Coauthoring as Place: A Different Ethos

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A place for us: that is all we seek. A place that allows full expression to the "you" and "me," the "we" of our commonality, a place where that abstract "we" discloses the traces that lead back to you and me.

—Benjamin R. Barber, A Place for Us

Names and Places

Writers reading this essay will most likely recall Anne Ruggles Gere's influential work, Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications in which Gere acknowledges that the "writing groups...phenomenon has nearly as many names as people who employ it. The name, of course, matters less than what it describes, which is writers responding to one and other's work" (1). Not surprising to us, Gere includes collaborative writing among the eighteen different terms for writing groups she enumerates. Muriel Harris defines collaborative writing as "involving two or more writers working together to produce a joint product.... Each may take responsibility for a portion of the final text [but each must take] some sort of collective responsibility for the final product" (569). Priscilla Rogers and Marjorie Horton acknowledge the broader definitions of collaborative writing that Gere and Harris speak of, but they extend the discussion to include the possibility of a "fully collaborative enterprise involving coauthors who plan, draft, and revise a document in a face-to-face context" (122). Gere and others acknowledge a wide spectrum of ways writers work together, and we would like to propose that collaborative writers, or coauthors, constitute...
As we collected and analyzed more stories of coauthoring, a pattern of "decorative coauthors." It was our book, and we chose to locate ourselves in a place where respect, trust, and care for one another might emerge. These coauthors described their interactions consistent with an ethic of care, which we observed in our research. These coauthors and their relationships spanned years, but all teams had produced at least one joint text that emerged as most significant in the stories they told us is the place made manifest for them by their desire to coauthor, their ability to coauthor, and their enactment of coauthoring.

**Studying Coauthors**

Inveterate coauthors are a breed apart, a breed worthy of study. But even though coauthored texts represent a significant percentage of published work in the academy, few studies exist of the material practices and affective features that characterize collaborative text production. As coauthors and their stories, we have been studying other academic coauthors for the past several years. We observe them as they write, but we also study the stories they tell about their work together. Included in their stories is often a description of the physical places in which these teams coauthor—hotels, lobbies or hotel rooms, summer cottages, departmental offices, kitchens, back porches. We have been spotted huddling together over a laptop on a back porch in the Las Vegas airport. Of course, many coauthors are separated by miles and even time zones, so the place they meet in may not be corporeal; their writing space then becomes virtual, filled with e-mail exchanges and telephone conversations. However, the place that emerges as most significant in the stories they tell us is the place made possible by their desire to coauthor, their ability to coauthor, and their enactment of coauthoring.

Our qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with ten successful academic writing teams, representing a range of disciplines, experiences, and expertise. Several of the teams have coauthoring relationships that span years, but all teams had produced at least one joint text previously and were engaged in a writing project at the time of our study. As we collected and analyzed more stories of coauthoring, a pattern of interaction consistent with an ethic of care emerged. These coauthors choose to locate themselves in a place where respect, trust, and care make possible not only publishable products but also rich and rewarding personal relationships.

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1. Some data from our research interviews appear in this essay; to read our full study of academic coauthors, see our book *Successful Coauthoring in the Academy*. Utah State UP, 2001.

**Classical Conceptions of Ethos as Place**

Stuart Brown, one of the experienced coauthors we studied, characterizes coauthoring as "a different ethos" (Brown). We too have come to see the space or place created by coauthoring as an ethos; our vision is based on the coauthors' perceptions of what their relationships evoke and on our own understanding of classical rhetoric. We have found some evidence to support a view that the classical idea of ethos conflates the concepts of character and place, and we start by describing the familiar conceptions of ethos, which primarily focus on the character of the rhetor.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle identifies three modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, logos—and the first, ethos, involves the personal character of the speaker; in fact, according to Aristotle, a speaker's "character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he has" (152). Edward P. J. Corbett, in his essay "The Ethical Dimensions of Rhetoric," stresses that Aristotle affirmed that the ethical appeal was the most potent of all the means of persuasion (256). However, scholars are perpetually challenged by the contradictions inherent in Aristotle's assertion that persuasion by moral character "must be due to the speech itself, not to any preconceived idea of the speaker's character" (17). Is ethos about being virtuous or about appearing to be virtuous? Corbett and others acknowledge the "ambivalence about the ethics of human conduct," which clouds Aristotle's definition of ethos; on the one hand, Aristotle describes ethos as putting the listener into a certain frame of mind to listen to the rhetor, and on the other hand, Corbett asserts, Aristotle is not indifferent to the morality of the means one chooses to achieve an end (261). Corbett is convinced that for Aristotle, "ethos was never a mere facade or veneer. It was the hard core of a person" (266).

However, Jasper Neel disagrees with this interpretation, using as evidence Aristotle's words from Book I of the *Rhetoric*: "Our discussion of ethos will at the same time make plain the means by which a speaker may produce in his audience the impression that he is of such and such a character" (qtd. in Neel 165). "In other words," says Neel, "virtue and goodness can be rhetorical effects, and by knowing how to produce these effects through the discourse, the rhetor can assume a virtue not actually present in the rhetor's life" (165). Other scholars, such as George Yoos, agree that Aristotle taught that the speaker could "distort the audience's perception of his own personal qualities" (qtd. in Corbett 263) if that distortion meant the audience would be persuaded. When Jasper Neel or George Yoos insist that the speaker must be situated authentically in their discourse, they mean that the speaker's products cannot help but reflect the speaker's character. Neel proposes that the writer or speaker cannot live just "any sort of life
while using rhetorical discourse to generate the effect of a moral, reliable ethos" (165).

We tend to align ourselves with Aristotle's critics, but, in the long run, it doesn't matter which interpretation we accept: when we read a text, we usually don't know anything about the writer beyond what he or she tells us. If the text appears moral, we don't know if the author is actually good or seems to be good. However, when we read a coauthored text, we know one thing about the writers: they write together. The implication for us is because they write together, especially if they choose to continue their coauthoring after their first project, the chances are good that these coauthors come from an ethical place, an ethos involving respect, trust, and care. Ethos has to do with both character and place. And the coauthors we studied come from a place created by their individual characters to another place that reflects their collective character: a different ethos.

An etymological approach takes us from familiar notions of ethos as character to the notion of ethos as place. We turn to William M. Sattler, who explains that ethos is "derived from the Greek word for custom, habit or usage." He posits a close connection between this interpretation of ethos (a habit or custom) and the term *folkways*, which he defines as "accepted and approved practice" (55). Furthermore, he continues, folkways are often raised to the level of mores, which "concern conduct deemed so vital to the group that to violate group practice is considered to be destructive to the social welfare." However, for Sattler, "ethos is more inclusive than habit...and has a more comprehensive meaning than mores." Ethos subsumes custom, habit, and mores and "may be defined as totality of characteristic traits, rather than in terms of mere custom or morally approved habits" (55). It is this "totality of characteristic traits" that interests us and helps us move our understandings of ethos to ethos as place.

Another root meaning of ethos is found in H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott's *Lexicon*: "éthea, a plural noun meaning haunts or, more colloquially, 'hang outs.'" Susan C. Jarrett and Nedra Reynolds point out that "this etymology teaches us that customs are formed in places where one is accustomed to being" (48). To further the connection between habit and place and the Greek notion of ethos, S. Michael Halloran notes that one Greek meaning for ethos is "a habitual gathering place" (60). Karen Burke LeFevre extends that definition to depict a "socially created or reader" (45–46). Halloran evokes an "image of people gathering together in a...place, sharing experiences and ideas...[and claims that] to have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks" (60).

**Coauthoring In Academia**

The coauthors we studied are members of a recognized culture: academia. But coauthors often struggle to "fit the square peg of multiple, polyvocal creativity into the round hole of singular 'authorship'" held sacred by the institutions in which they work (Lunsford 529). Consequently, they find themselves in a culture apart—their ethos (coauthoring) creates a place separate from the mainstream (academic) culture. We see parallels with the clubwomen in Gere's history of writing groups, *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U. S. Women's Clubs, 1880–1920*: the writers in our study, by their actions, "critique the dominant culture ... [and] often move from critiquing to developing and implementing alternatives to the status quo" (53). Therefore, those who choose to coauthor do not necessarily or automatically reflect the values of the culture they publicly represent. Coauthors especially are seen not to "manifest the virtues most valued by the culture" of academia, a culture they are seen by some to resist, either because they consciously choose the square peg or find themselves unwittingly in the role of rebel.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, two experienced coauthors in our study, told of the problems Ede had during her tenure review because of her coauthoring with Lunsford. After several years of productive coauthoring with Lunsford, Ede's publication record was called into question. Lunsford was even asked to provide "a line count of how many lines [she] wrote and how many lines Lisa wrote." Lunsford finally convinced the committee that a line count was impossible and Ede was tenured, although Lunsford "remember[s] the dean saying very specifically that if she [Ede] ever wanted to be promoted to full professor, she would have to do more singly authored work.

They also told the story of Edward P. J. Corbett's being "puzzled," "horrified," and "almost apoplectic" about their decision to coauthor an essay for Robert Connors's book on classical rhetoric and modern discourse, which was the first of their many coauthored projects. They thought Corbett would "think it was especially wonderful if they collaborated," but he cautioned them against it. Others cautioned them as well that they would jeopardize their tenure, expressing "shock, consternation, or dismay" at their coauthoring, and Ede and Lunsford admit they were at that time "naïve" in their belief that they "were not the odd ones...everyone in the world writes collaboratively" (Ede and Lunsford).

Also, several coauthors we interviewed explained that in their departments, points are awarded depending on author position on a publication; for example, a psychology professor revealed that she is awarded one hundred points for single authorship of an article, forty points if she is one of two authors, and five points if she is one of five authors. Many more stories
circulate about practicing coauthors being challenged during merit review, especially in the humanities.

So, coauthors create their own "haunts" within the larger culture of the academy. Despite admonitions from the academy, more and more scholars are choosing to coauthor with peers, and their motivations run from the pragmatic to the personal. According to Frederick G. Reamer "there is some evidence that the pressure to publish may be leading to a rise in co-authorship" (130). Is it surprising then that Anne E. Austin and Roger G. Baldwin cite studies that indicate "a positive correlation between the number of authors on a paper and the probability that it will be accepted for publication" (31)? In the September 3, 1999, issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, an annual survey entitled "Faculty Attitudes and Characteristics" showed that 66.5% of scholarly work is not conducted alone; the study also showed that 60% of the manuscripts submitted were accepted for publication. From these figures, we conclude that if we can assume writing is part of this study's definition of scholarly work, and if more than 66% of scholarly work is not conducted alone—is in fact collaborative—then a significant number of published texts are coauthored.

So where is this place the seemingly growing numbers of coauthors are accustomed to being, to hanging out? What are their customs and habits? And what are the virtues manifested by the coauthoring culture and its members?

Customs of the Coauthoring Culture

When we began studying successful academic coauthors, we expected them to talk about what they did: their material practices, how they negotiate what to include in the text, how they sit at a table together over a keyboard, and such. They did talk about their practices, but what struck us was their attention to—and sometimes almost reverence for—their relationships with each other. Like the members of writing groups Gere discusses in Intimate Practices, the coauthors in our study seem to value the relationship over the task, seeing their publications as happy by-products of their personal and professional associations. As they analyzed, some for the first time, their relationships, the words respect, trust, and care surfaced repeatedly. Among the issues raised spontaneously by these coauthors were first-author identification, promotion and tenure, cognitive gains, ownership, and the affective benefits of coauthoring; the elements listed previously—respect, trust, care—were integral to every discussion. These academics could not describe their acts of coauthoring and the attendant issues without using those words. It seems that the place these coauthors are accustomed to being, the ethos they have created, involves habits that reveal a respectful, trusting, caring approach to their work together.

First-Author Position

For instance, coauthors worked through the question of whose name would appear first on a publication by employing these elements. In reviewing studies of academic coauthoring, Austin and Baldwin point out that "conflict concerning the order of authorship can erupt" because "in a meritocracy like higher education, it is not sufficient to recognize all contributors to a joint publication. The system demands to know who contributed more and who contributed less to the collective endeavor" (67). Austin and Baldwin present some solutions to this problem, such as listing names in alphabetical order, attention to the significance of the contribution, and heed to seniority (68–69), and though some of the coauthors in our study acknowledged considering these solutions, most of them took a more nurturing stance, one that asks "Who needs to be first author?" This concern for the professional needs of each other is not even mentioned by Austin and Baldwin but is a primary focus for those in our study. For example, Duane Roen has coauthored more than seventy-five publications, often with graduate students, and he explained that "most often the first author has been the person who most immediately needs to have this publication...someone who is finishing a degree and is going on the market" (Roen). Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert have become accustomed to alternating first names on their coauthored publications, but Hurlbert admitted that when he became a full professor before Blitz, "We agreed...well we didn't have to agree...it just happened...that his name went first on everything...who needs it" (Blitz and Hurlbert). Several other coauthoring teams described their first-author decisions as context driven, based on a general concern for professional welfare, and primarily responding to the political implications of first-author status for untenured academics.

Once professional concerns were out of the way, most teams insisted that first-author position was arbitrary: it didn't matter. The teams we studied trust each other to honor their commitments, and they respect each other's work enough to hope for equal recognition of all team members' contributions by those who read and evaluate their writing. Consequently, first author is not seen to be about getting credit. When we asked Kathleen and Jim Strickland how they had decided who would be first author on their book Uncovering the Curriculum, Kathleen turned to Jim and laughed, "Ask him!" to which Jim replied, "Cause I put her first." They had discussed alternating names on their coauthored publications, but Jim thought that arrangement would be confusing, and they both insisted several times that they "couldn't care less whose name goes first." Now they remain consistent and place Kathleen's name always in the lead "for ease of readers and for people using [their] work" (Strickland and Strickland). But most teams claim they are satis-
fied alternating names and believe at this point in their careers that a new problem arises. Stuart Brown identified a single struggle in his coauthorship with Duane Roen; often he cannot get Roen and another coauthor, Theresa Enos, to take the credit they deserve. When we asked Roen and Brown how they decide author order, they joked that they “have a big fight about it” and then added, “usually we end up drawing straws or flipping coins...or something” (Brown and Roen).

Coauthoring as Epistemic

Even more evident in our study than the issue of first author is the enthusiasm with which one co-author characterized the contributions of the other. The cognitive gains the coauthors identified come from sharing knowledge and experiences, as well as from learning and practicing strategies for improving the writing itself. One co-author expressed a collective conviction when he said, “If I had written it on my own it wouldn’t have been nearly as good as it was,” and another co-author exclaimed, “Doesn’t your brain just think more?!” For all the coauthors, the cognitive advantages of their collaboration went beyond what they believe to be excellent products.

The coauthors we studied had come to realize that coauthoring is epistemic; some had sought out each other’s expertise initially, while others were able to describe the learning experience only on reflection during their interviews with us. Susan Besemer and Karen O’Quin came together because Besemer, a librarian, needed O’Quin’s expertise in analyzing quantitative data and then found that their skills complemented each other. They agreed they produce “more and better” than either of them could produce alone, and O’Quin credited Besemer with being the “brains of the gang because it’s her theory initially...it’s sort of like the kernel...Sue is the germinal one” (S. Besemer and K. O’Quin). Duane Roen also subscribes to the more and better theory. For him, “The important thing is that more than one mind is coming together,” and Stuart Brown enjoys that another mind provides “a different critical perspective that gets you kick-started” (Brown and Roen). Another pair, an education professor and a psychology professor, told a story of a four-hour car trip during which they both “moved positions” on theories of constructivism and behaviorism, theories that were relevant to their teaching philosophies as well as to a current writing project. Many pairs echoed the power of talk in the coauthoring ethos; Matthew Oldman, an inveterate collaborator, thrives on being confronted with people who don’t think he has all the answers, and his current writing partner says she welcomes “changing [her] ideas because of what someone else has said” (Kent and Oldman). And Kathleen Strickland insisted that Jim has taught her much about writing because he was a writing teacher before she was. She confessed to feeling “humble” when they began writing together,

but she added, “We have both gotten better at what we do, and I’m just tickled pink I have somebody to work with that complements what I do” (Strickland and Strickland).

They recognize, as does Frank Walters in his interpretation of Isocrates’ Antidosis, that “within the thematic scope of ethos a number of diverse issues adumbrate the relationship between individual and community...the private epistemé is meaningless—it means nothing—if it is separated from the community which holds the power of granting epistemological validity” (9). Typically, scholars present their putatively individually generated work to the academic community, and the community acknowledges the scholar’s contribution to their field’s body of knowledge. Both writer and reader do learn from that experience but on different planes, perhaps separated from each other by space and time. But for coauthors, the experience of sharing and weaving together diverse knowledge begins during the writing, resulting in a richer, more complete product, partly because of a built-in, immediate, trusted audience, or even audiences. As Gere points out,

the dominant concept of authorship serves to isolate (and therefore frequently alienate) writers from their readers...this alienation decreases writers’ ability to visualize their audiences...One of the benefits continually attributed to the collaboration of writing groups is that they bring writers and readers closer together, thereby providing writers a direct experience with audiences. (67, 66)

In their article “Audience Addressed, Audience Invoked,” Ede and Lunsford use the term invoked audience to describe the audience writers imagine as they create a text and the term addressed audience to characterize the concrete audience known to the author. We see that coauthors have an initial advantage in that they have, in each other, an immediate, addressed audience. Not only that, each coauthor, in addition to being an audience for the coauthored work, has their own experience with audiences involving themselves, colleagues, friends, critics, students, and so on. Consequently, writers working together increase exponentially the potential for invoking “a vision which they hope readers will actively come to share as they read the text—by using all the resources of language available to them to establish a broad, and ideally coherent, range of cues for the reader” (Ede and Lunsford 167). Writers working together multiply their audiences, both invoked and concrete, and their language resources. Ede and Lunsford maintain that coauthors’ commitment to make knowledge with each other can “attest concretely to the power of a co-author’s expectations and criticisms and also illustrate that one person can take on the role of several different audiences: friend, colleague, and critic” (168). If the community of the academy at large seems to value the private epistemé, then coauthors are motivated to create a space that validates a more collabor-
ately generated epistemology. Respect and trust inhabit this coauthoring space and are requisite in allowing these cognitive gains to be realized.

Ownership

Just as respect and trust are involved in the issues of first author and cognitive gains, the issue of ownership also involves respect and trust. Individual writers must be willing to give up recognition of their unique contributions, respect the voices of their coauthors, relinquish possession of their own language, and trust that the collective voice will represent them well. For all writers, the idea of sharing texts with peers, getting feedback from readers and being willing to make changes, is based on trust, and this sharing is especially visible and explicit in coauthoring. Successful coauthors may be following Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca’s advice to trust the audience, to imagine an audience that is receptive. In laying out New Rhetoric in 1969, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca described an ideal audience, not ideal in the foundational sense but ideal in that the audience is willing to listen, think, and accept the words of the speaker or writer, at least for a while. As we mentioned previously, for the writing teams we studied, the first and ideal audience is each other, and they trust that audience. The good will extended in that mutual audience created by coauthoring demonstrates the dimension of respect and trust we claim is located in the ethos created by working with others.

The coauthors in our study described their collective writing processes in a way that indicates a lack of possessiveness about their individual contributions and respect for each other as audience. One math professor in our study admitted that she and her coauthor both like to get their own way, but sometimes one of them just says, “Okay, fine, it’s a stupid quote but you can have it.” When we asked why they would “give in,” one of them answered, “Because I trust her judgment. She thinks it’s good ... she knows what she’s doing” (Smith and Sebastian). And from the beginning of their coauthorship, C. Mark Hurlbert and Michael Blitz agreed that what they contributed would not be held sacred. They said:

We have an unwritten rule that either one of us could change the other person’s words completely. We could chuck it and the other person wasn’t going to go, “Hey! What are you doing?” And it was clear early on that we wanted to say things that mattered in the best possible way we could say them.

One of them might have an idea and e-mail a draft to the other: “The other person can get rid of it down to a single syllable and send it back ... and there’s never been a moment when the other person has acted offended or defensive.” (Blitz and Hurlbert). The Stricklands too were insistent about the level of respect and trust they maintain. Jim said, “When you’re writing together you need to feel comfortable with changing somebody else’s words,” and Kathleen agreed: “And that person needs to be comfortable with your changing them. Anything that Jim would change would be a welcome change to me because there is such respect back and forth for the process and what we can each bring to it” (K. Strickland and J. Strickland, personal interview, January 1998).

Susan Besemer, in describing her coauthoring with Karen O’Quin, remarked, “Neither of us is possessive about our language. If she reads something that I write and she rewords it, I’m just so grateful...and when I’ve made a change, it’s generally received well...it’s not received with any question or hostility” (Besemer and O’Quin). Mark Bonacci, a social psychologist, and Katherine Johnson, a sociologist, described how they coauthored a cross-disciplinary textbook: they exchanged drafts, “messed up the other person’s draft,” and then discussed revisions as they worked on the book. Johnson claimed, “The big thing is that we respect each other and trust each other and know that what we’re getting from the other person is real quality.” In addition, both found the other’s style a useful counterweight. Bonacci appreciates Johnson’s ability to write in a more academic, less “over the top” style. He said, “I like the feedback because ever since I’ve been writing, people have argued that I am not subtle and I go a bit beyond the pale, so when Kate said, ‘look Mark, try to make this a little more balanced,’ it was fine with me” (Bonacci and Johnson). Through these stories, the writing teams we studied acknowledged what Lunsford calls “the largely collaborative and highly dispersed nature of most creative endeavors” (529). On their way to both producing texts and improving texts, they involve a trusted reader much earlier and more consistently throughout the process. These co-authors share responsibility and credit for the text which is jointly produced, moving the idea of co-authoring closer to Lunsford’s vision of “alternative modes of ownership” (541).

Affective Benefits

Few studies of coauthoring have addressed the affective benefits of writing with another. In a study of female academic coauthors, Cynthia Sullivan Dickens and Mary Ann D. Sagaria point out that “affective qualities enmeshed in academic research relationships have not been captured by traditional quantitative research methods” (95). We mentioned earlier that the coauthors we studied seemed to honor the relationship around their work more than the text production. In fact, their talk about their relationships—and the trust, respect, and care they involve—revealed the most about their success as coauthors. They claimed that coauthoring led to sig-
Significant friendships, fun, and the opportunity to better link what they do with what they value and who they are. None of the coauthors we studied were simply colleagues; most had begun their coauthoring as friends, and their work together had deepened their friendships. One of the best examples of a deep friendship is that of Michael Blitz and C. Mark Hurlbert. Although both could write (and have written) with others, their best coauthoring experiences have been with each other. Blitz explained, “There may be thousands of people I’d have great collaborations with but life is very limited ... it’s like when you have a family you want to make sure that family is sustained. Mark is my family and I intend to enjoy that as long as it is enjoyable.” Hurlbert added, “Certainly I am a fuller human being for my relations to him [Blitz]—so the value is personal—or even spiritual. ... to put it simply, my life is more meaningful for Michael’s presence in it” (M. (Blitz and Hurlbert). His words echo phrases Gere quotes in Intimate Practices, phrases such as “richer for having known and loved her,” spoken by women whose “literacy practices embodied their love, liking, and care for one another” (39, 45).

Many of the coauthors told stories of generous emotional support their coauthors offered them during times of personal and professional challenge: job searching and moving, family tragedies, divorce, and health problems. Some vacation together, visit each other’s families, help each other work on their homes, and care for each other’s children. That they achieve a level of comfort with each other is illustrated in a story told by one pair, Gilbert Adams and Julie Knight. Adams remembered a time when he and Knight decided to go to Knight’s apartment to work on a book chapter. He remembered thinking,

I’m so tired...now if I were home I would just lie down and take a nap...[and] I forget who mentioned what but somehow we just got on the topic of we were really tired...and Julie said, “Well, let’s just take a nap.” So she gave me a clock and went to her bedroom, and I lay down on the couch and we set the clock, and a half hour later we woke up and we started writing again! And I was thinking, “I’ve never done that...that’s what I would do if I were on my own!” (Adams and Knight).

Almost every team brought up the “F” word—FUN—an element sorely missing in most conversations about scholarly work. Hurlbert and Blitz admitted that a project sometimes has a “goofy start” and that they often “play around a little bit.” In discussing her one singly authored book, Kathleen Strickland lamented, “I didn’t have as much fun...I wouldn’t look to do that again.” When we asked Lunsford and Ede how writing together is different from writing alone, they agreed that alone they “don’t have as much fun,” and they wanted us to know that although they both have a sometimes punishing work ethic, they like to play too. Knight described her coauthoring with Adams as “a hoot,” and Adams added, “It was a blast!” One team had a great deal of fun teasing and provoking each other during the interview, and, at one point, one of them said about their coauthoring, “Your time is gone, that’s for sure...that [the loss of time] would be punishment, but the fact is you enjoy what you’re doing so much more that it’s not the pay...it’s not any of that.”

Perhaps these coauthoring relationships go beyond friendship that can develop during extended workplace interaction. These scholars were not just working together, they were writing together. In a telling comment, Knight defined collaborative writing as “an intimate process...and I think when you do it well and you get to that level of intimacy then you start to cross assumptions and values...and you can’t help but develop a good relationship.” This statement may sum up the relationships of the members of the teams more accurately and profoundly than any other in our interviews. When coauthoring is successful—when collaborators recognize and value each other’s strengths, watch out for each other, and trust each other to nurture their professional and personal relationships—perhaps intimate relationships are a natural and beneficial outcome. Perhaps the ethos created by coauthoring involves the space where affective responses, rather than being suppressed, become integral to the work.

A Place of Caring

The term ethos is a cognate of the word ethos, meaning that ethos is the parent term. Ethics has come to be regarded idiomatically as having to do with integrity, fairness, honesty; however, as we pointed out earlier, ethos is a neutral term. It has to do with a set of customs, a “totality of characteristics,” inherently neither good nor bad, that develop in “habitual gathering places”: the family home, the classroom, the workplace. We acknowledge that all coauthoring is not successful; most of the coauthors in our study told stories of coauthoring derailed by issues of hierarchy, ego, and irresponsibility. However, as we have shown, in the “habitual gathering place”—the ethos—of successful coauthoring, ethics of respect, trust, and care are enacted. In addition, we also believe coauthoring has the power to construct, or engender, an ethic of care. Nel Noddings, in proposing an ethic of care, claims that the impulse to care “lies latent in the human beings involved in the situation under consideration and their relations to each other” (173). In an ethical relation, participants strive to maintain or transform the relationship into a caring one. For Noddings, for us, and for the coauthors we studied, collaboration has the potential to engender ethical acts of caring.
Furthermore, the “habitual gathering place” created by coauthoring puts down a welcome mat and keeps the light on. The late Jim Corder describes a “generative” ethos that “opens up the borders of the discourse” (32). For him, an “ethos is generative and fruitful when the time and space stewarded by a speaker [or writer] give free room for another to live in...” Generative ethos is commodious” (34). This ethos welcomes other writers’ views, voices, ontologies, and experiences; everyone is invited. For example, Michele has recently coauthored two articles, one with five graduate students and one with a graduate student and her forty-three undergraduate freshman composition students. One of the coauthoring teams we studied consisted of two experienced faculty and one graduate student, and several of the coauthors told of writing with students and junior faculty. Coauthoring, as least in our findings, has a mentoring quality yet cuts across hierarchies.

Over the last few years, as we coauthored ourselves and became acquainted with other coauthors, we have often tried to visualize what the coauthoring ethos might look like. If ethos is a place, as we are asserting, then the metaphor of a group gathered around a pond illumines the term dramatically. When a number of people encircle a pond, coming to the water’s edge as separate individuals, they are suddenly reflected as one entity in its surface; that collective reflection is their ethos. Without the pond, without having come together over something (a civic problem, a community issue, a classroom project, a scholarly endeavor), there is no ethos. The ethos, in this case coauthoring, appears productive, commodious place. Some academics search in vain for such hospitable places; it is rare to hear a singular author claim to have enjoyed the writing process, even if the product has been positively received. But the successful coauthors we studied found a place to which they return time and again, knowing they will find deep satisfaction in the process due to the caring, respectful relationships they find there.2

Fox and Faver (1984) speak of the “costs” of collaborative work: excessive time, financial expenses, the “personal, socio-emotional cost of developing and maintaining a good working relationship,” and lack of commitment are termed “process costs” (352-53); “outcome costs” are delays caused by a “sluggish collaborator,” deciding who gets credit, and possible loss of quality (353-54). In a study of educators who collaborate, Joan P. Isenberg, Mary Rench Jalongo, and Karen D’Angelo Bromley (1987) report similar findings: fully 50% of the educators studied related negative experiences with collaboration. In addition, they found these drawbacks: inability to achieve consensus, the inability to resolve differences in writing styles, and a “clash of philosophies and interests,” which includes decisions about “purpose, focus, audience, and outlet for the publication.” But, for the respondents to their questionnaire, the most “pervasive and difficult” problem was “failure to share a vision” (14).

As we considered the coauthors in our study in light of these reports, we found that none of the teams we studied brought up money, and although some wished they had more time, and all but one team admitted that coauthoring took more time than singly authoring, they did not see the extra time as a cost. In addition, all the interviewees saw the quality of their products as enhanced by collaboration. None of these successful coauthors saw maintenance of a good relationship, allocation of credit, or reaching a consensus as difficult or costly. Our work has been criticized for presenting an ideal or romantic version of coauthoring, one devoid of horror stories and negative cases. In reflecting on collaborative research, Kirsch states: “I have come to realize that the ideal scenario of successful collaboration is just that: an ideal... It has become abundantly clear to me that collaboration rarely unfolds in all the ways we wish” (1999, 159). And though we don’t disagree with her, we believe that this ideal is possible with the right mix of coauthors and approaches. Some of the writers in our study mentioned past negative coauthoring experiences, but the stories they told in the interviews revealed a positive and productive process. We studied successful writing groups to find out why they work—for those who may desire to write with others and for those who hope to teach students to write together.

The writers in our study choose to coauthor and to continue coauthoring; they write from a place of respect, trust, and care, creating an ethos or place where writers agree to share and accept each other’s views while working toward a product that values and accommodates multiple voices and subject positions. In this way, a fresh environment is created, one that reflects the collective character and disposition of the community, dyad, or group. Moreover, we believe coauthoring possesses the power to engender an ethos of care; rather than attempting to represent an ethos split from his or her lived life, a coauthor forms an ethical character by “learning to speak to the interests of the community [or team]” (Jarrett and Reynolds 44) and coming to value the connections such a stance makes possible. And, consequently, we find ourselves more and more likely to respect the work of scholars who are in the habit of coauthoring; that they work successfully together suggests that they incorporate an ethos of care in their scholarship, in their interaction with colleagues, and in their pedagogy.

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1 We realize that after one experience, many authors choose not to return to coauthoring.
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Writing Groups Inside and Outside the Classroom

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