

The University of Canberra

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## Get Real! *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education*

### Abstract:

*Collaborative learning is a student-centred approach to learning that gains high praise in the literature. There is both strong opposition and support for this style of learning from practitioners, particularly in higher education. This paper examines the theory of collaborative learning, its advantages and impediments, then applies a Model of Collaborative Learning to Get Real!, a multidisciplinary project involving students from Graphic Design and Professional Writing. The learning outcomes for the students demonstrate that collaborative learning can be highly effective and rewarding. Considering the success of Get Real!, features of 'best practice' are highlighted.*

### Introduction

Students in tertiary courses for the professions often decry, from their perspective, the lack of exposure to the 'real world' in their studies, and the excessive concentration on theory as opposed to practice. Educators are aware of these criticisms and look for ways to provide learning experiences that develop and rehearse the skills and knowledge of the discipline to match and extend those practised in the workplace. This paper explores the multidisciplinary collaborative project, *Get Real!*, which brought together 60 third-year students and their educators in the Professional Writing and Graphic Design disciplines. The collaborative project, to create picture books, culminated in a public exhibition and performance, judging of the best work by a children's publisher, production of a range of published articles and publicity materials, and a conference presentation by the educators.

Such collaborative projects are unusual in higher education. There is supporting theory on collaborative learning yet few have taken up the challenge. There are several possible reasons why collaborative learning projects occur infrequently. These include the preparation, coordination and monitoring required, expectations that learning and assessment should be individual rather than collaborative, and, most importantly, the paradigm shift in teaching and learning that is required of both educators and students.

The *Get Real!* project is explored within the context of collaborative learning theory, with the aim to highlight both advantages and impediments, and to identify best practice. While the *Get Real!* project as a whole will be discussed, greater emphasis will be given to aspects relating to the Professional Writing discipline. Aspects to be covered include

- collaborative learning-assumptions and expectations
- advantages and impediments to collaborative learning
- design of collaborative learning
- best practice features

## Collaborative learning theory - assumptions and expectations

In the 1990s, collaborative learning in higher education featured in several texts (Foyle 1995; Thorley and Gregory 1994; Jagues 1991) and an electronic listserve (Panitz 1996) spanning three years. These sources and others indicate that a set of assumptions underlie collaborative learning. Firstly, there is the assumption that knowledge is created through interaction and not 'transferred' from educator to student. Secondly, learning is student-centred, with consideration given to the students' levels of knowledge, experience and understanding. Thirdly, the educator's role is that of facilitator of learning, developer of the structure, creator of the context, and provider of the learning space so that students can take control of their own learning.

Matthews, Cooper, Davidson and Hawkes (1995) amplify these assumptions that practitioners hold about collaborative learning.

- Learning in an active mode is more effective than passively receiving information.
- The teacher is a facilitator, coach, or midwife rather than a 'sage on the stage'.
- Teaching and learning are shared experiences between teacher and students.
- Balancing lecture and small-group activities is an important part of a teacher's role.
- Participating in small-group activities develops higher-order thinking skills and enhances individual abilities to use knowledge.
- Accepting responsibility for learning as an individual and as a member of a group enhances intellectual development.
- Articulating one's ideas in a small-group setting enhances a student's ability to reflect on his or her own assumptions and thought processes.
- Developing social and team skills through the give-and-take of consensus-building is a fundamental part of a liberal education.
- Belonging to a small and supportive academic community increases student success and retention.
- Appreciating (or at least acknowledging the value of) diversity is essential for the survival of a multicultural democracy.

The field of collaborative learning is broad both in theory and practice. No one theory or practitioner holds sway. Practice differs depending on the discipline, education and experience of those involved. Terminology shifts from collaborative learning to cooperative learning, group learning, and group investigation, with fine, varying distinctions made between these. Davidson (1994: 13) suggests there are six broad approaches to cooperative learning, the generic term. These approaches include the Student Team Learning, Learning Together, Group Investigation, Structural Approach, Complex Instruction, and the Collaborative Approach. Davidson then examines their differences and commonalities. The five commonalities or 'critical attributes' (Davidson 1994: 14) of collaborative learning include

1. common task or learning activity suitable for group work
2. small-group learning
3. cooperative behaviour
4. interdependence (often referred to as positive interdependence), and
5. individual accountability and responsibility.

The nine attributes (Davidson 1994: 26-27) that vary among the six major approaches include

1. grouping procedure
2. structuring positive interdependence
3. teaching explicitly collaborative skills
4. reflecting on social, academic and group skills
5. creating the environment for group work

6. structuring of group work
7. attending to students' individual needs and abilities
8. practising group leadership, and
9. practising the teacher's role.

Davidson (1994: 24) describes the particular elements of the collaborative learning approach. These demonstrate that collaborative learning is characteristically a less structured approach to cooperative learning. It is slower paced, lacks direct teaching of social skills, and encourages students to organise themselves. Interdependence and individual accountability are present, but less emphasised than in other cooperative approaches. Those educators from collaborative learning traditions tend not to manage all the small components, and they are less likely to provide rewards.

### **Collaborative learning in the writing discipline**

The concept of collaborative learning in relation to the discipline of writing has also been the subject of several texts (Bruffee 1985; Bruffee 1999; Lunsford 1990; Forman 1992; Leonard et al 1994).

The work of Kenneth Bruffee (1984; 1985; 1986; 1999) is particularly pertinent to this paper. Bruffee revolutionised his teaching of university composition classes during the 1980s through a new teaching paradigm based on collaborative learning. Since that time, his work has been widely published and his work emulated.

Bruffee's theory of collaborative learning is closely aligned with the design and implementation of the *Get Real!* project. In particular, *Get Real!* is based on Bruffee's view of knowledge as a social construct. This view holds that knowledge 'communities', or groups of like-minded people, create thoughts, facts and so on. These communities interact with one another, sharing their thoughts, language, and knowledge. The generation of knowledge, according to this view, relies on such communities working together, conversing, sharing, arguing and shaping the tenets of the field.

Translated into the teaching and learning environment of *Get Real!*, students in Graphic Design and Professional Writing worked initially within their own knowledge communities, then met to collaboratively explore the creation of picture books. This particular project brought together the interpretations of their different disciplines or, as Bruffee (1999: 189) would contend, it was 'an attempt to translate the language of one community of knowledgeable peers into the language of another community of knowledgeable peers'. Interestingly, the picture book itself is a collaborative art form bringing together text and illustrations to tell a story. As an art form, the picture book has its own knowledge community encompassing artist, author and experts in publishing. The *Get Real!* students, in creating picture books, developed an insight into yet another knowledge community.

### **Advantages of collaborative learning**

Given the strong support for collaborative learning in the published literature, it is surprising that so few published examples exist of good practice in higher education. Johnson and Johnson (1993) and Parsons and Drew (1996), as representative of many researchers' support of collaborative learning, point out the following advantages of this approach to learning. It

- promotes greater educational value than can be achieved by individuals working alone
- leads to understanding different perspectives, and gaining a broader and deeper understanding with resulting higher quality outputs
- promotes simultaneous learning of both academic and teamwork skills
- simultaneously affects outcomes such as individual achievement, and positive relationships among students

- builds a learning community  
assists in retaining students until graduation
- builds positive relationships among diverse students
- promotes psychological health  
allows students to construct and extend their understanding through group work and exposure to a rich learning environment
- offers individual feedback on developing skills and knowledge
- promotes individual accountability through group expectations, and
- promotes enhanced achievement through greater intrinsic motivation to learn, greater use of processes such as reconceptualisation, higher-level reasoning, metacognition, cognitive elaboration, networking, and longer maintenance of skills learned.

### **Impediments to collaborative learning**

Between 1996 and 1998, Panitz (1996) facilitated an electronic discussion on collaborative learning in higher education. Practitioners the world over discussed various aspects of collaborative learning, but the most extensive debate was on impediments to its implementation. Such impediments are germane to the aim of this article to examine theory and practise, and to highlight best practice. Providing an overview of the impediments can provide useful insights.

The views on impediments can be divided into two groups, those from the students' perspective and those from the educators'. Students, according to these practitioners and educators, objected to engaging in collaborative learning for such reasons as their

- preference for 'teacher expert' delivered content
- expectation that they would work alone
- objection to negotiating with others
- belief that collaborative work would not meet their individual standards
- previous 'bad experiences' with collaborative learning
- objection to 'freeloaders' believed to be inevitable in group learning, and
- objection to open-ended, conceptual learning without 'right answers'.

Educators, according to those expressing opinions, objected to engaging in collaborative learning because it

- required more time to structure, monitor and evaluate than other methods
- required use of unfamiliar teaching and learning strategies
- differed from their view of teaching and learning
- produced negative student feedback, including instances of student 'mutiny' and 'petitions' to cease collaborative learning strategies
- lacked a reward system for implementing a 'new' approach
- appeared to be a 'soft option' or 'the blind leading the blind', and
- failed to prepare students for the real world of competition by promoting cooperation.

Clearly, such impediments must be addressed when designing and implementing collaborative learning. The next section of this paper describes how the stage was set for the collaborative learning project, and outlines the student responsibilities and project expectations.

### **Setting the stage for collaboration between knowledge communities**

The idea for *Get Real!* was developed collaboratively by Julie Bradley, Lecturer in Graphic Design, and myself, lecturer in Professional Writing. Although we come from entirely separate sections of the University, we have a common interest in illustration, and over

some years, have swapped guest lectures in our two areas, and attended conferences on picture book illustration together. These exchanges laid the groundwork for our *Get Real!* collaboration.

The germ of the idea came from Julie who was keen for her 40 students to add high quality work to their Portfolio, a collection of their best materials required in their fourth year studies. The *Get Real!* project formed the sole requirement for the Graphic Design students but it was one of two options for the Professional Writing students. This decision was based on the fact that the Professional Writing students were accustomed to working as individuals; the *Get Real!* project was an untested concept; and my own experience with a project of this magnitude was limited. Of the 38 students in *Writing for Young People*, 18 selected the *Get Real!* option, but only 16 completed the project when, through an unfortunate slip-up in our matching of writers and illustrators, two texts were not 'chosen' by the illustrators. We believed that a 'real' project involving these 56 students would have strong personal, educational, and professional outcomes.

As lecturers in different disciplines, we each 'held membership' in a different knowledge community. This led to different requirements and expectations for each group of students. These requirements also meant that each student was individually assessed for their *Get Real!* work, either by Julie or myself. As facilitators in this student-centred learning project, we were responsible for the structure. This involved setting the goals and objectives, determining students' learning outcomes, structuring activities to promote learning, creating an environment conducive to learning, providing relevant resources, determining assessment criteria, and generally acting as 'guides on the side' rather than 'sages on the stage'.

In line with the real world aspect of the project, we agreed that students' motivation and learning outcomes could be enhanced beyond the usual motivation of assessment. Additional motivators were a 'published' product for public scrutiny and judgment accomplished with a public exhibition of the students' picture books, a judging and awarding of prizes by a qualified external expert, and a reading of the prizewinners. To bring out the best in both groups of students, we agreed on four prizes: Best Illustrator; Best Visual Text; and Best Collaborative Work (prizes for both author and illustrator).

An exhibition and prizes meant that we needed financial support. The campus University Union generously sponsored the Gallery Restaurant, with its inviting display walls, for a two-week exhibition, and an opening. The campus University Co-operative Bookshop sponsored prizes of book vouchers for our four winners. Our two Schools provided the funding for our external judge, Margaret Hamilton, a well-known Sydney publisher of children's books.

## Outlining student responsibilities and project expectations

Subject guides for *Writing for Young People* and *Graphic Design Techniques: Illustration* outlined requirements for the *Get Real!* project. The language used and the way in which subject requirements were detailed varied slightly according to the two disciplines.

The learning outcomes in the subject guide for *Writing for Young People* (Alderman 1999) stated that Professional Writing students would

- gain an understanding of the Professional Writing process
- participate in a 'real' collaboration between the illustrator and the writer
- participate in planning and executing an Exhibition
- create publicity material for an Exhibition
- participate in an Exhibition, and
- participate in a competition.

The Professional Writing students were required to

- submit various drafts as a result of working with the illustrator, including a brief explanation of why changes were made
- write an essay of 1,000 words, including a bibliography of sources used, on Collaborative Efforts between Author and Illustrator
- produce one publicity item, from the following list
- news story aimed at the *Monitor* or *The Canberra Times*
  - publicity flyer
  - media release
  - photographs and associated picture captions for the 'Show and Tell' event or for the Exhibition opening
- provide word processed text in agreed upon typeface for the Exhibition, and
- participate in the Exhibition.

Aims and objectives (Bradley 1999) for the Graphic Design students were to

- work with the Professional Writing students and thereby emulate a real collaboration between the illustrator and the writer
- develop technical ability and refine a personal style of illustration, and
- produce work for an exhibition of a high quality.

The Graphic Design students were required to create the following components for a children's picture book in a style that suited the market/age group/subject matter

- storyboard of the children's picture book
- cover illustration
- double page layout including type and illustrations, and
- a dummy book/mock up.

The Graphic Design students were also required to meet with the Professional Writing students on three occasions and to help with the set up and pull down of the Exhibition. They also mounted the artworks' caption material provided by the Professional Writing students, and created a poster and invitation for the Exhibition opening.

The next section of this paper features a Collaborative Learning Model, and examines its usefulness in relation to the *Get Real!* project. The aim here is to capture elements of 'best practise' and at the same time to take note of possible impediments to successful collaborative learning.

### **Design of collaborative learning**

Reid, Forrestal and Cook (1989) outline five phases of instructional design in their Collaborative Learning Model.

1. The *engagement* phase involves students acquiring information and engaging in a shared experience that provides the foundation for their ensuing project. The educator provides a structured overview, links new material with old, encourages interaction, and sets directions.
2. The *exploration* phase features students exploring ideas and information in an unstructured environment with time and space for engagement. The educator facilitates, monitors, responds and reflects.
3. The *transformation* phase involves students in activities to 'reshape' the information by reorganising, clarifying, elaborating, and practising or using information in a purposeful way. The educator monitors, facilitates, and provides information.

4. The *presentation* phase involves students in presenting their findings to an 'interested and critical audience'. The audience should be 'authentic' and provide feedback. The educator facilitates presentations and checks that goals are being met.

5. The final phase, *reflection*, involves students reflecting on what they have learned and the process, and offering constructive ideas on improving their learning. The educator reviews learning outcomes, processes, and student's responses, then reflects on these for future planning.

### **Design of collaborative learning - Engagement phase**

The first phase in Reid, Forrestal and Cook's Model of Collaborative Learning (1989) is *engagement*, or laying the foundation for learning.

It was important to bring the two groups, their lecturers and the tutor, together at the onset of the project. Unclear aspects of the collaborative project could be clarified and the nature of the collaboration discussed, but most importantly, the two groups of students could meet and talk with each other.

It was now the seventh week of the semester. The Graphic Design students were just beginning *Get Real!* whereas the Professional Writing students, working to a different timeframe, had already prepared the texts for the project during their first six weeks. Both were now ready to start the collaboration stage.

The meeting also provided the opportunity to seamlessly move into the *exploration* phase of collaborative learning.

### **Design of collaborative learning - Exploration phase**

Another objective for our large group meeting was to create the 'context' for the collaborative project by providing relevant resources for exploring and exchanging ideas and information. It was important too that we conveyed to the students that they already had, individually and collectively, knowledge and skills important to their upcoming project.

Visual and text materials were displayed on every flat surface of the large room. The Graphic Design students had just completed six weeks' work culminating in editorial illustrations in a range of graphic techniques. The students brought their completed work to the meeting to share with the Professional Writing students. While this work was not related to children's book illustration, it was an effective 'icebreaker' for the two groups. As the students milled around the artwork, they talked about ideas behind the illustrations and various graphic techniques. The Graphic Design students were proud to show their work, and the Professional Writing students were clearly impressed. Together they shared a common interest: the thrill of 'published' work.

The second resource for the students was more closely related to *Get Real!* Materials from the Lu Rees Archives of Australian children's literature were displayed. Draft manuscripts of picture books, work-in-progress sketches and final artwork, and related correspondence revealed many facets of the creative process. Both groups were very interested in just 'how it was done' and the examples revealed the high standard of work involved in picture books.

Although both Graphic Design and Professional Writing students brought knowledge and skills from their own disciplines, neither had particular expertise, knowledge or experience in the field of picture books. The Collaborative Learning Model suggests that students need to explore ideas and information when moving into a new area of knowledge. The challenge was to retain the student-centred nature of collaborative learning where students discover

and create knowledge for themselves. At the same time, as educators, we recognised the need to offer both groups of students relevant materials to explore.

### **Design of collaborative learning - Transformation phase**

In this third phase of collaborative learning, *transformation*, the students engage in wide-ranging activities - individually, depending on their particular discipline and its requirements, and together, as part of the collaborative project. The objective of the transformation phase is to provide activities for students to 'reshape', reorganise, clarify, elaborate or practise what they are learning.

#### **Graphic Design students**

Students in Graphic Design were given a very detailed Description of the step-by-step process involved in the creation of picture books. They were guided in developing skills for creating illustrations for picture books. This was based on a conference paper delivered by Kerry Argent (1998), a well-known children's book illustrator and designer. Julie Bradley recommended two texts which elaborated on the design and illustration of books (Shulevitz 1985; Bossert 1996). Thereafter students worked within the usual parameters of Graphic Design courses.

#### **Professional Writing students**

##### **Exploring picture book creations**

By the seventh week of the semester when *Get Real!* began, the Professional Writing students had experienced a variety of sessions on picture books. Two lectures, 'From concept to publication' and 'Creating children's picture books' outlined the creative process from idea to published book, and aspects of the picture book in particular.

During one tutorial, students worked in pairs to examine and discuss examples of unpublished manuscripts, correspondence, and prepublication material from the Lu Rees Archives. The aim was to explore the creative writing process, and the influences upon that creation. New ways of seeing picture books in their creation stage emerged.

Students in tutorial groups discussed four different topics with related examples of children's picture books. The topics: 'First Experiences'; 'Picture Story Books'; 'Let's Join In'; and 'Getting Ready to Read', featured as categories of picture books discussed in the students' text, *Best Books for Children* (Alderman 1992). During this activity, they began to understand variations of the picture book genre.

#### **Understanding study resources**

The subject guide for *Writing for Young People* included an extensive list of books, audiotapes, and videocassettes about illustration, picture books, and the creative process. These provided background study for the students' essay on the collaborative process. The aim of the essay was to synthesise such background materials with reflections on their own collaborative experience with the Graphic Design students.

### **Design of collaborative learning - Presentation phase**

In the *presentation* phase, students present their work to an 'interested and critical audience'. Reid, Forrestal and Cook (1989) stipulate that this audience must be 'authentic' and provide responsive feedback. *Get Real!* featured several presentation-style activities. The first involved Professional Writing students workshopping texts in tutorials or Graphic Design students displaying artwork in the joint 'Show and Tell' session. The second presentation strategy involved Graphic Design and Professional Writing students creating materials to publicise the Exhibition. These activities could be just as easily be argued as part of the



*exploration* phase as students were not only presenting but also reorganising, clarifying, elaborating, and practising what they were learning.

The third presentation phase involved the lecturers judging and pre-selecting, from the extensive display of all the artwork, each Graphic Design student's best work for the Exhibition. The amount of artwork generated (four pieces each for 40 students) and the size of the exhibition space necessitated this pre-selection. Interestingly, we individually made our judgments, then discovered that 95% of these were the same.

### **Collaborating on the writing process**

By the sixth week, 10 writing workshops for the Professional Writing students had transpired. A common practise in many writing courses, such workshops engage the students in peer critiques. The students view these workshops as peer collaboration to achieve the best piece of writing.

Bruffee (1985: 2-913) points out a number of advantages of collaborative activities in the discipline of writing. He maintains it

- repositions writing as 'conversation' and encourages students to talk about their internalised thoughts, clarifying, extending and recasting them for 'publication'
- organises students for productive conversation
- helps students negotiate among themselves to resolve differences of opinion and judgment, and to analyse why these occur
- assists students in developing judgment
- offers a structure for learning
- assists students in constructive criticism of others' work, and
- provides opportunities for a form of 'publication' (reading unpublished work aloud).

Professional Writing students have participated in tutorial presentations and critiques of their work since their course began. They invariably praise these writing workshops for insights into their own work and assistance with 'difficult' aspects such as language, style, content and resolutions of ethical and moral dilemmas. Rogers and Horton (1992: 124) also give high praise for the benefits of such face-to-face collaboration between writers. They point out that it

- voices internalised ideas
- probes for 'solutions' by voicing thoughts
- makes explicit 'talk about talk'
- examines language intensely
- assists rhetorical situation
- encourages consideration of ethical dimensions, and
- fosters discussion of implications of content.

The process in *Writing for Young People* involves the students distributing copies of their piece to be workshopped to all class members and educator the week before the workshop. During the critique, everyone offers constructive comments. The student presenting the piece is a very active participant, alternately rationalising, disagreeing, querying and agreeing with points raised. Everyone is encouraged to write comments on their paper copy before the workshop, and these are passed on to the student as well. The following week the student hands in the revised piece for assessment. Many of the stories submitted for *Get Real!* were workshopped in this way.

Students often experience particular difficulties in writing for a young audience. They wonder how to pitch the content and style at the right level, worry whether the language is too difficult or too simple, and ponder whether the story is culturally insensitive and noninclusive. They even wonder whether the story would *really* interest children at all.

Workshopping is very valuable here for two reasons. The various collective experiences of the students often include contact with children, and their experiences are valued. The

workshops also provide opportunities to explore the writer's intent, for while writers are also their own 'first readers', they are not the most objective. Often writers harbour a didactic urge to improve or impart a set of values to youthful readers. An external perspective assists in discerning and curbing such didacticism. Bruffee (1985: 3) maintains that as others judge our writing they do so according to the 'assumptions, goals, values, rules and conventions' of the communities to whom we speak'. The wide-ranging communities represented by the students offer a multiplicity of comments on the writer's intent.

Nathan (English 1999: 1-2), a student, describes the assistance he received at the workshop of his picture book text, 'Grunt', illustrated by two Graphic Design students, Whiteley and Cochrane.

I submitted draft one of 'Grunt' to my weekly tutorial where everyone attending had the chance to review and offer feedback. Upon reading it, it was commonly agreed that the story was appropriate for the age group at which I had intended (5-8 year olds). More visual Descriptions were recommended for the various monsters in the story. It was even suggested that Grunt's best friend Monica become the more appropriate focus of the story, as she might be easier for children to relate to being a child herself. More Description was also encouraged in detailing Grunt's world and the 'plain of dreams' which served as a bridge between his world and ours. Aside from this, some tighter editing was also needed.

Graham, another student, commented on particular aspects he felt were improved upon by workshopping his piece, 'Something about Grandad'. 'Workshopping the draft was immensely helpful, giving me both a sequence of events (from believable to unbelievable), and an ending to tie it together.' (Brown 1999: 1)

The more intuitive students discovered that there must be conscious 'gaps' left by the writer for the illustrator to 'tell' the visual story. Graham (Brown 1999a: 1) commented on this point.

I was conscious of developing 'visual' scenarios, hoping they would lend themselves to an illustrator's imagination, but also of not 'over-describing' them. The actual Description of each scenario occurs in a single line, leaving room for added detail in the illustrations. Each scenario ends with a (hopefully) humorous throwaway line, which puts a different twist on events, and was intended to again give an illustrator more scope.

The Graphic Design students usually held their own strong views on the style and medium for the illustrations. This is quite evident through the individual 'stamp' of various illustrators where the same text was illustrated by two or three different students with strikingly diverse results for the feel of the story. 'Zoe Imagines', winner of the Best Collaborative Work, illustrates this point. The first illustrator, Charmaine Ellis, is the winning collaborating illustrator: Ellis; Boulton; Tanton . Melissa Masters described her winning text to be about a little girl 'playing imaginary games'.

Equally diverse are the three illustrations for 'Papa and the Pond'. The first of these illustrations by Nicole Struik was chosen for the front pages of both the University's newspaper, Monitor, and Australia's national higher education and training newspaper, Campus Review. The other two, Larkham and Dobeer were equally enticing.

'My Colour' (Dalwood 1999b), winner of the 'Best Visual Text', is another such example. The three illustrators tackled the same story from entirely different perspectives: Kilburn and Brookman. The author, Sally (Dalwood 1999a: 1), describes her discussions with the third illustrator, Matthew (Matt).

We talked about the idea of shaping the book like a small child, with a fold out or pop-up. Matthew also suggested that the child in the story should not be fully seen until it is 'his colour' - only half his face one

page, maybe his hand on another. He began some rough sketches of the frog. I asked Matthew if he needed me to change the text at all. He said no - he felt he could work with the existing version.

One Professional Writing student was most accommodating, but created a number of problems both for himself and the students who selected his story, 'Dragon Hoarde' to illustrate. Mark (1999: 1) describes some of the problems.

After learning of what we had to do I heard that some of the design students liked to draw dragons. I also liked to write fantasy so I thought this would be a good way of guaranteeing interest in my story. I wrote a fairly rough piece about a dragon prince fighting an evil lord. Not very original but it was enough to get the interest of three different illustrators. I thought this was fantastic at the time but I soon realised I had to interact with three different people who had three different views on the story.

This was an unusual case. The time frame for the Graphic Design students was tight for completing all the work before the end of the semester. The Professional Writing students had been asked to create a text suitable for a 32-page picture book which could be given to the Graphic Design students when we initially met with them. Mark not only created a story after the meeting, but the story itself was over 6,000 words and evolving. He (Cavanagh 1999: 2) describes it this way.

Every time I tried to fix something up it would add another couple of hundred words to the story. At this point one of my illustrators got fed up with me a bit. I'd decided to give the character of Tara a more leading role in the story, instead of just sitting by while Baric became a hero I made her a heroine herself. This added another thousand words to the story and the illustrators were forced to keep up. They complained that they would have to change their storyboard to include this change and they had a general whinge. I told them if they wanted a good story then they would have to put up with some changes. After this major change I assured them that there would be no more and they looked collectively relieved.

'Dragon Hoarde', although the most problematic of all the stories submitted for *Get Real!*, inspired three dragon-loving illustrators: Funnell; Austin; Dang. The last of these three illustrators, Minh Dang, won the 'Best Illustrator' award. He spent over 35 hours developing his illustrations using the computer application Adobe Illustrator, and applying vector graphics in the creation of his dragon. Minh Dang (Lada 1999:10) describes himself and his fellow students in *The Canberra Times* article (written by one of the Professional Writing students), as being at 'the beginning of our illustrious illustrating careers'.

### **Writing for the media**

Recognising the importance of advertising a public event became the impetus for two simultaneous activities. While the Graphic Design students were designing invitations and a poster invitation advertising the Exhibition opening, the Professional Writing students were creating publicity material. They could select from a range of choices depending on their interests and skills. They could create newspaper articles, publicity flyers, media releases, or a photographic collection with captions.

Fortunately for the project, one of the Professional Writing tutors, Sue Page, had professional education and experience in journalism. She worked with the students in an hour-long workshop then provided supporting printed material on 'Writing for the Media'. Given that the Professional Writing course is aimed at creative writing, writing for the media required new skills. Several tackled this requirement with creative flair. *The Canberra Times* published one of the student's articles (Lada 1999) about the opening of the Exhibition.

## Show and Tell

Towards the end of the writing and illustrating stage of *Get Real!*, a formal 'Show and Tell' was arranged in the Graphic Design studio. The book dummies, storyboards, jacket covers, and double page spreads were proudly displayed, still smelling strongly of glue and fixatives. Students in both groups, lecturers and tutors all celebrated the achievements. Wine and nibbles, juice and cake made the 'Show and Tell' a proper celebration. Here for the first time, the Graphic Design students presented their work for all to see. There were a few dramas. One Professional Writing student discovered that his illustrator had misinterpreted his story in one very important aspect. He (Brown 1999a: 3) revealed this problem in his collaborative essay.

The ending was supposed to be left 'up in the air' by the text, and explained by the last picture, which also leads you to look back on the story in a different light (implied Grandad really did all those outrageous things). On his storyboard Dan wrote in text that should have been left out, making it stupid and obvious, as well as being poorly expressed.

Fortunately, there was time to change the storyboard before the Exhibition.

Another interesting, but regrettable, aspect at the Show and Tell celebration was the discovery that some texts had been illustrated without the Professional Writing students' awareness, and two texts were not illustrated at all. There had been no collaboration! How could this happen when the project's premise was collaboration? It should be remembered that both groups of students were accustomed to working on their own. A collaborative project was interpreted differently by individual students. To some Graphic Design students, simply having a text from a Professional Writing student was collaboration in itself.

The texts were given to the Graphic Design students with advice that every text must be illustrated. Afterwards, we found some students had exchanged texts among themselves. Other students chose to illustrate texts that were particularly appealing to them while two texts were rejected as not as appealing as others. This meant that some texts were illustrated three times while two texts were not illustrated. This was not discovered until late in the semester as the assessment aspect for the Graphic Design students occurred at the end of the semester, and the Professional Writing students had already had their picture book text assessed. It was only when two Professional Writing students asked why their illustrators had not contacted them that a check on texts and illustrators revealed this problem. At this late stage, it was not possible to do more than give the two Professional Writing students a different assignment as too little time remained for new artwork to be created.

## *Get Real!* Exhibition

Preparations for the Exhibition took place over a three-month period. The students completed the artwork and texts, poster and invitations, and some publicity material before the semester ended in June. The Exhibition was scheduled for early August. The completed texts were posted to Margaret Hamilton, the external judge, several weeks before the Exhibition. This was in keeping with the normal practise in picture book publishing where texts are read before any illustrations are created. The exception is where the one person creates both text and illustrations.

As to the criteria for selecting the winners of the four prizes: Best Visual Text; Best Illustrator; and Best Collaborative Work (recognising both author and illustrator) we relied on our external judge. It was her field of expertise, and we wished to retain a 'real world' aspect to the project. Later, at a conference ('Visual Language ...' 1999) where *Get Real!* was presented, our publisher talked about her criteria for selecting the winners. They were 'child appeal, originality, style of writing, plot, visual potential and "gut reaction"'. The last, she said (Lada 1999b: 10), was 'always a strong basis for deciding to publish, and therefore was an important consideration in the final decision'.

The week before the Exhibition, a group of Graphic Design and Professional Writing students assisted Julie Bradley in mounting the artwork. On 5 August, the opening night of

the Exhibition, over 150 people attended to celebrate the students' work. To add that extra element of celebration, two of the winning texts were read with dramatic flair by the Canberra troupe, The Players' Company. It was a celebration enjoyed by family and friends, including a sprinkling of children who sat up front in the audience, transfixed by The Players' troupe readings. This was truly the real *presentation* test - the audience for whom these stories were intended obviously enthralled.

## Design of collaborative learning - Reflection phase

### Students' reflections

According to Reid, Forrestal and Cook's Model of Collaborative Learning, it is important that students analyse what they have learned, how that learning occurred, the process involved, and implications for future learning. Such reflection assists the educators in their own review of what has transpired.

Recognising the gap that often exists between students' and their educators' perceptions on the same educational activity, MacCallum's (1994) study provided interesting insights. She examined students' perceptions of collaborative learning and assessment in a teacher education course.

MacCallum (1994) found that the majority of students perceived a positive change in their thinking about collaborative learning. For them collaboration resulted in more, different or better ideas, clarification or extension of ideas, and deeper thinking. Those who responded negatively to collaborative learning criticised the lack of freedom in having to work with others, the difficulty of incorporating ideas of others which might be different to their own, fear of upsetting others, and the difficulty of being honest about personal views.

One of the Professional Writing students was able to 'stand back' from the *Get Real!* collaborative project and see a range of possibilities and prospects, separate from his particular experience. His pragmatic approach highlights how students can often see things from a different perspective than their educators. Rob felt that, as a result of his involvement in *Get Real!*, collaboration had useful advantages (Lada 1999a: 1).

- A distinct advantage to overcoming procrastination. If you are establishing contact with an author/illustrator and meeting deadlines, then what better way to become enthused and stay enthused in the whole creative process.
- To learn a new perspective. To see and understand how your work is perceived by your partner and vice versa. You can find out how others work on a day-to-day basis. This leads to an improved understanding of your own work, leaving you better equipped to handle your side affairs - with the other person's ideas and expertise, in mind.
- To give and receive emotional support. Since the whole creative process can sometimes be daunting, or even a little bumpy at times, it is advantageous to have this available. The right kind of support tends to help make a person stronger, whether they are giving or receiving it.

Professional Writing students participating in the *Get Real!* project expressed a range of views on the project. Their collaborative essays were generally positive towards *Get Real!* and several offered ways to improve the project. Graham (Brown 1999a: 4) commented

The collaboration project was an exciting opportunity to write a children's picture book, and to see an illustrator's interpretation of the characters and story. In future the project could be improved by increasing the consultation between author and illustrator, particularly in the area of layout and design, and perhaps beginning before the story has been written. This would help the author learn to leave 'space' in the text for

the illustrator, and to gain a better feel for pacing while taking the onus of layout decisions off the illustrators.

Mark (Cavanagh 1999: 2) commented, 'This was a most rewarding process, to watch my story being slowly illustrated was most satisfying. I recommend that this project be offered in the future'.

Felicity (Farr 1999: 2) felt positively about the experience overall but believed that the exchange of views between writer and illustrator could have been better.

I have found the assignment *Get Real!* an interesting and thought provoking experience although there are some areas of the project that perhaps could use some improvement. I was very impressed by the work of the design students only I felt they held back on what they wanted to do because they didn't feel comfortable about asking me to change the story. As a result they ended up doing what I expected in the way of illustrations. Perhaps I was having too high an expectation to think they would add more meaning to the story by illustration.

While Felicity desired more input, other students were happy with limited collaboration. Melissa (Masters 1999: 1), for example, commented

I met with the illustrator, Mike Lin, soon after he was assigned the story. He showed me various works of his and we discussed the project, including how each of us perceived the story and what media we thought would best illustrate it. I was particularly drawn to his watercolour and coloured pencil sketches, as I thought the light colours and flowing lines would effectively illustrate the feeling of freedom I tried to portray in the main character's experience. Mike and I had planned to meet again, however this did not eventuate. Having discussed our ideas he developed the story pictorially. I would not have liked Mike to participate in the writing of 'Flying Lessons Here Today', and therefore extended him the courtesy of not interfering in his work.

Melissa's essay (1999), 'The collaborative efforts between author and illustrator', provided several examples of both the presence and absence of collaborative efforts between author and illustrator of published children's picture books. A large body of literature reveals there is no consensus on whether direct collaboration between author and illustrator results in a better picture book. But that is another story of collaboration altogether.

More formal evaluations were produced by CELTS, the University's unit for evaluating subjects and courses anonymously. In response to the open-ended question, 'Please comment briefly on the *Get Real!* assignment if you were involved', students (Writing for Young People students 1999) offered

'It has been fun and educational.'

'A good experience and good idea.'

'An invaluable experience!'

'Need to collaborate earlier - perhaps develop story and pictures right from the beginning, rather than write and submit.'

'A little disorganised, but since it was the first project of its kind, it was good.'

'I really enjoyed it - it needs a little more fine-tuning regarding communication between faculties and students.'

'It depended heaps on correspondence with each other. Considering this was a two-way street, it didn't always work.'

'Interesting and fun - a great experience.'

'Get Real should be compulsory, for a unit like this it is valuable

experience. Get Real was fantastic, must be continued.'  
 'Very enjoyable and rewarding to see my story made into mock-up book.  
 Good experience collaborating with the illustrator.'  
 'Fabulous! A marvellous idea. Even if we never get published it was  
 wonderful to see our stories come to life. I also appreciated the  
 opportunity to experience the collaboration process.'

### **Publisher's reflections**

The involvement of a children's publisher in the *Get Real!* Project was an essential ingredient for the 'real life' requirements of the project. Students knew that their work would be judged by an external expert. They hoped, secretly, that they might be 'discovered' and published through this project. Although this did not eventuate, Margaret Hamilton, our judge, commented very favourably on the potential of these students. In an email (Hamilton 2000) sent to Belle Alderman, Margaret reflected on *Get Real!*

The *Get Real!* project was an inspiring experience for me. I admired the organisation and work done by you and Julie and the encouragement you gave to the students. They had obviously gained a great deal from your joint tutoring.

Most of all I admired the students' work. They had handled this demanding project with a great deal of creativity and imagination. Their work, from the manuscripts I read beforehand, to the roughs, storyboards, dummies and finished art, showed an enthusiastic grasp of the tasks set for them. I was so impressed with the quality of their work, the range of different approaches in design and media techniques, the freshness and originality in the writing of the texts. I found judging the work, both written and artistic, extremely daunting, as I wanted to give everyone a prize! My impression was that there were students here who, with the right mix of determination and professional training, showed great potential to be published authors and illustrators.

### **Educators' reflections**

Reid, Forrestal and Cook's Model indicates the educator is actively involved in reflecting upon the learning. Like the students, reviewing what has been learned, the process of learning, and potential for future learning provides information for planning possible changes and enhancements. We called this process 'debriefing', and like our initial planning session, it took place over a cup of coffee in the Staff Club.

That debriefing happened two months after the Exhibition. The intervening time provided the needed distance to reflect on all the many details. Given the large numbers of students involved, the amount of effort required, and resources needed, we did need to review what worked well and what could work better. Our first question to each other was whether we should do it again. Both sets of students were overall very positive and hoped that we would offer another such project. The level of interest in the local and national community was strong. Despite some hiccups along the way, we also enjoyed *Get Real!* We have decided to run the project again in 2000. What will we be doing differently and why?

### ***Get Real!* The second time around**

#### *1. Produce a common student guide for the project.*

This will ensure students in both disciplines have the same understanding of responsibilities and expectations. Our main problem was that students interpreted 'collaboration' differently. The Professional Writing students expected to discuss their texts with the illustrators and, furthermore, were being assessed on that process through their essay on collaborative efforts. Some of the Graphic Design students interpreted collaboration as simply receiving and interpreting the text - with no other input from the Professional Writing students.

*2. Explore explicitly aspects of the picture book important to its creation.*

Although the picture book genre was explored through a range of activities, there still remained important gaps in the students' understanding which only became evident during the collaborative process. Activities and resources will be added to address the distinction between an illustrated story and a picture book story, signatures (printed sheets folded to form sections of a book), page breakdowns, and other technical features.

*3. Produce picture book texts only.*

The project is most suited to the production of picture books. The one 6,000-word text produced later in the project, while garnering the 'Best Illustrator' prize, created unrealistic demands on all these students.

*4. Specify the timeframe for completed texts.*

A few Professional Writing students continued to 'improve' (change) their text, and this created problems for the Graphic Design students. The texts will be required in their final form at a predetermined date, appropriate for the project deadlines.

*5. Develop strategies for helping students to understand their audience.*

Both groups of students grappled with the concept of children as the audience for their work. Julie Bradley put a large sign on her office door, 'THINK KID!', while students in Professional Writing consistently talked about audience in their writing workshops. However, we believe that the addition of a 'real' audience of children would assist the students in understanding their target audience. Our proposal, still under negotiation, is to have authors and illustrators together attend a public library storytelling session where their 'working' story and sample illustrations would be shared with a group of children by the children's librarian. It is proposed that the students talk with the children's librarian after the session as well. Our aim is to give the students some insight into children's responses, and to have them consider these in relation to their creation.

*6. Study the collaborative process sooner.*

With hindsight, having the Professional Writing students read about the collaborative process before it begins would assist them in understanding such concepts as a 'visual' story, leaving 'gaps' in the text for the illustrators, pacing, page breakdowns, and so on. It would be useful for the Graphic Design students to have a similar exposure to the collaborative process. Perhaps particular readings and videocassettes could be recommended for both groups, although this has not been decided.

*7. Secure an even more real world experience.*

Julie Bradley is pursuing the possibility of exhibiting the 2000 project's artwork at a 'proper' gallery with a specialist interest in illustrations of children's books. The Gallery we have in mind has workshops using the artwork and stories with children and adults. Such an activity would meet our goal of creating a project with real world learning outcomes for the students.

*8. Gain external professional sponsorship*

In the longer term, we are pursuing sponsorship for the prizes and administrative costs from professional associations related to this project. We believe that ongoing prizes awarded in the public arena, with other University prizes, will have a positive impact on our students and their careers, our courses and the University.

## **Best practice features**

It is very bold to suggest that *Get Real!* could be a model of best practice in collaborative learning. As educators, we are aware that our collaborative project was not 'perfect' and that fine-tuning is required. We could never have anticipated some of the problems that happened along the way. As Thorley and Gregory (1994:185) pointed out, 'Groups are unpredictable!' But many things were 'right', and a review of what appeared to be the



elements of best practise, in the light of both theory and practice, may prompt others to implement collaborative learning with greater likelihood of success.

Here, then, are best practice features for planning, implementing, and monitoring a successful collaborative learning project.

- Consider whether collaborative learning is the most appropriate strategy for the desired learning outcomes.
- Ensure the project lends itself to collaborative projects.
- Follow a 'tested' collaborative learning model that guides planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Explain the rationale, advantages and pitfalls of collaborative learning to the students - write this into the project guide and discuss it with them.
- Build in initial group interaction to establish a common foundation, focus and direction.
- Provide one set of written documentation for all groups involved.
- Include objectives, learning outcomes, responsibilities, expectations, timeline, and assessment details within the written documentation.
- Develop strategies to ensure individual and group accountability.
- Create a rich learning environment with varied resources that can be explored at different points.
- Provide meeting times and places where students can converse together.
- Develop strategies to enhance that sense of sharing knowledge communities.
- Provide support for students as they learn to share their knowledge communities.
- Develop strategies to enhance 'positive interdependence' - that sense that together they can do something that alone they cannot.
- Create a 'presentation' space to share the project with interested communities.
- Publicise the project in all appropriate venues.
- Evaluate the project, seeking comments from all involved and from the external communities.
- Reconceive the project, enhanced and rejuvenated, and
- Share the results in the professional community.

## Conclusion

A large collaborative project requires educators who firmly believe that students learn most when they are given the structure and the context then left to explore and develop their skills and knowledge for themselves. Not all educators and not all students will feel comfortable in such an environment. For those who do, the rewards are many. *Get Real!* provided opportunities for personal and professional growth. Students participated in a project that as individuals, or as a member of their particular group, they could not have completed on their own. The collaboration was on many levels. Educators and students alike collaborated and learned a little of the other's knowledge community. Through the project, the picture book became a more familiar art form, in its many stages from creation to published product. We respected and admired the skills and knowledge of each other, and we were all the richer for that.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge my colleague, Julie Bradley, for her enthusiasm and commitment throughout *Get Real!* I also wish to thank the following individuals and organisation: the Professional Writing students in Writing for Young People for the use of their comments on the *Get Real!* project; the Graphic Design students in Graphic Design Techniques: Illustration for use of their artwork; Andrew Sikorski for the photographs of the *Get Real!*

artwork; and The Canberra Times for permission to reproduce an article written by one of our students.

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## TEXT

**Vol 4 No 1 April 2000**

**<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>**

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