

◆ Understanding Collaboration Methods

The three scenarios that begin this chapter illustrate some of the problems that arise when teams fail to fully plan out a project and agree on a collaboration method. In all three cases, the students being interviewed disagreed with their teammates over the specific steps the team needed to follow. These conflicting views of how the team should go about collaborating hurt the quality of the final projects and led to dissatisfaction with the team.

Understanding different collaboration methods and their respective costs and benefits can help teams identify and negotiate conflicting visions of how the group should proceed. When working on documents, groups can structure their collaboration using one of three basic methods (see [Figure 1.1](#)):

1. **Face-to-face.** The entire team sits down and writes the document together. Usually one or two team members sit at the computer and type while others give input.
2. **Divided.** The group breaks the document into sections and assigns each team member a section.
3. **Layered.** Each person on the team is assigned one or more specific roles. Each person works on the document in turn, adding his or her own expertise to the product. The document slowly accumulates in layers as each team member revises and improves upon what already exists.



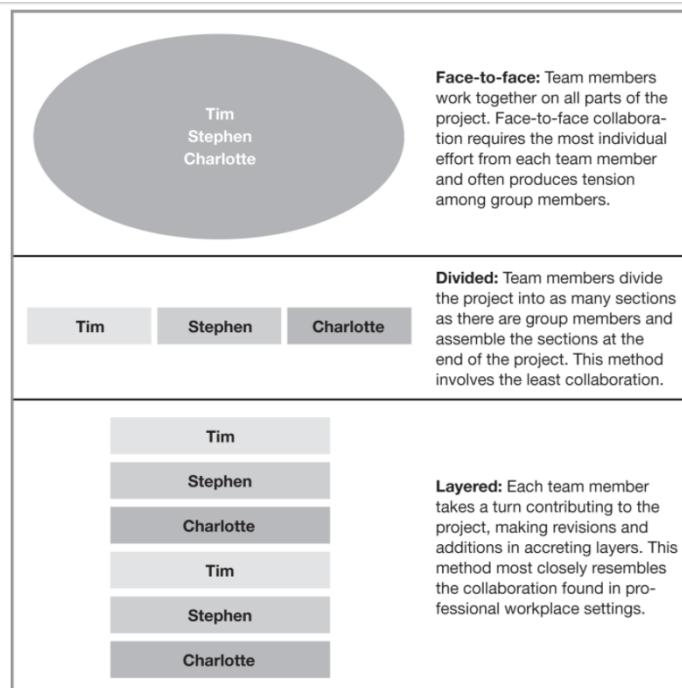


FIGURE 1.1. Three methods of collaboration

The type of collaboration method a group uses has significant consequences for how the work proceeds. In the interviews beginning this chapter, Eduardo describes experiences typical of groups that rely on **divided** collaboration. Team members completed their individual sections at the last minute, there was no time for discussion of the final draft, and Eduardo is not sure if his teammates even read the final report. Moreover, one of the team members produced a section that was of particularly low

quality — contributing to the disappointing grade this group received.

Whereas Eduardo's group never met to discuss the draft, Thomas's group tried to complete *all* of its work in team meetings. The team members' attempt to draft their entire proposal **face-to-face** not only was inefficient but also lowered project quality because they were rushed for time at the end and ended up dropping sections. In addition, although Thomas was not aware of it at the time, one of the group members was extremely upset with the group dynamics, perceiving the team as not valuing her input. When a team relies too much on face-to-face collaboration, such resentment is common because it is virtually impossible for three or more people sitting around a computer to contribute equally.

Susan's group illustrates how the failure to discuss a collaboration method as a group can produce conflict. Susan felt the group should have created the Web site **face-to-face**; however, Rene operated using a **layered** collaboration method in which she completed an initial draft and then tried to hand the project off to others to revise and finish. Although this layered approach seemed more appropriate to this project than Susan's face-to-face method, Rene's failure to discuss her collaboration plans resulted in a major breakdown in group dynamics.

See [Table 1.1](#) for a summary of the advantages and drawbacks of the face-to-face, divided, and layered methods of collaboration.

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Method	Advantages	Drawbacks
Face-to-face	• Allows team members to	• Often difficult to schedule

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Face-to-face	• Allows team members to quickly share a large number of ideas — particularly useful for brainstorming and debating the pros and cons of different ideas. • Effective for drafting plans, outlines, and task schedules. • Effective for discussing graphic design, such as a company brochure or the layout of a Web page.	• Often difficult to schedule large blocks of time when the team can meet outside of class. • Can be difficult for everyone to have equal input — the person sitting at the keyboard can control what is said. • Ineffective for drafting text and content — wastes individual time and can produce conflict. • Often impossible in the workplace, where team members may be geographically distant.
Divided	• Allows the work to be completed in the least amount of time.	• Minimal collaboration. • Can be difficult to recover if one team member fails to do his or her share or does a poor job. • Content likely to contain duplications, gaps, and inconsistencies. • Style can suffer from

Divided	• Allows the work to be completed in the least amount of time.	• Minimal collaboration. • Can be difficult to recover if one team member fails to do his or her share or does a poor job. • Content likely to contain duplications, gaps, and inconsistencies. • Style can suffer from inconsistent tone, word choice, and writing quality.
Layered	• Helps ensure a high-quality project because everyone has multiple opportunities to contribute, critique, and improve upon the project. • Maximizes the contributions of all group members. • Motivates the group because everyone feels ownership of the full document. • Particularly effective for drafting and revising. • Mirrors collaboration in the workplace.	• Different team members' roles may require unequal effort — this is common in a work setting but may create problems in a school setting, where all team members are expected to contribute equally. • Requires thoughtful planning up front — some team members may feel anxious spending time on planning rather than jumping into the details.

Despite its substantial advantages, student teams tend to underutilize layered