

Working Together: Reflections on a Non-hierarchical Approach to Collaborative Writing

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The authors are a group of geographically dispersed UK HE Learning Developers interested in research-related topics. Due to Covid-19, the ability to meet in person at the annual 2020 ALDinHE conference was thwarted, resulting in the evolution of a research Virtual Community of Practice (vCoP).

- Collaborative writing offers an opportunity for communities to share ownership of and responsibility for the writing, editing and reviewing process in a democratic, non-hierarchical environment. Such activity can foster the overall growth and development of the community.
- Organizing collaborative writing as a shared, democratic responsibility, without a traditional leader figure, smoothed out concerns among the contributors about their previous writing experience, the validity of their ideas and their written input.
- Writing collaboratively, rather than alone, produced effects on contributors which were akin to participating in a team sport; it spurred individual contributions, encouraged self-selected responsibilities and acted as a safety net.
- The model of collaboration developed by this particular vCoP could be used by other groups to address questions in the changing HE landscape that are relevant to them, and plan activities to strengthen their vCoP's group identity, especially now that technological advances have opened up additional opportunities for communities to engage in collaborative writing for creating scholarly knowledge.

Introduction

The process of writing is a cornerstone for academia, reflecting values such as rigour, critique and engagement (Mountz et al., 2015). Academic writing is typically valorized as an individual endeavour, but with the advancement of technology such as synchronous online writing platforms, opportunities to construct scholarly knowledge collaboratively have multiplied (Nykopp et al., 2019). Collaborative writing (CW) involves 'sharing the responsibility for and the ownership of the entire text produced' (Storch, 2019, 40), factors that have certainly been enhanced by developing technologies. CW differs from cooperative writing, which involves a division of labour with each individual being assigned to, or completing, a discrete sub-task (Storch, 2019).

This chapter discusses the reflections of ten authors from a UK-based research virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) on the challenges and positives encountered during the CW of a research journal article using a shared Google Document.

Literature Review: Collaborative Writing

Existing literature identifies a number of approaches to CW, including: in-sequence writing, in parallel, one-for-all, multi-mode and reaction writing (Lingard, 2021). Although this categorization suggests CW is a multi-modal dynamic process, generally the progression of CW is linear (Lowry et al., 2004). Hynninen (2018) discusses the creation of a series of synchronous writing clinics in order to produce a collaborative academic publication within the field of computer science. Within that group, the research leader assigned specific tasks to colleagues, with more experienced researchers offering comments on the text. Hynninen's (2018) account suggests that their approach combines horizontal and stratified-division writing, where members have particular roles to perform.

In a similar vein, Ness et al. (2014) created a writing group in order to develop a body of academic literature relating to the authors' teaching practices within the field of nursing. Their approach involved the rotation of the first author between members, with each stage of the writing process being distributed evenly. The first author was then responsible for final editing and submission. Similarly, Collett et al. (2020) discussed their experiences of CW for publication; through face-to-face and online writing sessions the three academics shared and rotated roles such as leader, editor, mentor, indicating that such an approach helped with the cohesion of the group.

From the beginning the aspiration of our vCoP was to be democratic with a shared ownership of and responsibility for the whole writing, reviewing, editing and revising process.

Method

The writing of the original article (Bickle et al., 2021) involved a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous writing sessions. The synchronous sessions included live online discussions interspersed with periods of quiet writing. After completing the research article, the authors reflected on their CW journey, via a further synchronous writing session, recording their responses to two provocation questions: Q1. What challenges did the democratic experience of writing collaboratively present for you?; Q2. What were the positive elements of writing collaboratively? Responses from the authors were numbered A1–10 for transparency. The reflections discussed below are from all ten members of this vCoP, but one member self-excluded from this author list, due to competing time commitments.

Evaluating the vCoP Method

Through a meta-reflection, the research vCoP authors identified how the purely non-hierarchical approach they had taken to CW – creating their research journal article with no leading contributor(s) or initial division of writing tasks – had been pivotal to the quality of their experience. The democratic nature of construction evolved organically, enabling the ten authors to have an ‘equal say, and all suggestions were carefully considered and discussed’ (Q2.A1), thus demonstrating the ‘level of respect that was shown for each other’s writing – nothing was deleted or changed’ (Q2.A3) without consultation between the whole group – either synchronously via verbal discussions, or asynchronously ‘via suggestions or comments’ (Q2.A3) on the Google Document. Despite the variation in their previous academic writing experiences, this non-hierarchical process enabled the ‘opportunity of drawing out the skills and experiences of individuals and seeing how others work when writing the same topic but from a different perspective’ (Q2.A6).

One author noted how they ‘really felt like part of a team during this collaborative process, and the discussions we had as a group made me feel like I was contributing to the piece as a whole’ (Q2.A3), whilst another compared it with ‘a team sport [...] being spurred on by it [...] but also enjoying] the sense of a security net’ (Q2.A9).

The non-hierarchical nature also emanated a strong sense of responsibility – ‘a personal pressure to complete bits for meetings out of a sense of responsibility to the group’ (Q1.A6). There was ‘the feeling of not being alone, [and it] sped up the rate at which I did things and wrote – like a team sport not wanting to let others down’ (Q2.A7), while also ‘knowing that things wouldn’t come tumbling down when turning your back onto the project for a bit was really comforting – and very helpful for writing’ (Q2.A9). This intentional focus on equitable inclusion built up a high level of trust between the authors with ‘everyone’s willingness to put their things out there for comment and criticism’ (Q2.A7), and a ‘general willingness to let people get on with things and give them a try, rather than worrying about what could go wrong beforehand’ (Q2.A7).

The ‘lack of hierarchy compared, say, with the supervisor/student type relationship’ (Q2.A1), and the absence of predetermined roles, such as those noted in the literature above, provided a level playing field that encouraged peer support. One author noted feeling ‘very supported when writing as this was a fairly new experience for me and an area which I had requested some mentoring for’ (Q2.A3), whilst more experienced writers who were used to having sole ownership of a text found ‘let[ting] go of a thought or a text and then see[ing] it in a new light when coming back because others have worked on it in between’ (Q2.A9), a very positive aspect of this non-hierarchical CW process. This level of teamwork led to the feeling of never being ‘stuck or blocked; there was always someone there to support you and collaborate with’ (Q2.A10).

There were some elements of nervousness, which was an interesting phenomenon since many authors were already-experienced and published academic writers; ‘[I] worr[ied] a lot at the beginning about saying the wrong thing’ (Q1.A1); ‘scary to

put your own draft work “out there” (Q1.A5); ‘I was apprehensive about the structure of my sentences, the grammar, the spelling, and also what will my writing reveal about me both professionally and personally’ (Q1.A9); ‘I felt worried about getting things wrong or doing things in a way that did not fit with everyone else’s ideas of writing for publication’ (Q1.A2). Perhaps these apprehensions occurred due to the act of sharing the writing process, versus the lone-working which is more commonplace in academic writing endeavours (Lowry et al., 2004).

The literature also discusses how CW can foster elements of professional development, such as extending the learners’ knowledge of the topic and/or writing process, learning from peers and combining perspectives to ascertain a shared goal (Abrams, 2019; Šuković & Milanović, 2021; Storch, 2019; Thorpe & Garside, 2017). It is clear that the non-hierarchical CW process provided the opportunity for professional development. The vCoP authors reported how it was ‘very helpful and insightful to experience the different writing styles of others and opened my views on how I might write in the future’ (Q2.A1); ‘the different styles of writing and approaches to writing [...] was interesting to see, in real time’ (Q2.A2); a positive element was ‘everyone’s writing styles and [...] gain[ing] an understanding of what writing for publication entailed from a range of perspectives’ (Q2.A3).

Variation in writing styles was also noted as challenging for some of the authors: ‘my writing style was quite different to many of the other contributors and I was concerned about this’ (Q1.A2); ‘merging styles of writing’ (Q1.A3); ‘how my “voice” fitted with other voices’ (Q1.A4); ‘getting used to the writing styles of different people’ (Q1.A6); ‘different styles and approaches to writing’ (Q1.A7). Although some expressed concerns about ‘how one consistent voice could be achieved for the whole paper’ (Q1.A4), and ‘how would we be able to agree and move forward’ (Q1.A7), such concerns soon disappeared as the true benefits emerged as the ‘sense of belonging from the community turn[ed] the perceived challenges into positive experiences’ (Q2.A6). These comments might suggest, more widely, the need to carefully consider the purpose, focus and author constitution of collaborations. Such considerations could include not only the different styles of collaborating authors but also the varying norms in different disciplines and academic fields (Lee, 2001). However, as our own group evolved organically from a research group with a mentoring aim, these considerations need not be seen as essential to all CW endeavours.

Conclusion

From our meta-reflection we conclude that a democratic, non-hierarchical environment enhances the effectiveness of collaborative writing activities in a research vCoP, and perhaps more widely for academics across the disciplines who are also committed to co-creating a more humane and democratic HE. The opportunity to present, discuss and evaluate a variety of perspectives, freely and democratically, promotes the truly collaborative nature of both the content creation and the writing processes from start

to finish. Therefore, this chapter evidences the importance of not only seeking out opportunities to collaborate with immediate colleagues but also networking beyond an individual's immediate institutional context in their wider field of academic practice in collaborative writing *per se* and thus also of modelling the opportunities and power provided in collegiality and cooperation. We recommend that any CW endeavours should be undertaken following a democratic and non-hierarchical approach to achieve a truly joint authorship of the co-created text.

Humane Relationships: Reflections on Dialogue and Collaboration in a Foundation Art, Architecture and Design Course

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- The authors' professional practices were bolstered, enhanced and even enabled through the very human relationships that they built as they studied together as students of the PGCert.
- Learning to bond, belong and collaborate in real, human ways enabled the authors to form an authentic Community of Practice (CoP).
- When the pandemic struck, the authors drew on their relationships of trust and human bonds to honestly interrogate their own behaviours, worries and concerns, and this in turn helped to support students and create creative, collaborative Learning & Teaching (L&T) spaces.
- The authors offer a model to their students of how creative practitioners can work collectively to share creative skills, ideas and expertise to democratically develop new knowledge.
- To allow for a CoP to develop, the authors advocate for tutors to have time and spaces in which to learn how to collaborate with each other and develop human relationships that in turn bolstered, enhanced and even enabled their L&T practices.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the importance of the development of human and humane relationships between academic staff and that this needs to be developed consciously in and between staff. We argue that courses for staff development, like our University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE (PGCert), should model, build and enable collaborative teaching and learning practice. Our PGCert makes space for collaborative practice in action, promoting the power of collegiality and the CoP (Smith, 2009; Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and encouraging staff to experience the process of 'becoming' with each other (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). We outline our own