What Do Teachers Mean by "Collaborate"?

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Three Roles for Students Working with Other Students: Consultation, Cooperation, and Collaboration

Teachers sometimes encourage students to collaborate with one another on their course work. But given that teachers also stipulate to students that "your work should be your own," what does "collaborate" mean? How can students' work both be collaborative and be their own?

In the instructions students are given for their assignments, the terms *collaborate*, *cooperate*, and *consult* are sometimes used interchangeably. Understandably, this can add to students' uncertainty regarding whether and how they can appropriately work with others in the context of the course work and how to attribute and cite one others' contributions to their work.

Defining these **three "C"s** – what it means to consult, cooperate, and collaborate – can help students and teachers to clarify students' roles when working with other students and to consider the implications for attribution and citation:

con·sult[1] *tr. v.* to seek advice or information of: *consult an attorney*

co·op·er·ate *intr. v.* to work or act together toward a common end or purpose

col·lab·o·rate *intr. v.* to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort

Each of these terms refers to a situation in which more than one person contributes to a single project – **contribute,** a fourth "C"! This piece is not intended as a formal or exhaustive typology but rather as an aid to help teachers and students communicate about how students can appropriately work together.

An Illustration

Consultation, cooperation, and collaboration can be distinguished from one another by these aspects of participants' contributions:

(1) To *whose* project is a contribution made?

(2) What is the *nature* of the contribution?

(3) What is the *extent* of the contributor's involvement in the project?

(4) To what extent are individuals' contributions *discrete and identifiable*?

To illustrate the nature of consultation, cooperation, and collaboration, let's consider the project of painting a mural.[2] Painting a mural might seem to have little in common with writing a

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[1] All formal definitions in this piece are taken from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd Ed. 1996/1992. Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin.

[2] I thank Abigail Lipson for helping me to construct these distinctions and to explicate the example of mural painting.

paper or completing a problem set. Granted, issues of ownership and attribution are more complex with some sorts of projects than others. Still, the example of painting a mural provides a context for thinking about how working with others actually works and for considering what different roles in working with others imply for attribution and citation.

Consultation. When I *consult* you, I seek your counsel, your thoughts and advice about *my project*. For example, let's imagine that I am preparing to paint a mural, and I ask for your reactions to several possible designs I've sketched. The mural is my project, for which I alone am responsible, but I seek your consultation as I go about my work.

In the course of my consultation with you, you might make a specific substantive contribution to my project. In this case, I need to attribute to you the contribution you make. For instance, if you suggest a significant modification of my mural design, or if you suggest an idea that takes me in an entirely new direction and ultimately leads to a new design, I will credit you for your contribution.[3]

If a contribution that results from consultation is in the realm of common knowledge – i.e., information that is commonly held by those experienced in a given field – there is no need to attribute the contribution. If, for instance, I consult with experienced muralists about customary ways of preparing a surface for mural painting, I need not attribute the information I gather. If, however, I consult a muralist to learn about his or her original, unorthodox surface preparation technique, and I use his or her technique with my mural, that contribution is specifically attributable to him or her.

Cooperation. When I *cooperate* with you, we work on *a common project* that might belong to one of us, both of us, or neither of us. That is, we might cooperate on painting my mural, your mural, our mural, or the mural of some other artist.

In cooperating, we typically work on different aspects or tasks of a common project. I'll sketch the general layout of a mural on the wall and you will decide on paint colors and develop the details of the image. Or, I'll design and paint one part of the mural, while you'll design and paint another.

In cooperating, the end product is the result of both of our contributions. We both contribute to the project, and we can each identify and take credit for our separate, distinct contributions.

Collaboration. When I *collaborate* with you, we work together on *our project* (or our particular portion of a project), which belongs to both of us. Collaboration is a synergistic process which results in creative solutions born of the generative interaction between people, solutions which are jointly created and which are not attributable solely to either party.

For instance, if, in the process of painting the border that frames the mural, we discover that somehow this border simply does not work, we enter into a complex, interactive problem-solving process. We try to identify just what isn't working. Is it the width of the border? The colors? The design?

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[3] For example, in footnote #2 above, I am acknowledging Abigail Lipson's contribution to my project.

We run experiments. We cover up part of the border to see if it should be narrower. We try to imagine it wider. We consider whether we need an entirely new color, or just another shade of the same color, or an additional color, or a new combination of colors, or a different placement of colors. We sketch new designs, paint each in different color combinations, and hold each sample against the mural to see which one looks best. Both of us are coming up with ideas, riffing off of one another's suggestions to generate a common process and ultimately create a common product.

Finally, we arrive at a solution that satisfies us. The solution might also surprise us: we might let the mural break the frame of the border, or do away with the border altogether, or come up with a design or color scheme quite unlike what we had expected.

Who designed this border? The ultimate solution belongs to both of us and neither of us. It is born of the interaction between us. Our individual contributions are not entirely discrete or readily isolated. It is as though one person contributes blue paint, and another contributes red, and the result is purple. Neither contributor can take sole credit for the creation of the resulting shade of purple. It does not make sense for one to take credit for the redness of the purple and the other for the blueness of the purple.

It is not uncommon for collaborators, when asked who contributed what part of a project, to look at one another with puzzlement as they realize that the ultimate solution was, quite literally, more than the sum of each person's individually contributed parts. A collaborative solution is one which none of the individual contributors could have generated alone. Collaboration often feels exhilarating for the very reason that there is a sense of alchemy and surprise involved.

Collaboration and Academic Integrity

When teachers encourage students to collaborate with one another, they of course are not asking students to collude with one another, copy from one another, or confuse their work with one another's:

> col·lude *intr. v.* to act secretively to achieve a fraudulent, illegal, or deceitful purpose; conspire

> cop·y *tr. v.* to make a reproduction or copy of

> con·fuse *tr. v.* to mistake (one thing for another)

Let's consider these three complicating **"C"s**.

Collusion. When I collude with you, we work together, whether in consultation, cooperation, or collaboration, but we do so secretively and deceitfully, without acknowledging to others that we are doing so. Returning again to the example of the mural, if we both take credit for a mural only one of us created, we collude in representing the work as a joint project. Or we might work together to design a mural but collude in misrepresenting the work as a solo effort. Or we might let one of us take credit for a mural the other one created and collude in keeping the real artist a secret. In each case, we deliberately misrepresent one another's contributions as if we have reason to hide the truth of who actually did what.

Copying. When I copy your work, I literally reproduce it, typically instead of producing my own work. Copying another's work is usually ill advised – unless I do that as an exercise to get a deeper sense and experience of your work, or unless I use a delimited piece of your work in the

service of my own; put quotation marks (or, in the example here, the muralist's equivalent of quotation marks) around that piece; and make clear whose work is whose and how your work serves mine. If I incorporate your work into my own, I must clarify precisely what I have copied and attribute it to you (as well cite your work so that others could find it for themselves); if I copy an element of your mural, and I do so without clear attribution, I am stealing. (In some circumstances, attribution and citation of your contribution might not be enough: I might also need to get your permission (or that of your publisher or copyright holder) to use your work to the extent that I am using it or in the way that I am using it.) If I copy a piece of your work and misrepresent it as my own, and I do so with your knowledge and consent, we are colluding. Whenever I misrepresent your contribution as my own, regardless of whether I do so with your knowledge and consent, I am being dishonest.

Confusion. When I confuse my work with yours, I inadvertently fail to distinguish between our contributions, either because I am careless and lose track of who did what, or because I have slid into cooperating or collaborating with you when I originally set out to consult with you and, as a result, have not maintained clear and independent ownership of my project. For example, if, in consulting with you, I at some point hand over my sketchpad and pencil to you, I risk later mistaking your sketch for mine. Or, for another example, if I accept your offer to help with the actual painting, I risk failing to recognize that you are no longer merely consulting to me on my project but rather cooperating (or maybe even collaborating) with me on a common (or joint) project.

Students who are accused of having worked inappropriately with others often report that their intention was not to collude, copy, or confuse. They did not intend to mislead anyone, to misrepresent themselves or to pass off someone else's work as their own.[4] Their priority at the time they were working with a fellow student was to *complete* the assignment and to *comprehend* the course material. These are certainly important and laudable priorities for any student. But these same students seem not to have attended to another priority: to *clarify* each participant's contribution to the ultimate product. Such clarification would require that they deliberately address the questions raised earlier: Whose project is it? What is the nature, extent, and distinctness of each person's contribution? Are these contributions attributed/cited so that an observer/reader can tell what happened – who did what with whom – to produce the ultimate product?

Clarifying whose work is whose takes time and attention. Many cases in which students are accused of misrepresenting another student's work as their own arise out of carelessness or panic, which are often the result of working frantically or desperately at the last minute.

Some students wonder what all the fuss regarding proper attribution and citation of sources is about. They figure, "If the project gets completed, and if I comprehend/learn something new in the process, what does it matter who contributed what along the way?" After all, people who consult, cooperate, and collaborate in the production of many sorts of writing – such as government documents, official speeches, and corporate publications – might go unnamed. Ghost-writing – and ghost-researching and ghost-producing – are common, expected, and accepted practices in many realms. So it is especially important for students to realize that the expectations about attribution and citation in the realm of academic scholarship are different from the expectations at work in other domains. In the academic world, *traceability* of ideas is a core value.

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[4] For a discussion of how students understand – and misunderstand – the letter and spirit of rules regarding citation of sources, see Lipson, A., and Reindl, S. M. "The Responsible Plagiarist: Understanding Students Who Misuse Sources." *About Campus*, 2003, 8(3), 7-14.

Taking Pains

The role of a student/scholar requires that one make clear to others the intellectual kinship of one's ideas and creations so that intellectual, creative work is ultimately traceable to its source. Attending to the family tree of intellectual relatedness is detailed work. Appropriate and adequate attribution and citation require that one clearly indicate whose words, ideas, and lines of reasoning are whose – in one's notes, in one's drafts, and in one's final product. When working with digital sources, students and scholars need to take special care not to cut and paste others' words, ideas, and lines of reasoning without attaching clear information about where those come from and keeping the text and attribution firmly attached to one another throughout the writing process.

The tracing and tracking of intellectual genealogy can be painstaking work. Many students simply consider it a pain. But, as Abigail Lipson and Sheila Reindl point out in "The Responsible Plagiarist: Understanding Students Who Misuse Sources," the academic world values this painstaking intellectual genealogy because it is considered essential to the nature and purpose of scholarship. Lipson and Reindl observe that acknowledging others' work is about being responsible not only to academic *rules* but to a set of *relationships*: "As scholars, we have a responsibility to our sources (to acknowledge our indebtedness to them), to our readers (to let them know what our sources were and how they informed us), and to ourselves (to declare our own contributions). Proper documentation traces a family tree of intellectual kinship, in which we place our own ideas and text in context" (p. 12).[5] They observe that attributing and citing others' work is part of a scholar's responsibility as a member of the community of the mind.

Colleges and universities typically take pains to make sure that their students are informed about the rules regarding proper use of sources. During freshman orientation and in a freshman writing course, students typically receive instruction on the proper use of sources and on the institution's rules and expectations regarding academic integrity. They are directed to a college's handbook and to guides on how to properly use and cite sources.

Most students get the basic message: "Don't plagiarize." But beyond this basic message, about the rules, students need to 1) appreciate the set of relationships which academic rules serve; 2) understand the importance of clarifying what would be considered acceptable forms of collaboration, cooperation, and consultation in a given context; 3) realize that what is considered an acceptable form of working with others might vary between courses, within a given course (depending upon the nature and purpose of each particular assignment), and even within a given assignment (e.g., with consultation being allowed during one part of the process of a project but not others);[6] and 4) know what would be considered appropriate ways of acknowledging those various forms of working with others and what would constitute appropriate attribution and citation of others' contributions.

For students to learn how to appropriately collaborate, cooperate, and consult with one another in the realm of academic scholarship, students and teachers need to communicate about these roles. A starting point for that communication is for teachers to *declare* which of these roles they want to students to assume for any given project, to *define* each such role, and to *demonstrate* what each role looks like and what each implies for attribution and citation of others' contributions to one's work. Students, for their part, need to ask their teachers what they mean by "collaborate."

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[5] See footnote # 4.

[6] Within a single project, one might work collaboratively during some parts of the process and work alone (or in consultation or cooperation) during other parts. In some courses, instructors inform students that they may consult (cooperate or collaborate) during particular parts of a project's process but that they must work independently during other parts of that process (e.g., http://web.mit.edu/academicintegrity/collaboration.html; retrieved 27 August 2012).