Working Together Apart – Collaborative Writing Tools for the Spatially and Temporally Displaced
by *John Lutz*

One of the amazing affordances of the Internet is that there are now a vast number of ways that collaborators can write collectively when not in the same room, country, or time zone. Some of them allow simultaneous collaboration and all allow the more common form of joint authorship: shift work. These tools also offer teachers some engaging ways to have students write collaboratively.

I use a number of different collaborative writing tools, depending on the complexity of the project and the personality of the collaborators, so I want to use this column to explore some of these and invite readers to share their recommendations of others.

For simple projects, and the most typical writing team of two people, emailing the file to each other at the end of each session is the simplest tool the internet offers. It's still the main way I co-write. However, this system breaks down with three or more authors, with a project that involves more than one file or format, and if there is a chance that the two authors want to work on the document at the same time.

More complex projects require some relatively simple and free tools. In one project where each of two authors is working from a series of different documents, including a timeline, a standard set of terms, a list of annotated items, and a main text, emailing became too complicated. We now use Dropbox (dropbox.com), a free software that creates a directory on your computer and shares the content of that directory with anyone you invite. Any file that you drag into the Dropbox directory will appear in your colleagues' Dropbox when they next log onto the internet and any file in that directory that has been changed will be updated in all the participating colleagues' dropboxes. Files are encrypted when transferred and so are private to your invited partners but are also available online with your password from a computer without sharing privileges.

Dropbox allows a high degree of complexity, with the possibility of subfolders for different chapters or types of resources like pictures or articles. It allows one to transfer files that are too large for email or back up, as well as to share files among your own devices like ipads, laptops, desktops, and smartphones. The downside of Dropbox for collaborative writing is that it is still possible to have two people working on the same document at the same time, and one wiping the work of the other out when it is saved. Dropbox does not save old versions so you can never go back unless you develop conventions of date stamping files in the file names itself and keeping old versions. With multiple authors the possibility of operator error increases and it may be time to look to tailor made collaborative tools.

With worldwide "Googlification," it's no surprise that the most common collaborative writing tool appears to be Google Documents (Docs), available from the "More" dropdown menu on the Google home page (google.ca). This free tool solves the version control problem by having the document live on the web and whenever a collaborator works on it, they are working on the master. Google docs allows more than one writer to work simultaneously on the same document, allows a live chat feature if you want side chats, and keeps track of all the edits and versions so you can go back to previous versions. Documents are exportable from the web into the normal formats: doc., txt, pdf, rtf, html, etc.

However, the editing tools are not as robust as a full word processor. For example, there is no track changes feature that you might find in Word or Open Document but there is a comment feature. Google docs also has a collaborative spread sheet and a Powerpoint-like presentation tool which means that so long as you have access to the internet you have access to your presentation. Google docs allows you to send emails to all your collaborators at once and it has a built in multi-lingual translation tool, though I cannot vouch for its quality. I have a colleague who has dual screens and marries Google docs on one with a video Skype on the other so that she and her collaborator talk, see, and write with each other at the same time.

Other tools that I have not used will do similar work. Zohowriter (zoho.com), Writeboad (writeboard.com) and Thinkfree (thinkfree.com) offer similar services to Google Docs. Mixedink (mixedink.com) is designed especially for large numbers of writers who rate edits up to a deadline, and the most popular becomes the ultimate version.

More specialized sharing tools include:
- Zotero, which allows for the sharing of bibliographies,
- Commentpress or Digress.it, which allow collaborators to respond in the margins of online texts and discuss with other readers, and
- WordPress, which is a blogging software with additional features like Anthologize (anthologize.org/), which grabs bits of blogs and puts them in a book format.

For teachers looking for collaborative writing tools for students there are wikis as well as several tools originally aimed for collaborative fiction writing that might serve for historical prose, as well. These include Vancouver based Protagonize (protagonize.com), which allows writers to create or add to existing stories.

I welcome your suggestions (Jlutz@uvic.ca) for other tools or comments on these. There are so many ways to collaborate now that there is less and less time to write!