

COLLABORATIVE ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

Many studies have examined the provision of academic writing development at tertiary level (Horowitz, 1986, Webb 1997, Pally 2001 and Zhu 2004, Magogwe & Nkateng 2017) but not focussing on collaborative writing. Students in Botswana seem to have difficulties appreciating the value of collaborative work in their writing classes and yet working in groups is an important mode of learning. This paper explores how students can benefit from collaborative approaches to academic writing. It will also share experiences of first year students at the University of Botswana (UB) when it comes to collaborative learning and teaching strategies in writing modules. Data for this study was collected from essays that students wrote about collaborative writing. The findings inform teachers of academic writing on ways of improving collaborative writing in their courses.

Introduction

Among Batswana and indeed many other cultures, working collaboratively is highly regarded. For example in the University of Botswana, such collaboration informs the use of group work. Collaborative writing or speaking assignments are assumed to be full-length assignments completed in pairs or small groups. Collaborative assignments transform the usually solitary work of writing, editing, and public speaking into a group endeavour. Instructors value such assignments because of their real-world relevance. After all, in many workplaces work is produced by a team or goes through multiple hands for feedback and revision. Giving students the opportunities to practice writing, editing, and presenting with others is a prudent step in preparing them for the world after graduation. This paper has two objectives; firstly it will explore different views of students about collaborative writing, secondly it outlines how collaborative academic writing can be used to support students' academic writing skills.

Collaborative writing

Collaborative writing has been studied across a range of academic disciplines (see e.g. Lunsford and Ede 1992, Lowry et al. 2004, Ritchie and Rigano 2007, Lassig et al. 2009, Onrubia and Engel 2009, Speedy and Wyatt 2014). There are different opinions concerning students' collaborative writing. Mishra & Oliver 1998, Roskams 1999 in their studies reported that students have positive attitudes towards group work while other studies showed that students have uncertainties about group work (Hyde 1993, Kinsella 1996).

Pair and group work are commonly used in the university; for example for communication and study Skills courses, students are given projects to work in groups. Very few studies have investigated the quality of such collaboration when students produce their work together. (Butler 2001, Yong 2010) Research on the most suitable ways of supporting academic writing

is widely debated in literature of higher education. (Wilhelm 1999, Wingate 2006, Gibbs 1981, Dowling and Ryan 2007). Collaborative writing is an instructional method in which a group of students team together on an assignment. It can be an essay or a research project. In this method students can produce the individual parts of a larger assignment individually and then compile the final work together as a team. When students are given assignments they share the work by assigning different members of the group to contribute different parts of the essay then they sit together to compile the whole essay or assign one member to compile the paper.

Collaborative writing can be beneficial if all participants are involved in all the stages of writing Ede and Lunsford (1990) state, "though these studies emphasize the importance of collaborative learning, all assume single authorship as a model. Peers can work effectively in every stage of the writing process except for drafting... (p9)

This study is attempting to investigate the University of Botswana Social Sciences first year students' views on collaborative writing and suggesting ways of overcoming challenges faced by students in collaborative tasks as suggested by Storch (2005) that "the other issue that needs further investigation is learners' views concerning collaborative writing."

Context

Communication and Study Skills is a unit at the University of Botswana responsible for teaching English for Academic purposes and for professional purposes. Each module is compulsory and is worth 3 credits. Students cannot graduate from UB if they do not have credits for these two courses. The modules provide students with academic writing skills across their entire degree programme and professional communication to prepare them for work.

Content

The unit has adopted a 'scaffolding' staged approach to academic writing skills development. Semester one covers the fundamentals of academic writing: paragraph development, essay planning, note taking and note-making, in-text citations and linking verbs for quotes. Module 2 develops students' academic writing skills and focuses on the various writing styles needed for various forms of assessment in the university as well as professional communication for the work place.

Students are given individual essays or tasks in groups where they work collaboratively. In most cases students will not submit on time because of different issues they encountered during the writing process and this led to this type of research. I have observed that when giving out collaborative tasks students are hesitant to work with some members. During the process of writing some students will not turn up for the meeting with the facilitator. When the group performs badly the writer is blamed which shows that some members did not participate fully.

Methodology

Participants for this task are first year Social Science students from 3 classes (one class had 54 students, class 2 21 and class 3 had 40 students) that are taught by the author, they were given written assignments to write about collaborative writing in groups, each task was to be

written by a maximum of five people. The students were given questions to choose what they wanted to work on. Students were to form groups of five and a minimum of three students in a group. There were only 3 students who worked individually. These are students who were excluded from their initial groups because of lack of participation. Students were to share their experiences, write their challenges and views about collaborative writing. 32 essays were collected and sorted according to the answers attempted. Permission was sought from the students to use their essays as data for this article, they were told before they chose the questions that the essay will be used for the article and they were free to agree or decline. Qualitative content analysis which is defined as: “A research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278).

Or

“Any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p.453).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) identified three approaches to coding within content analysis: conventional content analysis, directed content analysis and summative content analysis. Therefore directed content analysis was used as it fits what has to be achieved in this study, which is sharing students’ experiences in collaborative writing. Essay questions were used to determine the themes in the data.

Table 1: Student experiences in collaborative writing

Question	Number of essays
What is collaborative writing and what are your experiences in collaborative tasks?	1
List and discuss steps in collaborative writing	8
Discuss the benefits of collaborative writing	7
What are the challenges of collaborative writing and how can they be overcome	9
Ways of encouraging team members to work together	7

Findings and analysis

The writing style was not the main focus of this study, but students were encouraged to follow the writing process where the lecturer had to approve every process, or example notes, outline and drafts. See (Magogwe and Nkateng 2017 for writing styles and types of essays) Following Hsieh and Shannon idea of directed content analysis, the data was arranged into predetermined codes which are:

What is collaborative writing and what are your experiences in collaborative tasks?

Only one group attempted this topic. In this essay students defined collaborative writing and shared their experiences without making reference to sources. The essay did not look like a piece of academic writing the group did not follow the writing process steps with the lecturer. They talked about what they have learnt as individuals “it has taught me many things such as conflict resolutions” and the other one said “when I came to Botswana I learned what collaborative writing and group work is all about I have group projects in 4 of my classes and that is more than I have ever had in America” they also mentioned that though there are

benefits, collaborative writing can also be frustrating as there will be members who do not want to participate at all.

Collaborative writing is one of the effective and a solid form of gathering more quality information as people team up to perform a given task and hence this creates so many benefits for the participants in literacy writing. (Farkas,1991) defines collaborative writing as two or more people come together and contribute components to a document in addition to that (Storch,2013) states that collaborative writing in its broadest sense is basically co-authoring of a text by two or more writers. Hirvela (1999) notes that “Although major works on collaborative writing (Brufee, 1984, Ede and Lunsford 1990, Gere 1987) agree that applications of principles of collaborative learning to writing instructions are fairly recent ... they have significantly influenced the development of contemporary composition theory and pedagogy... (p9)

List and discuss steps important in collaborative writing

There were eight scripts collected for this topic: in this question the students outlined the steps. Some students talked about the writing process where they mentioned pre-writing, planning research and data collection, writing and revision. Then the groups provided the steps as: Identify the unique piece of the project, identifying members’ strengths and taking advantage of them, setting deadlines identifying editor and all members reading the final draft for review and feedback.

Discuss the benefits of collaborative writing

Seven essays were submitted on this topic. Most students wrote that collaborative writing saves time “since each participant gets their own task on their area of expertise to complete and this saves time unlike if all tasks were done individually” they mentioned that collaborative writing strengthens their writing skills, it helps them to push deadlines “when you work with a lot of people you reach deadlines much faster” they also learn to work together as a team and they stated that “ there is also sharing of expertise, new information and tasks, and it also develops their interpersonal skills. Lastly there is also division of labour. One group mentioned that collaborative writing “provides a sense of responsibility towards the task... participants become conscious of their contribution.

Belcher (1990) points out that collaborative writing groups constitute genuine reading audiences for each of the writers within a group, with writers then writing with the needs and characteristics of that audience in mind as they compose and revise texts. A study of college Freshman using vigorous control groups demonstrated that students who worked collaboratively learned and produced better work than students who worked individually (Clifford,1981) in addition to that (Vygotsky,1978) also said that it provides effective linguistic feedback for themselves and peers.

What are the challenges of collaborative writing and how can they be overcome?

This topic was answered by nine groups, in this essay students were to discuss challenges of collaborative writing and suggest ways of overcoming these problems. All the nine essays talked about time consuming, lack of commitment, free riding and conflicts. They said that collaborative writing is time consuming and explained that “ it takes a longer time to come up with the document as compared to writing individually” they also mentioned resistance as

one of the challenges they said “students show lack of participation in the group work, pay less attention and some never attend meetings. ‘free-riding’ is another challenge mentioned by the students Morris and Hayes (1997) explain that “free-riding is the problem of non-performing group members who reap the benefits of the accomplishments of the remaining group members with little or no cost to himself/herself”(p.566).

The students also mentioned personal conflicts and difference of ethnic mix as some of the challenges in collaborative writing. One group stated “more minds lead to conflicts over either the substance or the process of writing”

Schneider (1990) state that collaborative writing exercises operate on “assumptions of shared authority among group members and the notion that knowledge is socially constructed not received” (p36). Free-riding results in inequality based motivation, therefore when submitting students should leave out names of those who did not participate in the project. Harring-Smith (1990) adds that “requiring students to append an acknowledgement page to their joint efforts, giving credit to contributors will encourage contribution” (p106).

Ways of encouraging team members to work together

This topic was answered by six groups and 1 individual. They discussed that the team should set goals, “setting goals will help both members to work together as a team because they will be having a common goal and thus interacting more often to evaluate their effort and to check their progress” (Martin 2014:1). Setting goals also help members to focus on the big picture. Only one team added motivation and stressed that motivation is critical for team performance. The other group mentioned encouraging creativity amongst group members and students should not judge others. One group said “teamwork can be encouraged by making everyone a leader” Communication was mentioned by all the groups and they stressed that “It is the most important of all because without it there would be no joint work.”

Communication is very important because if all members are participating, they will feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging and this promotes cooperation and progress.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings above clearly show that there is need for facilitators to stress the importance of collaborative writing. There is need for group members to bond together and share the work responsibly and equally. Hirvela (1999) explains that “students often learn more effectively when asked to perform various tasks in pairs, small groups, and teams than when working alone” (p7).

Collaborative writing increases knowledge and application of technical, non-technical, conceptual elements of writing leading to improved ability to give constructive response. As students repeatedly work together in an instructed mode, they are able to actually understand their flaws and learn how to deal with social problems that may arise. Collaborative writing contributes to an increased complexity in writing and willingness to utilize feedback as well as increased grammatical accuracy and overall quality of writing further more (Vygotsky,1962) says students exposed to valuable input from others and are ‘encouraged to provide enhanced input.’

In addition, Collaborative writing also helps individuals from stress as the work load is shared and saves time because there are shared efforts. Another advantage of the collaborative

process is having multiple pairs of eyes to proofread the writing. Having a fresh perspective is vital when proofreading, so the more people looking at the writing, the higher the likelihood that mistakes will be identified and improvements will be made. A gap in their understanding of what they have learned in their course is also understood as they hear different versions of the same information from their peer and thus allowing group negotiations.

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