Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal: Students' Views, Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Takeaways

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Abstract: The "new normal" setup of education posed challenges in courses that require intensive collaboration among learners. Research outputs in the senior high school are commonly done collaboratively. Despite the cited advantages of collaborative writing, several challenges still confront learners which affect the quality of their output. Collaboration per se is already a challenge for the learners in face-to-face classes, more so in the context of online distance learning, which is a relatively new practice. Thus, this study aimed at exploring the views, challenges, and takeaways of senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the context of the "new normal." The study analyzed a total of thirty (30) reflective essays. Ten (10) sample essays from each of the three (3) academic strands, namely Humanities and Social Sciences, General Academic, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, were selected through Critical Case Sampling. Findings revealed varied students' views on collaborative research writing in the new normal. Various challenges encountered by the students such as those associated with research technicalities, communication, and collaboration were identified. Diverse coping strategies were found such as having a positive mindset, being patient, considerate and determined, seeking help from others, maintaining proper communication and collaboration, seeking spiritual guidance, and taking a break. Ultimately, the learnings of the students were not limited to academics or cognitive aspects—they were able to gain important values through their collaborative research writing experiences.

Key Words: Collaborative research writing; academic writing; content analysis; senior high school

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the Novel Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, previously known as 2019-nCoV), has drastically altered people's lives around the globe. According to United Nations (2020), the current pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core. A year after, the number of infections and deaths is still increasing worldwide. Based on the data of the World Health Organization (WHO), as of April 2021, there have been 150,110,310 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 3,158,792 deaths.

The efforts to mitigate the threats of COVID-19 became detrimental to almost all sectors and industries including public health, food systems (World Health Organization, 2020), pharmaceuticals industry, solar power sector, tourism, information and electronics industry (Haleem, et al., 2020). The Education sector is no exception. As reported by the United Nations (2020), the pandemic affected around 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries across continents, considered as the most severe cessation of education systems in history. Closures of schools and other learning facilities have impacted 94 percent of

the world's student population. In the Philippines, school closure has afflicted more than 28 million learners (UNESCO, 2020). The Department of Education (DepEd) implemented a "blended learning" program involving online classes, printed materials, and lessons broadcast on television (DepEd TV) and social media to continue educating the students while on despite the lockdown. Private schools, and higher education institutions also adopted varied forms of distance learning modalities.

The "new normal" setup of education posed challenges, especially on subjects or courses that require intensive collaboration among learners. In the Philippine Basic Education Curriculum, Grade 12 senior high school (SHS) students are required to accomplish a full-blown research paper in their Inquiries, Investigations, and Immersion class. Research, as a form of academic writing, follows strict processes, rules, and conventions. Given its complexity, Roxas (2020) argued that academic writing at advanced levels is challenging and difficult, more so with SHS students. Thus, teachers utilized various strategies to address the difficulties relative to the demanding and laborious nature of research writing. For instance, research outputs in senior high school are most commonly done collaboratively. Collaborative writing further augments the knowledge bases of the learners as they tap into their peers' writing skills (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). In consonance, Torres (2020) emphasized that collaborative academic writing is beneficial for students as they can gain insights from their peers which somehow lessens the burden of accomplishing the specific task. Storch (2011) suggests that collaborative writing can combine the merits of learner-to-learner interaction with the processes of writing, such as "testing hypotheses, receiving and noticing feedback, and focusing on accuracy" (p. 276). Montero, (2005) also averred that collaborative writing is a highly motivating learning experience for students, as well as a creative pedagogical tool for teachers. Writing collaboratively also encourages individual participation, increases self-confidence, and most importantly, improves productivity. In other words, collaborative writing enables generating and solidifying shared knowledge (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012) as learners craft their writing pieces in cooperation with other students (Kormos et al., 2014; Storch, 2011). However, despite the cited advantages, several challenges still confront the learners which may affect the quality of their output, such as working with uncooperative members, and those with conflicting personalities (Torres, 2020). It can be noted that collaboration per se is already a challenge for the

learners in face-to-face classes, what more in the context of online distance learning, which is a relatively new practice. Therefore, this study aimed at exploring the views, challenges, and takeaways of senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the context of the "new normal."

Specifically, it answers the following questions:

1. What are the views of senior high school students toward collaborative research writing in the new normal?

2. What are the challenges encountered by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

3. How did the senior high school students cope with the challenges in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

4. What are the important takeaways gained by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed Qualitative Research Design, and Content Analysis (CA) as a research approach. As defined by Bryman (2011) CA is the study of documents and communication artifacts, which might be texts of various formats, pictures, audio, or video. This study focused on written reflective essays as a source of data.

2.2 Corpus of the Study

The study analyzed thirty (30) reflective essays written by senior high school students from three (3) academic strands, namely Humanities and Social Sciences, General Academic, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

The following questions were given to the students as a prompt in writing the reflective essays:

1. How will you describe your experience in completing a collaborative research project in the New Normal setup (Online Distance Learning)?

2. What are the most important things or concepts that you have learned in PR2 and III? Why do you consider it important?

3. What are the challenges that you have encountered throughout the completion of your research project (from planning to completion of the final paper)?

4. How did you cope with those challenges that you have encountered? Explain specific instances/strategies.

Ten (10) sample essays from each of the three (3) strands were selected through Critical Case Sampling which is the process of utilizing a small number of important cases that are likely to "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2001, p. 236).

The following considerations were observed in critically selecting the sample essays:

1. Number of words/length of the essays.
2. Completeness/adherence to the prompt.
3. Overall quality of the reflective essays.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which involves the process of data familiarization, data coding, and theme development and revision. Moreover, a deductive approach was utilized where coding and theme development are directed by existing concepts or ideas. In the case of the present study, the themes and sub-themes were extracted guided by the four elements elucidated in the research paradigm which are (1) views on collaborative research writing, (2) challenges encountered in collaborative research writing, (3) coping strategies, and (4) takeaways in the context of the new normal education setup.

To ascertain the accuracy and validity of the findings, the four rudiments of methodological rigor which are transferability, conformability, dependability and credibility were observed (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Transferability was exhibited as the participants richly described their experiences in collaborative research writing in the new normal through reflective essays, which were then translated into meaningful themes and sub-themes. The deductive approach to thematic analysis through a "check-recheck" strategy guided by the research paradigm established the conformability of the findings. To ensure dependability, Intercoder reliability was observed in extracting themes and sub-themes from the sample reflective essays. Two (2) licensed professional English teachers who both obtained their master's units in English Language Education were asked to participate in the analysis of data. To guarantee credibility, member checking through an online focus group discussion (FGD) was also performed to validate the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis. Additionally, ideas or excerpts from the sample essays expressed in Filipino were translated into English.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The researcher maintained the utmost confidentiality and anonymity of the sample reflective essay authors. The results do not necessarily reflect the overall quality of the teaching-learning process and the delivery of instruction offered by the University.
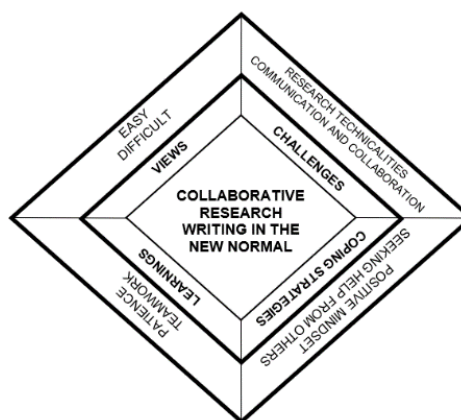
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 1. Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal

Figure 1 summarizes the findings of the study. It also captures the entirety of the participants' experience in collaborative research writing in the New Normal.

1. What are the views of senior high school students toward collaborative research writing in the new normal?

1.1. Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal is Difficult

It was revealed that the new normal education setup made collaborative research writing more difficult. The students did not find the online modality of learning efficient and engaging compared to the face-to-face.

> "I think doing the research in this kind of crisis is difficult. I did not find it engaging and I cannot feel the thrill upon finishing it. It is more like I am obliged to do it for the sake of graduating. This whole Online Distance Learning is not really efficient for me unlike being with your friends, classmates, and teacher... I feel more tired than usual." (Reflection #24)

Furthermore, the learners experienced emotional and physical challenges, such as frustrations, and tiredness or exhaustion.

"My experience in this research project was like a roller coaster ride. It was difficult for us to complete the paper, especially that we are in an online setup. I had a lot of breakdowns in the past two semesters." (Reflection #2)

This finding corroborates with the studies of Baticulon et al. (2020); Cao et al. (2020); Rajkumar (2020); Tandon (2020) and Copeland et al. (2021); where it was pointed out that the pandemic has given students uncertainty, stress, and anxiety.

In connection, the participants shared that there were various adjustments needed for them to cope with the new education setup, specifically the online distance learning setup.

"I wouldn't say it was depressing, but I wasn't happy either. The adjustments we made mixed with the pressure of meeting the expectations as a student was not fun at all. As someone who is not "techy", I find it really hard to keep up with other students." (Reflection #19)

These adjustments were not only applicable to the students but also to the teachers.

"The new normal setup was indeed a new experience for everyone, not just for us students but as well as the teachers so we really had to adjust with each other and find a compromise to still effectively learn and deliver quality education." (Reflection #13)

Kerres, (2020) and Wang et al. (2020) supported this idea and claimed that teachers also had challenges in operating the system and in facilitating online learning.

1.2. Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal is Easy

On the other hand, some of the participants were able to see the positive side of the situation. It was averred that the online learning setup actually made the research process and tasks easier to conduct. This is due to the numerous technological tools and platforms that they can take advantage of.

"It was much easier through the use of technology. It feels weird n some sort of ways or feelings that I tend to get all the time considering that this is a major subject to be taken seriously and not to be underestimated." (Reflection #30)

"Completing our research project in the New Normal setup was sort of easier in terms of writing our own parts with the freedom of choosing what time is best for us to do our task but more complicated in terms of communicating (like for example brainstorming) with each other. In this kind of setup, I had the freedom of writing and researching for the paper anytime it would be most efficient for me." (Reflection #6)

The said findings were consistent with the study of Ng (2012); Roblek et al. (2019) and Barrot et al. (2021), which divulged that the students

encountered the least difficulties in technological literacy and competency as they belong to Generation Z also known as digital natives.

1.3. Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal is Challenging but Fulfilling

It was also articulated that although the "New Normal" education setup was challenging, they were still able to learn many things. Moreover, they ended up feeling fulfilled after they accomplished all of the requirements, especially their collaborative research output.

"For me, it is indeed challenging and brings worries and fulfillment. Challenging because I never experienced conducting and finishing any research until I reached this group research study. It is fulfilling for the reason that we all know that we did our best together with my groupmates to finish our paper works." (Reflection #17)

"I had many new experiences that gave me new knowledge since this was only my first time conducting research. It's not easy because you will have difficulties communicating with one another… and some things are easier to discuss in person. But I can say that even though we're facing a pandemic, I still got an opportunity to learn and experience writing a research paper." (Reflection #3)

"This experience was memorable, meaningful, significant, helpful, and beneficial. It helped me to overcome many things, to be more responsible, more productive, stronger, and more confident." (Reflection #20)

2. What are the challenges encountered by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

2.1. Challenges Relative to Research Technicalities

Looking into the challenges encountered by the participants, research technicalities were one of the major concerns. They encountered difficulties in formulating a research topic and title. This was due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic. For instance, in the STEM strand, experimental research topics are somehow challenging to conduct because access to laboratories was not possible.

"First of all, we faced challenges in thinking of topics related to our strand (STEM). Especially that we were encouraged to conduct experimental studies, and we cannot really go out of our houses due to the pandemic." (Reflection #10)

Data Collection was another issue, the student-researchers encountered difficulties in looking for respondents or participants, as well as administering research instruments, and performing experiments.

"The challenges we encountered as a group came mostly from the data gathering procedure…

not all students tend to respond or answer the given surveys from researchers which causes insufficient data…" (Reflection #30)

"We encountered problems with finding respondents and volunteers for the research, but we persuaded and messaged as many people as we can so we have more and more potential respondents for the research…" (Reflection #26)

"It is definitely risky for us to get the samples during the pandemic, but we have to take it for the sake of the research." (Reflection #28)

Numerous studies such as those of Barrot et al. (2021); Day et al. (2021); and Kapasia et al. (2020) confirmed the detrimental effects of COVID-19 restrictions on students' learning experiences.

2.2. Challenges Relative to Communication and Collaboration Among Group Members

Another very prevalent problem that was revealed is inefficient communication and collaboration due to unresponsive or uncooperative group members.

"The challenges that we encountered throughout the completion of this research was probably the/those uncooperative members, as at first, they will ask for what they can help to accomplish the task and will ask so many questions regarding it, but at the end of the day, they did not make it, and did not know how to make it." (Reflection #17)

"I think the biggest challenge was my group mates. I would constantly send messages to our group chats so we can talk about the things that we need to accomplish, but they rarely reply. I would distribute the tasks among my group members, but they do not accomplish the task on time." (Reflection #22)

There were also group members who cannot fully participate due to internet connectivity problems and lack of gadgets and other resources.

"To be honest I find completing a collaborative research project quite a challenge and somewhat stressful and since this is collaborative, communication with other members is essential and not all members communicate effectively due to various reasons such as having a problem with internet connections and some are not always available during collaboration and due to this not all members contribute." (Reflection #8)

4. How did the senior high school students cope with the challenges in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

The student-researchers utilized varied strategies to cope with the identified challenges. Having a positive mindset, being patient, considerate, and determined helped the participants stay grounded on their goals. Seeking help from others, such as their peers, and teachers also aided the students in addressing problems relative to research technicalities. The participants still did their best in maintaining proper communication and collaboration despite uncooperative group members. Some of them believe that efficient communication and collaboration are key to producing a quality research project. Some of the participants did not forget to seek spiritual guidance albeit the hardships. Taking a break and maintaining a healthy balance between leisure and academic work were also observed by other participants for them to cope with the difficulties. These findings were congruent with the study of Fawaz et al. (2020 p. 5) where it was emphasized that "students employ active-oriented coping mechanisms, as they acknowledge their situation and they try to deal with it rather than just give up on it."

3. What are the important takeaways gained by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

The findings showed that the participants learned many research-related concepts and skills such as avoiding plagiarism, using different citation formats, different data analysis procedures, and writing each part of the research paper. More importantly, student-researchers were able to imbibe important values such as patience, teamwork, collaboration, cooperation, and time management. This suggests that their collaborative research writing experience was able to develop not only their cognitive abilities but also the affective aspect.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study explored the collaborative research writing experiences of senior high school students in the new normal through analyzing thirty (30) reflective essays. The themes derived from the corpus of the study shed light on students' views, challenges, coping strategies, and learnings relative to collaborative research writing.

Based on the findings, students have different views on collaborative research writing in the new normal. Some view it as easy, some see it as difficult, and others view it as challenging but fulfilling. Various challenges were also encountered by the students such as those associated with research technicalities, and communication and collaboration.

Varied coping strategies were also identified such as having a positive mindset, being patient,

considerate and determined, seeking help from others, maintaining proper communication and collaboration, seeking spiritual guidance, and taking a break.

The learnings of the students were not limited to academics or cognitive aspects—they were also able to assimilate important values.

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