

Collaborative Writing Among Students With Different Personalities: Perceptions and
Outcomes of Conflict

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Abstract

Five sessions of collaborative writing among tertiary students were observed. Five Diploma in Mass Communication students completed a product-centred course which focused on play analysis and stage performance. They formed a case study group in this study when performing a script-writing task. The main objective of this study is to obtain insight of conflict during collaborative writing among students with different personality profiles categorised under Leonard Personality Inventory (LPI). Using video recordings, interviews, diary entries and observations, the findings indicated that there were perceptions of conflict and outcomes of it in the course of collaboration. These findings suggest that conflict can be advantageous but can be detrimental to group dynamics if it is not monitored closely. It is crucial for instructors and students to be aware of the existence of conflict. Additionally, positive and adverse consequences of conflict on student collaboration in the writing classroom should be given much prominence. The understanding will help further enhance and refine the use of collaboration.

Keywords: Leonard Personality Inventory, conflict, outcomes of conflict, group dynamics, collaborative writing

Collaborative Writing Among Students With Different Personalities: Perceptions and Outcomes of Conflict

Collaborative writing is described as a situation in which writers share power, make decisions together and eventually produce a piece of written work through joint effort (Allen, Atkinson, Morgan, Moore & Snow, 1987). Collaboration is traditionally conducted via face-to-face communication. In addition, collaborative writing has even involved the use of technology such as developing a process-oriented collaborative writing system called Process-Writing Wizard (Yeh, Lo & Huang, 2011); using Web 2.0 (Rice, 2009), including Google Docs in group facilitation (Suwantarathip & Wichadee, 2014) and setting up a portal named The Writing Portal (Lee, Said & Tan, 2016) as a bid to increase student involvement.

However, conflict may result from student collaboration. Therefore, Speck (2002) has designed a framework to increase comprehension on the use of collaborative writing. Bush & Zudeima (2013) have used it as a guide to define “good” and “bad” conflict. The former is having debates regarding ideas while the latter is having arguments pertaining to personal and procedural struggles which should be reduced (Bush & Zudeima, 2013).

In addition, collaboration may be challenging due to different personalities of individuals. LEONARD Personality Profile (LPI) was used in this study to identify the preferred behavioural styles of participants. LPI was designed by Yong (2003) and consists of 100 items used to assess the personality style of an individual. The items measure five dimensions of personality which are Openness, Neutral, Analytical, Relational and Decisive. The main objective of this study is to obtain insight of conflict during collaboration among students with different personality profiles.

Method

Participants

There were five participants in this study. They were Diploma in Mass Communication students who were in their first year of studies. All of them majored in Journalism.

There were three female and two male participants. They were Susie, Alfie, Wan, Mira and Tina. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality of the participants involved in this study.

All of the participants were given LEONARD Personality Inventory (LPI) questionnaire to complete in order to find out their personality profiles. Mira and Susie were Helpful Encourager (Neutral and Relational) while Alfie was Creative Relater (Relational and Open). In addition, Wan was discovered to be Exhorter (Relational and Decisive) and Tina was Creative Expert (Neutral and Open).

Writing Task

A script-writing task was given to the participants to perform in this study. They self-formed a group in order to carry out the collaborative writing task. Cooperative learning which is crucial in collaborative writing is promoted when students are given the choice in selecting whom to collaborate with (Cote, 2006). Susie was appointed as the group leader after much negotiation over the appointment of a leader because of the reluctance of other group members in leading the group.

The length of the script should be about 2000 words. It should consist of three acts. The script could be based on tragedy, comedy, problem play, farce, comedy of manners, fantasy, melodrama or musical play or even a combination of a few types of drama.

The participants collaborated in writing the script. It meant they had to discuss in making decisions regarding the setting, characters, description of scenes and producing dialogue lines for the script. Eventually, the group performed a play in their classroom. The participants needed a total of five sessions to perform the writing task.

Data Collection

The researcher video-taped all of the collaborative writing sessions. In addition, she observed the participants during the collaborative sessions. She produced observation notes to record down significant episodes which emerged in the course of collaboration.

Two other research methods used in this study were interviews and diary entries. The participants described their experiences and provided their views on the collaborative sessions through them. Triangulation of data was obtained through the different research methods used in this study.

Results and Discussion

Critical Incidents Related to Conflict

There were a few critical incidents identified in which conflict was perceived as present in the course of collaboration. They were pertaining to situations created from a lack of in-depth discussion, leader's facilitation ability and group's refusal to accept instructions. The critical incidents produced mixed results which affected student collaboration and group dynamics. The results observed arising from perceived conflict were concerted efforts in task performance, progress in work and tense situations which inhibited free flow of interactions.

Critical Incident 1: A Lack of In-depth Discussion.

Generally, the group faced difficulties in having deep discussions on their writing task. They moved rapidly from one topic of discussion to another without much deliberation which failed to lead to effective decision making. These actions created conflict among the group members due to their different levels of commitment towards their work.

It was observed that Alfie was solely responsible in changing topics of discussion introduced by Susie as the leader of the group. Alfie who was a Creative Relater was talkative and inattentive. He changed the direction of the discussion on the cause of the death of the protagonist's mother to strong emotional bond shared by the protagonist and her father. In addition, he initiated a discussion on the polygamous marriage of the protagonist's parents as his group members were elaborating on the way the protagonist was self-supporting herself. Alfie also started talking about the protagonist's brother being immature as his group was elaborating on how the protagonist was raised by a single father. His continual actions exasperated his group members.

The rapid change of topics of discussion resulted in the group being unable to make decisions effectively on ideas to be included in the script. It was also observed that the group was interrupted in their decision making on role allocation and size of props to be used for their play. The group members were frustrated and described their collaborative sessions as "aimless" and "confusing" through their interviews and diary entries. They were uncertain if future collaborative writing sessions would be beneficial to them since they experienced a lack of focus in the previous discussions.

Outcome from Critical Incident 1: Having More Concerted Efforts in Task Performance.

The situation of lacking focus on their writing task resulted in the group leader, Susie placing much effort in guiding her group to concentrate on their task. She was a Helpful Encourager who was described as harmonious and resolved tension well. Susie did not want her group to be delayed in their work and decided to play a proactive role.

Susie expressed her frustrations through her interviews and diary entries of the situations before taking control of the discussions. She described them as, “So far, it’s like everyone giving different ideas. Haywire. I get temperamental and upset because I don’t like distractions when I’m writing. Each of us are playful.” Susie was instrumental in asking leading questions to ensure the discussions were progressing well. She provided questions for her group members to answer regarding the selection of type of drama for their play, role allocation, year, trends, vehicles, clothes pertaining to their play and details regarding the plot. Her action was to ensure that her group was concentrating on their task and not distracted by Alfie and other group members who would join him as he moved from topic to topic without having any in-depth interactions.

Critical Incident 2: Leader’s Facilitation Ability.

Susie was inexperienced in leading her group during the collaboration. In the earlier sessions, she adopted a relaxed and open approach in guiding her group but later changed her leadership style to becoming strict and controlling. It was prompted by her observations that her group was aimless in their discussions.

Susie, being a Helpful Encourager was sociable and did not like to create friction in her group. She expressed her hope through the interviews and diary entries that “groupwork was interesting becoz. everyone can share ideas freely and happy”. Therefore, she decided to be friendly and open in her manner of leading the group initially.

However, after a few sessions of collaborative writing, she discovered that her group was playful and was unable to focus on their task. Susie described her group as “playful” through her interviews and diary entries and decided to change her leadership style. She became too controlling and filtered ideas more thoroughly than before. It could be concluded that Susie being an inexperienced leader did not know how to seek a balance between being relaxed and controlling when facilitating her group.

Outcomes from Critical Incident 2: Progress in Work and Unhappiness among Group Members.

There were mixed results from the second critical incident. Firstly, there was more progress in the group’s collaboration than earlier sessions. On the other hand, Susie’s change of manner in leading her group created dissatisfaction among her group members.

Susie’s strict manner of guiding her group’s discussions caused her group to concentrate on their writing task. She successfully guided her group in making decisions on finalising the characters and the plot of the play. Simultaneously, it created tense situations when Susie disallowed the group members from diverting attention to matters which she felt were unimportant. Alfie and Wan paired up in opposing her guidance openly such as protesting verbally when she attempted to move to new topics of discussion and select suitable ideas for the script. Susie’s group members except for Alfie voiced their dissatisfactions through their interviews. They stated that “open and clear communication start early”, “have to stop group member argue” and “leader critical” when describing their collaboration. It showed their disapproval of Susie’s change in the manner of facilitating the discussions.

Critical Incident 3: Group Members' Refusal to Accept Instructions.

The third critical incident observed was the group members' unwillingness to follow the leader's guidance. Their action was consistent in all of the collaborative writing sessions. The group members except Tina were influenced by Alfie in ignoring Susie's guidance.

Alfie, being a Creative Relater, talked incessantly during the discussions. Besides that, he had many ideas flowing through his mind being a creative person and he was spontaneous in presenting them to his group. Therefore, he was unable to take time to listen to others and to accept guidance from Susie. Mira and Wan interacted with him actively and failed to allow their leader to facilitate the sessions. Consequently, the group except for Alfie acknowledged their slow pace in their writing task after a few sessions. It can be concluded that the group lacked Socially Shared Regulation of Learning (SSRL) due to the group's inability to co-ordinate their actions during collaboration. SSRL can only result when group members co-operate to complement and negotiate shared insights and aims for the task in order to complete the group task (Ku, Tseng, & Akarasriworn, 2013; Malmberg, Järvelä, Järvenoja, & Panadero, 2015; Malmberg, Järvelä & Järvenoja, 2017).

Outcome from Critical Incident 3: Tense Situations Created.

The refusal of group members to follow the guidance resulted in tense situations formed. Susie became strict and controlling towards her group members. She openly filtered their ideas and urged them to perform their sub-tasks such as props selection and making decisions on characters in the play. It was achieved at the expense of Susie ignoring some of her group's suggestions which she deemed as unimportant.

Alfie, Wan and Mira decided to discuss matters they regarded as important instead of being totally led by Susie. Alfie challenged Susie's decisions in rejecting their ideas which

seemed inappropriate to her. Wan even joined Alfie in ignoring Susie and laughed at their private jokes which diverted attention from the topics being discussed. In addition, Mira refused to let Susie continue writing their script when Susie observed that she was not writing out everything they had discussed. Mira gently pulled the paper from Susie and continued writing without explaining her action. The tense situations created much frustration and unhappiness which the group expressed through their interviews and diary entries. Therefore, they described their experiences as “leader too much in control”, “no creativity in discussions” and “i dun care i do what i like”.

Conclusion

According to Kirschner and Erkens (2013), success in student collaboration is not guaranteed in all situations. Conflict which may be caused by many factors can be detrimental to collaborators. The findings in this study revealed that critical incidents such as a lack of in-depth discussions, a leader’s inexperience in facilitating a group and refusal of group members to follow their leader’s instructions were perceived to breed conflict. Consequently, there were mixed results on the outcomes of collaborative writing.

When conflict is handled successfully, collaborative writing can be advantageous to students. According to Bush and Zudeima (2013), productive collaborative writing sessions can enable students to learn academic teamwork which is impossible to be taught by instructors in the classroom. The required skills can only be honed when students are directly involved in the process of collaboration itself.

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