Collaborative Workplace Writing: Insights from Experienced Workplace Writers

Latisha Asmaak Shafie, Surina Nayan*
Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Perlis Branch, 02600 Arau, Perlis

Corresponding author: *surinana@perlis.uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Collaborative workplace writing is a collective writing that combines the expertise of a group of workplace writers to produce well- written pieces of writing. It is more efficient than single-author writing at workplaces. However, collaborative workplace writing is challenging as the writers have their challenges, schedules and aspirations. Therefore, insights from experienced collaborative workplace writers assist novice workplace writers who do not know what to expect when they write collaboratively. The study is a qualitative multiple case study to investigate the collaborative workplace writing skills and collaborative technologies used by four experienced collaborative workplace writers. The data were collected were collected through semi-structured interview. The study investigates the characteristics of experienced collaborative writers, the collaborative writing skills and the collaborative technologies. The findings suggested that experienced collaborative writers are subject matter experts, independent learners, 21st - century learning skills and adaptability skills. Additionally, the findings show that collaborative writers use a framework for collaborative writing in their writing projects. The study also reveals that collaborative technologies are necessities to enrich the writers' collaborative writing.

INTRODUCTION

Bush and Zuidema (2013) refer workplace collaborative writing as professional writing because the writers write for their organisations. Effective writing skills have become essential skills for workplace success as employees with superior writing skills enhance their companies' productivity and their professional image (Lentz, 2013; Washington, 2014). Workplace writing skills contribute to workplace success because employers recruit and reward their employees for the employees' excellent writing skills which range across genres, audiences and purposes (Angouri, 2013; Mahili, 2014). At workplaces, employees collaborate with their colleagues and clients by creating the companies' documents and transactions (Paré, 2000). Employees have many opportunities to learn and innovate when they collaborate with one another.

Collaborative writing means that two or more people work together to produce a piece of writing while learning the craft of writing (Rice & Huguley, 1994). Studies on collaborative writing reveal that the collaborative practices improve the participants' writing skills (Farrah, 2015; Mansor, Shafie, Maesin, Nayan & Osman, 2011). The relationship between workplace writing and success at workplace is

insufficiently researched (Machili, 2014). Therefore, it is a need to study experienced collaborative workplace writers so their insights could assist novice writers. In addition, they may feel that workplace writing is already a complicated process, and they are intimidated by their experienced colleagues. Employees often integrate their collaboration practices with available collaborative technologies to eliminate distance, space and time factors which increase productivity. Collaborative technologies consist of mobile phones, the intranets, emails, video conferencing, instant messaging, e-learning, social network sites like Facebook and Twitter and collaborative platforms like GoogleDrive and Youtube. Thus, communicative technologies enable collaborators to share data, skills and experiences (Samarah, 2006).

Considering all the above, this paper describes the characteristics of experienced collaborative writers, the collaborative writing skills of experienced collaborative writers and the collaborative technologies they use in their writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the research areas related to the study, namely, collaborative writing and collaborative technologies are discussed. Collaborative writing skills can be transmitted when the writers socialise. Studies also report that workplaces collaborations are becoming increasingly important at current workplaces (Mansor, Osman, Nayan, Shafie & Maesin, 2010; Zhang, Venkatesh, & Brown, 2011). For instance, Mansor et al. (2010) investigated collaborative activities among 27 language lecturers in a Malaysian university due to contributions to professional and personal growth because they achieved satisfaction. The lecturers reported increased knowledge and improved interpersonal skills which enhanced their credibility and efficiency at their organisation. However, they faced physical barriers as an obstacle to their collaborative practices. For some workers, Zhang et al. (2011) reveal the workers need to develop collaborative skills to communicate their ideas and combining with the team's ideas to produce quality work. There are not many studies on workplace writing (Nur Ehsan & Saadiyah, 2011).

It is essential to investigate writing approaches in collaborative writing. Raimes (1993) describes three writing approaches; the product approach, the process approach and the genre approach. The product approach concentrates on the form of the writing. Product approach is a traditional approach as the writing approach focusses on producing the correct product by avoiding errors in syntax, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation and cohesive devices (Matsuda, 2003; Pincas; 1982). However, product approach assists novice writers because it neglects the writing process (Zamel, 1983; Badger & White, 2000). The process approach concentrates on the writers The process approach focusses on the process of writing as writing is a recursive process. The process approach emphasises on writing skills than linguistic skills (Badger & White, 2000). Learners learn the writing process of pre-writing, composing, rewriting and editing to produce good writing. However, the process approach does not educate the readers (Tribble, 2003). On the other hand, the genre approach focusses on the readers. The genre approach caters for the audience as the writing focusses on writing for a specific purpose as it concentrates more on real-world contexts (Hyland, 2003). Writing tasks involve specific genres such as reports, journal articles, business letters and proposals. Genre approach writing concentrates on the importance of communicating the message to the readers. Novice writers find it hard to write for workplace purposes as the writing tasks are aligned with the organisations' practices (Nkateng & Kasule, 2016).

Collaborative writers often write together as they seek many benefits of collaborative writing as a result of various perspectives, efficient process as each writing partner plays his/her parts, increase their

productivity, eliminates lonely writing process and cost-effective as the cost of each writing project is shared among the team. Yet, novice writers refuse to participate in collaborative writing as they are intimidated by several disadvantages (Davies & Birbili, 2000). The writers have professional and personal disagreements when they work together which cause disputes that hinder their writing project. For instance, writing projects can be time-consuming when one of the writing partners procrastinate. Writing to meet the group's deadlines can cause stress to the writers because they are expected to accept and give feedbacks gracefully. Hence, tolerance towards other writers' temperance and personality is required.

Online collaborations enhance writing skills of the learners (Lund, 2008). Studies suggest that online collaborative tasks improve the learners' writing, motivated them to write, increased audience awareness, cultivated positive attitude towards writing and improved the learners' interpersonal skills (Choi, 2008; Farrah, 2015). Collaborative technologies support various learning skills and enhance the learners' engagement with the collaborative tasks (Jacobsen, 2001). Google Drive's extensive networks connect learners and instructors with texts, ideas and practices in small groups, individual users and the whole class (Slavkov, 2015). For example, learners could witness the processes of evaluating their final drafts implemented by their instructors. Moreover, the instructors could keep track of the learners, progress.

Studies have shown that collaborative technologies improve online collaborations enhance social interactions, English language proficiency, intercultural awareness, collaborativewriting skills (Coelho, Galante & Pires, 2006; Lakkala & Ilomaki, 2015; Nerantzi & Gossman, 2015; Tour, 2015). Suwantarathip and Wichadee (2014) compared the writing skills of a group of learners who used Google Docs to write their written assignments with a group of learners who wrote collaboratively in class. The data were collected for 14 weeks. The participants who wrote collaboratively using Google Docs took writing tests and surveys to evaluate their attitude towards using Google Docs and collaborative writing. The findings suggested that the group who used Google Docs performed better as they benefited from collaborative learning using collaborative learning technologies such as Google Docs. The participants faced no restriction of time and place as they received feedbacks from their group members and assisted the group members in less stressful contexts. The participants were more committed as their instructor could see their writing progress. Moreover, the participants found Google Docs easy to learn. However, there are not many studies on various writing activities and collaborative technologies (Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016; Elola & Oskoz, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The Research

The research aims to explore four experienced collaborative writers' experiences in writing collaboratively and collaborative technologies used by them. The research attempts to answer the research questions:

(i) What are the characteristics of experienced collaborative writers?
(ii) How do experienced collaborative writers write?
(iii) What are the collaborative technologies used by experienced collaborative writers?

The results obtained from the study act as possible avenues to explore how to experienced collaborative workplace writers participated in collaborative writing in their current and future writing challenges.

The Informants

Four informants volunteered to participate in the study. The informants were experienced collaborative writers who wrote many journal articles, textbooks, academic articles, reports, workplace documents, poems, speeches, scripts and short stories. Their ages were between 35 – 47 years old. They were four English language lecturers at a public university in Malaysia. The informants used anonymous names to ensure their confidentiality. The informants were identified as Myra, Rose, Teratai and Anggerik.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected were collected through semi-structured interview. The informants' interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The researchers read and understood the data. Thematic analysis was used to derive the themes (Creswell, 2003). Member checking was implemented to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data showed three emerging themes as mentioned below:

Characteristics of Experienced Collaborative Workplace Writers

The data indicate experienced collaborative workplace writers have several characteristics as stated below:

The first characteristic is experienced collaborative writers are subject matter experts. The informants had vast experiences in the knowledge domain. They represented authority in their particular areas as they developed their expertise by continuous learning in their fields. Thus, the subject matter experts maintained current and holistic knowledge of their domains.

> *In this field, you need to keep up with the trends as well as master the subject matter. (Myra)*
> *Master all the subjects..be knowledgeable. (Rose)*

The second characteristic is experienced collaborative writers are independent learners as they are self-directed at their own learning. Independent learners are responsible for their learning (Holec, 1981). The informants were proactive and able to think critically about their own career progress without depending on their bosses. They evaluated their own achievements and failures.

> *No one will tell you what to do. You got to plan and be responsible. (Anggerik)*

The third characteristic is experienced collaborative workplace writers have 21st - century learning skills such as critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, communicating and collaborating skills These 21st - century learning skills enable the writers to write efficiently together. Critical thinking abilities include analysing, arguing, evaluating and explaining. Meanwhile, creative thinking skills include imagining, designing, creating and innovating. Communicating skills describe skills like evaluating messages, using

technology, writing, reading, listening and speaking. The informants developed communication skills in their personal and professional lives that enabled them to fit in their organisation's culture apart from possessing technical skills. The informants emphasised on collaborating skills like team building, making decisions, managing time, leading and resolving conflicts.

> *You cannot lose your temper easily…trust. The information must be correct. (Myra)*

> *Time-management. You make sure the task is complete before the deadline. (Rose)*

> *A collaborative writer has to communicate with other team writers. (Teratai)*

The fourth characteristic is experienced collaborative workplace writers have adaptability skills. Adaptability skills refer to behaviours, cognitive and affective changes in response to changes in the environment (Nelson, Zaccaro & Herman, 2010). Pulakos, Arad and Donovan (2000) define adaptability skills of having competency in handling stress, handling emergencies, solving problems, managing workplace uncertainties, workplace competency, having interpersonal skills, having intercultural skills and having physical fitness. These informants recognised workplace changes and the organisations' cultures as to their professions. Their adaptability skills contributed to their writing productivity.

> *Collaborative writers are adaptable and adopt the changes faster. (Rose)*

> *Never stay the same or you become extinct. (Teratai)*

> *You got to sniff the changes and the politics of the workplace. (Anggerik)*

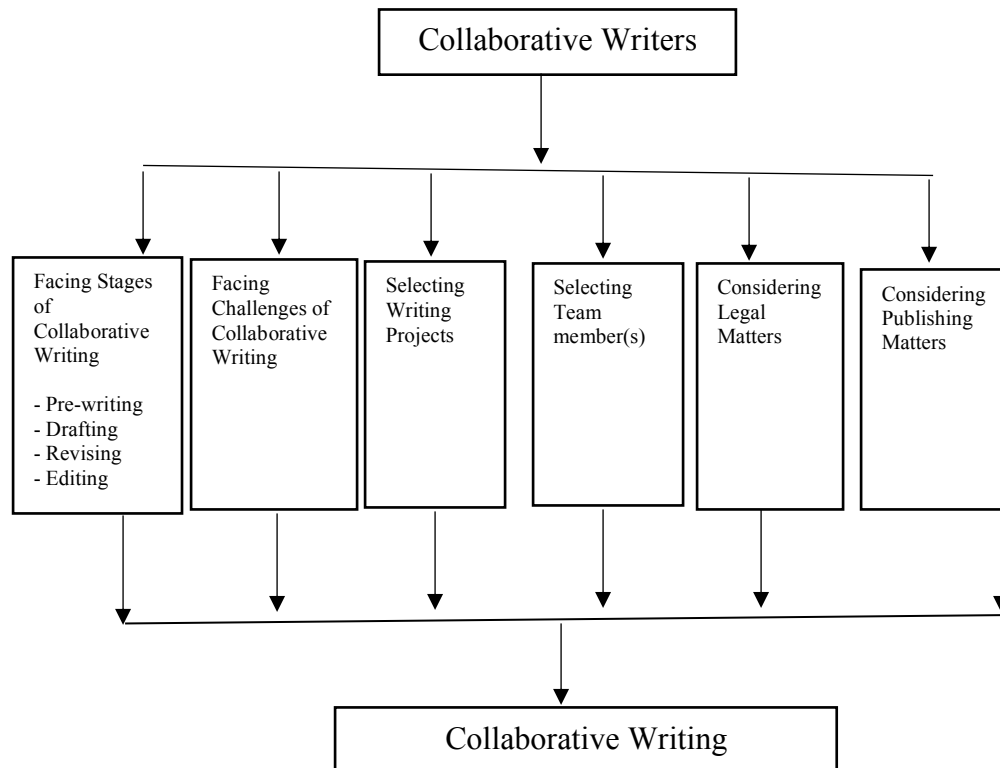*Deciphering the Writing Framework of Collaborative Workplace Writers*

The informants felt that collaborative workplace writers have their own writing frameworks for collaborative workplace writing which assist them in their writing.

> *There is an unwritten guidelines when you write together. (Teratai)*

> *As you progress, you know what to do. It is easier to work with the usual team. We know what to do and in a quicker way .(Rose)*

However, as these writing frameworks acted as their tacit knowledge, novice writers do not have proper guidance for workplace writing. It is not surprising that novice writers do not have strong collaborative writing skills due to lack of guidance for workplace writing (Nur Ehsan & Saadiyah, 2011). All the informants confessed that the contents were decided before they started writing collaboratively. The informants often conducted less face-to-face meeting because they had virtual asynchronous meetings using collaborative technologies to determine the contents of the book. The informants often improvised the content as they wrote. The tables of contents were explicit and detailed as all the writers needed to be familiar with the contents of the writing project. The writers always updated the team using a revised outline, so their works were not overlapped using e-mails, Dropbox and WhatsApp.

Figure 1 shows proposed framework for collaborative writing suggested by the informants.

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                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │ Collaborative Writers │
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| Facing Stages of Collaborative Writing

- Pre-writing
- Drafting
- Revising
- Editing | Facing Challenges of Collaborative Writing | Selecting Writing Projects | Selecting Team member(s) | Considering Legal Matters | Considering Publishing Matters |

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                        ┌──────────────────────┐
                        │ Collaborative Writing │
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Figure 1   Framework for collaborative writing skills

Figure 1 shows experienced collaborative workplace writers face six components of collaborative writing before they end their collaborative writing practices successfully. The first component is collaborative writers face four stages of collaborative writing such as pre-writing, writing, revising and editing. Collaborative writing is a process writing that has four writing stages such as pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing. Pre-writing strategies include clustering or mind-mapping, free writing, brainstorming, listing and outlining to come up with ideas on what to include in the team's writing. Experienced writers discuss and choose appropriate pre-writing strategies that are appropriate for the team to assist in the team's writing. At the end of a pre-writing session, the writers should be clear of the contents and the organisation of the contents. The second stage is the drafting where the writers start writing. There are three writing strategies during drafting which are parallel, sequential and reciprocal writing. Parallel writers write assigned sections concurrently. Sequential writers take turn writing as the first section needs to be completed earlier. Reciprocal writers work together and write simultaneously on the same section/sub-section. The third stage is revising the writing piece after receiving feedbacks from team members. The fourth stage is editing to ensure the written product will not be errors in spelling, grammar and the flow of the writing. Deciding the contents of the writing projects before the writers start the projects is an essential act of collaborative writing.

The second component is collaborative workplace writers face challenges of collaborative writing like credentials, royalties, ethics, genres, time management and writers' disputes. It is imperative that collaborative writers manage their writing projects properly, so the projects will end as planned. Therefore, a collaborative writing requires the members to manage the division of work, the roles, the deadlines, the meetings, the writing stages and completion projects. Collaborative writers often set the time-management of their writing projects such as setting deadlines for the writing process, editing or

proofreading and getting published. In addition, the writers decide the standard of writing that will be followed by the writing members such as the font, space, the layout. Collaborative writers know their roles and responsibilities to maintain a collaborative writing group like project managers, production manager, editors, proofreaders and treasurers. It is easier in collaborative writing when all the involved writers know their roles and responsibilities.

The third component is collaborative workplace writers select writing projects. The fourth component is collaborative workplace writers select their team members. The fifth component is collaborative writers consider legal matters such as copyright, trademark, copyright infringement, contracts and plagiarism. The last component is collaborative writers consider publishing matters like the avenues for publishing the contents. Having completed all six stages, collaborative writers can be assured that they have completed a productive successful collaborative writing. Once all the stages are completed, the writers manage to complete successful collaborative writing.

Using Collaborative Technologies

The informants revealed that they used collaborative technologies to assist them in their collaborative writing project. Collaborative technologies make writing more interesting (Bikowski & Vithanage, 2016). They did not often conduct face-to-face communication as they used collaborative technologies to keep in touch with other writers. In addition, the team usually chose familiar collaborative technologies such as e-mail, Dropbox and WhatsApp. If the team members were not familiar with the collaborative technologies, the informants ensured that all the members of the writing projects undergone training for the collaborative technologies. The informants did attend courses to be familiar with the collaborative technologies given by the university or on their own incentives. In some cases, the informants were trained by the more experienced members of the writing team.

> WhatsApp..group chats..we rarely meet. (*Anggerik)*

> Google Hangouts…FB groups.. In the beginning we do meet ..then we write on our own. (*Rose*)

> *Outline first..Then we write.* (*Teratai*)

The informants added that they used the university e-mail if they wrote for academic writing tasks and university written tasks. However, if they wrote for commercial or creative writing projects, they used their personal e-mail. The reason given was to avoid the lawsuit and copyright infringement. Other popular collaborative technologies that the informants used were Google Hangouts, Google Drive, iCloud, Facebook groups and Telegram.

> *Personal time, I use my own laptop at home. (Teratai)*

> *A common practice to use the university e-mail if we are writing documents for the university, the test paper etc. (Rose)*

The informants confessed that they created WhatsApp group for each collaborative writing project to manage their writing, conducting discussions, making decisions, keeping writing progress, reminding other writers, inspiring one another and giving feedbacks as this collaborative technology allowed synchronous and asynchronous communication. WhatsApp also allowed the writers to voice call or video call with cheaper cost when compared to traditional telephone calls.

CONCLUSION

This paper investigates the characteristics of experienced collaborative writers, the collaborative writing skills and the collaborative technologies used for successful collaborative writing. It focussed on four English language lecturers who were experienced collaborative writers. The study was conducted by semi-structured interview with the informants, and thematic analysis was employed. This paper has shown that experienced collaborative writers possess four dominant characteristics, the collaborative writing skills of collaborative writers and the collaborative technologies the writers used. Undoubtedly, there are more new collaborative technologies, yet the collaborative technologies being selected depend on the writers' familiarity with these collaborative technologies. Based on the above findings, the insights of experienced collaborative workplace writers contribute to assist novice writers to cultivate their collaborative writing skills by working with experienced collaborative writers. By working with experienced writers, novice writer can develop the characteristics of experienced writers. Novice writers need to improve their English language skills especially if they need to write workplace documents in English. It is advisable for novice collaborative writers to follow the framework for collaborative writing as the framework would act as guidelines for their collaborative writing projects. It is recommended that collaborative workplace writers to enhance their familiarity with collaborative technologies so they could collaborate with people across the globe and enrich their collaborative workplace writing.

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