



A Case Study on Facilitation Styles and Outcomes during Collaborative Writing among Malaysian Tertiary-Level Students

Siew Fong Lin

Tunku Abdul Rahman University College, P.O Box 10979, Jalan Genting Kelang, 50932 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to observe facilitation styles during the process of collaborative writing among students in a private university-college in Malaysia. Participants in this study comprised fourteen Year Two Bachelor of Social Science students. They formed two case study groups in performing their writing tasks. Data was obtained from various instruments such as video recordings, interviews, diary entries and observations. The findings showed two totally different approaches used in leading collaborators. Both approaches, in hand, successfully promoted teamwork. In addition, significant outcomes from collaboration were observed. It can be concluded that positive output from collaboration is very much dependent on the high commitment level of collaborators.

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Introduction

Many teaching practitioners advocate the use of collaboration in the classroom. Dillenbourg (1999) defines collaborative learning as two or more individuals involved in the process of learning. The collaborative process, in turn, has been described as having students co-operating when performing a task in which learning is promoted through interactions, stimulated learning and knowledge construction (Liao, Huang, Chen, & Huang, 2015).

Collaboration is commonly used due to many clear benefits gained by students. They include improving skills and collaborative skills when performing problem-solving tasks (Ravetz, Kettle & Felcey, 2013; Retnowati, Ayres & Sweller, 2017); increasing understanding and retention of subject matter (Vázquez-García, 2018); establishing support by providing feedback on ideas presented (Leach, 2004; Vygotsky 1978); enhancing critical thinking in real and fictional situations (Hatton & Nicholls, 2018) and improving students' attitudes and persistence level in learning subjects (Springer, Stanne & Donovan, 1999; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1993).

Social process is crucial to a group and therefore, similar goals shared with concerted efforts and positive group dynamics are needed for successful collaboration to occur (Dillenbourg, 1999). Additionally, students can increase comprehension and learn successfully when placed in a conducive setting which has been planned well for collaboration (Prusak, Hershkowitz & Schwarz, 2012; Veenman, Denessen, van den Akker & van der Rijt, 2005). It has been found that the areas of leadership, facilitation styles adopted and group dynamics have significant effects on the outcomes of collaboration.

Leadership and facilitation styles have been investigated by Cobb, Stephan, McClain & Gravemeijer (2001). They discovered the importance of creating situations which warrant collaboration; establishing conducive contexts for team efforts and setting appropriate regulations for groups

to function smoothly. Another study conducted by Zha & Ottendorfer (2011) in investigating cognitive achievement among undergraduate students revealed the significance of leader roles. The findings obtained showed that leaders could affect group dynamics through their actions when interacting with their group members, asking questions and providing guidance them in problem-solving tasks.

Therefore, it is crucial to study the impact of group facilitation adopted on student collaboration. The findings from this study will enable instructors to gain insights on facilitation styles and the influence on teamwork. Two research questions which have been formed for this study are:

Research Question 1: What facilitation styles are used during collaboration?

Research Question 2: What critical incidents are observed from different facilitation styles?

Literature Review

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Sociocultural Theory. According to Ohta (2000), Sociocultural Theory is the main theoretical framework for collaborative learning. Social interaction is regarded as important in the learning process.

Sociocultural Theory is proposed by Vygotsky (1978). He opines that interaction is the tool which makes learning possible. Knowledge construction occurs during interactions with peers. Simultaneously, cognitive change is stimulated through interaction and sharing of knowledge which occur through social processes.

In addition, the process of teaching and learning is created between the "novice" and "expert" (Dobao, 2012). It is important for learners to move from the interpsychological plane to the intrapsychological plane. This happens when more capable learners assist less capable learners to gain

knowledge and improve on their skills. This is known as the scaffolding process.

The presence of mediators allows stimulation of thoughts for different perspectives can be explored. According to

Vygotsky (1978, 1986), mediated activities result in students achieving higher mental processes than they had before. The process of mediation is explained by Ashman & Gillies (2003), as individuals having more capable people than them translating knowledge about the society and culture so that it can be internalised.

Methodology

This study involved fourteen Year Two Bachelor of Social Science students who majored in Psychology. They were from a private university-college. Two case study groups were formed for this study.

There were seven participants in each case study group. Group 1 consisted of Lena, Aster, Yen, Tim, Barry, Harry and Elsa. The participants in Group 2 were Ida, Tasha, Kiki, Leslie, Hannah, Yoon and Myra. There are four male and ten female participants involved in this study.

Two different collaborative writing tasks in the form of producing a paragraph of about 250 words were given to the participants. The title of the paragraph writing given to Group 1 was "Why is Psychology an Important Field to Us?" However, the title of the paragraph writing for Group 2 was "Ways to Handle Stress". Both groups read an article each which was related to their topics prior to starting their writing tasks. The articles were provided by the researcher as a bid to provide useful information to guide them in their tasks.

Both groups needed two collaborative writing sessions, with each session having duration of ninety minutes, in completing the writing tasks. Their sessions were video recorded and observed by the researcher. In addition, the participants were interviewed and required to describe their experiences through diary entries.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the research questions formed for this study.

Research Question 1: What facilitation styles are used during collaboration?

The appointment of leaders and the facilitation processes of Groups 1 and 2 were observed. There were distinct differences discovered between the groups. Group 1 was systematic and a leader was selected to lead the interactions. However, Group 2 did not appoint a leader but was able to perform their task successfully.

Group 1

Lena was appointed as the group leader in the first session of collaborative writing. Her group members nominated her and she agreed in becoming the leader. She regarded her role as a leader seriously.

Group 2

There was no leader appointed in Group 2. None of the group members wanted to be appointed as the leader. However, all of the group members managed to work well together. The findings were similar with a study conducted by Wickham & Walther (2007) who found out that it was possible for groups to function smoothly without the presence of an official leader to guide them.

Research Question 2

There are different critical incidents which occurred in Groups 1 and 2. Detailed information on them is presented and explained in the following sub-sections. The first sub-section focusses on critical incidents happening in Group 1 while the second sub-section provides information on critical incidents taking place in Group 2.

Critical Incidents in Group 1

Lena, being the leader, facilitated her group in their collaborative writing sessions. There were four critical

incidents identified in the course of collaboration. They were having organised discussions, knowledge sharing, idea generation and fair turn-taking occurring.

Organised Discussions

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Knowledge Sharing

Behaviour of negotiation and knowledge construction are common in groups with high engagement level (Yang, Li & Xing, 2018). Similarly, knowledge sharing was also observed during the interactions among members in Group 1 in this study. They were willing to contribute their ideas freely. Furthermore, some group members even offered to assist their friends who faced difficulties in expressing themselves.

When the group was defining the field of psychology, Lena invited Elsa to contribute her ideas. However, she declined and explained that she did not have the knowledge. Therefore, Yen and Tim eagerly helped out by providing their input. The former stated that "psychology is practical". The latter continued to expand the idea by saying that psychology is a field to analyse "why people act in one way".

The second situation in which knowledge sharing was observed was when the collaborators needed to provide reasons for studying Psychology. Barry wanted confirmation from his friends on his point "in increasing confidence" was acceptable. Elsa refined his idea by elaborating that learning Psychology helped them to improve themselves.

The group members also identified knowledge sharing as an advantage gained from collaboration. Their input was obtained from their interviews and diary entries. Barry was favourable of collaboration because "... every member of the group provide idea and opinion as we proceed with our work". Harry found the session interesting "because we can learn from others". This piece of findings which revealed gaining of knowledge as a benefit of collaboration is in line with the emphasis of social constructivism on discussions as a means to obtain knowledge and skills (Vygotsky, 1978).

Idea Generation

Barron (2003) is of the opinion that collaboration makes it possible for production of ideas and assisting students in understanding different perspectives. It concurred with the situation observed during the discussions of participants in Group 1 when they were actively producing ideas for their collaborative writing task. Initially, there were a few group members such as Elsa and Aster who seemed unclear when approached by their group leader to contribute their ideas. However, their understanding of the topic slowly increased as they listened to their group's discussion. Consequently, they were able to produce relevant information for their task.

The group was able to define psychology at the beginning of the discussions. The group members were confident in explaining the areas covered in the field. Furthermore, they could help their group members to heighten their level of knowledge of the field.

Idea generation was also observed when the group was thinking of functions of psychology. Elsa stated that "psychology helped one to understand human behaviour and thinking". Lena swiftly provided the second function which was "not to judge others easily". However, she was indecisive whether her point was related to Elsa's point and attempted to stop her friend from including her point. As a result, Barry

assured her that it was possible to list her point down first and then filtered their ideas before writing out their paragraph.

It was discovered from the interviews and diary entries that the participants were satisfied with the idea generation process occurring under their leader's guidance. Tim expressed his approval of the sessions as "... everybody has their chance to share their own ideas. And most important is that ideas were being considered". In addition, Lena described the sessions as "... helpful in generating ideas". Elsa was happy that the sessions "... involves the participation of everyone".

Fair Turn-taking

Lena as the group leader provided fair opportunities for her group members to provide their views throughout their discussions. She constantly invited a passive group member, Aster, to contribute her ideas. In addition, she tactfully hinted at active group members who had voiced out their opinions to allow others to present their input.

It was observed that the entire group except for Aster was actively contributing their ideas throughout the sessions. She was shy and lacked confidence in joining in the discussions on her own initiative.

There was a situation in the first collaborative session when Aster was unsure of her point to present after being prompted by Lena. Harry and Elsa interrupted her and attempted to voice out their opinions. Lena politely reminded her group members to be patient and wait for Aster to present her ideas. Consequently, Aster had a turn in sharing her views with her group.

Lena again invited Aster to present her ideas in the second collaborative writing session upon noticing her silence. However, Aster shook her head and laughingly stated that she did not have anything to contribute.

The group was satisfied with Lena's guidance which resulted in them having fair opportunities to present their ideas. Their opinions on this matter was obtained from their interviews and diary entries. Yen found the sessions favourable because "... I find Lena able to include everyone in the group to give out ideas". Furthermore, Tim described the session as "...everybody has their chance to share their own ideas. And most important is that ideas were being considered". Lena even reflected on her facilitation and discovered that "... though I hardly know some of them, I think I manage to persuade everybody into contributing their ideas".

Critical Incidents in Group 2

Group 2's writing task was performed successfully despite the absence of a group leader. There were three critical incidents identified. They were, namely, ability to work well, increase in ownership and refining of ideas.

Ability to Work Well

There was no conflict observed in the collaborative writing sessions. All of the group members were courteous and attempted to maintain a harmonious atmosphere. Consequently, they were able to write their paragraph effectively.

There was a situation in which Hannah was unsure of the number of points to be included in a paragraph. She checked with her friends on the matter. Consequently, Kiki and Yoon readily explained to her that there should be a point in every paragraph but since they had to write only a paragraph, all points could be placed in the single paragraph.

In addition, there was an encounter when Leslie enquired on the progress of their writing because he was concerned that they were spending too much time in discussing the

layout of their writing. Kiki then passed their work to him and requested him to edit it. Leslie looked uncomfortable and laughingly pass their writing to Yoon and Myra. He then politely asked if they could check it instead and they obliged to his request.

The participants were able to work well as a group. Their interviews and diary entries revealed their satisfaction with their collaboration. Ida described the sessions as "... helps me to come out from my comfort zone to discuss with my friends" while Tasha stated the sessions as "... listening to each other opinion and helping each other". In addition, Kiki expressed her approval of the discussions because "... my groupmates are all very friendly and understanding which made our discussion smooth and on track" and Hannah was relieved because "... there is no argument in the group and the discussion went well".

Increase in Ownership

According to Dawson(2006), students who discuss with others on a regular basis have an increase sense of belonging. Similarly, it was interesting to observe that Group 2 had a high sense of ownership towards their task. All of the group members had the initiative to contribute ideas and to check their written work constantly. It could be attributed to their situation of not appointing a leader and they were anxious that it could prevent them from producing high-quality work.

Myra managed to present four points on their topic on her own in the first session of the discussions. She initially informed her group that she had researched on the topic. Therefore, she successfully found relevant points such as having time management, getting enough sleep, saying "no" and talking to someone. Her group responded positively to her points and started discussing each point in detail. In addition, it was observed that some of the group members had private discussions during the sessions. However, they were actually focussing on their task and reported to their group the ideas they had obtained from their private discussions.

In addition, Kiki checked the paragraph as Yoon was writing it. Kiki was unsure of whether the word "we" or "us" should be used in a sentence and sought for assistance from the group. Yoon readily informed her that the correct word to use was "us". After Kiki had checked the paragraph, she requested that Myra edit it, as well. She agreed and pointed out to Yoon that she had to provide more explanation for their point on getting enough sleep.

It was found that the group members noticed their increase of ownership as well for they regarded the discussions favourably through their interviews and diary entries. Tasha described the sessions as "... everyone of us is cooperating ..." and Kiki stated that "... my groupmates are all very friendly and understanding which made our discussion smooth and on track". Furthermore, Yoon explained the sessions as "... produce a fruitful complete essay with the combination of all of our point of views. Hence, we have enjoyed the discussion much" while Myra was of the opinion that "we can share our knowledge with each other and this will increase my knowledge and I can learn new things from my friends".

Refining of Ideas

The collaborative writing sessions in Group 2 was productive. They were actively refining ideas presented during their discussions. In addition, most of the the group members had initiative to participate in the sessions without needing any prompting from others in the group.

Myra started presenting her four points which were having time management, getting enough sleep, saying "no"

and talking to someone for the writing task. Her group members were receptive to her input. They further assisted in providing lengthy explanations and examples for the ideas.

The group members simultaneously helped to clarify the meaning conveyed through their sentences while explanations and examples for the points were discussed. Two group members, Yoon, Kiki and Myra constantly edited the work as the paragraph was written out. Consequently, Kiki noticed an error in using the pronoun “we” instead of “us” in a sentence and alerted her group members. Therefore, they discussed the matter and reached consensus in using the pronoun “us”. Similarly, correction of peers was evident during a study conducted on peer assessment activities among 130 students comprising fourth to sixth graders (Hung, 2018). According to Collar & Fischer (2010), constructive feedback is crucial in the process of peer learning.

Group 2 was satisfied with the collaborative writing sessions. Their positive views were obtained from their interviews and diary entries. Kiki stated that she “... contribute by providing ideas for the essay that was discussed and written” while Yoon was relieved that “... if we have done something wrong in our assignment, one of them will point out and help us to correct it”. Harry concurred by saying “... moreover, when we found there were some confusing parts, I would ask them to check again”.

Conclusions

Collaborative writing sessions of Groups 1 and 2 were closely observed in this study. There were different facilitation styles used by Groups 1 and 2 in this study. As a result, there were different critical incidents observed in the groups.

Group 1 appointed a leader to facilitate their discussions. In contrast, Group 2 decided against appointing a leader but conducted their collaboration successfully. It can be concluded that some groups may not need leaders to guide them in order to have productive collaborative sessions.

There were different critical incidents observed in Groups 1 and 2. They range from having organised discussions, knowledge sharing, idea generation and fair turn-taking in Group 1 while the critical incidents observed in Group 2 were ability to work well, increase in ownership and refining of ideas. These positive episodes during collaboration resulted from the high level of commitment displayed by the group members.

It is crucial for students to familiarise themselves with collaborative work and ideally gain valuable experiences from classroom collaboration at tertiary level which can increase commitment towards such tasks. The knowledge gained from collaborative experiences will enable students to adapt well to their future workplaces in which team efforts are commonly required. Adverse consequences at organisational, time and working situations may be the outcomes when employees lack training in collaboration (Forte & Flores, 2014).

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