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Review of *Forming the Collective Mind: A Contextual Exploration of Large-Scale Collaborative Writing in Industry,* by Geoffrey A. Cross.

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BOOK REVIEW

Forming the Collective Mind: A Contextual Exploration of Large-Scale Collaborative Writing in Industry. Geoffrey A. Cross.

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While preparing to write this review of Geoffrey Cross's carefully documented study of a large-scale collaborative writing project in industry, I could not help but remember the old Virginia Slims ad inviting women to smoke by showing a sassy lady puffing away under the banner "You've Come a Long Way, Baby!" Indeed, we have come a long way in studies of writers in professional settings, learning with each exploration how these behaviors differ from and relate to the processes we have taught beginning writers in our classroom. Studies of these processes have become increasingly more sophisticated since Selzer (1983) treated researchers to his intriguing account of a technical writer's composing processes. Next, we saw case studies of writers designed to produce real-world writing contexts for students—such as *Cases for Technical and Professional Writing*, which I co-authored with Rymer Goldstein (1985)—and then more detailed descriptions of how writers learn to become proficient communicators in their profession, such as Winsor's (1996) *Writing Like an Engineer*.

Running apace with these studies of individual writers, several researchers now have investigated the complicated role of collaboration in workplace writing—a dynamic not desired or promoted in literary writing or academic writing in the humanities—conducting studies of specific writer-supervisor relationships, the peer-review process of editing complex documents, and the effects of electronic writing tools on promoting and directing collaborative writing processes. But even though we have come a long way in our studies of writers in professional settings, I wonder whether the conclusions drawn from such research can truly help advance our knowledge about how to improve professional writing practice and its teaching.

I found this question most compelling as I lived along with Cross the lives of the hapless employees of Montmarche Corporation's Technological Services

(MTS) unit, a data-processing service, who were asked to document a lengthy Service Level Agreement (SLA) with more than 20 other in-house units. This massive project was intended to outline MTS's services and help assure quality control. Not only did the task involve describing MTS's services to each unit, but it also involved defining the function of each unit as it was relevant to MTS's service. Furthermore, the proposed document was believed to be the last—and perhaps only—hope of rescuing MTS from dissolution in the face of criticism for services that did not meet users' needs or were rendered in an untimely or incomplete fashion. The writing task itself was daunting, making the task of recording its intricacies in the hope that lessons might be learned even more formidable.

As Cross explains, the actual process of writing the SLA was intended by management to "play a major role in transforming MTS from a functional to a process-based culture" (p. 15). But even more important, producing a successful SLA with its 20-plus departmental customers was considered mandatory to MTS's survival. Not only would it outline services and levels of accountability, but it would also provide documented reasons why the MTS unit should remain a part of the Montmarche Corporation.

Cross begins his book by describing the Montmarche Corporation as "approximately Fortune-500 size with assets of more than \$4 billion and revenues of nearly \$2.4 billion in 1994" (p. 11) and explains that emphasizing Total Quality was the goal for the SLA writing project. Then, he narrates the collaboration in chapters that highlight significant events in the formulation of a "collective mind" among the participants in the large-scale collaboration. The text concludes with an assessment of the major components in large-scale collaboration that lead to the formation of a "collective mind." Appendixes to the book include the table of contents of the model SLA from another company that was used as a template for the MTS SLA, drafts of section A of the SLA for 3 of the 22 corporate units, a discussion of the research method and the "mode of representation" of the subjects and context, and, finally, a discussion of the "location of the ethnographer" in this enterprise. This final appendix is perhaps the most significant guide to interpreting this text because it has implications for further research on writing in workplace settings and classroom practice. Here, Cross voices his struggle as the author of his own "large-scale" writing project, chronicling his process of conducting and transcribing 64 discourse-based interviews; his method of coding "1,500 pages of audiotape transcriptions and 500 pages of field notes and documents" (p. 244); his work with research assistants who recorded the data, including the editorial changes to the documents; and his analysis of the substance of these changes.

Cross's explanation of his research method suggests that the project weighs in heavily as empirical research, based on masses of data, systematically categorized and objectively assessed. This impression, however, is all but undone by his intriguing remarks about his "mode of representation" and the "location of

the ethnographer." Cross's organization of this tale of large- scale collaboration is based on his interpretation of the story here—about a unit and process in crisis that recovers from a disaster. Beginning with the premise "research suggests that large-scale collaborations rarely work, so it is important to identify potential causes of failure and their interrelation," Cross explains that "for this reason, causation was used to organize the analysis of the problem-ridden phase of the collaboration that culminated in the 'mutiny' against consensual leadership shortly after January 13" (p. 257). Cross takes on this storytelling mode to make the book more useful to others, particularly to managers in industry, and also more comprehensible to professionals in his academic area "who are not familiar with this managerial and technological context" (p. 247). "Quotations [from participants in the collaboration] were selected," he tells us, "because they were part of an important part of the process or because they shed light on whatever generalization is being made" (p. 248).

Regardless of Cross's attention to factual detail, it remains evident that the story we learn about here is clearly the story of the ethnographer's interpreting the scene as one of a communication disaster, a disaster that nearly led to "mutiny" against the project leaders, whose masterful recovery interventions resulted in the formation of a "collective mind." This authorial interpretation is the most significant datum presented to the reader in this study—a point that Cross reinforces with his commentary on his own background, prejudices, and relationships with his respondents; his intrusion in the research context; and his mixed attempts to be the "detached reporter" (p. 250).He discusses his careful efforts to weigh the effects that his presence had on his respondents against the threat of missing vital information by remaining too distant. He concludes that these decisions, all in all, remained a judgment call, noting that following the most tested methodologies, collecting data with the most sophisticated instruments, and being thorough and careful in observations did not, in the end, relieve the author from the "responsibility of 'piloting' the book" (p. 252).

Indeed, Cross does do a good job of "piloting" the book. Following his explanation of the Total Quality context in Montmarche Corporation that generated the SLA assignment, Cross deftly organizes his presentation of the massive writing project to keep the reader oriented to his "disaster recovery" story in which the writing project is saved through formation of the collective mind. In chapter 3, he introduces current theory about how collective action is generated and points to cracks in the organizational structure of the project that mitigated against formation of the collective mind, cracks that would make successfully steering the collaboration difficult for the two project leaders. These organizational cracks included the absence of significant leaders at SLA team meetings, the lack of a reference point for collaboration in a common text that all participants had in hand, and the lack of clarity about the purpose of the SLA document, resulting in laborious discussions of pet initiatives and complaints in team meetings. In chapter 4, Cross describes the process of reshaping the SLA project in terms of Piaget's con-

cepts of "assimilation," that is, "the reshaping of the mental representation of the perceived object to fit the existing cognitive structures in the perceivers," and "accommodation," the process of adapting to novel aspects of the assimilated situation (p. 59). The concepts prove useful in explaining the communication breakdown that occurred in the disastrous team meeting of January 13, where the participants' failures to "assimilate" and "accommodate" nearly caused a mutiny against the project leaders.

In chapter 5, Cross describes changes made in the management of the large-scale collaboration that addressed these problems, and here Cross introduces the concept of a "procured collaboration," that is, "a hierarchical large-scale group writing process in which group leaders train agents to facilitate subgroups that write related documents or sections of one document." Cross focuses on a set of 22 procured collaborations that produced section A of the SLA, the purpose of which was to "educate MTS and IS [institutional support services personnel in individual units who coordinate their work with MTS] about each business unit" and demonstrate that "MTS and IS understood [their] computer needs" (p. 88). He details the project coordinators' various visions about the shape of the document, finally settling on a prototype document developed through employing another company's SLA as a model. Cross also documents how the project coordinators managed a meeting with 1 of the 22 units so that participants followed ground rules for communication. Instead of trying to achieve consensus, as was the aim in the failed meeting on January 13, the project coordinators prepared participants this time by giving them a questionnaire to complete beforehand. They also gave hierarchical directions that relieved the group of the responsibility to be "skilled dialogical communicators" (p. 104) and developed a "parking lot" for issues that were important to the group but not on task. In response to feedback from this first of the 22 units, three drafts were developed from which the project coordinators developed a "prototype." From this prototype, the project coordinators formed principles to guide their training of the "procurators" in each unit who would collaborate with them to produce the remaining documents. This chapter gives the reader a sense of the tension coworkers felt when faced with organizing a project from what seems a vat of primordial soup and reveals how steps were crystallized by the project coordinators to create model expectations for the SLA document to be produced by each unit.

In chapter 6, Cross follows the process of one "procurated collaboration," the writing of the business overview for the Montmarche Human Resources unit, as written by an MTS procurator and researched by an IS representative who collected and produced an information database before the meeting. In reading about this project, I was struck by the vast amount of information and concerns that were indeed "parked" in this process—concerns that spoke to the future operation of MTS and needed changes in service, all matters beyond the scope of the SLA, yet vital to better organizational functioning. At the same time, the pro-

cess produced the side benefit of the service unit and customer unit each gaining a better understanding of their respective functions in the Montmarche corporation. At the height of the project, information retrieval and interactions about the document took place in a "war room," a centrally located room that gave visibility to the project and encouraged participation. As each document was completed, project coordinators obtained a sign-off from unit heads that documented their agreement that the document accurately reflected the current service-level agreement with the unit.

In chapter 7, Cross attempts to categorize the stages of this collaboration and the components that were critical to the collaborators' formation of a collective mind. He concludes that the model SLA, introduced from another company, had to be assimilated by the collaborators to reshape "the mental representation of the currently examined object to fit the already-existing cognitive structures in the perceiver, in this case, the pre-existing perceived form of the document at Montmarche" (p. 170). Following this assimilation, the collaborators accommodated this assimilated form to the novel aspects of their situation, developing a "common schema" (p. 173). Cross argues that although the value of modeling as an aid to writers has been called into question, "background knowledge" of a coordinated process appears critical in a large-scale collaboration. He cites, too, the importance of hierarchical leadership and of the architectural location of the war room, where the entire project was organized, which created a "cultural world," allowing the VPs and the workers who were in contact with it on a daily basis "to dwell in the concept and goals of the SLA" (p. 184). The chapter outlines several other principles that defined and characterized the collaboration and the implications of these observations for the successful management of large-scale collaboration.

In answer to the question posed at the beginning of this review, I believe that instructors who are teaching future teachers of technical and professional writing would find Cross's study a valuable tool to show students who have not written in a professional context what that setting is like. In addition to providing a comprehensive record of how such a monumental writing task was completed in a corporate setting, Cross manages to organize the material so that readers can easily follow the key stages of the collaboration and understand the motivations and behaviors of the participants. Cross strikes a careful balance between overloading readers with detailed information and reducing that information to principles that guide his conclusions. In short, he convincingly supports his conclusions with his observations without overwhelming readers with detail.

Beyond the implications for managing large-scale collaboration that Cross cites, this corporate tale reveals the many outcomes of such a collaboration that go beyond the goals selected for a writing project. As a result of working together to produce the SLA document, personnel across several units developed a better understanding of one another and, through discussion of "parking lot"

issues, identified several areas for future improvement in their business operations. A final remark: A curious and sad outcome of the project is given rather short shrift by Cross; despite this elaborate effort to document MTS's services in an effort to assure quality improvement, shortly after completing the SLA, most of Montmarche's companies were bought out by another company, making the situation addressed by the SLA irrelevant. Subsequently, the project coordinators were phased out of the corporation within a year, and the MTS head was laid off. This unfortunate outcome, however, should not be held against Cross's assessment that the collaboration, due to the eventual formation of a collective mind, was an overall success. Or should it? Another research project for Dr. Cross, no doubt.

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