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Collaborative writing communities for learning development research and practice

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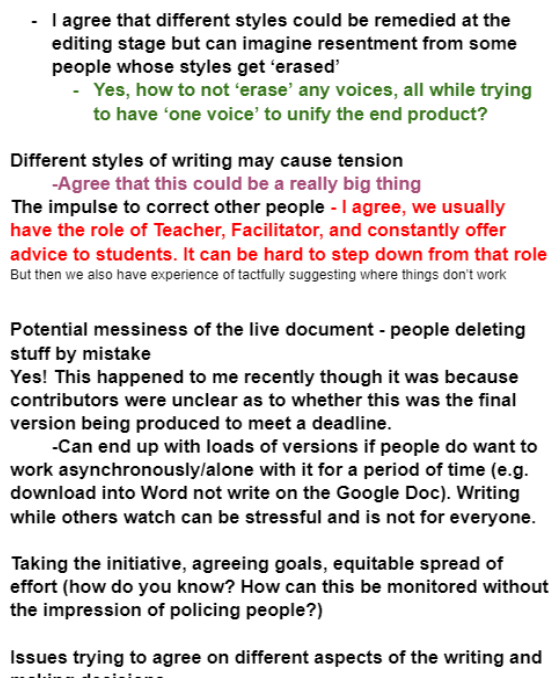
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Presentation abstract

This workshop discussed how collaborative reflection and writing provides us, as a group of learning developers, with insights into our role and sense of identity. The wider potential for using collaborative writing to develop topics of mutual interest was also explored. Our

reflections on the collaborative writing process arose from our first-hand experience of collaborative writing (Bickle et al., 2021). Therefore, we aimed to introduce participants to the tools we used for our writing and encourage them to experience the tools themselves to stimulate a discussion on the potential and challenges of collaborative writing for LD research and practice. We hoped to increase participants' understanding of collaborative writing through practice and reflection, and provide ideas on how others can initiate a collaborative writing community. The introduction briefly outlined the insights we gained from our study, focusing particularly on the way collaborative writing served as a tool to examine and broaden our identities as learning developers. It also introduced the methodologies for creating (collaborative writing) and analysing (collaborative autoethnography) data. Next, participants were invited to try out collaborative writing activities and reflect on their potential use as part of their own practice. We used a Google document (Figure 1) to collect their spontaneous responses to short writing prompts related to the challenges and potential of collaborative writing. Finally, at the end of the session, participants left with tips and techniques on how to develop a collaborative writing group of their own.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the collaborative google document used to capture experiences during the session.



- I agree that different styles could be remedied at the editing stage but can imagine resentment from some people whose styles get 'erased'

- Yes, how to not 'erase' any voices, all while trying to have 'one voice' to unify the end product?

Different styles of writing may cause tension

- Agree that this could be a really big thing

The impulse to correct other people - I agree, we usually have the role of Teacher, Facilitator, and constantly offer advice to students. It can be hard to step down from that role

But then we also have experience of tactfully suggesting where things don't work

Potential messiness of the live document - people deleting stuff by mistake

Yes! This happened to me recently though it was because contributors were unclear as to whether this was the final version being produced to meet a deadline.

- Can end up with loads of versions if people do want to work asynchronously/alone with it for a period of time (e.g. download into Word not write on the Google Doc). Writing while others watch can be stressful and is not for everyone.

Taking the initiative, agreeing goals, equitable spread of effort (how do you know? How can this be monitored without the impression of policing people?)

Issues trying to agree on different aspects of the writing and making decisions

Community response

Respondents to this session appear to have embraced the challenges of collective authorship, offering positive encouragement as well as acknowledging the 'productive discomfort' that their questions engendered.

Firstly, there was a strong sense that this approach brought a welcome and enlivening challenge to writing practice. One respondent left the session feeling energised and encouraged to ruminate over the issues involved in collaborative writing. Silvina's reflection that collaborative writing made her feel like she could never live without being research active was well received and left respondents wondering whether collaborative writing could be seen almost as a 'positive addiction'? Could collaborative writing become a way of 'getting into' or initiating writing in the first place? Like being inducted into a secret society? Others similarly noted the feeling of seeing – through a glass darkly – what the experience might be like on 'the inside' for those who have tried collaborative writing. Respondents found this engaging and the authors' approach to sharing their experiences 'refreshingly honest' and something which warranted further discussion with a wider audience.

Secondly, there was an awareness that this approach to writing challenges normative approaches, publishing, thinking even. One respondent offered encouragement to the authors' endeavours in this regard, noting that this is a potentially critical – if difficult – topic that requires delicate treatment, patience and persistence. There was a sense that what the authors were inviting us to try in this taster involved intellectual ambition but also some courage! Respondents shared the feeling that we need to keep these challenges at the forefront of our professional thinking and theorising. After all, [can we afford not to?](#) Others reflected on the synergies with similar, related efforts to establish a community of practice on Critical Learning Development and a potential future stream at ALDCon.

One respondent went further and, in the spirit of deconstructing normative writing practices, challenged presenters on whether the efforts made to ensure a certain standard of coherence and consistency of 'voice' in the collaboratively produced article was ever necessary. This respondent was further struck by the thought that it would be interesting to 'experiment with *not* seeking this consistency, or at least not always prioritising it'. It was

posited that an alternative approach would be to foreground the ‘multi-voiced, multi-perspective character of any collaboration’. Further, they suggested, there would be value in reading pieces which ‘sought not to resolve differences (tensions even)’, or which were not generated under a ‘pressure to cohere’. Instead, we should invite readers to mediate the differences between the authors’ respective positions. This would be less of a staged ‘debate’, and more an acceptance that contestation, open-endedness, provisionality, can – as with more creative forms of writing – be productive and engaging features of a piece of writing in themselves.

Editorial comments

‘Hell is other people’, or is it? Jean-Paul Sartre’s ‘L’enfer, c’est les autres’ must be one of the most well-known yet misinterpreted lines from theatre. Put simply, it is not other people that make life hellish, but our inevitable dependency on how others think and feel about us. Perhaps similarly, with collaborative writing and publishing, the challenge is not actually ‘other people’ but navigating our own discomfort and subjectivity. This presentation and the rich community responses to it surely remind us that such innovative writing practices are worth the effort.

Authors’ reflection

It was unexpected to have a small number of participants, and to see that, although many learning development practitioners engage in supporting student academic writing, they are reticent about doing it themselves. For us, this raised questions about the priorities in practitioners’ roles and the areas where learning developers feel they need to develop their skills and practice. Some of these areas seem to be prioritised because of institutional, local or governmental agendas.

Multiple authorship is not unusual for academic papers, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects, where members of hierarchically structured research groups contribute to projects in multiple ways. However, multiple authorship rarely refers to ten people developing a project democratically and non-hierarchically from scratch. Because we agreed upon fully democratic and collective

ownership of our paper, several norms around authorship were naturally challenged. These included whether it was possible to achieve one coherent written voice for publication, given the eclectic input of voices. One participant's response above, which suggests the potential of a deliberately contrary approach in which the individual voices are encouraged to remain, is of great interest to us. In fact, we toyed with this idea when writing the paper. Interestingly, the mechanisms of the publishing industry became apparent during the various feedback rounds, and gradually manoeuvred us towards one voice – whether deliberately or whether simply due to habit and convention. As two authors performed the final editing round, they were highly conscious of wanting to make the paper sound coherent, yet not seeming to silence any of our co-authors' voices. Our experiences of writing, then reflecting on it through this session, therefore throw open deeper debates around authorship and publishing conventions. We hope to take these further within the ALDinHE community in the future.

Next steps and additional questions

Both the conference presentation collective and respondents from our community of practitioners questioned the extent to which a collaborative approach to writing would be supported by publishers (journals, academic, commercial publications). In many ways, our approach to collating and publishing conference proceedings for this issue of JLDHE has been experimental. Key questions remain, however, about where the limits of innovation in publishing might be. These continue to be relevant, topical issues for our community to discuss.

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References

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Ed Bickle is a lecturer in Learning Development at Bournemouth University, where he works within a small academic team to provide faculty level support to students. He has 20 years' experience within the HE sector is a member of the ALDinHE Research Community of Practice. He has held research roles within the Widening Participation field and worked within national schemes such as Aimhigher.