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Writing as tribal practice¹: revisiting online collaborative writing
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Abstract
Many teachers encourage the sharing of ideas through collaborative group writing as a means of building self-confidence in developing writers. One aim of collaborative writing is to enable students to develop a sense of supported authorial voice through sharing thoughts and ideas with others. As individuals become more confident, they may trust group members sufficiently to engage in increasingly critiqued textual practices without experiencing humiliation or ostracism. Where individuals experience a sense of authorial voice through textual encounters within a group, writing development may emerge. However, some students do not appear to develop a notion of authorial voice in collaborative group writing experiences. Rather, they reproduce passages of texts without appearing to engage with or respond to the ideas generated by discussion within the writing group. This evolving study explores online collaborative writing.

A group of language teachers from Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and the USA meet every second Sunday evening in cyberspace for a two-hour intensive collaborative writing session. Our focus is on writing as process rather than writing as end-product. Our group relies on Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of dialogical engagement in a negotiated process of meaning-making. Our ‘dialogic relations’ (Bakhtin, 1981:427) would encompass the external negotiated dialogue (between each other) and we would also engage in an internal dialogue (within ourselves). This ‘dialogue with self’ (Bakhtim, 1984:213) will, we believe, provide the key to open the door for articulation of the individual sense of authorial voice to emerge.

One aim is reclaiming writing as a conscious collaborative act, where meaning is negotiated and articulated through the dialogic process and authorial voice is strongest only at the end of the thought-sharing process. Therefore, the process of writing is seen as more important than the end-product, although the product is usually the focus of most assessment regimes. A further aim is to discover how authorial voice develops in the online writing group and whether issues of student empowerment may affect collaborative writing. The final aim is to observe whether intensive writing collaboration affects both the writers and the writing during the online collaborative process.

The emerging ‘tribe’
The participants in this ongoing writing project are seven English language teachers: three in Australia (WSS in Melbourne; BC in Sydney and AT in Queensland); one in Auckland (TU); two in Hawaii (KT & HT) and one in Singapore (PC). All participants are currently teaching English language or literacy subjects, although not all are in university faculties or departments of Education. We know little about each other’s personal lives – we do not know each other’s real names, careers or history and have deliberately maintained some distance with respect to...
sharing personal and private information in our online environments. We do, however, share intimate details of classroom practices, issues for us as teachers of writing, policy reforms and constraints of curricula. Although none of us have met physically, we have been in online communication for about 8 months, after discussion on topics of shared interest on a language teachers’ Listserv. Mutual interest in discussing collaborative writing in online classrooms spurred this collaboration.

In late 2005, seven of us decided to form a group to meet and discuss specific issues for writing online. We meet online every second Sunday evening 18.00-20.00 Melbourne, Sydney and Queensland time, 20.00-22.00 in New Zealand; 16.00-18.00 hours in Singapore and 22.00-24.00 hours (Saturday evening) in Honolulu, Hawaii. We stay online for only two hours due to time and cost factors and usually try to pick-up from the last thread of the conversation. We all use broadband Internet connections, so do not have the usual problems that dial-up modem users experience in trying to stay connected for the full period. We have a dedicated discussion room operating through WebCT, which only we seven participants can enter. The most fruitful and rich discussion occurs when all seven participants are online, but it also works with up to five members. Any less than five members and the discussion appears to lack the diversity needed and we apparently become a little more self-conscious and reticent to engage. (Our experience indicating that seven participants is the ‘ideal’ may be of interest to teachers constructing writing groups online as a pragmatic feature of our writing collaboration).

In April 2006, we decided to investigate whether collaborative online writing could assist participants articulate their thinking within group exchanges. We agreed that online collaborative writing itself constitutes a technology of power (Foucault, 1980) and one which we could utilise to explore in practice the emergence of authorial voice. We wanted to share written ideas online in order to probe whether collaborative writing would challenge some of the traditional power relationships between teachers and students or students within groups. Would the environment provide what Richard Ohmann (1997:273) terms an ‘opening up and intrinsic liberation’ of the writing classroom? Particularly persuasive in our group discussion, was Ohmann’s (1997) statement that:

We tell students to find their own voices, yet most feel subtly and not-so-subtly pressed to submerge their identities in academic styles and purposes that are not their own…the academic paper calls for a knowing posture and for the routines of mastery. (p.252)

We all related to this notion and a great deal of discussion ensued with examples from our own experiences as well as various specific examples where our students had alluded to this idea. We asked ourselves whether collaborative writing could build a type of writing ethos, and permit students to engage in ‘knowledge transformation’ (Hinkel, 2004:12), from which authorial voice could emerge within a protected scholarly online space. ‘Authorial voice’ as used in this project follows Donald Stewart’s notion that an individual’s, “authentic voice is that authorial voice which sets you apart from every living human being despite the common or shared experiences you have with many others” (Stewart,1999:175). In keeping with the collaborative writing aims of the group, a personal narrative methodological approach was deemed appropriate by the group. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000) provided support for this method of collecting and reflecting upon text. They said:
Participants are encouraged to participate in a personal relationship with the author/researcher, to be treated as co-researchers, to share authority, and to author their own lives in their own voices. Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author’s world, evoked to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand and cope with their own lives. (p. 742)

As a group, we are co-researchers, we share authority within the writing space and present our ‘authentic’ voices to each other. Our group engages intimately with the thoughts and ideas of members and we feel deep professional and personal bonds through the intense sharing of our personal experiences, our innermost thoughts and our best (and worst) classroom practices. We feel connected to each other, despite the fact we have never met, we share no common ancestors, we speak different languages and exist in different physical places but we do share a common space – the online collaborative writing classroom, and this transcends other barriers and boundaries. The project continues.

**Tribal rules for collaborative writing**

At the outset, we negotiated online to write freely and openly and in our own voices about issues we faced in online collaborative writing classrooms. We agreed that we would not use abbreviations common to phone-text messaging and familiar email exchanges (such as F2T?, are you ‘free to talk’), but acknowledged that we would not use a formal written academic register. Therefore, we decided to use what David Crystal (2001: 48) terms ‘Netspeak’ – a combination of ‘spoken, written and electronic properties’ that suited the medium of the Internet. The group agreed that whoever did not understand a term, could use what we called the ‘whisper’ option, which was to type a question-mark preceding the unknown term, which was sent only to the writer of the unknown term (using the ‘silent to group’ option). In this way, it would not be known to the group that someone did not understand something. The writer of the unknown term would then type a short explanation and send it back, unseen by the larger group. An example of a ‘whisper’ is provided in extract 2. This often simulated what we discussed was equivalent to a classroom experience where students conferred with each other in order to clarify something said, whilst the ‘teacher’ or another student was speaking. Extracts 3 and 4 also indicate that emoticons were used by some participants to reflect their personal feelings in an exchange and added for clarification of intent (such as PC letting us know he was confused, using :-/ in extract 3). Emoticons were not used a great deal, but some group members seemed to prefer their usage to ‘express rapport’ where individuals may have been ‘worried about the effect a sentence might have’ (Crystal, 2001: 38).

**Tribal initiation**

After overcoming a number of false starts and time-zone issues, our first substantial exchange was sharing a recent online classroom experience where we felt that some student participants did not fully engage with the group. We had already agreed that we would only use initials to refer to ourselves. Participants wrote about their experiences in a manner that assumed an ongoing dialogue or exchange would occur. In other words, the text was not assumed to be the final product. For example, WSS wrote:
Extract 1
Hi guys…don’t know about you but one thing I’ve noticed is how easy it is to fall into the trap that you think everyone’s with you but there are a couple of lurkers in the group. Don’t know quite what to do then…do you just let them ‘come in’ when they’re ready…do you try to ask direct questions? Whaddya do? I’m worried that they may feel too pressured and you’ve lost them…I think you have to allow space…but then, it’s easy just to sit back and not engage. I hate the idea of putting ‘number of hits’ type nonsense in there as a means of trying to see who has ‘input’…says nothing about quality of comment or depth of engagement with readings or the group discussion…interested in your thoughts….

From the section, it can be seen that first person is used, some slang terms ‘whaddya’ and ‘guys’ and contractions such as ‘I’ve’. The group agreed that we would try to communicate so we felt comfortable in the medium and much of the ‘writing’ resembled ‘speaking’ which, as Crystal (2001: 17) notes, is common in Netspeak. This ‘electronic discourse’ mode of communication is explained by Boyd Davis and Jeutonne Brewer (1997:2) as ‘writing that very often reads as if it were being spoken – that is, if the sender were writing talking’. Language was generally informal in tone but with an awareness that colloquial expressions may not be understood by the whole group, even if used because the participant felt comfortable to do so. In addition, as can be seen in extract 1, WSS acknowledged later in the exchange, that because she could type quickly she felt more at ease in ‘speaking’ rather than ‘writing’ mode of dialogic interaction, although the computer was the interface.

After sharing some initial thoughts on problems that we found in online group writing, we distilled a number of issues that we wanted to focus on in detail during our online writing sessions over the coming months. They included:

- Lack of intellectual engagement with readings, so online discussion seems fairly superficial – raising the issue of students ‘empowerment’ to contribute
- Online lurkers – not contributors
- Flaming – both each other and staff
- Some students dominating the online space
- Groups getting off-track with continued, lengthy discussion of irrelevant matters
- Appearing to expect the teacher (as facilitator) to be monitoring the discussion and provide answers to questions.

The list is not exhaustive and this paper will illustrate the way in which the ‘tribal voice’ emerged with extracts from our group exchanges on the first issue, the lack of intellectual engagement with reading and related issues of student empowerment.
The composing mind of the tribe

As a group we decided to exchange ideas and experiences about students’ online contributions and in particular our concerns as teachers that their engagement appears, at times, to be fairly superficial. We wanted to explore why this might be so by reflecting on how we, as teachers, incorporated our understandings of theoretical readings through discussion of a particular topic. In the process of writing as a group, how would we exchange ideas and negotiate our own understandings? We set ourselves the task of discussing and writing about the notion of ‘student empowerment’ in online collaborative situations. This was a precursor to exchanging ideas on facilitating deeper textual engagement as a foundation of an online ‘communication event’ (Nunan, 1993:5). Our aim was to consciously focus on a collaborative exchange of ideas and experiences about student empowerment. Although we did not set out to produce a final ‘outcome’, we eventually arrived at a negotiated group definition of ‘empowerment’ that emerged through the writing exchange. During each two hour online writing exchanges over five weeks, we ‘unpacked’ layers of meaning in the topic by seeking to clearly understand everyone’s perspective and articulate our own. These exchanges were based on our own practice, our theoretical frameworks and our contextual settings. The writing sessions were often frenzied, with time only for immediate response to the thread of the exchange. Any detailed examination of what was actually said and how participants operated in the textual space could only be undertaken after the event. Extract 2 illustrates one part of one exchange:

Extract 2

PC: Yeah…but I think we need to get right down to what we all mean by creating the environment so that students participate. Can we talk about empowerment here?

WSS: I’m with you, PC. For me, it’s all about empowerment of students and by that I mean it in the sense of handing over to the students to decide. Enabling students to take control of their learning, whether that’s of the topic or the subject is important. How many times do we read how kids are bored in class and that schools are just turning out factory robots (in John Holt’s sense). I’d rather see the kids calling the shots from a place of real enfranchisement.

[KT sent a ‘whisper’ to WSS asking who John Holt was; what he said and in what context]

AT: TU, by enfranchisement, do you mean the sort of Flores’ notion of authorising them. She talks about students being empowered through education but where students remain silent, we somehow fail to enfranchise them (can’t remember the reference). Is that the sort of ‘empower’ you mean?

TU: Nope. I mean it more broadly. I like Barker and Kemp’s idea that enfranchising is enabling the student to demonstrate some sense of authority or control over the particular task at hand. I like the idea that the thrust comes from the students rather than somehow an external force ‘authorising’ them to do something. It is an internal thing.

HT/KT: I think we here in Hawaii think of it even wider than that. Particularly working with a mixture of indigenous and non-indigenous students on the islands, we find that using ‘empower’ as more of an umbrella term is useful and we also have it in our University Honor Codes. It’s a sort of encompassing respect where it covers
not only the students having respect for each other so they share equally, but also that they have respect for learning so that they know they are ultimately responsible for their own learning. In this way, they are empowered because they know that they are responsible to themselves and their families for their time in class and what they get out of it.

AT: Hmm…that sounds pretty much what I think and I seem to recall reading something like that from Mark Warschauer, who may also have been in Hawaii at that time…anyone know?

BC: Yeah…I think he wrote something about that kind of empowerment in the CALICO journal a few years back. I think it was something on face-to-face and electronic discussion but can’t remember the title of it. You’re on the right track though. I think it’s pretty much up to them to realise they’re adults and take some responsibility and whether you ground that in notions of respect or whether you ground it in notions of responsibility, it seems to me that that’s empowerment – the acceptance of the right to be responsible.

PC: This is all really interesting but I just wonder whether ‘empowerment’ isn’t a term that teachers and academics like to bandy around because it makes them feel good, as though classrooms are actually egalitarian in some way. I think the students just parrot the rhetoric. Whether students feel empowered or not, depends on the idiosyncrasies of not only each teacher but surely each classroom? I mean, how many of us would really claim that our classrooms are truly egalitarian and that students are empowered…do they set the assessment tasks? Do they get to choose whether the want to attend classes that may not appeal to them? Do they get to choose whether they do assessment tasks or not? I mean…come on, isn’t it a moot point?

This excerpt indicates one small section of the broad ranging and lengthy discussion of various notions of student empowerment. It illustrates how we tried to grapple with the concept of empowerment to try and better understand ways in which students may feel disempowered in online classrooms. As can be seen, group members use the literature fairly generally, where the gist of various writers becomes the means to justify individual interpretations of meaning: ‘in John Holt’s sense’; ‘Barker and Kemp’s idea’, ‘something like that from Mark Warschauer’. No specific references were given on this occasion, but group members sought to clarify and explore with each other, the pooled notions of ‘empowerment’. The individual ideas offered to the group were, as evidenced in the extract, based on both participants’ experience and their engagement with literature. Some participants noted that certain ideas ‘would work well’ with their students and gave reasons why they preferred some interpretations to others. Other members disagreed with the notion and also gave broad experiences to back up their ideas. Members of the group appeared to be very honest about what they did not understand or had not read. In bringing together seven individuals, to share experiences and ideas online it is essential that the group understands it needs to develop ‘hospitable space’ online (Palmer, 1999:15). It is very difficult to develop a ‘community of seekers’ (Palmer, 1999:12) if individuals in the group have not been able to establish enough contact to trust that the group will be supportive rather than punitive or judgmental in exchanges.
At several points during one evening’s discussion, one member or another would try and capture the essence of what appeared to be formulating. In extract 3, PC asks:

**Extract 3**

So are we saying that *empowerment* is something that is driven from within but it just needs to be acknowledged as being the student’s own responsibility, as in a style of *respect* for each other? :-/²

Often these comments sparked further discussion, justification and debate as in this case, where participants further attempted to clarify individual meanings and agree or disagree with others in the group. Often one entire session could be spent just debating one notion – as in the excerpts presented – and the debate went over two or three weeks (four to six hours). The final stages of the ‘empowerment’ discussion are presented below (extract 4) to illustrate the way in which we as a group moved through the exchange and how individual notions melded together in the collective mind – the tribal authorial voice.

**Extract 4**

AT: No…I think we’re coming back to where we started. It’s not so much a notion of ethics as personal ethics. I think that where a teacher is ethical, he or she will marry KT’s idea of ‘respect’ for all things into the idea of empowerment. If the students respect each other, respect themselves and the learning environment they’re in, then they’ll take responsibility for that. It’s just like taking responsibility for cleaning up your desk or the local park, it’s a personal choice that students make.

WSS: I agree it’s always a personal choice about whether people engage or not. I think that goes right back to where we, as individuals, think learning actually occurs. For me, it’s in oneself – so I can choose to engage in this or any other environment and feel empowered to do so by the way in which it’s set up. I think it’s always personal choice, and I don’t think that any teacher can *make* a student learn, any more than anyone can *make* any other person empowered. I like KT’s idea of respect as a basis, because it fits in with notions of ethics and fair treatment, which, for me, is what empowerment is about.

TU: I quite like the idea of *respect* as the foundation ( KT). I can see how indigenous students here [NZ] would probably relate more to that than terms that are not as easily resonant with their own beliefs. I’m still not sure, though AT, whether you’re suggesting that it’s a personal choice to become ‘empowered’ or not. How do you see the teacher’s role in this case?

AT: Quite simply as a person who hands over the reigns and gives the student the right to make the personal choice. I think that where teachers still keep control, then there can’t be any true empowerment, so teachers have to hand over the right to the students to run the group and be responsible for the quality of the interaction in it.

BC: Here, here AT. But what if the kids don’t want to take up the reigns and the discussion group falls flat on it’s face ☹️? What then?
KT: We’ve generally found that kids do want to have a say in their own group – they want to be free to run it and have ultimate control. If it falls flat on its face, then that’s their issue and they need to unpack that in their group evaluation. The point is that if they really understand ‘respect’ then they won’t let themselves or their group members down by not contributing – they’ll use the time to get on with whatever the task is that they’re writing about.

As can be seen in this extract, clarification was sought as to specific points of difference in perspective. Close reading of the empowerment exchange reveals that as group members begin to understand the perspectives of others and their own perspectives come under personal or group scrutiny, they experience what Joyce Magnotto (1995:171) calls ‘aha moments’ These ‘aha moments’ occur when an individual reflects upon their ‘discursive expressions of belief or notion that is used (consciously or unconsciously) as the basis for practice’ (p.171). For example, an ‘aha’ moment occurred for WSS when KT – in a whisper – asked who John Holt was and what he wrote about. WSS, who thought she ‘had a handle’ on KT’s theoretical framework, stopped to examine her assumptions about what was common academic knowledge within an international writing community. For WSS, the exchange provided her with an opportunity to reflect upon her praxis as practice. In extract 4, some members of the group explored the idea of respect as a foundation for conceptualising empowerment, and found it appealing. The extract reveals that their reasons varied: for TU it is a concept that his indigenous students could relate to in New Zealand; for BC it is about assuming the mantle of responsibility; KT sees it in terms of the individual respecting her ultimate responsibility to the group; for AT it provides students with real choices rather than rhetoric about responsibility and for WSS it related to her notions of ethics and fairness. The discussion reached a point where we agreed – after a great deal of online negotiation, argument and redrafting of ideas – on a definition of ‘empowerment’ with which we could move forward. The group decided empowerment would mean: enabling students to draw on their notions of mutual respect for themselves and their contributions, the group members, the learning environment and the differences in perspective that each would bring to the forum.

Individual ideas, suggestions and reflections were ameliorated through the group discussion process, creating a tribal notion of ‘empowerment’ and one by which the tribe still operates. There did not appear to be the problem noted by Don Byrd and Derek Owens (1998: 51) that:

Single authors, whether working in isolation or in accordance with traditional collaborative modes, is that a painfully…self-reflective voice or stance remains engaged in an act of self-definition or self-question. Either way it is inevitably an act of self-promotion

Rather, there was not so much ‘self-promotion’ as an attempt by members of the group to engage with various notions of empowerment and try to communicate clearly enough to allow a refined collaborative notion to emerge. Participants were simultaneously critiquing the pooled ideas whilst drawing on their own understandings of empowerment through academic reading and personal experience in order to engage in the debate. The aim of the group was to develop a notion of empowerment that was acceptable and appropriate for all participants in the group and
not permit one dominant voice. The collaborative online writing forum encouraged all members
to wrestle with the difficult task of articulating complex ideas in writing and being able to justify
particular stances. As Crystal (2001) states, ‘Communication in the group does seem to
transcend the individual exchange, being more focused on the group, or its textual record’
(p.169). Our online exchanges did ‘transcend the individual exchange’ in an effort to focus on
what could work for all participants in the group. We believe our experiences will help us
support and facilitate improved collaborative writing spaces for our students in the future.

Reclaiming collaborative writing as a pathway to authorial voice
This study suggests that when the group refocussed on writing as a process we moved past the
product-driven outcome and reclaimed writing as a means by which individuals could articulate
thinking to share and negotiate meaning. The writing space, however, took time to build and
participants were writing with regard to tribal rules and protocols in order that ideas were freely
exchanged. The collaborative writing environment allowed us to engage with ideas in an
interactive manner and provided us the opportunity to reflect on our own ideas in light of many
other different perspectives. Christine Casanave (1995:107) suggests that ‘the interactive nature
of the socialization experiences could help [us] “own” these experiences’. The process of
articulating our thoughts into words to be shared with the group and having to defend or amend
stances, allowed us the reflective space Ellis and Bochner (2000) advocate. We did reflect on
and consider our positions in relation to each other and our own classroom practices. The fact
that different perspectives were brought to a shared environment meant we had to engage in
dialogic interaction with other ideas or points of view and our own meanings became clearer and
sometimes more clouded before becoming clearer again. It was through the visible written
articulation of our various viewpoints that our process of constructing meaning was tangible.
The metamorphoses of ideas on empowerment, for example, was a crucial experience for us as
the tribal authorial voice was born.

As teachers of academic writing, we feel that there are a number of potential benefits for
creating online collaborative writing environments, where sharing ideas, informed perspectives
and experiences can help our students. Our early findings suggest that engagement in online
writing collaborations may assist learners who experience difficulty engaging with ideas and
texts because such practices offer participants the chance to develop an authorial voice based on
experiential reflection rather than focus on reporting information in writing. The possible
benefits are:

- to help students who are reluctant to enter into group writing tasks
- to refocus course emphases on writing as an activity, rather than as product
- to provide beginning academic writers with a sense that they are not alone
- to experience a community where group members identify with and teach each other
- to encourage genuine collaborative writing, rather than individuals’ piece-meal cut
  and paste writing, which is then submitted as ‘group work’ for assessment purposes
to encourage students to articulate their own authorial voices in a supportive peer-group environment

Conclusion

As teachers, we need to revisit how we encourage students in online group writing classrooms to become more meaningfully engaged with ideas. Currently, many online participants are not actively participating in their online writing classrooms, but disappear into cybertan and emerge only to furnish the final product for assessment. To enter into conscious collaborative online group writing means that participants must enter the space with a desire to explore meanings together and must feel empowered to do so. Facilitating online writing forums where ideas are meaningfully fleshed out, unpacked, examined and critiqued may stimulate students to justify and defend their ideas, thus unleashing the power of ‘voice’ in the debate. Assisting learners to focus their authorial voices in the construction of a group consciousness – the tribal author – may be one place to start.

References


¹'Tribal’ in this paper means ‘a set or number of persons of one profession grouped together’ (Concise Oxford Dictionary). The use of the word ‘tribal’ is not intended to delineate ethnic/racial groupings, rather it denotes a cross-cultural grouping of professionals who share common ideas. The term emerged during our online discussion when PC noted that we seemed to be moving towards a third voice, distinct from our own individual voice, which he said was a kind of ‘tribal voice’. We decided that was probably accurate and so we referred to ourselves as ‘the tribe’

²:-/ means “I’m confused”