Essay in two voices – What does it mean?

Madelyn Blair and Leif Josefsson is using the tool in order to invent it.

Madelyn 500 words

Zeldin said, “The kind of conversation I like is one in which you are prepared to emerge a slightly different person.” I am fond of this phrase as it expresses my view that conversation is one of humankind’s tools for moving forward into greater understanding. Daily use of conversation rarely creates this ideal of constant forward motion. Blogging is a remarkable phenomenon that has allowed millions to express themselves, but to what end? Collaborative opportunities abound both virtually and face to face, yet do we always gain from these moments as we might?

Essays in 2 Voices brings together two concepts. The first is to bring two individuals into conversation to more easily explore a question together. Writing in pairs is common – Gilbert & Sullivan, Flanders & Swann. In Germany there are 2 signatures (vier Augen, four eyes) at the bottom of business letters. Peer review is common in many professions for improving initial ideas while preserving the original intent. Two heads are better than one. While these examples imply judgment or consensus, mutual inspiration is the guiding principle, not critique or even agreement with Essays in 2 Voices.

Second, essays tend to be short pieces. While essays do not offer the possibility of covering a topic fully, within the confines of the question being explored, the essay can move understanding forward.

The remaining question is how to structure the flow of writing. In Essays in 2 Voices, the structure begins with a small question, clearly written, on which each writes in stages. Thus:

- Establish the question on which the authors will write. The question is directive so that the 500 words can be a sufficient container. The question needs to be clear to both writers - even if they interpret it differently.
- Each partner writes 500 words on the question.
- Each writes 250 words of response to their partner’s 500 words.

Leif, 500 words.

When I encountered the software Lotus Notes in the early 90's the idea of technology as a tool for collaboration become clear to me. I discovered the world of collaboration over time and space, and had the fortunate experience of working in a pioneering space for a number of years, across the world.

In Lotus we talked a lot about “collaborative spaces” - there was Learning Space, Team Room, Customer Room etc. There was a lot of knowledge and experience in how to facilitate collaboration. But the ideas were was hard to sell to customer who after trying some collaboration tools often fell back to email.

In a previous Essay conversation we have talked about ”Space” and I realize that in order for writing to be meaningful for me, I want to know there is someone listening. To work together with someone in that process.

I like the differences between talking and writing as a means of conversation, and what these different . When I am in a creative mode I use lots of words to talk, and I can jump from topic to topic, going up and down.

But getting down to writing helps me to become more structured. I also think that when after coming into the writing mode my intuition is helping me in the writing process.

Possibly what we are on the way of creating is a tool for people who are talking about an idea they want to develop and in the next step would like to write together.

When the concept of ”essay in two voices”caught my interest I saw this as a tool that provides you with the opportunity to write something together with someone else in a simple but yet structured way.

It introduces an idea which starts with a “collaborative blogging” and concludes the conversation in a 140 character sentence that hopefully will catch the essence of the conversation.

Two people can decide to start working together on a topic, each with a first essay on 500 words. After
This process continues for up to 4 more iterations moving from 250 words to 125 words, 60 words, 30 words, and finally 140 characters.

The value of this approach is that it is easy to understand and accomplish.

It allows for individual expression without concern for judgment. It creates a comfortable space in which two people can converse on a question in a manner that encourages focus and as the process continues, conciseness.

As each partner acknowledges the contributions of the other, there is new understanding engendered, and the final step has the potential of capturing the very essence of the question posed at the beginning.

Here is an effective way in which blogging can be done together in a manner that can lead to a conclusion small enough to Twitter. At last, there is a way to build a Twitter that has intrinsic value and link to its development. Blogging and Twittering move to a new level while offering the partners the opportunity converse to a conclusion without losing individuality.

Madelyn 250 words

I so appreciated the story of how you found Essays in 2 Voices. It has given a more human face to this concept.

I realize also that some refinements to the concept could help partners use it more effectively. For example, writing in parallel is important. The objective is to let the first writing reflect first thoughts – each partner writing what comes to mind on the question. This becomes a sort of base set of information on which to build. Then the fun begins as each round is written aware of the previous round. Thus, using that first step as one that is independent of each other offers a way to get as many different initial thoughts out for later refinement. Writing in parallel at each step permits this gathering of more ideas even as fewer and fewer words in each stage.

Your comments about how early technology attempts at collaborative spaces were not as useful as hoped by the vendors reflects how our concepts grow from what we already know. Increasing our knowledge through experience or perspectives from others adds to our reflection on the topic. Just as the vendors learned over time how to make more useful reading each others writing you write a new essay on 250 words, then 130, 60, 30 words until you you reach the last step.

The format of Essay in two voices provide an opportunity to iterate a theme until the final 140 characters that, if so wanted, can be tweeted out as the visual sign that this conversation is concluded.

It is OK to be fluffy, or a little whimsy in the beginning as each step will probably align as the essay partners read each others material, getting mirrored and inspired..

Essay in Two voices provides with a simple but powerful process where two people can work together, each in their voice, but still creating something together where each turn aligns them toward the last 140 character tweet.

250 words Leif

Looking back at our first 500 words I got thrilled by the different approaches we took at the same topic. The more strict approach of you Madelyn, explaining the Essay idea, and my story approach. This made me think of a ground rule I think we should recommend: That the essay partners do not look at each others essays until they both are done.

The essays, at least in the beginning, should be written without any thoughts of being smart or clever. Just write what you have in mind at this topic.

As neither partner has any knowledge of each others writing the result is a real opportunity to discover the perspectives and assumptions of the other.

Therefore it is also important that you are not judgmental into reading each others contributions.

One of the key characteristics is that there is no place for argument here, just dialogue. You can be inspired by what your partner just wrote, or you can feel an urge to clarify yourself. By reading your partners story you will experience his/hers perspective in own words, and learn something from this.
collaborative spaces based on their enhanced experience, writing with a partner brings new insights to the question.

My last insight is that while this process allows for writing together virtually, writing together face to face can use the same approach with equal benefit.

As the space for writing narrows down each time you has the choice of aligning with /be inspired of the writing of your partner. Or you can choose to clarify your own thoughts. The last step is the 140 characters that ends the conversation and can be sent out as a tweet. But here you could also decide to do the process all over again.

Madelyn 120 words.

I was surprised to see such alignment in our words until I remembered that we had discussed our 500 word pieces over lunch. How interesting that talking brought us into alignment yet, inspiration is more important to me in this conversation than perfect alignment. The written word is concrete, unmoving, yet like Legos, as we have more pieces to play with, the greater becomes the options that can be created. Like Legos, you don’t have to use all of the pieces. The key is to create what you have in mind. The richer the field of possibilities. Talking is like sorting the pieces and selecting only a portion of them for the next round. So, keep silent and let our written words feed us.

60 words Madelyn

Independent thinking done through written words bounded in size but unbounded in possibilities. Judgment gone, replaced by inspiration. Soaring thoughts. Unexpected outcomes. Appreciation renewed. Blue sky overhead –flying in the air in different directions, supported by each other. Allowing the emergent to emerge regardless of whether we agree or not – to a point of resolution and value.

Leif 120 words

What I realize now is that this is very powerful as a writing exercise for people who actually are in a physical room together. Madelyn and I are now down to our 120 words after approximately 1,5 hours, and if someone was here in this room they could feel the energy of us writing, deciding not to talk to each other until the writing is over. As I look over what Madelyn wrote in her 250 words I hear her pounding on the keys for our 120, and I feel real excitement. The power of being physically present while using these tools for virtual communication. And it is interesting how we are using the tool while we are inventing it..

Leif 60 words

Essay in two voices aims to provide space for two collaborators to elaborate on an idea, a project, or anything where it is useful to drill down to some conclusion. The approach facilitates conversation without judgment, and provides a real insight into each others perspectives. The process starts with a blog style aproach and ends with a twitter sentence

Leif 30 words.

Essay in two voices is creating a nonjudgmental space where two people can mirror themselves and be inspired by their partner, using the written world in a simple and powerful process.

Leif 140 characters.

Essay in two voices is a great way for two people to create result together for any urgent topic using differences as the most valued asset.

Some basic rules if you want to test the process like we did.
• Decide on a topic that feels specific enough for you to start writing about
• Establish a ground rule/agreement around being non judgmental. “What you want to write is the right thing to write!”
• Do not share the result from each step until both have finished.
• Try not to discuss between each step if you sit together. Feel free to share appreciative comments about the contributions.