THE UNIVERSITY OF BOTSWANA FIRST YEAR STUDENT'S ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS COLLABORATIVE WRITING

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Abstract

The study investigated students' attitudes and perceptions on the use of collaborative writing. The purpose of this study was to find out if students benefitted from using collaborative writing in academic contexts. The study involved 94 first year students in one faculty in the University of Botswana, and the data was collected towards the end of the second semester. A questionnaire consisting of 25 items with 4 point Likert scale was administered and 10 randomly selected focus group students were interviewed. Exploring the students' views and getting their suggestions may influence lecturers planning and methods of teaching. The results of the study indicated that most of the students found collaborative writing effective and beneficial in improving their communication, presentation and problem solving skills. They however, perceived collaborative writing negatively due to the challenges that they experienced in using group work to do a writing assignment. Some of the challenges they highlighted were poor time management and lack of participation by some group members, there overburdening other members. Students suggested that they preferred working in pairs and individually compared to groups, as it gave them an opportunity to work at their own pace. The collaborative writing approach therefore presents some serious in teaching and learning challenges, and needs to be considered critically by lecturers.

Keywords: Collaborative writing; attitudes; perceptions; communication

Introduction

Working collaboratively with others is a well-appreciated skill by both employers and colleagues. Employers see it as an opportunity to provide additional workforce through subdividing responsibilities (Morgan, Allen, Moore, Atkinson & Snow, 1987). Working collaboratively is a critical skill that provides better needed brainpower, commitment and motivation to generate ideas and present new perspectives in task handling, problem-solving and decision making (Alonso, Alexander & O'Brien, 2018; Tarricone, & Luca, 2002; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012; Schneider & Andre, 2005). In the context of higher learning, collaborative learning gives students the opportunity to work together and establish effective relationships with their colleagues, express themselves and develop teamwork spirit, which in turn will develop and refine their interpersonal skills, just as it would be expected in the workplace. It allows and gives a group or pair of learners the opportunity to connect and interactively work on the specific planned task, share ideas, discuss and achieve their goals together (Akindele, 2012; Al Tai, 2015). Al Tai (2015) investigated the effect and learners' attitudes towards collaborative learning. The researcher was comparing students' individual, pair and group work using a

specially designed task. The results indicated that collaborative writing improves accuracy and fluency as learners become involved in discussion and sharing ideas about the task. Akindele (2012) investigated how students managed communication in teams and the advantages and disadvantages of group work. The researcher found out that working collaboratively enhanced students' communication skills and built their confidence, self-esteem and interpersonal skills as they were forced to interact.

Collaborative writing which is becoming more prevalent in the higher education because of the increased emphasis on team work (Pfaff and Huddleston, 2003), provides the students with the skills to work together in pairs, groups of three or more, to produce a common piece of work. There are several previous studies which investigated collaborative writing tasks (Dobao, 2012), benefits (Shahadeh, 2011; Yarrow & Topping, 2001; Khatib & Meihami, 2015) and online collaborative writing (Alsubaie & Ashuraidah, 2017).

This study investigated students' attitudes and perceptions of collaborative writing at the University of Botswana. This is an area that has not been researched widely in the context of the University of Botswana, though group work is a strategy that is used throughout the different disciplines in higher education. Students in higher education, like at the University, are largely expected to show their knowledge and understanding of disciplines through writing.

Collaborative pedagogical strategies are viewed differently by different researchers. Some view collaborative writing as a strategy where students work on a task simultaneously to make additions, subtractions, edit and correct a document they are working on (Hadjerrouit, 2014). Collaborative writers can also plan and brainstorm for their writing together, then they divide sections that make their document amongst themselves to write in solitude. At the end the sections are put together to make one document (Noel & Robert, 2004). The focus of this study was on collaborative writing where students worked together in a group, right from brainstorming on the topic, planning, writing and producing one common document.

Though collaborative writing has many benefits, it also has its challenges that need to be taken into consideration. Some of the challenges may be students' lack of confidence in expressing themselves, especially when writing in English. Other challenges arise from viewing issues differently, poor time management, conflicting interests, workload, and disagreements on roles played in the writing task (Akindele, 2012; Bremmer, 2010; Rice & Huguley, 1994; Bremmer, 2010; Colen & Pelitin, 2004; Daouk & Bacha, 2015; McGraw & Tidwell (2001) in Hassanien, 2006)

Despite its many challenges, collaborative learning is one of the teaching methods used at the University of Botswana. The Communication and Study Skills Unit uses collaborative learning to develop the students' various skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is a pedagogical strategy that is often used in project writing (Akindele, 2012). Though collaborative writing has been researched worldwide (Yarrow & Topping, 2001), at the University of Botswana it has not been well investigated. Doing such a study at the University of Botswana, which works at being an excellent institution (University of Botswana Learning and Teaching Policy, 2008), can make academic staff aware of the students' views and consider them in planning their teaching. The focus of this paper is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of the

first year students on collaborative writing. However, this study focused on collaborative academic essay writing which the students worked on with the researcher who was their lecturer. This was to find out if students could not help each other in planning and writing better essays. The questions explored were;

1. What are students' views on collaborative writing?
2. What are the students' views on the benefits of collaborative writing?
3. What suggestions do students make to improve collaborative writing?

The researcher believes that at higher education, students have gone through enough learning and teaching to be aware of pedagogical methods that work well for their success in their academic studies. Hence, students' needs, attitudes and perceptions should be sought in order to offer relevant and appropriate necessary assistance in planning for lectures.

Theoretical Framework

Collaborative writing, as a means of encouraging learners to work together and learn from each other, is underpinned by the social constructivist perspective of learning by Vygotsky (1978). From this perspective, learning is a social activity and learners' knowledge development is a shared experience through interaction and language usage. Thus, it puts importance on the interaction with peers and holds that as learners interact with others they develop useful skills and strategies. This perspective deviates from the traditional method of teaching where the teacher was the source of information and the learners were regarded as passive recipients. In a social constructivist environment learning is sustained by teamwork. Learners are expected to actively interact and learn from others and the environment, not in isolation. They are expected to be active, make use of their social setting and context to derive knowledge. This could be facilitated through interaction and discussion between learners themselves or the teacher and the learner, where the learner actively gains knowledge (Yang & Wilson, 2006).

Social constructivist theory expects learners to interact verbally and non-verbally, play various roles in respect to one another and cooperate to accomplish specific goals in pairs or groups. As they interact and exchange ideas, make decisions and plan on their writing tasks, they help each other handle the task and therefore acquire relevant and appropriate knowledge and skills of writing (Fung, 2010; Nguyen, 2013; Yilmaz, 2008). That is, they gain mastery of the required skills to be able to do tasks even outside the classroom, in the real world. They should then be able handle the tasks if they encounter them alone without peers.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) highlights the interdependence between two levels of knowledge he refers to as an individual's actual level of knowledge and the potential knowledge level. At the actual level the learner is autonomous but at the potential knowledge level the learner is not able to work independently. Thus, when a less capable learner works collaboratively with more capable peers, their level of potential development is likely to be increased.

Collaboration supports social constructivist learning as it creates opportunities for meaningful interactive, learner centred environments where more capable peers and the less capable discuss,

argue and negotiate ideas to collaboratively solve problems. Social interaction among learners can be promoted through collaborative writing activities. Collaborative writing provides a social context of learning as it involves the construction of a shared document where group members engage in significant interaction, shared decision-making and responsibility for the document (Allen et al. 1987). Social interaction develops learners to be good writers through sharing and discussing the writing process with their peers. It enhances them to critique their own writing and be cognisance of the different styles of writing (Peretz, 2005).

Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Data were collected from the first year students in one faculty at the University of Botswana towards the end of Semester two. This was an opportune time, at the end of the first year when students have had experience in various pedagogical strategies including collaborative writing. The total population was 139, and only 94 students completed the questionnaire. The students who were retaking or registered at upper levels were excluded to avoid any bias in case they viewed collaborative writing differently from the first year students.

A questionnaire was used to collect data from 94 students, 30 males and 64 females. The questionnaire consisted of both open and closed ended items. The closed ended items requested the students to respond to a 4 point Likert Scale of Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Agree (3) and Strongly Agree (4). The closed ended items solicited students' responses on their preference between working alone, in pairs and as a group and whether collaborative writing benefitted them. The open ended items requested students to state how they viewed collaborative writing, how it was beneficial to them and come up with suggestions that could improve collaborative writing. This information was important to the researcher and colleagues to find out how students felt about collaborative writing in order to consider their views and make necessary improvements in the use of this approach.

In addition to the questionnaire, a focus group interview was conducted with 10 students who had completed the questionnaire. Though the students were randomly chosen, they were each drawn from the groups that worked on the collaborative essay writing. The students chose their group members and the lecturer asked them to accommodate those who did not belong to any groups. The lecturer was aware of the disadvantages of the self-selection grouping where some students in the group may feel left out (Chapman, Meuter, Toy & Wright, 2006). The groups that worked on the collaborative tasks in class had 5 members each as suggested in Machemer & Crawford (2007) that the "…activity is best approached through a small group of two to five students" (p. 11). The focus group participants were suggested by their group members so that they could nominate interactive people who could give more information based on their collaborative essay writing. The focus group was used to provide "rich details of complex experiences and the reasoning behind [an individual's] actions, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes" (Carrey, 1995 in Powell & Single, 1996, P. 500). It was also ideal for this study as the participants motivated and stimulated each other during the interview discussion. The interview lasted for about 40 minutes. There were 5 male and 5 female students. The focus group interviews were done to enrich and verify data collected through questionnaires. The participation in this study was voluntary.

The data was analysed statistically and descriptively. The closed ended items in the questionnaire were presented in tables for comparison and analysed quantitatively. The data from the focus group interview was presented and analysed qualitatively.

Results and Discussion

This section provides the results based on the predetermined themes which are: students' preference on collaborative writing, benefits of collaborative writing and students' suggestions on collaborative writing.

Research Question 1: What are students' views on collaborative writing?

The first research question sought to find out the students' views on collaborative writing. The aim of the question was to find out if students preferred working alone, in pairs or as a group. There was a follow up discussion through the focus group interview to get more data on students' views on collaborative writing.

Table 1: *Students' views on collaborative writing*

	Working alone	Working in pair	Working as a group
Considering your group writing activity, what do you prefer?	*45*	*25*	*23*

As Table 1 shows, a significant number 45 (48%) of first year students involved in this study stated that they preferred working alone, 25 (27%) preferred working in pairs, while 23 (25%) preferred working as group. In the follow up open ended item, which requested students to state their reasons for their preference, some of the participants who preferred working alone stated:

Participant: *I prefer working alone because it is difficult to work with other people. It is better when we discuss and write individually.*

Participant: *Some people do not turn up for group work and it wastes time.*

Participant: *Just as it says too many cooks, writing alone is the best. When we write as a group we do not agree on what to write and others just want their ideas to be written. I always prefer working alone.*

Participant: *Some of the students want others to do the work for them and get marks.*

Those who preferred working as a pair or in groups stated:

Participant: *Working with others helps to come up with better ideas and a better write up. I think we understand better when we discuss in a group though it takes all our time.*

Participant: *We gain a lot from working as a group and we got good marks too.*

Participant: *It makes the work interesting as we discuss and write together.*

Participant: *We learn from each other.*

A follow-up focus group interview was done with 10 students who had responded to the questionnaire. The students were asked to state why they preferred working alone than in groups. Four participants stated that they preferred working alone. The participants' responses were:

Participant 1: *It is difficult to write as a group. I prefer writing alone, in my space and finishing Working with other people, especially writing takes a lot of time.*

Participant 2: *Working with others is a problem. Many students have other things to do. They want to get good marks but refuse to work.*

Participant 3: *We do different courses and it is difficult to meet to write. Group work is difficult because we sometimes don't agree and we stay long arguing.*

Participant 4: *Writing in groups takes a lot of our time, it's better to work alone or maybe in a pair not group. I prefer working alone. We do learn a lot from each other when we work in groups, but it creates arguments. Some members didn't want to do their tasks.*

Some of the focus group interview participants who stated that they liked working as a group said:

Participant: *I like working with others because it motivates me. When we are writing a difficult assignment, we get to discuss and it helps. It took a lot of effort and arguments but got very good marks for our essay.*

Participant: *Our group was very good, though yes, we had two members who liked absenting themselves, we did well. We communicated about our topic and researched a lot. We helped each other. Sometimes working alone is boring.*

As indicated in the extracts above, most students preferred working as individuals instead of working with other students in a group. This view works against the proponents of learner-centered approach. For instance, Johnson & Johnson (1994) in Biria & Jafari (2013) empahsise that "…students can learn best in a more learner-centered, collaborative learning context compared to individualistic and competitive learning settings" (p. 164). Collaborative writing would provide the students with the opportunity to control their learning. Alsubaie & Ashuraidah (2017) expound that adapting learner-centered method is a significant change that is needed to concentrate on students learning. They highlight that, "One of the methods that implement learner-centered is collaborative learning" (p. 10). If the University of Botswana first year students prefer individual work than collaborative work, then it means they may not advance through the progressive learning and teaching methods aligned to research (Daouk & Bacha, 2015). Working with other students is indicated to have a number of advantages. Firstly, it has the potential of developing students' social, cognitive and self-efficacy

When students engage in collaborative writing, they would become responsible for their own learning and become critical thinkers (Soetanto & McDonald, 2017). Therefore it is critical that the University of Botswana first year students are encouraged to work collaboratively with others in order to develop as a whole individual who can fit into the global world (University of Botswana Learning and Teaching Policy, 2008).

Research Question 2: What are the students' views on the benefits of collaborative writing?
This question solicited students' perceptions about collaborative writing. The aim of the question was to find out how students perceived collaborative writing based on their responses to the 4 Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The question also asked students to state their views on which aspects of collaborative writing they benefited from.

Table 2: *Students' views on the benefits of collaborative writing*

Collaborative writing:	SA	A	% (SA + A)	D	SD	%(D + SD)
benefitted me	29	49	83	12	4	17
improved my vocabulary	28	43	76	16	7	24
improved my grammar	31	38	73	20	5	27
improved my communication skills	52	33	90	6	3	10
contributed to my academic growth	50	34	89	7	3	11
improved my time keeping skills	25	41	70	18	10	30
improved my referencing skills	29	40	73	19	6	27
improving my ability to provide constructive critiques to others	33	41	79	15	3	19
helped me understand ethical issues involved in conducting research	41	31	77	13	7	21
improved my problem solving skills	31	44	80	11	6	18

Table 2 shows the students' views on the benefits of collaborative writing. As the table indicates, 83% (Strongly Agree and Agree) of the students felt that they benefitted from the group work while 17% (Disagree and Strongly Disagree) felt that they did not benefit. The students showed overall satisfaction with the benefits of collaborative learning as; improving communication skills 90%, contributing to academic growth 89%, improving problem solving skills 80%, improving ability to provide constructive critiques to others 79% and improving vocabulary 76%. Improving grammar and referencing skills were both frequented at 73% each. This shows that the students were aware of the benefits of collaborative writing.

In the focus group interview the students said:

Participant: *Writing together is a good idea if other students were cooperating. We learnt a lot from each other. We even learnt terms, English, because some students attended English medium schools. But keeping time and loafing were a serious challenge, especially before we told you.*

Participant: *I learnt referencing a lot because I didn't understand it and it was difficult to read it. We discussed and asked other people to help us so that we write the right thing and we did.*

Participant: *I benefitted a lot from my group members coz they were serious with the task. We agreed on what to do in the next meeting. We had made rules of how we communicate and meet. It made us communicate a lot and built our confidence. When you were absent you were charged and after the submission we bought drinks. It was fun and we hope to continue helping each other with our studying.*

The focus group interview participants, in response to why some students did not contribute well to the collaborative essay writing task, said:

Participant 1: *Some students don't cooperative and don't want to do work. What do we do?*

Participant 2: *It's very difficult to work in groups. We have many things that we do and sometimes group members don't tell us when they meet. Sometimes people just stay away, but others are held up with classes and assignments.*

Participant 3: *Students who stay outside at times don't come for group meetings. They want us to do work for them.*

Participant 4: *Like "participant 1" said, it's difficult to say what the problem is because students just give excuses. Some don't say anything until you ask them.*

All the 10 students who participated in the focus group responded positively to the benefits of collaborative writing. Although students responded positively to the benefits of collaborative writing, in practice students did not like working in groups as shown it Table 1. The results indicate that the students are aware of the benefits of collaborative writing as shown above in Table 2 and in their responses in the focus group. However, it can be assumed that students did not like the challenges that they experienced in working with others. The responses of the focus group highlighted on some of the challenges of working in a group.

A follow up question on views of how well group members contributed to the collaborative writing task indicated that they worked well. The students expressed positive views about collaborative writing and perceived it helpful by learning from each other, improved their communication skills and built their confidence. There were some members who did not work well though. The difference between those who responded positively and those who responded negatively was noteworthy. 49 (53%) stated that all the members contributed well towards the collaborative writing task. 41 (43%) indicated that not all members contributed and 4 (4%) participants did not respond to this questionnaire item. The responses from the questionnaire respondents and the focus group interview both agreed on the benefits of collaborative writing. It is interesting to note that though students indicated that they viewed collaborative writing negatively and preferred working alone in question 1, they had positive attitudes about the benefits of collaborative writing. Akindele (2012) stated that through collaborative writing, students improve their writing and communication skills as they share knowledge and ideas, learn to cooperate, manage their emotions and solve problems and conflicts. They were able to elaborate on the benefits, though they still stated that the problem emanated from working together in groups. They stated the challenges of not agreeing or failing to turn up for group meetings and agreeing on the logistics of how to carry out the writing task. Though collaborative writing benefits the students, it poses many problems to them. Al Tai (2015) reports that it "…is considered a disadvantage by some students" (p. 167).

Research Question 3: What suggestions do students make about collaborative writing?
This was an open question that invited students to make reference to their experiences on collaborative writing, and suggest how the tasks could be carried out in future. The question was also asked during the focus group interview, and the students' responses were the same as responses in the questionnaire on the open ended item. The participants' responses in this question have been numbered for ease of reference in the analysis. The students' responses were:

Participant 1: *I would suggest using technology like email, Moodle or whatsApp for discussions so that everyone can contribute anywhere they are, so that the group work is not delayed in anyway. Sometimes it's difficult to meet.*

Participant 2: *I would suggest that I work with students who have a similar timetable as mine. It will help us to agree on times to meet.*

Participant 3: *Working in pairs is better than a group. So I suggest that we be given work in pairs rather than groups because that way work will be done faster and there will be no 'free-rider" problem.*

Participant 4: *I suggest lecturers intervene. We introduce a system where a register is availed and every time when there is a meeting, every person signs. When we submit the write up the lecturer should find out how much we contributed to the write up, and award marks according to our effort.*

Participant 5: *Lecturers need to also keep on checking on how we are working and attend to our problems.*

The responses from the participants suggest that the students were aware of how best collaborative writing could be handled by both students and lecturers to be beneficial. Participant 1 made good suggestions on how collaborative writing could be improved. The students felt that the use of technology in collaborative writing could help in saving time for physical group discussions. This response proved to be interesting and appropriate as Bremmer (2010) confirmed that "…many students are now able to call upon an increasingly sophisticated range of tools to communicate (p. 124).   This is upheld by Oxnevad (2013) in Alsubaie & Ashuraidah, (2017) who explained that collaborative learning includes the use of technology, and that teachers need to adjust their teaching strategies "…to integrate new technologies while redefining learning and writing in specific for the 21st century" (p.12).

Participant 2 suggested that to make it easier for the groups to meet, it was better if they based their grouping on lecture timetables that are similar. This calls for students' self-selection groups that enable students to work with other students that they know. Self-selection groups, however, have disadvantages where some students feel out of place (Chapman, Meuter, Toy & Wright, 2006).

Participant 3 felt that working collaboratively with others in a group delayed their progress and gave opportunity to social loafing. The participant preferred pair work to group work. Pair work is collaborative, but if students work in groups it brings in diversity of ideas, styles of writing and experience (Al Tai, 2015). It is however, necessary for students who feel very much against group work to be allowed to work in pairs while they learn to adjust to working in groups. Yang & Wilson (2006) emphasise that, "Allowing your students to work independently is an essential aspect of social constructivist theory" (p. 370).

Participant 4 suggested that there was need for a monitoring mechanism of what students did in groups. The student suggests that they keep record of all that they do in collaborative writing and submit the recording with the collaborative writing task. This would help the lecturer to find out how the students worked on the task and award marks accordingly. Participant 5 also suggests that lecturers should monitor how they work in groups and intervene when they have problems. Collaborative work does not relieve the lecturer their role but allows learners to develop autonomy (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore the lecturer is expected to facilitate the learning and assist the learners.

Conclusion

This paper explored the attitudes and perceptions of the first year students on collaborative writing. At higher education, students have gone through enough learning and teaching to be aware of pedagogical methods that work well for their success in their academic studies. At this level they are also being prepared for the field of work and the approaches and strategies used should focus on that.

Although the students' responses suggested that they preferred working alone compared to collaborative writing, they also responded positively to the benefits of collaborative writing. It gives a clear indication that the students may show a positive attitude if their problems of working with others could be addressed by their lecturers. Students suggested the use of technology as one strategy that could be used to organize group work. This highlights the need for lecturers to embrace technology in teaching in order to make collaborative writing a meaningful experience for students. It is also important to educate the students on the importance of collaborative work. Since students seemed to experience a lot of problems in working with others, they should be left to self-select their groups to minimize the conflicts.

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