COLLABORATIVE WRITING ACROSS DISTANCES:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WORKPLACE WRITING ACROSS COASTS
AND CULTURES

by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband Scott, my always supportive parents, and my grandmother, who always believed I could write.

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ABSTRACT

COLLABORATIVE WRITING ACROSS DISTANCES:
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AND CULTURES

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This thesis describes the collaborative writing practices among colleagues within the same company who work in two geographically-dispersed offices. The author conducted an ethnography of ERC, the education research division within a large research and development organization, observing and interviewing staff in both the east and west coast offices over a period of five months. The study examined the overall organizational culture, the two distinct office cultures that emerged in part because of the distance, and the individual writing team cultures, and how both the cultures and distance influenced writing collaborations. It also addressed how collaborative writing shapes the various cultures. Although a literature review suggested that being in two different places with two different office cultures would hinder collaboration, this study found that ERC was able to have successful writing collaborations *because* of the cultures of the overall organization, the two separate offices, and the individual writing teams.

1. Introduction

The nature of workplace writing has been changing in recent years with both the proliferation of satellite offices and increasing communication and collaboration between different offices via technology. Indeed, according to some workplace technology analysts, 35 percent of work will be conducted virtually from satellite or home offices in the next few decades (Kemp and Baker 92). Introducing different places for work to take place also introduces the possibility of different workplace cultures. Workplace culture includes a combination of the values, beliefs, and shared perspectives of the workers, ways of communicating, and the "tacit rules, practices, and conventions that govern [a] group" (Spinuzzi 420).

Even though more workers are engaging in distributed work, researchers suggest that the phenomenon of distributed work and its causes and effects need to be more clearly understood, including the role of the type of work being conducted, as some types of work may be more suited to being done at a distance (Hinds and Kiesler xv). Because most people will have to write collaboratively at some point during their careers (Colen and Petelin 138), it follows that they will likely have to do it at a distance from their colleagues. Thus, collaborative writing is an important type of work to examine when it is distributed across distances and office cultures.

According to Colen and Petelin, there is still a need to focus future research on "the frequency, nature, sites, and cultural context of this type of collaboration," as first

suggested by Couture and Rymer in 1989 (14). This study sought to examine how collaborative writing happens across the different offices of ERC, the education research division of a large research and development organization. Following Cross's suggestion for further research to determine what organizational characteristics enable collaboration among large groups of people (217), this study looks at the specific conditions, including office culture, that enable collaborative writing across distances.

As social constructivists contend, writing is a social process, and it involves the writer's interpretations of the social context and the social interaction the writer engages in when writing (Doheny-Farina 159; Schneider 170; Hartman 83). Collaborative writers need to form together a common understanding of the task and each individual's role in it (Cross 176). Distance and lack of face-to-face interaction likely complicate, or at the very least, change how common knowledge and context are created. The different offices across which writing occurs may also have different organizational cultures that play a role in how writers are able to create shared context. Building upon social constructivist approaches and Doheny-Farina's theory of writing as a social process that both is influenced by and influences a company culture (159), this study looks at how common understanding is created when colleagues are not in the same place, the roles that distance and organizational culture play in the collaborative writing process, and, conversely, the role collaboration plays in shaping the context.

It is important to recognize the role of culture in how collaborative writing happens. An organization's culture provides writers with a set of values and beliefs that give the writers a sense of who they are, what they do, and what they are working for. It

also provides guidelines for how colleagues should interact, communicate, and behave. Typically, culture is viewed as being created either from the top down (through an organization's leaders) or from the bottom up (through the workers). The former view of culture acknowledges the perceptions of management and suggests that an organization's leaders establish the values and rules that staff must follow (Strangleman and Roberts 49, Raz and Fadon 166). The latter view acknowledges the perceptions of the workers and posits that culture is created through the daily interactions and practices of everyone in the organization and the ways in which those individuals interpret the organizational context and rhetorical situations (Doheny-Farina 176, Raz and Fadon 166).

While these two approaches may seem to be mutually exclusive, they are interconnected (Raz and Fadon 166) and equally valuable in the context of this study. In other words, while an office's leaders set the stage for the values and rules that are adopted, the ways all staff within the organization interpret those values and rules affect how they play out in practice. Defining culture as a combination of top-down and bottom-up forces provides a basis for understanding how culture can shape collaborative writing (through the established norms, practices, and rules) and how culture itself can be shaped through writing and communicating.[1]

The following broad research questions are the focus of this study:

- How do different office cultures within the same company influence the collaborative writing process among colleagues in the different offices?

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[1] Geertzian approaches to culture have been fruitful for studies of discourse. These semiotic approaches view culture as signs and symbols that invoke meanings that simply "are" and are constantly shifting but are not causal. However, this study required a definition of culture that acknowledged both the causal role of culture in shaping practice and the role of participants in shaping culture.

- What impact, if any, does writing collaboratively with colleagues across geographical distances have on the respective office cultures?

In order to answer these questions, this study also addresses narrower, more specific questions:

- What does the writing process look like when people from different offices collaborate at a distance?

- How do participants in the writing process interpret the challenges and rewards of distance collaborations?

- What similarities and differences do participants recognize between writing collaboratively across offices and within their home offices?

- What technologies do they use to collaborate across distances? How do these technologies shape culture?

- How do the office cultures differ? How do participants perceive the two office cultures?

A large body of literature suggests that working in the same location is the ideal, and focuses on the challenges associated with trying to collaborate at a distance (Kiesler and Cummings 57; Kraut et al. 137). While writers at the company under study, ERC, experience common challenges associated with this type of collaboration, it has an overall organizational culture, two distinct office cultures within each separate location, and individual cultures within each writing team that, taken all together, impact the writers' abilities to write collaboratively across the geographic distances. The case study of ERC illustrates how culture can be an enabling factor in distance collaboration. At the

same time, writing collaboratively at a distance has instigated a cultural shift that also

serves to facilitate the process of collaborative writing across distances.

2. Literature Review: Filling the Gaps that Connect Collaborative Writing, Distance

Collaboration, and Organizational Culture

Examining the dual effects of organizational culture and geography on collaborative writing has not been the focus of much research. The impact of the collaborative writing process across distances on organizational culture has similarly not received much attention. To better understand these phenomena, this study draws upon various, interrelated topics: the social aspects of writing, collaborative writing, working at a distance, organizational culture, and the tools that can be used to bridge that distance, both geographically and culturally, for the purposes of collaborative writing.

Writing as a Social Process

Social constructivism provides a good foundation for understanding how writing is impacted by social interactions and contexts. It suggests that composition happens through our daily conversations and experiences, such that "all writing is interactive" (Sharples 2). In large part, writing depends on the social norms of the authors; as co-writers are more comfortable with each other and engage in more interpersonal communication, they then interact more on the content of the writing task at hand (Weber 59). A writer's interaction with others during any point in the writing process contributes

to the document, and can include specific instances, such as discussions that generate new ideas, or the more broad social and cultural dynamics of the workplace (Sharples 2).

Interpersonal interaction is thus important in the writing process. At the same time that writers are interacting to produce texts, they are also shaping the culture through their interactions. Henry contends that "professional writers daily compose and recompose the cultures of their workplaces however subtly through their discursive projects" (8). According to Jones, it is within this group collaboration, when authors plan, draft, and revise together, that they develop a sense of group identity as a team with a common goal (454). Other researchers confirm this idea, suggesting that they form a social group with a unique personality and dynamics (Sharples et al. 10).

Perhaps most notably, Doheny-Farina illustrated this phenomenon of the reciprocal relationship between writing and culture in his research of the production of a business plan at a start-up company. He showed how the production process shaped and reflected the company's organizational context (165). In the process of writing the document, the leadership structure changed from authoritative to collaborative, in the form of an executive committee. This change in turn influenced the writing such that is was now a collaborative process. While this study provides evidence for the reciprocal relationship between a company's culture and writing, it is, by Doheny-Farina's accounts, "provisional" (183) and only begins to help us "understand how organizational context relates to writing." However, it lays the groundwork for investigating how more complex organizational contexts, in this case, an education division with two geographically-dispersed offices, relate to collaborative writing.

Collaborative Writing

By its very nature, collaborative writing is a social process. Bosley defines collaborative writing as "two or more people working together to produce one written document in a situation in which a group takes responsibility for having produced the document" (qtd. in Cross 6). Researchers have shown that writing alone is difficult in and of itself, and that writing with others is even more complicated (Passig and Schwartz 396; Farkas 13; Colen and Petelin 139). With multiple writers, collaborative writing requires clear and open communication and negotiation to make sure all writers understand their roles and responsibilities for the task (Barile and Dorso 174; Cross 176; Sharples et al. 11).

The complexity of collaborative writing is important to understand so that one can appreciate the added difficulty that is introduced when it is done across offices and great distances. Posner and Baecker's taxonomy for collaborative writing provides an example of the complexities. The researchers discerned four main categories for analyzing the collaboration process: roles, activities, document control methods, and writing strategies (129). According to Posner and Baecker, the writing process can be viewed from each of the following lenses:

- Roles: the parts each individual member plays, including writer, consultant, editor, reviewer;
- Activities: the tasks performed, including brainstorming, researching, initial planning, final editing, and final reviewing;

- Document control: the management and coordination of the document, including:

  - Centralized: one member controls the document the whole time;

  - Relay: one person controls the document at a time, but control passes among members;

  - Independent: each member works on a specific piece, and controls that piece throughout the process;

  - Shared: each member has access to the document at all times; and

- Writing strategy: the steps taken to produce the document, including single writer, scribe, separate writers, or joint writing (130-131).

Indeed, there are so many variations of what collaborative writing can look like that researchers are still trying to create a nomenclature and continuum for it (Lowry, Curtis, and Lowry 66; Jones 451).

Collaborative writing is also difficult for a number of other reasons. First, people are emotionally tied to what they write; the authors may not be comfortable discussing it with others or they may be highly sensitive to suggestions. In a related vein, personalities may conflict or may not be accepting of others' ideas. Next, documents generally take longer to produce and are always revisable. Writers must reconcile their different styles and writing strategies to avoid inconsistencies. Finally, it is hard to gauge a successful collaboration (Farkas 15; Colen and Petelin 139; Sharples et al. 10). Mankin and Cohen further suggest that any collaboration is more complex when it involves high task uncertainty (e.g., unpredictable inputs or ill-defined procedures), multiple people, high

diversity ("of language, goals, organizations"), different goals and agendas, and virtual communication (3). The authors posit that any kind of differences make collaboration more challenging (4). Thus, any writing collaboration that has any of these characteristics would be more difficult.

Despite the challenges, there are benefits to collaborative writing, which help explain why colleagues engage in it, particularly why they might do so from a distance. Positive findings include higher quality documents (due to writers' range of experience and skills); more motivation (writers encourage each other); multiple sources of feedback during draft stages; opportunities for less experienced writers to work with more experienced colleagues during which they can improve their skills and become acculturated to company norms, values, and standards; enhanced work relationships; and higher levels of acceptance of the final document (Colen and Petelin 138).

Many of the identified challenges and benefits of collaborative writing are dependent on the individuals participating in it. This study, while recognizing the contributions of individuals, moves beyond individual inputs to examine how the characteristics of an organization as a whole either positively or negatively influence collaborations. The elements of organizational culture and writing across distances in relation to collaborative writing add to the complexity of the process.

Workplace Culture

As described above, collaborative writing is an involved process that is influenced by many factors, such as the social contexts and the personalities and styles of the

writers. Because writing is a social process, writers must interpret the social context and the social interaction in which they engage while writing (Doheny-Farina 159; Schneider 170). Social contexts can be difficult to navigate when writers from more than one culture participate in the process. As described earlier, workplace culture includes a combination of the values, beliefs, and shared perspectives of the workers, the ways of communicating, and the "tacit rules, practices, and conventions that govern [a] group" (Spinuzzi 420). With globalization and improved technology, Mankin and Cohen state that "we live in an era of business without boundaries, where competing effectively means collaborating across time, distance, organization, and culture" (1). Many companies have multiple offices or employees who work from their homes, and these employees must frequently work together despite the distances and time differences. Even though they are employees of the same overarching company, the distance fosters the creation of different office cultures. Halford and Leonard contend that "different parts of the same organization offer distinctive experiences, resources, and subjectivities to employees" (658).

Thus, understanding different organizational contexts, with "embedded meaning, opportunities, and practices" (Halford and Leonard 661), is increasingly important. Social contexts shape the communication patterns and expectations associated with writing (McCarthy 201). Indeed, "particular organizations are embedded in specific times and places. They have complex histories, spatialities and associated meanings. These different contexts offer multiple, fragmented and distinctive discourses on which individuals may also draw in the production of subjectivity" (Hardy et al. 2000, as cited

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in Halford and Leonard 660). People working in different offices with particular contexts would have different subjectivities and discourses to draw upon when engaging in writing.

Armstrong and Cole illustrated how even within the same organization with the same overarching leadership, different office locations may experience different cultures. They studied nine distributed work groups—located from 15 kilometers apart to half a world apart—within a software engineering organization. They found that the groups experienced communication misunderstanding and conflicts in part because each group had unique site cultures and contexts, which led to different viewpoints and beliefs (Armstrong and Cole 168, 172). Each group had the tendency to interpret messages based on their own assumptions and expectations and on their relation to the rest of the company (Armstrong and Cole172, 178). Geography promoted group identity, with the teams viewing their home group as the people they sat beside at work (Armstrong and Cole 172). However, to overcome the distances and develop a group culture and sense of closeness, the groups had to come to an understanding about how to work together, including developing shared goals, norms, and expectations (Armstrong and Cole 174).

While problems may arise from work groups having different cultural norms and expectations, there is danger in a dominant culture trying to assert itself over subordinate or counter cultures (Casey, 1995:178, as cited in Strangleman and Roberts 51). Cultural change often results only in superficial attachments of the workers to the new culture (Strangelman and Roberts 62). Thus, it seems necessary for organizations to recognize differing cultures and find ways to work with them rather than try to change them. This

study builds upon the research on the interactions of different office cultures by examining how different office cultures within the same organization impact collaborative writing.

Distributed Work

The literature on distributed work helps enrich our understanding of the issues that arise when collaborative writing happens across distances and cultures. While some challenges are unique to collaborative writing, as discussed earlier, research on distributed work sheds further light on challenges that are common to any work that is distributed across people and locations and can be applied to the situation this study examines.

Working across distances increases the likelihood that people will encounter different office cultures and contexts, and creating the shared contexts that are necessary for successful collaborative writing is more difficult. According to Snowdon, Churchill, and Munro, "Where actions are not physically co-located and co-temporal, providing shared context is more difficult" (9). Researchers of distributed work have found that shared social settings and face-to-face interaction help maintain group culture and norms (Kiesler and Cummings 64), and are necessary "for sustaining the social relationships that make distributed work possible" (Nardi and Whittaker 83). When people are in close proximity, they are more likely to have similar expectations and to create "a shared territory" (Kiesler and Cummings 65). Physical distance can foster social distance, a lack

of group identity, or increased social and cultural diversity of the group membership, and can lead to conflicts (Hinds and Bailey 2000, as cited in Kiesler and Cummings 71, 72).

Nardi and Whittaker characterize aspects of face-to-face communication and contend that activities enabled by face-to-face communication, such as touching, are necessary to maintain the social relationships that are important to distributed work, and are necessary for information exchange (83). Physical proximity allows shared context to develop through shared artifacts (Snowdon, Churchill, and Monroe 9). Creating shared context is difficult when team members cannot see the same artifacts as the subject of communication for local negotiation.

Several other challenges emerge from working at a distance. When people do not physically see each other, they may inadvertently pay less attention to coworkers (compared to their co-located colleagues), make less effort, or rely on others to do most of the work (e.g., "free riding"). These consequences can all lead to slower overall work (Kiesler and Cummings 63). In her study of geographically distributed student project teams producing a policy document, Weisband found that collaborations were more successful when teams created or reinforced awareness of others and the work (311, 313, 323). Because uncertainty was higher in geographically distributed groups, frequent awareness messages, early information sharing, and early interactions led to better team performance (Weisband 313, 323-4).

Successful distributed work relationships depend on leadership and communication. Weber suggests that "uncertainties may arise, particularly in large projects, about the aims or coherence of the eventual product. Where spontaneous

consensus is not realistic, this potential uncertainty raises the need for a single guiding view of the writing process—e.g., a document leader—to ensure completion and coherence" (54). Leading teams over time and space requires developing trust between leaders and team members, bridging diverse cultural and organizational norms, and making geographically-distanced colleagues feel part of the organization and team, all of which are difficult to achieve (Connaughton 42-3). An effective team leader sets the stage for and reinforces interaction styles that will lead to successful collaboration, such as sharing schedules, checking progress (including setting times to communicate), consciously building in social messages, and working in as close to real time as possible (Weisband 324-5; Connaughton 57-60). A leader must use the most appropriate medium for sending messages, using rich media (face-to-face interaction) for more ambiguous and uncertain information because it allows for immediate feedback (Connaughton 57-60).

Schunn, Crowley, and Okada studied the differences between collaboration across distances and local collaboration (407). The authors examined the impact of distance on scientific collaborations in regards to who collaborates, how successful the collaboration is, and what the process of collaboration is. They found that distance changes some aspects of the research process. While collaborating at a distance, people used research group meetings less frequently and had fewer face-to-face meetings, but they more consistently shared and provided wider access to data sources and ideas across the coauthors (Schunn, Crowley, and Okada 422). Distance collaboration may also be preferable for people who do not work well in the same space (Schunn, Crowley, and Okada 423). Other researches suggest that some tasks may be more suited to distributed

work. Working alone on complex tasks would provide fewer distractions from others and their needs (Kiesler and Cummings 63). Understanding the potential consequences of working from a distance enhances our understanding of how collaborative writing happens at a distance.

Technology for Collaborative Writing

When individuals cannot be in the same location, technology can serve to create a sense of proximity (Kiesler and Cummings 67) and shared social spaces (Pargman 753), and to socialize the writing process (Duin, Jorn, and DeBower 164). Computer and internet-based technologies are important methods for communicating and writing collaboratively for geographically distributed work groups. There are many technological tools for collaborative writing, including, but not limited to:

- email;
- telephone;
- instant Messenger programs;
- shared online editing tools;
- software that enables users to work in the same document at the same time (Erkens, et al. 467);
- software such at Netmeeting (by Microsoft) that enables group members to view each other's work as it is proceeding and take turns in editing the document in real time (Barile and Durso 176);
- listservs and online discussion forums (McIntosh 68; Giles 88);

- networking technology (Lopez and Nagelhout 15, Kaye 53); and

- computer-based tools that support distributed, asynchronous authoring of structured documents that contain both text and graphics (Jones 185).

Research has shown that computers facilitate collaborative writing, and email is the most widely-used asynchronous tool for doing so (Passig and Schwartz 398). Email allows writing groups to communicate and to share texts and templates. With the computer, writers compose and revise faster and easier and communicate easier, more accurately, and more frequently (Van Pelt and Gillam 177).

Most importantly for distanced workers, technology is becoming a means to recreate face-to-face interactions or to compensate for the lack of them. While Hinds and Kiesler stated that "proximity has proven to be hard to simulate through modern technologies such as videoconferencing" (xiii), researchers studying face-to-face versus computer-supported collaborative writing have found many benefits to the latter. For instance, one study concluded that computer-supported collaborative writing is more integrative and coherent, with team members compromising and agreeing on their ideas faster, and consequently creating the documents in less time than teams who collaborate face-to-face (Goldger, Russell, & Cook, 2003, as cited in Passig and Schwartz 398).

In another study, Passig and Schwarz also found more success with technology than with face-to-face collaborative writing. The researchers studied the use of GROOVE, an online work environment that can be used for a number of purposes and on different synchronous levels. Within the virtual computer component, participants can work together or individually to edit materials in such a way that all participants can

identify who edited it (Passig and Schwartz 398). For the study, each group wrote two articles—one using face-to-face collaboration and one using GROOVE at their home computers. In the end, groups produced a higher quality document using GROOVE, a result the researchers attributed to their need to be more focused on the assignment (less tangential conversation) and to ask clear and concise questions online (Passig and Schwartz 405-6).

On the other hand, studies have found less individual investment in work that is done through collaborative technologies. Pargman studied a group of graduate students preparing an academic document together using a synchronous computer-supported collaborative writing system. Participants communicated little, had low interest in assessing others' ideas and texts, spent more time coordinating tasks than collaborating on the contents of the text, and felt disconnected from the product (Pargman 738). Conversely, groups that collaborated face-to-face conversed more frequently and discussed the content of the document (Pargman 745). In addition, the anonymity of communication mediated by technology can deindividuate group members, reducing each individual's perception of herself as a member of a group, which in turn undermines the cohesion of the group (Sharples et al. 21).

The decreased investment may result because technology still has less social presence than face-to-face communication. As mentioned earlier, face-to-face communication is considered the richest medium for communicating because people can convey messages verbally and nonverbally. Email is low in media richness because messages are conveyed only verbally: intonation and gestures, for example, are not part

of the communication (Barile and Durso 174). Studies of email discussion have also

shown that contributions tend to be more antisocial and the discussions more extreme

than in face-to-face conversation. Lack of nonverbal cues mean emails can be

misinterpreted (Siegel et al. 1986, as cited in Sharples 4)

Pargman asserts that "supporting communication in the context of collaborative

writing is much more complex than just supporting a space for co-authors'

communications" (753). She contends that context plays a significant role in

understanding the text (753). Mankin and Cohen similarly state,

> Face-to-face collaboration is simpler than virtual collaboration. The
> immediacy, social cues, richness, and almost instantaneous reciprocity of a
> face-to-face interaction generally make it easier for two or more people to
> collaborate. But their task becomes more difficult if they have to interact
> via media that are less rich and more impersonal and that feature time
> delays between the back-and-forth responses that characterize successful
> collaborations (4).

Another goal of this study, then, is to learn if and how the technologies collaborators use

create shared social spaces and contexts during the writing process when writers cannot

be in the same location.

As this literature review suggests, while collaborative writing, distance

collaboration, collaboration tools, and organizational culture have been the focus of much

research, there remains a gap in the research regarding the reciprocal relationship

between writing collaboration (including the technologies used) and the cultures of the

participants' different offices. This study attempts to address that shortcoming and

describes how office culture can help mediate and ameliorate the challenges associated

with writing at a distance, and how the act of writing together can impact a work culture.

3. Study Background

Methodology

To examine collaborative writing processes across geographical and cultural divides, I conducted a workplace ethnography at ERC, the education division of a large research and development organization. The division is mainly divided between two offices—the west coast office, which is also the company headquarters, and the east coast office—with a handful of employees working remotely across the country. Conducting an ethnography enabled me to observe how interactions and social context shape the writing process, and how the act of writing shapes the culture. Henry argues that writing is "the means by which realities become socially constructed—by which local cultures create realities with effects far beyond their borders and reproduce the local realties of their organizations" (6).

To that end, I conducted observations and interviews over the course of five months. As an employee of the company, I was a participant observer, and often engaged in the writing activities I was studying. My employment status at the company granted me instant access to the company and the employees; however, it also presented the dilemma of dividing my attention between participating in cross-coastal meetings and acting as an impartial observer.

Initially, I observed writing activity opportunistically; in other words, I observed any cross-coastal meetings that occurred during the observation period. The meetings were either phone conferences across offices or in-person meetings in which colleagues from both offices were in attendance. Because I work in the east coast office, I was able to observe actions of only the participants on that coast during conference calls; for the west coast, I relied on listening for verbal cues and asking follow-up questions.

I soon realized that my observations needed to focus in on the production of one document because of the great variation in collaborative writing activities. Sharples et al. explain,

> There is no single activity that can be described as collaborative writing. An episode of collaborative writing may range from a few minutes taken to plan a joint memo, to many years for writing a co-authored book. Nor is there a clear distinction between writing and not writing… Given the diversity of activities, there is little hope of producing a simple all-encompassing account of collaborative writing (13).

Thus, for two months I followed the drafting of a final report for the Opal project, a collaboration primarily between one east coast colleague and two west coast colleagues. In addition to attending team meetings (via phone), I was copied on emails among team members relevant to the document production. During the observation time, the team wrote both an outline for the final report and the actual report. This collaboration serves as the main example for this study.

Also during the data collection period, I visited the west coast office for a period of two days, which enabled me to observe the office layout and culture. Additionally, I participated in two site visits, each with one person from the west coast, which allowed

me to observe how collaboration happens when people from different offices have the

chance to work together in the same place.

Finally, I conducted interviews with 10 colleagues, 5 from each coast, none of

whom were supervised by me. The interviewees were recruited through an email asking

for interested participants, and the first to respond were chosen. They represented the

gamut of experience and expertise at the company. The participants included three men

and seven women (women make up a larger percentage of the division). I interviewed the

director of the education research division, five senior level researchers, and four mid-

level researchers. Table 1 represents the breakdown across coasts.

Table 1. Participants by Position, Location, and Tenure

Name*	Position	Location	Tenure at ERC (in years)
Steve	Division Leader	West coast	20
Mitch	Senior	East coast	11
Lenny	Senior	West coast	10
Wendy	Senior	West coast	9
Yvette	Senior	West coast	8
Nina	Upper Mid-level	East coast	3.5
Jo	Mid-level	East coast	8
Miranda	Mid-level	East coast	3.5
Cara	Mid-level	West coast	1.5
Penelope	Mid-level	East coast	1.2

*All names are pseudonyms

Employees in the upper-level positions typically have their doctoral degrees, and those in

the mid-level position either have their master's degrees or several years of relevant work

experience. Two of the mid-level researchers work remotely but previously worked in the

east coast office, so for the purposes of the study they are considered east coast employees as that is the office culture they know. Entry-level researchers were not included in the study because they do not yet engage in many writing activities. The division editors were also not included for several reasons: the edits tend to be grammatical and not substantive (and thus require little collaborative discussion), and no documents were going through the editing phase during the observation period.

I conducted two sets of interviews with each colleague (see the appendix for a list of the interview questions). I collected over 75 typed pages of field notes. The field notes were open coded to generate themes. Similar themes were then combined into larger, overarching themes to help organize the analysis.

Description of the Company

ERC is an education research company that originated on the west coast of the United States and was affiliated with a prestigious university. As the company grew, it expanded its offices to other locations in the United States and about 30 years ago became independent from the university. Its main business is conducting evaluations of education reform initiatives for federal, state, and local governments and private foundations.

The majority of the employees in the education research division work in the west coast office. There are 22 full-time employees in the west coast office, and 13 full-time staff in the east coast office. Four employees work from home in four other states, though at one point all worked in one of the two offices. As mentioned earlier, the director of the

entire division resides on the west coast, as does one of the associate directors. The other associate director leads the east coast office.

At the company's headquarters, the west coast office is a sprawling 63-acre campus composed of many buildings, each housing different areas of research and development. The campus offers many amenities to the employees, such as a gym, cafeteria, credit union, and dry cleaners, among others. The education research division is located on one floor of the policy building, which is shaped like a figure eight, and each staff member has his or her own office. There are tables and chairs set up in the hallways where the staff members tend to congregate. The academic culture from its days connected to the university seems to have persisted at the company; this culture is evident both in the layout of the campus and the openness of the staff.

The east coast office is located on three floors of a high-rise building near a major city. The education research division has offices on one end of a floor it shares with colleagues in other divisions. Each of the employees has his or her own office, but the east coast is lacking all of the amenities available on the other coast. The division has a conference room on the floor dedicated to team meetings or other forms of interaction.

Two years ago, the company conducted a survey in an effort to be named one of the top 100 companies to work for in the United States. The survey found that many of the employees in the education division, particularly from the east coast office, were not satisfied with the amount of communication and collaboration happening between offices. Staff from the east coast office often felt left out from decisions made on the west coast, and did not feel well-known by the upper management located there. Thus, they

felt like staff in the west coast office had advantages when it came to staffing projects and salary and promotion decisions. There was an overall sense that the culture was one of isolationism, in which each office worked on separate projects and there was little interaction between them. In response to the survey results, the management made an effort to increase the interaction between offices through the development of bicoastal committees (e.g., communications committee, project management committee) and a renewed commitment to bicoastal staffing on projects. With more interaction between the offices, there were more opportunities for writing tasks to involve members from both coasts.

Description of Writing at ERC

There is a wide range of writing completed by ERC employees, including proposals, memos, policy briefs, interview protocols and write-up guides, site visit write-ups, and evaluation reports. The type of writing that happens requires different levels of collaboration (e.g. memos may only involve one or two writers, site visit write-ups include the two staff who conducted the site visit, and proposals and evaluation reports generally involve an average of three to seven writers). More writers are typically involved when the stakes for the document are higher, such as winning a project or preparing a cumulative document for the client. Using technology for collaborative writing is the norm in both offices.

To produce co-authored documents, writers at ERC typically use one of two collaborative processes, which are used in each office. The first is what Jo, a mid-level

researcher who worked on the east coast but now works remotely, coined "divide and conquer." Sections of the writing are divided among the writing team and each member has control of the section he or she writes. The team members each write their sections individually, then share them, and provide feedback to writers of the other sections. The second method is "draft and review," in which one person is responsible for writing the first draft and then another person reviews and edits it, followed by more back and forth. This method divides up the tasks such that one person is the writer and the other is the advisor/editor/proofreader, and control of the entire document shifts from one person to the other.

The process that is ultimately used is usually determined by an initial meeting, most often through conference calls, of all authors who will be involved. While there are two main writing processes, every collaboration is different because of the unique interplay of the project leader, the team members, the client, and the types of deliverables that must be produced. The individual project leaders play a large role in determining how the division of labor happens, how much oversight they have in terms of scheduling meetings and informal calls, and the level of control they exercise over the drafts. To share the written drafts, participants typically use email back and forth, whether they are in the same office or not. To ensure that all of the edits are acknowledged in the document, some researchers include directions in the body of the email to alert the reader to changes that have been made and areas that still need attention. Less often, colleagues in the same office may share edits via hard copy. In some cases, colleagues may discuss the edits over the phone.

This study followed the production of the final report of the Opal project, which started with the construction of an outline. For that document, three main team members—Steve, the division director, and Lenny, a senior researcher, from the west coast and Nina, a senior researcher from the east coast—determined the content and organization. Nina flew out to the west coast for a week for the initial process, in part because the client was demanding and wanted his hand in the creation of the document. It was necessary for the team to discuss and agree upon the intended audience and the approach to dealing with the client. This conceptualization was easier and more efficient with all team members in the same location. The drafting of the sections of the outline were split primarily between Lenny and Nina, with Steve serving as a reviewer and providing guidance; the entire process was very collaborative and iterative among all three of them. The team occasionally asked others to conduct background research to provide national and research-based context to the outline.

To write the final draft, Lenny and Nina again divided the outline and each was responsible for writing several parts of the document. This part of the process was more individual, and because the conceptualizing was done and Steve's input was not needed as much at this point, Nina did not feel the need to travel back out to the west coast during the writing of the actual draft. It is important to note that because no writing collaborations are exactly alike, this particular example is not meant to be representative of every collaboration that occurs at ERC. It does, however, illustrate the nuances and benefits and challenges of writing across distances that most projects encounter.

4. Analysis

With employees in two offices on opposite coasts that frequently work together on projects that produce written deliverables, the factors of distance and office culture come into play in a significant way. There are three main issues ERC employees must contend with when writing together: the overall difficulties of collaborative writing in general, the complexities of working at a distance, and the convergence of two separate office cultures. In the end, while ERC has experienced common challenges associated with each of these issues, its staff has been able to write collaboratively at a distance *because* of the unique cultures of this bicoastal organization. Throughout the study, it emerged that there are three types of cultures that play out at ERC: the culture of the overall organization, the distinctive cultures of the two offices, and the cultures of individual project writing teams. These cultures have shaped the approaches to collaborative writing at ERC; they have also been shaped in various ways by the writing collaborations.

This analysis begins with a description of the three different types of cultures present within ERC. It then examines how these cultures shape how collaborative writing happens across the two offices, followed by an account of points when proximity is always important, no matter how conducive a company's culture(s) might be. The analysis then looks at the study from the other angle, discussing how collaborative

writing at ERC has shifted the cultures and what practices have emerged from the cultural shifts.

Three Types of Culture

There are several layers of culture that are evident at ERC. There is one overarching organizational culture that comes from being part of the same organization with one overall leader. The two offices also have distinct cultures that vary in some of their rules and values. Finally, each writing team has its own culture that is determined by the project leader, the nature of the products to be delivered, and the client. These various cultures each shape how collaborative writing happens at ERC.

Overall Organizational Culture

Before we can understand the distinctive cultures of writing collaboration that each office and writing team bring, we must first recognize that as part of one organization, there is an overall organizational culture that is "common enough" for productive collaboration. The offices hold the same values and work towards the same goals, namely improving educational opportunities for students. Respondents from both coasts said their office cultures were hard-working, collegial, open, and trusting. Both have relatively unstructured hierarchies: while there are defined roles and titles, the distribution of work is relatively flat. Nina shared that Steve's philosophy about hiring is that "when we hire someone at any level, we assume they can be any one of us. It engenders respect for [lower levels] coming in and allows us to value what the person brings." Anyone can offer ideas, and assignments are based on expertise and time, as

opposed to level. This open environment is important to how collaborative writing happens, and will be discussed later.

The Distinct Office Cultures

The two offices have distinct cultures that emerge in part because they are located in different areas and have leaders with different styles. Each office has different beliefs about and values placed on work hours and work locations and different ways that sharing, communication, and interaction happen.

While both offices have one overall division leader, who is located in the west coast office, the distance necessitates that the east coast office have a leader on site, Nora, to make immediate and daily decisions. The leader sets the tone for the office. In addition to organizing the work, "[leaders] set the stage and write the script for the value system and culture that is to be acted out by their workforce" (Strangleman and Roberts 49). Although each office is part of the same company and generally adheres to the same company rules, the leaders in each office are very different and have set different norms for the offices that affect how collaborative writing happens, which override the company-wide policies in some cases.

The west coast office is more informal, flexible, and social than the east coast office, a reflection of the division leader. West coast staff are frequently in the hallways or in each others' offices conversing. The informality can be seen in where people work, with staff able to work from home, a coffee shop, or any other location. The flexibility is also evident in their schedules. Many of the staff have families and arrange their

schedules so that they can be home part of the day with their children. One participant, for example, works half of the day in the office and the other half at night from home.

One informant felt this flexibility was a result of the division director, who also works more varied hours. The flexible schedules may also lead to more collegiality when the colleagues are in the office because they need to take advantage of each other when they are there at the same time. Employees in the west coast office engage in many hallway discussions and congregate at the table in the hallway or in others' offices to spread out papers together. As Cara, a mid-level researcher on the west coast, shared,

> We are out in the halls a lot and hang out in Steve's office a lot. We take our lunch and documents and spread them out on the hall table. [It's a] very community-oriented office. [I was] yelling from my office today telling Jeanette about sources [we still need] in the reference section [of a document we were writing].

In contrast, the east coast office is more structured and formal. The associate director who leads the office prefers her staff to work in the office at regular office hours (e.g., 9:00 am - 5:00 pm). Several staff work from home one day a week because they have children, but their day is scheduled and regular. In addition, the culture of the east coast office is much less social; colleagues tend to stay in their offices, and many keep their doors shut as a matter of course. Impromptu meetings between employees do happen on occasion, but there is a marked difference between the hallways on the east and west coasts. Unlike the west coast, in which staff feel comfortable interacting socially in front of, and often with, the division director, Nina shared that she is conscious of how her social interactions will look to Nora and fears she will come across as unprofessional, even if fun is mixed in with work discussions. While Nina acknowledged

that Nora may not be as concerned about it as Nina thinks she is, Nora has clearly set expectations that staff should not socialize too much. Indeed, even during conference calls, employees in the east coast office often stay in their individual offices, whereas the west coast staff always meet in a conference room or a colleague's office for the calls.

The Culture of Individual Writing Teams

In addition to distinct office cultures, the distance contributes to different cultures across writing teams for individual projects. The locations of the offices often dictate what projects staff work on, as they more often work on projects related to their geographic areas. West coast employees are more heavily staffed on projects involving west coast initiatives, and the east coast staff work more often on federal projects. Their varied project experiences have led staff to use different language and have different knowledge bases, and thus they come to projects from different contexts. It was not until after the survey was conducted that project leaders made more efforts to staff projects bicoastally. Yvette, a frequent project leader on the west coast, shared that the company is "still feeling the effects of that history." When staff from both offices do write together, it is more imperative that they establish a common understanding first.

Further, the project leaders of specific writing teams establish their own sets of norms and practices for the writing process. Mitch, a frequent project leader located in the east coast office, shared that the offices have several sub-cultures based on the various projects running at any given time. He said the subculture is "in many ways based on the leader of the project." Each project leader sets different guidelines for the writing

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of deliverables. These guidelines often vary based on the size of the writing team, the type of product to be created, and the individual styles of the project leaders.

The location of a project subculture is most often determined by the location of the project leader. And although there has been more effort to staff projects bicoastally, there are typically more staff from the project leader's office on the project. The location is important, as the distinct office cultures often influence the project sub-cultures and how the project leader and the staff approach the writing process. For example, Yvette's leadership style for writing is a social process, akin to the west coast office culture, and involves having multiple conversations among the entire project team to identify themes for the reports. She then creates an outline based on the conversations, which team members comment upon. Then the outline is divided among the team members and each person writes a section. Throughout the process, each section is distributed to the team for everyone's input. Once all sections are compiled, the entire draft is again sent out to the team for feedback.

In contrast, one project led by Nora out of the east coast office involves a very top-down approach. After an initial post-data collection debriefing meeting among all team members, the project leaders create an outline for the report, and sections are divided among team members to elaborate upon. The expanded outline sections are submitted to the project leaders for feedback, and then the team members on that section write their sections and again submit their work to the project leaders for feedback. The entire team does not see other sections of the report, and instead concentrate only on their own sections. They do not see an entire copy of the report until it is completed and

compiled by project leaders for submission. Thus, each section team is relatively independent of each other throughout the process, and the project leaders exert a large amount of control.

How the Cultures Shape and Enable Collaborative Writing Practices

In addition to having to adapt to, and in many cases grapple with, the various types of cultures, writers experience other minor difficulties when they write with colleagues in the other office. Many of these challenges are associated with being situated in different time zones and not having immediate access to colleagues. If writers have questions about a document, they may have to wait until the next day to get an answer from someone on the other coast. They are more likely to have spontaneous conversations with colleagues in their office, leaving the potential for colleagues in the other office to miss out on receiving crucial information and on creating a shared context. In addition, many staff members still do not know each other well because the instigation of a culture that creates cross-coast collaboration is relatively new. Relying mostly on email and features in Word to communicate edits or revisions introduces the possibility of misinterpretation.

Given these difficulties, at the outset of the study I expected to find how the distinct cultures hampered effective collaboration. Instead, I found that the common overall culture, the differences between the office cultures, and the individual writing team cultures in their own ways contribute to, rather than hinder, high quality collaborations.

Overall Organizational Culture

Within the overall organizational culture, the flat hierarchy has made the writing more collaborative across all levels of staff. As Jo said, "On some level that unstructuredness [of the hierarchy] is helpful for collaboration because everyone is considered on equal footing." Participants agreed that writing assignments are given based on writing skills, ability to understand the subject matter, and availability; while employees in higher positions are more likely to possess more of these skills, it is not necessarily the case that level dictates the contribution.

The flat hierarchy also means that managers, including the director and associate directors, participate in the conversations about and the writing of documents. Research suggests that project leaders need to engage in assigned tasks and participate in activities to show their commitment to the project, which results in more successful collaborations (Cross 194). For the Opal project, Lenny and Nina worked hand in hand with Steve to produce the report outline. He engaged in the conference calls and emails, and provided valuable feedback to the process. Steve was also often the note taker for the meetings, a task typically given to lower level staff. In one instance, when Nina was in the west coast office specifically to work on the Opal outline, Lenny was out of town, and Nina and Steve worked together on the outline and associated presentation for the client. Steve picked up the slack when Lenny could not be there.

The Distinct Office Cultures

The differences between the two offices each contribute to collaborative writing at a distance. The flexibility of work times and locations on the west coast have made

west coast staff comfortable with working at a distance, because that is how they often work even with people in their own offices. Lenny said, "Distance is a state of mind. I sometimes feel at a distance from people right down the hall from me because of our different schedules. [There are] more funky schedules on the west coast because we're allowed to, in large part." Two of the participants from the west coast office felt that the challenges of writing collaboratively with colleagues on the east coast were no different than the challenges they face when working with people in their home office. There was little evident stress associated with the task of working with the other office, which may result from the flexibility and collegiality they experienced with working with colleagues in many locations. Their varied work hours also provides more time in the day for project work to get done. All respondents cited the benefit of the time zone difference because east coast staff can work for three hours in the morning before west coast staff typically start work, and the west coast staff can work in the evening well after east coast staff go home.

The east coast office culture also can be beneficial to writing at a distance, albeit in a different way. With their regular work hours, staff can usually be found in their offices via email or phone. Because the east coast staff work more individually in their own offices, they are independent and do not usually rely on immediate conversation. Some staff can go entire days without speaking to anyone in the office. They typically schedule meetings with colleagues in their own office just like they would with those on the west coast. Thus, their approaches to working with any colleague, regardless of distance, tend to be the same. In addition, working in individual offices lessens the

chance for distractions. Because collaborating involves multiple team members working together, there is more chance for extraneous and tangential conversations or distractions. In his study of large-scale collaboration, Cross found that environments where people work together in close proximity (e.g., cubicles) fostered an oral culture that led to many interruptions and provided little uninterrupted time to read and write (69).

The Culture of Individual Writing Teams

The flat hierarchy of the overall organization has trickled down into the individual project teams. Most project leaders appreciate the input and feedback of all team members, regardless of their level. For many projects, part of the process includes emailing out the relevant documents, such as a report outline, a few days before a team meeting for everyone to read and comment upon. This process prevents the problem that Cross encountered in his study of large-scale collaboration, in which documents were revised too quickly because the documents to be reviewed were not given out until the team meetings and team members were expected to read them during the meetings (69). Because the leaders and project team members are all valued participants within the organizational and team-level culture, collaborations have greater potential to be successful.

Despite the benefits of the various cultures within ERC, difficulties do arise on occasion as a result of the different cultures and manifest in the ways staff behave within their writing teams. For example, the east coast staff tends to sit separately in their offices during conference calls with the west coast, rather than congregating in one meeting room, as the west coast does. Observations showed that people were more likely to be

distracted by their computers or other documents when they stayed in their own separate rooms. As Cara pointed out, this leads to staff on the east coast being left out of the writing process because they are not paying attention. Similarly, in discussing people disengaging during phone calls, Steve said that the disengagement is always in one direction, that it always comes from the east coast office.

Recognizing the importance of staff having others in their office working on the same project for increasing engagement, Yvette tried to staff one of her projects such that an entry-level researcher on the east coast would not be the only east coast staff member on the project. Initially Jen was the only east coast team member and it was difficult for her to become engaged, and Yvette felt she did not know how to better engage her. Yvette then decided to add a mid-level researcher from the east coast to the project team so that Jen would have someone local to work with. In an effort to engage Jen during a conference call to discuss the writing of the project's interim report, Yvette asked that the mid-level researcher have Jen come into her office for the conference call, thinking that she would be more likely to share her ideas. Having at least one person working face-to-face with Jen also made her more accountable for participation. Thus, Yvette's leadership of this writing team created a culture that valued participation and engagement, and led to all staff being involved in the writing process.

Points When Proximity is Important

Even with a culture that contributes to working at a distance, there remain points in the collaborative writing process when being in the same location is especially helpful.

As mentioned earlier, research has found that it is harder to provide a shared context in different physical locations (Snowdon, Churchill, and Munro 9; Kiesler and Cummings 65). Steve shared the importance of face-to-face contact in the conceptualizing phase of writing. He discussed the need for intersubjectivity:

> Developing the shared perspective, developing the common goal from which to move forward on the writing process is really important. The issue of developing a common perspective on the challenge in front of you is really important. Building common knowledge takes place best in person in visual contact. That is typically not recreated virtually when we work cross-office. It's a major shortcoming.

Indeed, in large group collaboration it is important for all group members to know both the task representation and the text representation, e.g., what the problem is and what the product should look like (Cross 9). Group interactions will be well coordinated if members define the rhetorical situation (purpose and audience) alike (Cross 67, 198).

Being in the same office is also helpful when a document is being completely restructured or reorganized. At this stage, people felt it was important to be able to see together how it would be reshaped. Being in the same place allows colleagues to use artifacts that can be manipulated and physically moved, such as drawing schematics and constructing outlines on the whiteboard together, or shifting papers around. While some people have attempted to do these activities over the phone, they feel it is much more effective and collaborative in person. Snowdon, Churchill, and Monroe state that within shared spaces, collaboration happens through focus on a common activity or a shared artifact, and the artifact becomes the medium for communication (e.g., pointing to the document, making visible changes) (9). Several observations of conference calls revealed

the difficulty of pointing out areas in a document when participants look at it on their respective computers.

In one example, Lucy, a senior researcher in the east coast office, was responsible for combining sections of a chapter that had all been written by different authors. After combining the sections, Lucy felt the chapter was very dense and she was having difficulty deciphering the story line. She needed someone to look over the chapter with her, particularly someone who had had his or her head in the data already. All of the authors were out of their respective offices except Chelsea, a researcher from the other organization (located in the same city on the east coast) working on the project. Lucy invited Chelsea over to the office, where they worked together in the conference room for 4 hours with papers spread all over the table. I later asked Lucy why she felt the need to work with Chelsea in person. She replied, "It would have taken forever on the phone. We printed out two or three versions as we moved things around." Most participants who write across distances cannot as easily come together for this purpose.

Other points when proximity is beneficial to the collaborative writing process are when writers need to have quick, impromptu discussions about such things as specific sentences, transitions, and facts, or when they need a second opinion or a sounding board. Participants said they were much less likely to call someone on the other coast for this purpose. Wendy, a senior level researcher on the west coast, shared that she would instead ask someone in her office for their thoughts, even if they were not working on that project. She said, "What's missing, and it's not just with writing, is spontaneous information conversations that happen. I'm more likely to walk over to Cara to help me

work through the logic of a paragraph. I wouldn't pick up the phone. …if I'm just stuck in writing, I talk to people in the hallway." Several respondents said they did not use the phone much for quick check-ins because of the time zone differences and they felt like they were interrupting their colleagues. Lenny shared that his tendency to not check-in because of the time lag led him to feel less confident in his writing. Rather than calling someone to clarify a quick question, he continues writing and then feels anxious that he is not following the right path and is just wasting time. Overall, there was a sense that "quick fixes" were too minor to bother people on the other coast about or to wait for someone to answer given the time lag. These perceptions could potentially lead to problems with document quality.

Cultural Shifts as a Result of Distributed Collaborative Writing

Culture and writing have had a reciprocal relationship at ERC. While the various cultures at ERC have contributed to collaborative writing across distances, writing collaborations across the coasts has contributed to shifts within the three levels of culture at ERC. The survey revealed that the overall culture was one of isolationism, in which the two offices felt separate from each other and staff were not used to working together across coasts. While interviews showed that the division leader always valued integration, those values were not being explicitly promoted or practiced. The survey made division leadership staff as a whole realize that they needed to be more explicit in their valuing of integration such that it manifested in the behavior and practices of the staff.

To institute a culture of integration, the leadership changed some of the center's practices, most notably in the project work and subsequent collaborative writing. The center made more efforts to staff projects bicoastally, and as such more collaborative writing across distances had to happen to produce the deliverables. Having to write together across coasts in turn motivated and reinforced the cultural shift to integration.

As the staff from the two coasts worked together more and wrote collaboratively with each other, they found that certain points in the writing process were more conducive to being in the same location, as described earlier. ERC's division leader has since recognized the importance of proximity to certain points of collaborative writing and has adapted to enable face-to-face interactions at those crucial times. As a result, the culture has shifted to be more integrated, such that all staff now expect to work together on projects and feel empowered to come together in the same location when necessary.

Whereas before the survey staff rarely traveled to the other coast, now project leaders feel they can bring staff together to work through these writing phases together. This shift from isolationism was instigated by the division director, Steve, who served as a model for other project leaders and put the integration into practice. For example, he coordinated a full day for all companies involved in the writing of a proposal to work together in the same office. The proposal was an effort between ERC's two offices and two other companies, one in Pittsburgh and one in Chicago. In order to get all participants on the same page, Steve initiated an in-person meeting for everyone in the east coast office (a more convenient location for the two other organizations). The participants used the whiteboard to outline the proposal and to divide responsibilities.

Interviewees reported that having an initial face-to-face meeting to brainstorm before they begin the writing process is an important step that still does not occur frequently enough. Again, the need to develop shared social contexts requires more time and resources, luxuries many projects do not have. But the fact that Steve spent resources on a proposal, a document covered by overhead costs, revealed his commitment to integrating the staff to establish a shared context and to create the best proposal possible.

The change in practice around collaborative writing resulting from the high value placed on integration has had implications for the cultures of individual writing teams. Staff now feel like they can come together for certain points of the writing process. The time spent in the same location has helped foster a common culture among writing teams. For the Opal project, Nina felt that it was important for her to be in the west coast office during the initial drafting of a report outline when major organizational and conceptual decisions were being made. She felt that if she had remained in the east coast office during this period, she would have been left out of crucial conversations between Steve and Lenny. She said,

> I knew because of my experience with Steve, who is very present and in the moment, he'll come in to see how we're doing and stay for 30 minutes and make great strides conceptually. I knew he'd do that with Lenny and they may or may not communicate with me. It would be fragmented. [I knew] it would move forward more if all three of us were together.

During Nina's time in the west coast office, the team members spent a great deal of time discussing the rhetorical situation and making sure they understood what the client wanted to see in their outline. The team also created a lingo for their project, coming up

with terms for the report that would become the language they used in all following conversations.

This limited time together was important given the alternatives the team used when they worked distally, which was for the majority of the project. They relied on email or phone conversations to serve as a proxy for proximity, even though each had limitations. An email scan showed that email was used to set meeting times, devise timelines for sharing drafts, share meeting notes, and distribute document drafts for review. Observations revealed that phone conferences were used mostly to discuss the client's expectations (e.g., the audience) and to organize the outline (and thus the report) in a way that suited the client's needs. However, according to Nina, it took much longer to discuss these issues over the phone; they came to decisions much more quickly when she was in the west coast office. In one particularly telling moment when the project team was uncertain with how to proceed in their writing given the complexity of the organization of the report, Steve said, "There's only so much writing you can do verbally." The actual content of the writing was not discussed in detail over the phone or via email, and the team members typically wrote individually and reviewed others' drafts through Word's comments or tracked changes features.

The integration of teams has been strengthened by the ability of team members to work together more, both in and out of the office. They create a common culture through their interactions. Teams then rely on the common team culture as projects continue, particularly when they cannot be in the same locations. Teams become more integrated the more familiar members are with each other, and this familiarity helps cross the

physical boundaries created by distance and makes collaboration easier. Most projects

now include members from both coasts, and site visit teams are often composed of one

team member from each coast. The opportunity to work together in person during site

visits helps mediate the difficulties that arise when people do not know each other well.

Several project leaders, who often control the final documents for their projects, shared

that they are less forthcoming with their edits when they do not know the people they are

revising. Wendy said,

> One other thing and I think it's part of not knowing people well is when
> I'm giving feedback or commenting on someone else's writing, not
> wanting to hurt someone's feelings. If I said 'this isn't quite right, I think
> we need to improve that.' [With] people I work with day to day, it's easier
> to say that. With people I don't work with day to day, I'm more careful.

On the flip side, it is harder for the recipient of feedback to decipher comments when

they do not know well the person giving it and they cannot see the body language to

provide context. The distance forces staff to be deliberate and thoughtful in the feedback

they give.

Once people have worked together before and have established norms for the

process, it becomes easier to write at a distance. Lenny described his experiences

working with Roberta, a colleague who previously worked on the east coast but now

works from home in New Mexico. As the only two members of the division with

knowledge in a specific area, they have worked often together and know each other's

strengths in writing. He said,

> We trust each other a lot. [That is a result of] having worked together a lot
> and [having] lots of common experiences. We usually agree with the
> changes. In the lit review, I felt like I knew the literature better in some
> areas. I trust my judgment and argue for substance. In writing, I trust

Roberta because she's a better writer. And she'll restructure pretty
drastically and it's usually good.

Because they know each other so well, it is easier for Lenny to collaborate with Roberta
at a distance than it is for him to work with someone in his own office with whom he's
had little shared writing experiences.

This description of the shift in culture from isolationism to integration, and the
changes in practices that reinforce that shift, reveals one way that collaborative writing
shapes culture at the organizational and writing team levels. However, while each office
has bought into this shift to integration, it is not clear yet whether that will translate into
office cultures that are less distinct than they are now. Time will tell whether or not the
two different office cultures become more similar as more integration happens.

The Role of Technology in the Cultural Shift

The time and expense required to travel across the country precludes every project
from supporting it. And site visits only happen at certain points during the year (usually
in the spring), so people cannot easily come together at other times in order to create
shared context. Given the advancements in technology for collaboration in recent years
and the success they have shown for collaborative writing, ERC not surprisingly looked
to technology to help bring staff together in a virtual environment and to create shared
context in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

The purchase of new technology represented leadership's attempt to change
practice in order to reinforce the culture of integration. Shortly after the survey results
were shared, ERC implemented a wiki, a collaboratively created web site, so that all

employees, regardless of their location, could have access to all necessary project documents. Individual project leaders could create wikis for their projects, and members of the project team could have access to the wikis and the documents posted on it. Wikis are intended to be shared online spaces where authors can co-create and co-edit. According to Lamb and Johnson, "Wikis are designed to be free, open spaces for sharing. Rather than focus on a single author's contribution, wikis concentrate on the synergy that comes from multiple contributors creating a project as a virtual team" (57). Because ERC's use of wikis grew out of management's response to the survey results, which revealed that employees in the east coast office felt disconnected from the main office, it seemed to be viewed more as a tool to provide access rather than as a tool for writing collaboration. Only a few people spent time to learn how to use a wiki, due to interest and time, and they were tasked with setting them up for each project.

Based on observations and interviews, it is clear that wikis are not yet being used as a tool for collaborative writing. Instead, they are used more like servers in which final documents get posted and other resources are available for project team members. The lack of use of a wiki as a tool for collaboration seems to stem the fact that it is not consonant with the current writing culture that values control over a text. Wendy said, "As a place to exchange documents as works in progress, I've never used it. Thinking of it that way makes me uneasy. I don't know how to use it [in that way]." Her reluctance to use a wiki resulted from her fear of not being able to control versions or knowing who has control of a version at any given time. Steve reiterated this hesitation: "I don't want everyone implicitly thinking they can grab a document at any time and work on it. If they

want to work on chapter 3, they need to find who has it and get permission to work on it."

Given this hesitation, it is not surprising that employees lacked knowledge and training

on using a wiki, and as a result project leaders chose not to use a wiki to its full capacity.

However, one project's use of a wiki showed its potential as a collaborative tool.

Nina described a cross-coast project in which a wiki was used to post and review drafts of

the final report. The wiki was able to be used without version control problems because

the team had deadlines for when they had to post onto the wiki the sections of the report

they were writing. There was an explicit process for who had what sections when, with

one person designated as the overseer of the entire report. Thus, a wiki could be a tool

that could help ease the collaborative writing process, as long as there is a deliberate

process for ensuring version control.

There is hope that the technology can eventually serve to make up for the distance

between the offices. Kiesler and Cummings hypothesized that "the effectiveness of

remedies for physical distance in work groups will depend on the degree of existing

social distance or cohesion in the group. If existing cohesion is high, then mediated

communication technologies provide a plausible remedy for lack of proximity" (72). The

small steps ERC has already taken to integrate its employees and promote familiarity for

the purpose of collaborative writing has resulted in more cohesion among the offices.

Indeed, employees new to ERC in the past few years since the survey expect to

work with colleagues on the opposite coast and view the offices as equals. Cara shared,

"There's a strong sense that the east and west coasts are equal. We constantly are told to

bring someone in from the east coast, [that] we should visit the east. It's more of a shared

thing. I have the sense that it wasn't like that before because they make such a big deal about it now." For Yvette, who left ERC to earn her PhD and came back after the survey administration, it is now a given that she will staff her projects bicoastally. She said, "It's taken more for granted that we need to staff [projects] from both coasts. In the west coast [office], we are more aware of the strengths of folks on the east. We know what an appropriate assignment might be for them." Thus, the culture has shifted from two offices that work in relative isolation to a more cohesive division in which the norms are now to work across the coasts and the employees value the input of staff from both offices.

5. Conclusion

Based on the literature, it is not surprising that writing with multiple authors is complicated or that writing with individuals in other geographical locations, often with different cultures and expectations, is difficult. One would expect that working across distances and cultures would impede collaborative writing. However, in the case of ERC, which relies heavily on collaboration between its offices on separate coasts, what is surprising is how it has been able to make collaborative writing across distances work in a productive manner. This study has found that the office cultures—the overall organizational culture, each office's distinct culture, and each writing team's culture—contribute to, rather than hinder, writing collaborations across geographical distances. In addition, ERC's explicit commitment to integrating the two offices has led to changes in practice that in turn have reinforced that commitment. The increased collaborative writing across distances has contributed to the shift in culture at ERC, from one of isolation in which each office works unto itself to one of integration and cohesion among the offices.

Overall, there is an organizational culture that is common enough across the two offices that enables productive collaboration. The offices have shared values and all writers are working towards the same goals. The staff in both offices are collegial, hard-working, and open, and are committed and willing to collaborate across distances. ERC

has a flat hierarchy and an appreciation and respect for staff at all levels that increase

participation in collaboration. In line with the research that suggests that an effective

leader sets the stage for interactions that will lead to successful collaborations

(Connaughton 42-3), the leaders' own participation in the collaborative efforts signifies

the importance placed on such activities, and in turn encourages the staff to place value

on collaborating with their colleagues.

When it comes to offices with different cultures, there is a danger in a dominant

culture asserting itself over a sub-culture (Strangleman and Roberts 62). At ERC, the

west coast, as the main office, could have tried to establish its culture as the only

acceptable one. Instead, while the differences have been recognized, the two offices are

learning to work together despite the differences. Individually, each office brings a

unique culture that, taken together, enable the cross collaboration. The west coast's

flexibility in terms of where and when staff work has made them comfortable with

working at a distance. It has also made them appreciative of the time they have when they

actually work together in the same office, which transfers to how they approach the

limited time they have to work with east coast staff in the same place (either during site

visits or trips to the other office). The east coast staff typically work independently and

do not rely on frequent and intense conversations, so working with staff on the other

coast who are not always available is not much different than working with staff in their

own office. Their set schedules also mean that west coast staff know when and where

they can find their east coast counterparts. Given these factors, all staff are comfortable

with writing individually and collaborating mostly via email, sharing comments and tracked changes in the actual documents.

Both the overall organizational culture and the distinct office cultures have contributed to how individual writing teams operate. The project leader sets the stage for how the project is run, which often mirrors the culture of the office in which the project leader resides. Each leader develops guidelines for the project and each project team creates its own language based on the particularities of the project and the client. The individual project teams are now composed of staff from both coasts, and the project leaders value the input and encourage the participation of all people involved in the writing process.

In order to write together at a distance, ERC writers rely on technology to compose, send drafts, and share feedback. Most of the collaboration happens via email and telephone conversations. The literature provides two views of technology use versus face-to-face interaction for collaborative writing: one side suggests that face-to-face interaction is important for maintaining the social relationships that are necessary for successful collaborations (Narid and Whittaker 83) and that there is less cohesion when teams rely solely on technology (Sharples et al. 21). The other side posits that technology can serve to create shared social spaces and teams that use online tools for writing are more integrated and coherent than those that write in a face-to face environment (Pargman and Schwartz 405-6). This study provides evidence for each of these approaches. At ERC, writers acknowledged the importance of face-to-face interaction during certain moments of the writing process, such as conceptualization or organization.

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At the same time, once familiarity and common ground have been established, writers have been able to write together effectively with technology despite the distances, and in some cases they work better with individuals in the other office than with colleagues in their own office. Staff are comfortable with relying on technology as their shared and only space for collaborating.

While the three types of cultures at ERC have enabled collaborative writing across the coasts, the practice of collaborative writing has also reinforced a shift in culture. The survey revealed to the leadership that staff felt isolated, and that even though the leaders valued integration, it was not being explicitly shared or practiced. The leadership made a commitment to bring the two coasts together, and the subsequent changes in practice, including more collaborative writing, served to reinforce the cultural shift to integration. Projects were staffed bicoastally, meaning that the deliverables had to be written by colleagues from both offices; this cross-coastal writing shed light on the points in the writing process in which proximity is a key factor. ERC has thus further changed practices to allow for staff to work in the same place at particularly important times, or when that is not possible, to provide technology to better enable collaboration. These changes are supporting the shift in culture from being isolated to being more integrative, in that staff expect to work with their counterparts on the opposite coast, feel comfortable asking to travel to the other coast to work, and view colleagues from each coast as equal members in the writing process.

In effect, the culture of ERC—the combination of the overall organizational culture, the distinct office cultures, and the individual writing team cultures—works

favorably with distance collaboration. The commitment to have the offices integrate and collaborate has shifted practice and culture to facilitate that type of collaboration even more. Indeed, it seems important for companies with multiple offices that expect their staff to write collaboratively with each other across the distances to consider the office culture they have and how it might influence how the collaboration happens.

Implications for Future Research

ERC provides strong evidence for how culture can contribute to writing collaboratively at a distance. It also provides some preliminary evidence for how writing collaboratively at a distance helps an organization's overall culture shift; it is a practice that reinforces particular values. However, it is too soon to tell its effects on the individual office cultures. It is not clear if the shift to becoming a more integrated organization will make the two office cultures more similar than they are now or whether the cultural shift will be maintained. It would be interesting to follow this company in the coming years to examine these issues. Will the offices be able to merge into one overall culture with less apparent differences, or is the distance, and all it entails, just too great to overcome?

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe the culture of the west or east coast office?

2. How would you describe the hierarchy in your office? Does that hierarchy translate into how writing happens?

3. Have you noticed any changes in office culture since there has been more of an effort to staff projects bi-coastally?

4. How often do you work on written documents with colleagues in different offices?

5. What methods do you use most often to write collaboratively with remote colleagues?

6. What tools or technologies do you use most often to facilitate your writing?

7. What are the major differences between writing with colleagues in your home office versus those in other offices?

8. What challenges have you faced when writing collaboratively with remote colleagues? How did you attempt to overcome them?

9. What has helped facilitate the collaborative writing process with remote colleagues?

10. What do you think could help make the collaborative writing process more efficient?

11. What are the rewards/benefits, if any, of collaborating at a distance?

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