, really. So, that's not gonna work. So, you know, you need to really be intentional about why you're asking your students to write together. So, we think of collaborative writing, we're talking about singular texts with multiple authors. So why do you feel like it's important to do that, and it might be, because that's important for people to be able to do in your discipline, or it's important for people to be able to do after graduation. It might be because you'd rather grade five papers than then 25. But that's, that means, as you know, it's the case for active learning and lots of other things that just front loading that work, you have a lot more preparation to do.

JIM: I can also see one other thing because you know, we do we do a sort of this sort of thing when in the basic speech course, where they have to do a group speech, and it's essentially, there's an outline, for example, that they all contribute to, and part of the idea of that is to show them to get them used to the idea of working in groups, but it's because we talk about group dynamics and stuff. But the other thing is- is we're also teaching them research at the same time. And to really comprehensively talk about a topic. That's an awful lot of research to do. And so, they're able to, to select different areas and- and do the research as well. So, I think that might be another- another reason to do that.

CLAIRE: Right? Well, I think there, you know, so the best reason is that what you want is too much work for one person. Yes. So, there's this thing that I kind of call the Monica's law, which is just really flippant, but it is, if one person can do the work, one person will do the work, okay. So, any kind of collaborative or group undertaking should always be designed with the idea in mind that it's going to take more than one person

to do this work, it can't be done well by one person by themselves. So, when I used collaborative writing in English 101, I also used it for research, but it had to be primary research, right. And they had to go out and conduct surveys or interviews or observations or something like that. And in order to get enough, enough data to make any kind of statement, then it took more than one person to to collect that data, and often more than one person analyze it. So yeah, that's, you know, those are situations where it really does take more than one person to do this work.

JIM: So, let's, let's get into the nitty gritty, what does it take to actually prepare the ground?

CLAIRE: Yeah. So, I think the first thing you should do is you should find something preferably in your discipline or related discipline, that was written collaboratively. And you should share that with the students. Here's an example. You know, you're going to be writing a paper together, there will be five of you, four of you, six of you, whatever working on this paper. Let's look at this. Here's an example. This was written by four different people. And ask them to analyze it to think analytically, I think a really interesting question would be to ask them, who do you think wrote which parts? Yeah, because ideally, they won't be able to tell. So even better if it's not something that has subheads, where they can say, well, we think one person must have written this subhead, and one person must have read this up, you know, we want them not to be able to tell B, and that's the norm. And that's what you want. But that's what when faculty talk to me about collaborative papers, what I hear most often is, it's, there's, there's no single voice, it's they each wrote a section, they didn't even tie the sections together. Well, it's like this patchwork quilt of text. And that's been mine, they repeat each other, you know, when sections are they contradict each other. It's just a mess. And so, I think, I've been thinking more and more recently about the importance of showing them a model and showing them how impossible it really is in a well-crafted collaborative text to sort out who might have written once. In fact, my experiences with collaborative writing have been that once the text has been produced, even the authors aren't sure who wrote the funny because I worked on an article recently. I mean, well, I don't know couple of years ago with seven other people. And after it was published, my husband said, so Which part did you write, and I burst out laughing. I said, you know, there's no way to sort that out. Although, interestingly, we had originally started with each of us sort of working on a separate question. And then, you know, but we had pulled it all together. And as we did that, you know, people added, so it was, there was no way of saying, oh, I wrote hardly even a way of saying, Well, I wrote that sentence. So, I couldn't remember.

JIM: You sound very excited about this.

CLAIRE: It is cool.

JIM: It is cool.

CLAIRE: He's done. Well. Yes. So how awful, without badly.

JIM: Okay. And I think most students who have tried to work in groups, whether it's a collaborative project, specifically like this, I think they students will be bringing into

your class, probably a little bit of baggage of group work. So yeah, so how do you get them excited? Or at least get them not as timid about the process? From the get-go? How do you engender that excitement in the in them? So, they kind of get over that initial inertia? Whatever?

CLAIRE: No, I think I think it's partly what we've been doing. You talk about the usefulness, you know, you talk about why you're having this as, it's always helpful to provide students with a rationale about why they're being asked to do anything because, you know, they're natural skeptics or something, they think we're just we don't have anything to do but keep them busy doing things that don't matter.

JIM: So, So, what's the what's in it for me?

CLAIRE: You know, why why is this going to be important for you? Why How is it relevant to your life, right? Um, and, and, as I said, having them read things that have been written collaboratively and really see what that looks like, because I'm betting, they don't often look at a text. And notice how many authors there are on the text, you know, it's so I mean, unless somebody pointed out to them, so I'm letting them see what it can look like that it can look like more than just a patchwork quilt.

JIM: So, what are some other planning things that you, as an instructor have to do even before you talk to your students? What are some of the things that you have to think about or put in place?

CLAIRE: Well, I think you have to be prepared for the fact that when you're asking students to write collaboratively your this, this is a really, really complex undertaking in so many ways. And, and you're taking students who are essentially novices, or not much more advanced than novices in a variety of areas and asking them to perform and all of those areas at once. So, there's, you know, when you write collaboratively, there's a group process that's going on, you know, and there's a lot of writing and theory and research out there about what a group process looks like, regardless of what task the group is engaged in, you know, there are things that happen in a group. And and so you've got, you've got that going on. And they may not know anything about that. There is a writing process that's going on. And the students, if you're asking five students to write together, you're essentially asking five different writers who may have over time, developed five different process writing processes, or approaches to writing. And asking them to work together through a process that's probably not totally comfortable for any of them, much less of them, right. And there's a creative process that's going on, you know, so there are ideas that need to be born that don't exist in the world, and they are only going to be born because of this particular group of people interacting at this particular moment of time in this particular setting, you know, so it's, it couldn't happen any other time. So that's a really exciting thing. But it's, it's, it's not something students are used to experiencing.

JIM: No, and that that, to me is one of the most exciting things about this. I mean, yes, maybe having a little less to evaluate at the end of the semester is nice, too. But but really, like, like we've said, it's a lot of heavy lifting up front. But when we, when we did our previous episode, when we first talked about cooperation, I finally was able to

distill the definitions you gave down to, essentially cooperation is working together to find meaning in a text or in a in a… some sort of area of study, when we're talking about cooperation and learning. And collaboration is making new meaning. Yeah, together that work. And and I think I think that that's a that's a cool. And so, you're going to create something new is actually a good selling point for yes, yeah. And you'll get something out of it. In the process of creating it. You'll learn by doing. Is it worth it?

CLAIRE: Yeah, there's, they're gonna get so much more out of it than they are you Bamber realize,

JIM: So, getting into the getting our fingernails dirty here with this idea, do you upfront, do you give them a structure by which the group will work? Do you let them figure it out? Do you give them reading on on best group practices? What What would you recommend as far as laying down ground rules or doing anything to preempt any group, you know, some of the usual group problems that happen?

CLAIRE: Well, you know, I think I would, and I think we've done other podcasts where we talked about, you know, group work, or collaborative work and approaches to that. And I think, you know, doing some of those same things, will will work in terms of, you know, forming a group identity and cohesion and peer and self-evaluation, and all of those things. All of that also works for collaborative writing, and should be, should be built in. I think it helps to talk to students about the possibilities, because when we say we talked about collaborative writing as if it were a thing, but actually, it's a lot of different things. There are a lot of different ways to approach the collaborative production of a text and there's been some research done on this recently. It was Lowry Curtis, and Lowry. Okay, um, but what they did was create sort of a taxonomy of types of approaches to collaborative writing. And they they identified five of them, one of which we probably don't want our students doing, which is, well, one person writes, you know, when one person writes.

JIM: One person writes in the other people kind of give their two cents. Yeah.

CLAIRE:

CLAIRE: Yeah, you know, and that's, that's probably not what we're aiming for. Although that does happen, you know, that's that happens around here a lot, one of us will write something and then send it out to others in the office and other people add stuff to it.

JIM: Right. But that's not a learning experience for us. That is that is you are the- you are getting the work done, you know, among our colleagues, you are the acknowledged expert in x, right. So, you're going to, you're going to run run with it, and then we're going to shop it around to see how it plays for different audiences. So that's it, that's a whole that's learning all different things, learning is not the objective, right? So yeah.

CLAIRE: And so, there's also sort of sequential writing where somebody writes a piece, and then they pass it on to the next person, and the next person writes a piece and they pass it on to the next person, and, and that person writes a piece. So that's an

approach that students may could take. They might take an approach that's called horizontal parallel writing, which is basically, and I think this is where students almost always go first. Okay, um, each of us will write a section. Yes. All right. Okay. And to be fair, as I said earlier, this is where my sort of large my largest collaborative writing experience, you know, where there were eight of us creating a text, that's kind of where we started, each of us is going to address this particular issue, and then we're going to pull it all together. Not where we ended up. But that's, but that's kind of where we started. There's also a sort of a stratified parallel writing. And this might be okay with you. It might not, it's where students identify their own sort of strengths as writers, or as contributors, and they build on those. So, somebody says, well, I'm a really good researcher, right? Oh, somebody else says, I'm actually pretty good writer. And somebody else says, you know, well, I'm a good proofreader or a good editor. So, they, they sort of each contribute their own strengths to the process.

JIM: If only one of them said, I'm good at outlining. Yeah, I would die a happy man.

CLAIRE: Well, you know, I'm not a big outliner myself. Yeah, I know, I don't really care about that stuff. But a lot of people do. Value. Yeah, I understand the value of the outline. It's just I personally can't do it much, are well. And then the last sort of collaborative writing, and I've written this way, too, with with one partner and maybe with a couple of partners, where you actually have multiple people around a single computer. And they're, they're composing together. Really? Yes. Yeah. And that's, you know, I've done it. I've done it with my husband really successfully. But that's, you know, we know each other well.

JIM: I was gonna say that, that represents a level of trust, I would imagine, we're still married. Yeah.

CLAIRE: It's pretty amazing. It's kind of like wallpapering a bathroom. Who do you survive that? Right, exactly, um, are that the relationship would read survive that so, um, but it's, but it's done. And it and I think it's done, possibly most often with people who have sort of a preexisting relationship. But I think it might I also, I've seen it work in the workplace to where, you know, we do this, sometimes we do this, I was thinking about that, where we put a document up on the screen in our conference room, and we all sit around the table, and we basically shop the document. Yeah, no, we revise the doc.

JIM: And typically write it and typically that there is a draft, when we do it, there's a draft of the document that has existed already, either, either, it's easier. Well, we're usually we're revising old material, because something has changed on a grant has changed or something like that on campus, but I can see where from, from a student standpoint, that may be. And I don't know what the research says. But that may be a second step that may be what they move towards. They one of the other, maybe more parallel, sort of sort of collaborative writing styles, they may do that first, but I can see them, you know, alright, we need to knock this into shape. And that, to me, sounds like one of one way to have that sort of unified voice that you were talking about at the beginning of the episode.

CLAIRE: You know, it does contribute to a unified voice and that, you know, so one way to achieve that unified voice is just to have everybody write together. Now students are they may want to do that, or they may not because that, you know, they they often complain about not being able to find time to work together, you know, so, and this is this is writing together in real time. It's not you know, what, we have a Google Doc and we're all sort of contributing to it. But it can be, it can be a pretty exciting illuminating way to write you know, and that's, that's also a situation where you get finished. And you're like, I have no idea where these ideas came from. Because they really are produced by the synthesis of the ideas of the people in the room, and they don't belong to any one person.

JIM: So I would assume that as they are going through the collaboration process, we would hope anyway, that they are going to be sharing different iterations, depending on which method they're using. But you as the instructor, would you recommend you still asked for drafts from the group? Yep. Okay, moving on. You know, someday we're going to have to do an episode just talking about drafts, because because that is such a talk about now, you know, you're not grading 25 papers, you're grading 50. Right. Yeah. Which is not actually true, because you give different kinds of feedback at different stages. Let's shift. You know, in our final moments here today, let's talk a little bit about how do you evaluate the- this writing this document that's produced? How do you evaluate, evaluate it not just for substance, but also for the collaboration?

CLAIRE: Okay, so that so I would say, and I think also, you want to evaluate it on the on the form, right, because as I said, at the start, the concern I hear most frequently is, I just got this mess. They did that they did the research; they had some valuable stuff there. But it was it was not a single text; it was it was a quilt Crazy Quilt as a matter of fact. So I think you want to, I think, you know, I'm a fan of rubrics. I know not everybody is, but I think you design a rubric before you start. And you are very clear about those expectations, including the expectation that this will, that this text will have a single voice and will be cohesive, and you know, will not will not be a crazy quilt. So, you know, you need to find ways to do that. And then. And then yes, I would also have in the rubric, an element a criteria for the success of the group process or something like that. I mean, I would go, everything I've ever said before about evaluating group work goes for this too. So, there might be a criteria that's based on contributions to the group or participation in the group or whatever. And I would strongly recommend that that come from a combination of self-evaluation, peer evaluation and instructor evaluations so that you know that, so maybe it's not part of the rubric, maybe it's something separate, but I think you do want to evaluate them, particularly if learning to write a text collaboratively is one of your course outcomes. Right. Okay. Right. So that's, you know, because if it's one of your course outcomes, then you probably are willing to spend some time supporting students designing the assignment, well, preparing them for what they're about to experience, you know, in a variety of ways, and giving them some support along the way, and then evaluating them based on criteria that they know up front. Yeah, that's sort of the that's the nutshell.

JIM: You know, as we're talking about this, this would be attractive to me if I was teaching a course in the hard sciences or something like that, because I could get the writing, I could get that that kind of learning that comes from having students write, but I can

also take some of the unevenness of the learning, the hope is that if they collaborate, and they do a good job collaborating, that they will learn from each other, and they will support each other in the learning. Absolutely, absolutely. So, in some ways, even though it is a lot of heavy lifting at at the outset, and it may take a couple tries to get it right. And you may be using maybe just a couple, yeah, maybe just a couple, and maybe more. And you may be using rubrics for the first time or something like that. I think that the benefit to your student will actually I think there'll be some payoff there because they're engaging with the material in a different way, maybe in a way they don't expect in a biology class or something like that. But they're also then able to support each other so that they kind of they, they kind of form an idea of of what they should be learning as they go along.

CLAIRE: This paper. Yeah, absolutely.

JIM: Well, Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about today's episode by going to our website CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. Click on the podcast link in the upper right of the page. For Dr. Claire Lamonica., and for all of my colleagues here at the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology, until we talk again, Happy Teaching.