

Influence of Contextual Factors on Collaborative Writing among Students with Different Personalities

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Abstract: This study was conducted with the aim to gain insight on the process of collaborative writing among students with different personality profiles. The participants' personalities were categorised using Leonard Personality Inventory (LPI). Five Diploma in Mass Communication students formed a case study group and their collaboration process when performing a writing task was observed. Data was obtained by using video recordings, interviews, diary entries and observations. The findings highlighted contextual factors which influenced the participants' collaboration. They were participants' personalities, use of humour, leader's facilitation skills, participants' attention level and the influence of culture. These factors both promoted and inhibited group dynamics and task performance. It is recommended that collaborators be provided with information regarding their personalities and of others prior to collaboration. Furthermore, possessing knowledge of contextual factors which may affect group performance is advantageous. As a result, the outcome from collaborative writing may be enhanced.

Keywords: collaborative writing, Leonard Personality Inventory, contextual factors, personalities

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I. INTRODUCTION

Collaboration among students is strongly advocated by practitioners to be used in the classroom. Research findings have shown that collaborative work benefits individuals in many aspects. Collaboration enhances construction, retention and application of knowledge (Higgins, Flower & Petraglia, 1992; Lai and Law, 2006; Shah and Marchionini, 2010; Sharma and Hannafin, 2005; Fawcett and Garton, 2005); improves language learning and acquisition (Donato, 1994; Storch, 2005) and improves relationships among individuals (Rice & Huguley, 1994).

Therefore, according to Lam & Muldner (2017), since collaboration among peers is advantageous in learning, studies investigating instructional activities used in collaborative contexts should be given much prominence. The aim of this study is to gain insight on the process of collaborative writing among students with different personality profiles. Collaborative work among students with opposite personalities may be challenging due to their different priorities and perspectives. It is hoped that the findings of this study will increase knowledge of collaboration for both instructor and students in order to refine its use in the classroom. The research questions for this study are:

- a. What are contextual factors which influence student collaboration?
- b. What is the impact of contextual factors on task performance?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The pedagogical value of collaborative writing is based on social constructivist theories of learning. They are grounded in the work of Vygotsky and Bruner. According to Kim (2001), social constructivism regards development of cognition as possible through socially-situated processes.

Capable learners assist less capable ones to gain higher level of knowledge through their social interactions with one another. Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976) describe this process as scaffolding. Both instructor and peers are involved in providing scaffolding to less abled learners. Their help make it possible for these learners to achieve higher levels of learning which may not be possible through their own efforts.

3 categories of mediators have been identified by Vygotsky. They are material tools, psychological tools and human mediators which in turn, are interconnected in one's learning process. According to Kozulin (1994), Vygotsky has not provided details on mediators but the theoretical gap has been filled by Feuerstein,

Rand, Hoffman and Miller (1980). Vygotsky's theory has moved from psychological tools by emphasising on the human role as the mediator and the cognitive development of a learner (Feuerstein et al., 1980).

The role of the human mediator is regarded as a source of stimulation in learning. The conducive situations created for learning promote effective learning (Williams & Burden, 1997) and enhance mastery of knowledge and skills through the assistance rendered by peers (Salmon, 1988). According to Costa (2000), it also results in fostering intellectual growth among learners.

According to Helen Du, Sam, Chu, Randolph and Chan (2016), collaborative writing is a common collaborative activity. It provides learners with the opportunity to work together in discussing their writing from the initial stage of obtaining input for their writing until the final production of their writing. Collaborative writing has moved from traditional face-to-face setting to incorporate the use of technology. Applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Dropbox, Google Drive, Google Docs, Wikis as well as email messages and the use of softwares such as JCollab and TellTable are used by students during collaborative work.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study involved five Diploma in Mass Communication students from a private university-college who formed a case study group. There were 3 female participants and 2 male participants. The former were Michelle, Shian and Trisha while the latter were Aw and Woon. The personality profiles of the participants were obtained after they had answered LPI questionnaire online.

A collaborative writing task in the form of producing a script of about 2000 words was given to the participants. There should be three acts in the script. Information on different types of drama which was useful when performing the writing task was disseminated to the participants during their lecture. The participants could select either one or more genres for their script.

There were five collaborative writing sessions, with each session having a duration of ninety minutes, required in completing the writing task. All of the sessions were video recorded. The researcher interviewed the participants and requested them to describe their experiences through personal journals.

III. FINDINGS

The findings in this study revealed there were contextual factors which affected the collaborative writing sessions. The factors identified in this study are different personalities of participants, humour used, leader's facilitation, attention level of participants and culture. These factors had mixed results on the performance of task and group dynamics. The findings of this study pertaining to contextual factors and the impact of factors on task performance are closely related. Therefore, they are presented simultaneously.

Personality

It was observed from this study that personality had an impact on on task performance and group dynamics. Similarly, there was a study conducted by Rao (2016) in which collaborators were divided according to their personality for it was believed that it had significant effect on teamwork. Similarly, the collaborative writing sessions in this study were interesting and enjoyable due to Aw's personality as a Creative Relater who was active, loquacious and easygoing. In addition, Michelle and Shian who were categorised as Helpful Encourager attempted to create a harmonious atmosphere for their group to work in. Therefore, the participants revealed their satisfaction with their sessions through their interviews and journals and it showed that personality helped to promote their collaboration.

However, there were challenges faced by the group due to their personalities as the sessions progressed. Aw who was a Creative Relater was creating aimlessness in the discussions with his talkativeness. He was inattentive and changed topics of discussion incessantly. Consequently, his group was unable to progress in their work. Shian, the group leader, who was a Helpful Encourager was placing priority in creating harmony in the group and failed to stop Aw from distracting the group. As a result, there was a lot of unhappiness among the group members. It was evident from the comments they produced in describing the sessions through their interviews and journals which ranged from "aimless discussions", "frustrating when cannot move on with task" and "some people talk too much but not on topic".

Humour

The collaborative writing sessions were interspersed with heavy doses of humour. It assisted the group in two ways. They were reducing tension and making the sessions interesting.

Firstly, humour assisted in reducing tension in the sessions. According to O'Quin and Aronoff (1981), humour is an effective method in decreasing friction among group members. The group argued over a few matters such as deciding on the genre of the play, division of work during performance, types of vehicles and clothes to be used and procrastination in performing their sub-tasks. The group members created jokes or simply laughed over the matters so that they could continue with their discussions productively.

Furthermore, humour made the sessions very interesting and engaging to the participants. The participants enjoyed their collaboration. Their opinions were obtained from their interviews and diary entries through which they described their sessions as “a lot of chemistry among us”, “I feel comfortable” and “We’ve the same wavelength!”.

Leader’s Facilitation

Leader’s facilitation has an impact on student collaboration. It was found from this study that it could both inhibit and promote the collaborative writing sessions. The consequences were prominent in the areas of group solidarity, group dynamics and task performance. The findings corroborate with findings from another study investigating influencing factors on collaboration and it was discovered that the approach adopted by the facilitator affected groupwork (Brewer, Flavell & Jordon, 2017).

The leader, Shian, was observed to be relaxed and easygoing in the first few sessions. Therefore, her group members had good rapport with each other. They described their experiences in collaboration as “smooth”, “a lot of chemistry... I feel quite comfortable” and “We’ve same wavelength” in their interviews and diary entries. However, as the discussions progressed, the group became easily distracted and their pace of work slowed down. Some of the group members were frustrated and revealed their feelings through their interviews and diary entries.

Consequently, Shian decided to become stricter than before in her manner of leading her group. It was attributed to her dissatisfaction with her group’s gradual decline in their performance during the writing task. Shian posed questions to her group in order to keep them focussed on their sub-tasks. Furthermore, she disallowed her group from being distracted from their work by directly steering them back to their topic of discussion. The advantage from Shian’s change in managing her group was increasing their progress in their task. However, it was observed that a few of her group members such as Aw and Woon were unhappy with the change and decided not to follow her guidance closely. It resulted in a tense atmosphere which affected the group’s solidarity.

Attention Level

Another factor which has an impact on the student collaboration is attention level of the participants. It could promote or inhibit their team efforts. The former was when the group members chose to pay close attention and co-operated with their group members. However, the latter was when some group members were inattentive and misbehaved by not concentrating on their writing task.

Most of the participants except for Aw paid rapt attention to the discussions. It was observed that Aw behaved and interacted freely without considering the impact on his group. He changed topics of discussion quickly and made light of situations when the group had to make decisions on the genre of the play, props to be used and division of work. In addition, he ignored, Shian, the group leader who attempted to steer the interactions back to their writing task. His action frustrated his group and in a few occasions he even attempted to influence his friends to disobey their leader but was unsuccessful.

Culture

The participants in this study were affected by their culture during their interactions. Collectivist and individualistic culture were both observed in their course of collaboration. They simultaneously promoted and inhibited the group’s collaborative efforts. According to Calabuig, Olcina and Panebianco (2018), culture has a deep influence in long-term group production.

A majority of the group members were observed to be influenced by collectivist culture during their collaboration. An advantage of being collectivist was they placed priority on maintaining harmony and following the group’s decisions in many encounters. Therefore, there was little friction existing among them. However, due to their agreeableness with each other, the group was not proactive in disallowing some group members from constantly diverting from their topics of discussion. Aw was constantly introducing new topics of discussion which resulted in his group being unable to make decisions effectively and progressed with their task smoothly. Therefore, a few of the group members only complained about his behaviour through the interviews and diary entries instead of confronting Aw over his behaviour.

Only Aw was consistently behaving under the influence of the individualistic culture during the collaboration. However, Shian, the group leader who was influenced by the collectivist culture initially changed in becoming individualistic when she noticed that her group was slow in performing the task. The advantages of being individualistic were Aw was able to provide unique and creative ideas to his group while Shian was able to manage her group successfully in task performance. However, the disadvantages were Aw was insensitive in not realising that his actions resulted in his group being distracted from their discussions and being rebellious towards his leader. Furthermore, Shian’s strict behaviour in facilitating her group made her group members unhappy but she decided to place priority on task performance over maintaining group harmony.

IV. CONCLUSION

There were contextual factors which affected the collaborative writing sessions in terms of task performance and group dynamics discovered in this study. They ranged from personalities of participants, humour used, leader's facilitation, attention level of participants and culture. Recommendations on how to improve future collaborations are provided in the following paragraphs.

It is suggested that sub-tasks be provided to enable collaborators to work together successfully. In addition, the leader of the group can refer to the sub-tasks to guide the group closely and avoid from being distracted from their task. Conflict among group members can be reduced, too, when they are clear on the tasks they have to perform together.

In addition, it is crucial for group members to discover their personality profiles through personality tests such as LPI. They should attend a LPI workshop to help them understand their own strengths and weaknesses and of others. Therefore, they will understand each other better and collaborate effectively.

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