

Collaborative writing has received increasing interest in the teaching of writing as well as in writing research over the last two decades. While co-authoring in the physical and social sciences is now a norm, more attention has been given to the former, leaving it rather obscure as to what co-authors in the social sciences and humanities experience during and after their collaboration. In particular, what co-authors learn from one another's research and in what ways such learning is applied to their own teaching practice and research have received scant attention. This paper aims to address this gap. It serves as an autoethnography where we, two young-career researchers, reflect on our recent coauthoring experience of academic writing. We hope that our reflections and self-evaluations offer some food for thoughts to other writing researchers, especially those who are early-career academics and writing researchers.

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Two young-career researchers' reflection on their experiences of co-authoring

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Abstract

Collaborative writing has received increasing interest in the teaching of writing as well as in writing research over the last two decades. While co-authoring in the physical and social sciences is now a norm, more attention has been given to the former, leaving it rather obscure as to what co-authors in the social sciences and humanities experience during and after their collaboration. In particular, what co-authors learn from one another's research and in what ways such learning is applied to their own teaching practice and research have received scant attention. This paper aims to address this gap. It serves as an autoethnography where we, two young-career researchers, reflect on our recent co-authoring experience of academic writing. We hope that our reflections and self-evaluations offer some food for thoughts to other writing researchers, especially those who are early-career academics and writing researchers.

Introduction

“Being reflective involves being: open... curious... patient... honest... rigorous.”

Williams, Wooliams, & Spiro (2012: 2f.), *Reflective Writing*

It is well known that publications are the currency of academics. However, due to huge workloads, academics often struggle to get published. Early-career faculty members and writing professionals may have to fight a harder battle to keep up to the expected productivity. Many, therefore, look to collaboration as a solution. *Collaborative writing* is defined as “an activity that can be simply defined as the involvement of two or more writers in the production of a single text” (Storch 2019: 40). Writing collaboratively has been reported to bring a number of benefits, including boosting research output (McGrail/Rickard/Jones 2006: 19), increasing quantity and quality of writing (Zutshi/McDonald/Kalejs 2012: 32), enhancing mutual learning and mentoring (Jones/Jones/Murk 2012: 91; Zutshi/McDonald/Kalejs 2012: 43), providing accountability, and the potential for developing long-term friendships (Zutshi/McDonald/Kalejs 2012: 32).

While productivity and writing quality are the most often credited benefits of collaborative writing, expertise sharing, an inherent part of the collaboration process, has remained underresearched. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap by reflecting on our recent collaborative writing experience. The focus of our reflection is on what we learnt from each other's research, and how our learning has influenced our teaching and research. Since both authors' backgrounds sit in the second language learning discipline, our discussion is directly related to this knowledge domain.

Before our collaboration

We both did our doctoral research at Victoria University of Wellington. Ha's research was on peer feedback (PF). She examined the effects of computer-assisted and face-to-face PF on student revision, writing quality, and student perceptions. Vola's research was on learner autonomy (LA). She investigated how LA, in this case students' writing skills, was enhanced through reflective writing.

The settings of our research were Vietnam and Madagascar where English is used as a foreign language (EFL). In the two years that we shared at our graduate school, Ha learnt about Vola's research through osmosis, particularly through a PhD writing group where both frequently updated each other on research progress. However, it was not until when she was asked to help Vola validate the coding of her thesis data did Ha have a better understanding of Vola's research and of LA in particular. Through analysing Vola's participants' journal reflections, Ha learnt that one of Vola's key findings was that journal writing had positive effects on writing quality and LA.

After graduating, we embarked on our new journeys. With Vola in Japan and Ha in New Zealand, and both engaged in new responsibilities, co-authoring a paper seemed to only exist in our distant dream, until one day when Ha learnt of a Call for Proposals (CfP) for an edited book titled *Writing beyond the University*. Given that our research areas sit under the same knowledge domain and that there were many overlaps between our topics, co-authoring seemed to be a natural call.

Our collaborative work

In our work, we examined the short- and long-term effects of reflective writing and PF on student writing (Pham/Ambinintsoa 2022). The short-term effects were examined in our PhD research (Phase 1), whilst the long-term effects were investigated between one and two years after (Phase 2). The results of Phase 1 showed that reflective writing raised students' awareness of writing goals and problem-solving abilities, while PF benefited students' writing at text level and their critical thinking. The results of Phase 2 showed that our participants' perspectives on writing evolved from product- to process-oriented. This

finding was deemed significant in our contexts, for here writing pedagogies have remained product-based. In what follows, we will present on what we gained from our collaborative writing experience.

Vola's reflection

In this section, I reflect, first, on how I integrated PF, an approach I learnt from Ha's research, in my teaching and then on how I think collaborative writing can help us develop as teachers, researchers, and writers.

I have learnt that PF is a form of collaboration that stemmed from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978). PF is also theoretically underpinned by other frameworks, including process writing, collaborative learning, and interaction and second language acquisition (Liu/Edwards 2018: 3). Grounded in these theoretical backgrounds, PF promotes interaction, scaffolding, and collaboration among peers. It also stresses the idea that writers need to receive feedback in order to improve their writing (Pham 2019). The fundamentals of PF have a lot in common with LA, which has a social dimension according to scholars in the field (e.g., Benson 2011: 14; Little/Dam/Legenhause 2017; Palfreyman 2018: 52). One of the definitions of LA is "the capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person" (Dam et al. 1990: 102). As a researcher in LA, I strongly believe in the importance of peer collaboration in EFL learning. However, I had never used PF in my teaching. Though I used peer collaboration in my classes for various activities and researched on its effectiveness on the development of LA, I did not have my students exchange their written work and give feedback to one another. Thus, co-writing with Ha and learning about the positive results of PF from her research have raised my awareness of the importance of PF. In both undergraduate and graduate school courses that I currently teach, I have my students write their reflections on platforms such as Moodle and Google Docs, which enable them to be commented on by everyone in the class. Though this is not exactly PF on the writing itself, it can still be considered PF, as students still need to read and then give feedback on what has been written. That is a practice I started to adopt since the collaborative writing with Ha. From my observation, that type of PF also helps students improve their audience awareness. This awareness makes them pay more attention to their writing. Moreover, reading their peers' writing influences how they write, as the others' writing pieces serve as examples of real writing.

I have realised that collaborative writing can help us develop as teachers and researchers. In our case, writing collaboratively enabled me to learn more about PF and Ha to learn more about using reflection to promote LA (see Ha's reflection below). By writing about our research together, we were able to combine our suggestions of approaches to offer pedagogical implications that could be applied in contexts such as ours, where writing support is scarce. Those suggestions are also relevant to any EFL/ESL settings, like

Japan and New Zealand, where we are currently working. For instance, one of our suggestions was to integrate self-reflective prompts and guidance for PF into the English writing curriculum so that students become accustomed to taking charge of their own writing and also to helping one another (Pham/Ambinintsoa 2022). If we had not written collaboratively, we may not have reached such a conclusion. Therefore, our collaborative writing allowed us to explore our research findings together to find better ways to support EFL/ESL learners.

Besides, collaborative writing can help us develop as writers, who are expected to possess a range of skills, including planning, revision, and editing. During our project, we had to plan carefully, as we had to figure out how to make our writing as succinct and yet informative as possible due to the word limit we were given. Throughout the writing process, we had to negotiate the writing content a number of times. We evaluated one another's writing sections and gave feedback to each other. That enabled us to improve the writing as a whole, that is, to make it clearer and better structured. Fitting the descriptions of two pieces of longitudinal research into 4,000 words was a real challenge to us. Nonetheless, we developed these skills thanks to our collaboration, and we believe that they are useful to our other writing endeavours.

Ha's reflection

My reflection was guided by Kolb's (1984) *experiential learning* model, designed to help learners learn from their experiences through four stages: *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualisation*, and *active experimentation*. I presented my first stage of reflection, concrete experience, in the Our collaborative work section above. In this section, I will discuss the last three stages.

My reflective observation, which is the second stage of Kolb's model, had more to do with affection than cognition. The overarching feeling that I had at the time was joy, which came from the fact that it was my first collaborative project after my PhD, and it would be published open access. I also felt proud that, despite challenges, my co-author and I managed to see our work through by pooling our skills, knowledge, and prior experience.

When those initial feelings subsided, as my reflection progressed to the next stage, abstract conceptualisation, I noticed that I gained more from our collaboration than I had expected. Though I had learnt about Vola's PhD research, it was only through our project that I had a better grasp of LA, which is broadly defined as "learner's ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec 1981: 3) and intended for both language teaching and learning in general (Little 2006: 1). More specifically, LA is defined as "when students take control and responsibility for their own learning, both in terms of what they learn and how they learn it" (Hardy-Gould 2013). Also, according to Hardy-Gould (2013), LA is based on an assumption that students are capable of self-direction and are, therefore, able to develop a

proactive approach to their learning. I further learnt from Vola's research that LA largely remained unknown in her Malagasy context (Ambinintsoa, 2020: i), despite being popular elsewhere, e.g., Europe, for it was "central to the Council of Europe's thinking about language teaching and learning since 1979" (Little 2006: i). What Vola reported in her research resonated with my context of Vietnam because here too, despite some recent studies on the topic, there is a big chasm between research and practice. Since LA is often associated with lifelong learning, which is particularly useful to language learners, I wanted to know more about it and learn how to boost LA in my students.

One of the LA methods I learnt from Vola's research was reflective writing, an aspect studied in the second phase of her PhD. In our collaborative work, we surveyed some of Vola's former participants' use of reflective writing. We found that they became more self-driven in learning thanks to applying reflective writing beyond the university (Pham/Ambinintsoa 2022: 116f.). One of the questions I asked during our research was: How could reflective writing help? I later found out that to become autonomous, learners must learn to control their learning, which can be achieved, according to Little (2022: 68), "by requiring learners to identify learning targets, choose learning activities and document the learning process." Then it follows logically that documenting the learning process involves reflection on, for example, how one did over a period of time and on whether learning targets were met. Before our project, I simply presumed that students reflect regularly and that reflection is an individual activity. However, it dawned on me during our project that formal reflection, which requires students to reflect on their progress and share such reflection with their instructors and peers, has a greater impact on their learning.

Our project ended in mid-2022, and since then, I have applied reflective writing to research, teaching, and supervision, which means I have embarked on the last stage in Kolb's model – active experimentation. In one of my current research projects, my team evaluates the effects of product-based as against product-and-process-based assessment in student collaborative writing. For both assessment methods, we asked our participants to reflect on their writing process and products. We did so based on the findings reported in Vola and Ha's research, my new knowledge of reflection, as well as my teaching experience. Besides reflective writing, our participants also did PF, a step that has become established in the writing process due to its positive effects reported in recent research. We found that reflective writing and peer feedback enable students to collaborate better, hence engage better in assignments. We also found that product-and-process-based assessment resulted in better writing quality.

In a writing course that I am teaching, reflection is an official component. It is an assessed task in which students are required to prepare a 1,200-word portfolio to reflect their writing development. My observations informed me that my students showed great engagement with the task and were critical of their learning process and outcomes. Figure 1 below, which is an excerpt of a student's reflection, provides an illustration. In it, Miriam (pseudonym), reflected on how her referencing skills developed thanks to my feedback. In

the upper part of the figure, my comments on Miriam's first draft are on the right margin; in the lower part, Miriam's revision includes a citation (highlighted) and a reference.

Figure 1

Student reflection on writing improvement

Instructor's feedback

This argument is worth considering because many policies about poverty “focused on creating opportunities for those who are able to escape poverty” (Hulme, 2003, p.417). teacher feedback
Vs. Hulme & Shepherd (2003)

which is difficult to get out of once somebody is in it. It is caused by not only a lack of access to basic necessities such as shelter, food, education or healthcare but also inequities including gender or ethnic discrimination, conflict, poor governance and more (Peer, 2021). Over time, teacher feedback
Add a full citation of this source to the references list

Student's revision:

impossible. “Initial findings by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre identified a number of categories of individuals, households and social groups who are particularly likely to suffer from chronic poverty” (Hulme & Shepherd, 2003, p.410). It showed that several of them were

Peer. A. (August 23, 2021). Global poverty: Facts, FAQs, and how to help. Published online at *WorldVision.org*. <https://www.worldvision.org/sponsorship-news-stories/global-poverty-facts#different>

In her reflection, Miriam said:

The first goal I set was to reference and use in-text citations correctly in the APA 7th referencing style. Before this course, I was aware to write a reference list at the end of the writing but did not know about the in-text citation and how to do it in a proper way. This was one of my weaknesses at the beginning. At first, it was a bit challenging for me because I constantly forgot to bookmark or save the resources I found on the internet. As a result, I ended up writing an incorrect in-text citation and missing a full citation of the source in the reference list. These mistakes can be seen in Figure 1 [upper part].

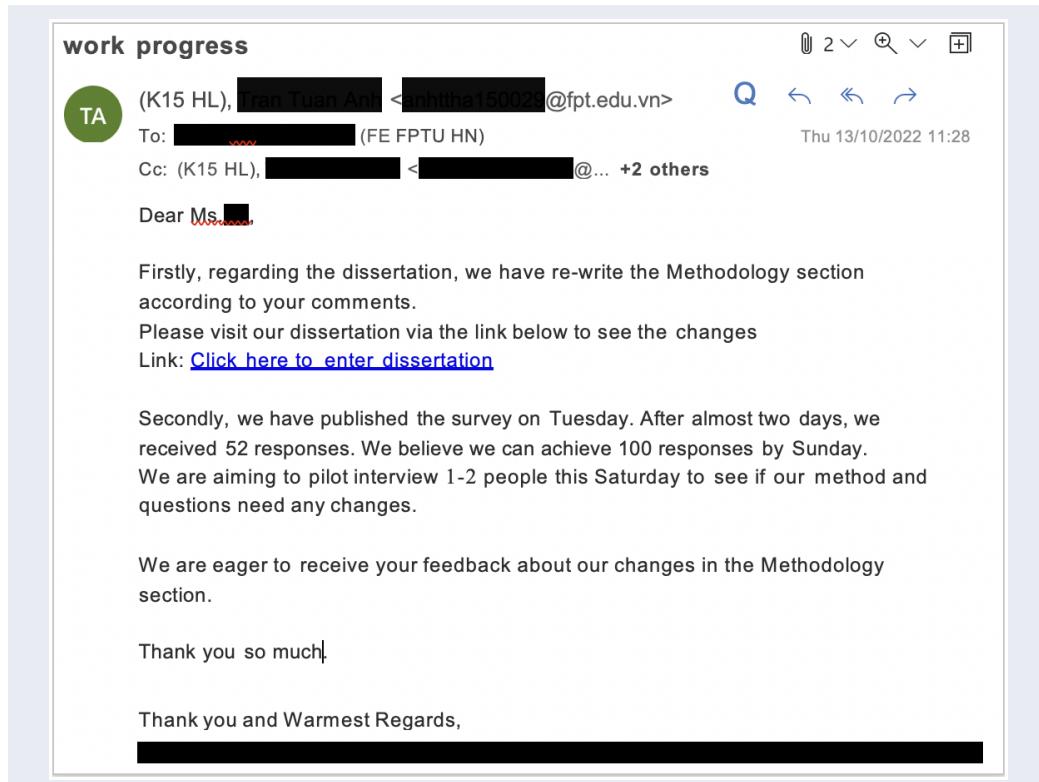
To overcome this weakness and achieve my first goal, I kept reading ‘The Concise APA Handbook’ (Iida, P, 2020) which was the recommended reading at the beginning of this course. This book really led me to the right way of referencing and using in-text citations. Therefore, I made good progress in improving these skills thanks to WRIT 151 course. Figure 1 [lower part] shows the developed and correct example of the reference and in-text citation.

With a detailed account that she provided, Miriam demonstrated that she was well aware of her achievement and how she obtained it. In her concluding paragraph of her reflection, she said, "From the writing skills I learned throughout this course, I think I have pretty much become an independent and critical writer." With the writing knowledge and momentum that Miriam gained, it seems likely that she will do even better in her future writing.

As for supervision, I noticed that the thesis students who were asked to reflect tended to be more autonomous than those who were not. Evidence of their autonomy includes regular reports on their work progress. As seen in Figure 2 below, these students share their self-driven exploration of knowledge. The effects of being in control of learning were clearly felt, though it still requires formal research.

Figure 2

Undergraduate thesis students' update to supervisor on their work progress



work progress

TA (K15 HL), [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]@fpt.edu.vn>

To: [REDACTED] (FE FPTU HN)

Cc: (K15 HL), [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]@... +2 others

Thu 13/10/2022 11:28

Dear Ms. [REDACTED],

Firstly, regarding the dissertation, we have re-write the Methodology section according to your comments.

Please visit our dissertation via the link below to see the changes

Link: [Click here to enter dissertation](#)

Secondly, we have published the survey on Tuesday. After almost two days, we received 52 responses. We believe we can achieve 100 responses by Sunday.

We are aiming to pilot interview 1-2 people this Saturday to see if our method and questions need any changes.

We are eager to receive your feedback about our changes in the Methodology section.

Thank you so much!

Thank you and Warmest Regards,

Implications and conclusion

As demonstrated above, our collaborative writing experience has positively influenced our research, teaching, and supervision. It has also motivated us to apply collaboration to our teaching and writing. We hope some implications drawn from our experience below would be useful to writing teachers, researchers, and writers.

The first suggestion is to encourage teachers to write collaboratively with others who are in the same field as them but whose teaching approaches are not necessarily similar to theirs. As researchers, we tend to focus so much on our specific fields that we do not explore other topics, which can be useful for our professional development. Also, as teachers, we may use the same teaching approaches, and we may not have the willingness or the confidence to try different approaches. As we demonstrated in this paper, collaborative writing can push us to reach out beyond our comfort zones. By reading the co-author's writing section and discussing the writing content, we learn something new in terms of the co-author's field.

Collaborative writing has another benefit, as the discussion with the co-author can also help develop writing skills. In our case, we constantly gave feedback to each other's writing, which enabled us to see our own writing in a different perspective and to improve it. Though we are aware of the importance of feedback, it is not always easy to appreciate it in our own writing. However, as we also give feedback to the other author, we understand and see that it is mutually beneficial and is intended to make the co-written paper better. Also, since the paper is co-authored, we both feel ownership and aim to make it the best it can be, which means that we are less cautious about providing constructive feedback than when we are asked to review a colleague's writing where there is no co-authoring for instance.

Our third suggestion is related to the importance of reflection. In this paper, we put collaboration and reflection into practice, as we reflect on our previous collaborative writing experience together. Writing this paper has made us aware of not only the benefits but also the joy of collaborative writing. Without actually writing this paper, we surely know that collaborative writing is useful, but we would not have reflected so deeply on how it has affected us so positively. Thus, after any collaborative writing, it would be useful for the co-authors to reflect on the experience, which can be done in writing. Pointing out the positive points can be rewarding and can encourage other writers to co-write in the future, if the reflection is shared. If there are any negative points, discussing them can engender ideas on what needs improvement.

In conclusion, we both felt that we learnt *prima manus* the value of collaborative writing and what a Community of Practice (Wenger 2011: 1) could bring when we regularly interacted with others in a research community. In our small community of practice, though we were both new to collaborative writing, we learnt from practice and experienced the influence from our collaborator's research on our own work. This learning and

influence have empowered us to reach out to other research communities, both within and beyond the applied linguistics field, to expand our own communities further.

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