USING COLLABORATIVE GOOGLE DOCS FOR JOINT CONSTRUCTION IN GENRE PROCESS WRITING

Matthew Miner
Kanda University of International Studies

BACKGROUND: A GENRE APPROACH TO WRITING AND THE CURRICULUM CYCLE

One of the core English courses at this institution follows a genre approach to reading and writing, which "aims to make the learner aware of the structure and purpose of the texts of different genres—the significant features" (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998, p. 309). What results is a critical exploration of various genres, such as procedural texts, information reports, and narrative stories, wherein students learn how language works through genre-specific conventions, empowering students to identify features and adapt them to their needs. The genre approach also follows a "curriculum cycle," which provides "a context for language exploration while [students use] language for real purposes in a variety of curriculum areas" (Derewianka, 1990, p. 6). The cycle features multiple steps to help students critically engage with different stages of identifying and creating genre texts, including modeling, joint construction, and independent construction.

The stage of the curriculum cycle called joint construction involves students writing a text collaboratively with a small group of peers or as the entire class. During this stage, writers may need scaffolding, modeling, guidance, and assessment from the teacher (Derewianka, 1990, p. 8). This is when digital tools such as collaborative cloud-based Google Docs significantly aid in the joint construction process for students and teachers alike.

PREPARING A GOOGLE DOC FOR JOINT CONSTRUCTION

What follows is a specific procedure for creating, preparing, sharing, and using a Google Doc during the joint construction phase of a genre cycle. It can be adapted depending on the teacher's needs.

The example scenario is a class of 21 students who are learning how to produce recount texts, which involve retelling a personal experience by orienting the audience, describing events in chronological order, and reflecting on lessons learned after the experience. In this example scenario, once the genre cycle reaches the stage of joint construction, the teacher can separate the class into seven groups of three.

To prepare for the joint construction, the teacher creates a Google Doc. The first section of this document should serve as a resource for the entire class and feature instructions and models for the groups to follow. This information section instructs each group to role-play a manufactured experience from the past and then create a paragraph detailing one event from the experience. For example, the teacher may instruct the groups to imagine that they studied

abroad in Canada; the task for each group is to write a paragraph about one event during their stay, such as meeting their host family at the airport or visiting a local high school. With these instructions, the teacher can scaffold the writing process by listing and describing the parts of an event paragraph: a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. The teacher can then type or paste an example event paragraph into the Google Doc to provide a model.

With the information section complete, the teacher should then create a main template for the groups to use, then clone it seven times within the single Google Doc, *not* create separate Google Docs for each group. The group sections in the document should be clearly delineated with headers such as "Group 1" and, if desired, different colored texts or fields for each group. Using the "Insert /Table" feature of Google Docs, the teacher can create text fields to indicate where students should type.

Once the document has been prepared, it can be shared with the students. This can be done through the "Sharing" options in Google Docs by pasting in the class email list and setting the permissions to "edit." The file can also be distributed via Google Classroom as an "Assignment" with the option "Students can edit file" toggled (*not* set to "make a copy for each student).

Now that all students have access to one shared Google Doc, they can edit the file synchronously and in real time, and their changes are reflected and saved instantaneously.

The benefit of students collaborating in this class document versus in seven separate group files is detailed in the following section.

THE BENEFITS OF A COLLABORATIVE GOOGLE DOC

1. Synchronous Co-Authorship Ensures Efficient Group Work
If students are expected to write collaboratively during joint construction in order to draft a complete document, traditional paper formats and non-collaborative digital documents limit production efficiency as the document can only feasibly be edited by one participant at a time. This issue is remedied in the shared Google Doc as multiple users can type at any given point and time, even simultaneously. This means that students can discuss and delegate writing assignments beforehand (using the Google Docs built in chat feature or a secondary medium such as Zoom) and then each member can begin writing immediately without taking turns. To mitigate the confusion of multiple users typing at the same time and in the same space, Google Docs assigns each user a differently colored cursor so that writers can quickly identify which is theirs and what they are typing. Additionally, as the collaborative document is synchronous and cloud-based, changes are instantaneous and saved automatically, so there is no need to switch between active writers or virtually "pass" the document back and forth after updates. A collaborative Google Doc thus reduces downtime and promotes active participation from all group members throughout the process of joint construction.

2. A Class-Wide Collaborative Document Allows for Live Peer Reading Opportunities

A single, collaborative Google Doc shared with the class grants all participants real-time access to the working processes of all their classmates. In addition to having access to their immediate task, students can see the workflow of other groups. This aids tremendously in cases of mixed-tier classes or groups with less confident members as they can, at any stage of their joint construction process, simply scroll up or down to analyze what other groups are writing. In this way, groups or individuals can assess if they are using genre conventions correctly, if they are missing key components (such as a topic sentence), or if their paragraph formatting is accurate. Groups can also gain or share inspiration regarding content, grammatical patterns, vocabulary choices, and so on. Finally, the class can holistically level out a comfortable writing pace for all groups: for example, one team may rush to finish and scroll down only to find that the others are still working on supporting sentences, thus realizing that they need more detail in their paragraph; likewise, a group who has spent significant time planning or chatting may notice that they are being outpaced by their peers and therefore begin the writing process. Having the class work together, passively assisting each other, is one benefit of a shared Google Doc.

3. Teachers Have Immediate Access to All Group Work and Can Give Impromptu Feedback
Because the assignment template was duplicated seven times in the same document rather than made into separate assignment handouts, the teacher can access all jointly constructed texts within one document instantly. Additionally, because the changes are reflected in real time, the teacher can analyze group work as it is being constructed, watching for issues that can be quickly addressed via chat or Zoom, therefore engaging with students at the stage of error creation so that they can identify, correct, and understand mistakes in the moment rather than after completion. Shared Google Docs, then, become an essential teacher tool for observation and formative assessment.

SUMMARY
With the likelihood of online learning growing in popularity and/or necessity, teachers hoping to involve students with collaborative writing projects, whether as part of a genre cycle or simply to foster cooperation and communication between peer learners, may find creative and engaging ways to adapt shareable cloud-based media such as Google Docs to their course curricula.

REFERENCES

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