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Are we talking about the same thing? Researcher and practitioner perspectives of student collaboration

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is one of the 21st century skills identified by Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2016; now known as Battelle for Kids), and collaborative assignments feature in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across disciplines, e.g., social psychology (Johnston & Miles, 2004), law (Berry, 2007), occupational therapy (Plastow, Spiliotopoulou & Prior, 2010), and accounting (Gammie & Matson, 2007). While research has been carried out on collaboration in English language teaching, less has been done in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) specifically. Since EAP plays a role in helping students develop the 'language and associated practices' they will need in their studies (Gillett, 2011, it is important that EAP prepares students for collaboration.

In order to contribute to furthering our knowledge of student collaboration in EAP, this paper explores EAP practitioner understanding of collaboration and contrasts it with the relevant literature. While there is a clear distinction between collaboration and cooperation in the literature, which would require quite different approaches and assessment strategies, the practitioner conception is much broader, with no such distinction made. This could lead to confusion amongst both practitioners and students. In light of the considerable gap, we propose a definition for student collaboration in EAP, bringing together the focus of the literature, allied with the realities of the EAP context. It is hoped this paper will provide a springboard for further discussion and research into student collaboration in EAP.

WHY COLLABORATIVE LEARNING?

Collaborative learning is grounded in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that learning is a social process. The key concepts with relation to collaboration are the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the concept of a collaborative scaffold (Ohta, 1995). The ZPD describes the space between what a learner is able to achieve on their own and what they are unable to achieve, i.e., what they are able to achieve given some support by the MKO (see Figure 1). While this support (or scaffold) could come from a teacher, it could also be a peer or, indeed, a computer program.

Within the concept of the ZPD, the MKO is particularly important when considering collaborative learning. When working in a group, one student may have expertise the others lack, and can help them by serving the role as the MKO. Importantly, within a group context, the role of the MKO is not fixed and may change between the group members, as their different strengths come to the fore, developing a collaborative scaffold whereby they are able to work together to achieve more as a group than they could as individuals (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2015; Ohta, 1995).
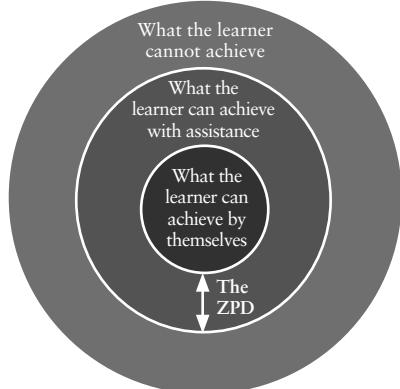

Figure 1 The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – adapted from The Open University (2018)

This higher level of achievement can be seen in collaborative writing. It has been found that collaborative writing leads to higher quality texts (Shehadeh, 2011; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) and better task achievement, with more complex and accurate writing (Fernández Dobao, 2012; Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011; Storch, 2005; Talib & Cheung, 2017). Studies into student perceptions of a collaborative writing assignment in an EAP course also reflected these findings, with the students recognising that working in a group led to better essays, with better ideas (Levrai & Bolster, 2018; Scotland, 2014). That is not to say collaboration is without tensions, as other studies have also found (Berry 2007; Li & Campbell, 2008; Strauss & U, 2007), with some students being resistant to the idea of collaborating or simply preferring to write individually.

INVESTIGATING COLLABORATION IN EAP

SURVEYING EAP PRACTITIONERS

To better understand the role of collaboration in EAP, a survey was distributed through the BALEAP and EATAW (European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing) mailing lists in 2018. There were a mix of open and closed questions and comments were codified and categorised for analysis. There were 66 respondents, from 60 institutions across 27 countries. The majority of the institutions (62%) were based in Europe, with 53% of the institutions operating in non-native English speaking (NNES) environments. The practitioners who responded worked on a range of EAP programmes, including pre-sessional (52%), foundation (56%) and in-sessional (71%).

RESULTS

THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE ASSIGNMENTS IN EAP

To understand the prominence of collaboration in EAP programmes, survey participants were given a definition of a collaborative assignment as one in which 'students work in groups to produce a joint piece of work for which they share joint responsibility' and were asked about the role of collaborative assignments in their contexts. Although there was variation from course to course within the same institution, the survey results indicated that collaborative assignments feature in 83.3% of courses and contribute to final grades in 76% of cases.

Students could be involved in a number of collaborative assignments during a course, most typically 1 (21.1%) or 2 (15.2%), although in the experience of 7.6% of respondents, students could be engaged in 5 or more collaborative assignments over a semester. These collaborative assignments could also vary in nature. The most common collaborative assignment type is an oral task, such as a group presentation, used by 87.3% of respondents, followed by written assignments, which were used by 47.3% of those who responded. Forty per cent of the survey participants also used collaborative assignments which were a mix of oral and written production and 23.6% of respondents used multimodal assignments. Multimodality is defined by Elola and Oskoz (2017, p. 53) as, 'the use of different modes in an integrated fashion to communicate meaning (e.g., text and visual combined in a blog)'. Regardless of the assignment type, the majority of collaborative assignments had a summative element, with only 20% of assignments being wholly formative and not graded.
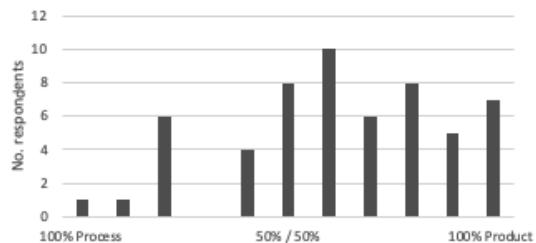

Figure 2 Assessing process or product

When it comes to grading, the importance of collaborative assignments becomes clear. The collaborative assignments were typically assessed on both process and product, with 'process' meaning how the students worked together and 'product' referring to the final artefact, e.g., essay, report or presentation. The relative weighting between process and product, on a sliding scale from 100% process to 100% product, varied considerably (see Figure 2). As Figure 3 (below) shows, collaborative assignments contribute to students' final grades, to a greater or lesser extent, in 76% of cases. This means a collaborative assignment could be the deciding factor in a student receiving a higher or lower grade, merit or distinction, or more vitally, in passing a course or not.
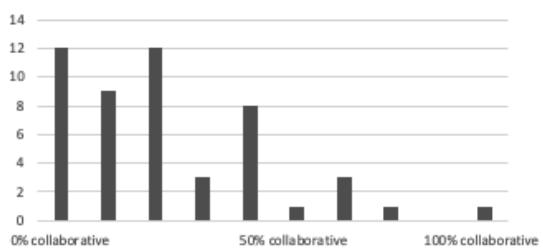

Figure 3 The contribution of collaborative assignments to final grades

Since collaborative assignments play such a potentially important role, it is essential to ensure practitioners have a shared understanding of student collaboration.

Defining collaboration

Before providing the definition of collaboration in EAP, the survey elicited respondents' understanding of the term. The first question asked participants to explain what 'student collaboration' meant to them. An inductive approach to coding was used (Thomas, 2006), based on the content of comments, and, after coding, the following broad categories became apparent (see Table 1). As is clear, for the practitioner, 'student collaboration' covers a wide range of activities.

Table 1 Practitioner understanding of 'student collaboration'

What does the term 'student collaboration' mean in your context?	
Students engaged in any team or group activity (in class or online)	57%
Students working together to produce a piece of work	37%
Peer tutoring/Peer feedback	17%
Academic dishonesty	3%

In addition to asking participants for their own definitions of student collaboration, the survey also asked them to determine if particular activities could be categorised as collaborative. These activities were drawn from various types discussed across the literature about collaboration in EAP, education and discipline courses (Berry,

2007; Gammie & Matson, 2007; Scotland, 2014; Strauss & U, 2007, to name but a few) and the authors' experience of group assignment types (Levrai & Bolster, 2018). As is clear from Table 2 (below), at least half of the practitioners responded that each of the activities was collaborative.

Table 2 Practitioner classification of activities as collaborative

Which of these would you classify as a collaborative project/assignment?	
1. Students make a video together about a topic.	86.4%
2. Students plan an essay together and write it individually.	54.5%
3. Students plan and write an essay together.	80.3%
4. Students conduct research together and write individual reports based on the results.	65.2%
5. Students plan an essay together and individually write different sections.	71.2%
6. Students prepare and deliver a group presentation.	97%
7. Students write essays individually and work with another student for peer review.	51.5%
8. Students discuss a topic together.	56.1%
9. Students discuss ideas for an essay together and write it individually.	54.5%

Discussion

The perspective from the literature is quite different from that of practitioners, however, as students simply working together does not automatically mean they are collaborating (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002). Collaboration requires that students are working together towards a common goal with a joint responsibility for reaching that goal and joint ownership over the final product (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002; Storch, 2019). This is nearer to the definition of collaboration given by only 37% of practitioners (see Table 1).

Within the literature, a distinction is drawn between cooperation and collaboration. Although both cooperation and collaboration involve students working together towards a common goal, cooperation could see a division of labour with students working relatively independently of each other, taking responsibility for *a particular part* of the task. In contrast, collaboration would feature shared creation and responsibility for *the whole task*, with no clearly identifiable individual 'parts' in the final product (Hathorn & Ingram, 2002; Kozar, 2010; Paulus 2005; Storch 2019). Consequently, using the conception of student collaboration from the literature, the same activities from Table 2 could be categorised as shown in Table 3 (below).

Table 3 Classification of activities according to the literature

Collaboration	• Students prepare and deliver a group presentation. • Students plan and write an essay together.
Cooperation	• Students make a video together about a topic. • Students plan an essay together and individually write different sections. • Students conduct research together and write individual reports based on the results. • Students plan an essay together and write it individually. • Students write essays individually and work with another student for peer review.
Group work	• Students discuss a topic together. • Students discuss ideas for an essay together and write it individually.

The collaborative tasks are those where the students work together throughout the process, from planning to production. The categorisations in Table 3 are dependent on how the students are instructed/choose to work together. For example, the group presentation task could be considered more cooperative if the students divide the

presentation out and have their own section to deliver and the video assignment could be considered more collaborative if the students share roles, e.g., they all do some of the filming and are involved in all the stages of making the video.

As is clear from Tables 2 and 3, there is a significant gap between the understanding of collaboration in the literature and that amongst practitioners. This is an important concern because if there is not a shared understanding of a term, it can be difficult to theorise and develop relevant strategies surrounding it (Wilson, Goodman & Cronin, 2007). Our understanding of collaboration matters as it impacts how we design assignments, how we support them, how we expect students to work together and how the assignment is assessed. The issue of assessing collaboration could be particularly pertinent in EAP, as in some EAP contexts, such as the UK, distinct individual scores may need to be drawn from assessments for course entrance or visa purposes. So too does it impact the experience and subsequent attitude of students if 'collaboration' in one classroom means something very different in another classroom.

Taking the case of a group essay assignment into consideration, for example, students could take a cooperative or collaborative approach. In a collaborative approach, they would discuss the essay topic, conduct research together and discuss the literature. They would formulate and agree on a plan and begin the drafting process, with each of them contributing to every part of the essay. There would be a high level of reliance among group members as they review and refine the essay, with the students engaged in a collective scaffold, working very much in the ZPD, having

the opportunity to learn from each other. In contrast, in a more cooperative essay group, the students could discuss the essay topic and divide out roles, where each is responsible for one section of the essay. There is potential for them to fall into the trap of 'working in silos' (Caple & Bogle, 2013) which could, in turn, result in a 'Frankenstein's monster' of an essay with disparate parts stitched together (Bolster & Levrai, 2019) and which also misses the opportunity to operate in and benefit from the ZPD.

That is not to say collaboration is always preferable to cooperation, but that they are, by nature, different and thought should be given to how they could be best scaffolded and implemented in EAP courses (or discipline-specific courses). Within a cooperative assignment, the division of labour could be discussed and decided with the teacher, with each student having clear guidelines on their particular role and responsibilities (e.g., following referencing conventions, finding sources, or paragraphing) and each could be assessed on those specific features of the essay. In a mixed discipline assignment, there could also be scope for students taking the lead on a particular aspect of their essay in their field of knowledge. For instance, if the task involved the development of a product, a business student could be responsible for the costing and marketing, an engineering student could take the lead on product design and a humanities student could evaluate the benefit of the product to society. What becomes clear is that the classification of an assignment (be it collaborative or cooperative) has a significant impact on the nature of the assignment.

Although the concept of collaboration is well discussed in the literature, one issue

with transposing the understanding of collaboration in the literature directly into EAP contexts is that most collaboration research tends to focus more on shorter, in-class activities, where students are co-constructing a text and are negotiating on an individual word choice level (Storch, 2019). Expecting the same level of discussion and negotiation on an assignment which may last weeks, or potentially a semester, is not realistic, especially as collaboration may be taking place synchronously or asynchronously, either face-to-face or in online environments.

The use of online environments or computer-mediated communication (CMC) has grown in popularity along with collaborative writing and indeed, they complement each other (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Godwin-Jones (2018) also identifies that, in writing assignments that utilise CMC, learners engage greatly with the writing process and he echoes Elola and Oskoz's (2017, p. 63) findings that employing digital tools in collaborative writing leads to 'drafting and revising in a more recursive way' than more traditional writing with pen and paper. Zheng and Warschauer (2017) highlight that literacy no longer simply means being able to read and write, but also includes digital literacy. CMC and collaborative writing are natural bedfellows in the modern EAP course.

Bridging the gap

Given the range of practitioner responses as to what collaboration is, and the distance some of those are from the understanding of collaboration in the literature, the following is proposed as a definition of student collaboration in EAP.

A collaborative assignment is one where learners work together and make equitable contributions to develop an indivisible artefact for which they share responsibility and ownership. During the development of the artefact, learners may work synchronously or asynchronously, face-to-face or online, but there is interdependence between group members, drawing on all their strengths.

This definition brings together the focus of the understanding of collaboration in the literature, in terms of students working together with shared responsibility to create a product over which they have shared ownership, and the realities of the EAP context, wherein students may be engaged in the process of developing extended assignments over a longer period of time. It is hoped this definition will enable EAP practitioners to reflect on practice, to change the way we talk about collaboration, to develop new ways of supporting collaborative assignments, and to open new avenues for research.

In relation to practitioner reflection, it is worth considering the case of the task most widely accepted as collaborative in the survey. There was almost complete agreement amongst practitioners that students presenting together represented collaboration (97% of respondents) and clearly the students are all involved during the delivery of the presentation and share responsibility for how it goes. However, marking rubrics for group presentations the authors are familiar with tend to assign grades to the group for presentation features like content, organisation, visual aids and use of support, with individual grades awarded to each speaker on delivery and, perhaps, how they deal with questions from the audience. While this general approach to the assessment of group presentations has face validity, a potential concern is that it ignores the process of how the presentation

is developed. It could be the case that the presentation is the work of one or two members of the group, who dealt with the research, organisation and planning, with the other speakers simply given the lines to deliver. While that is an extreme example, it does indicate that even in the case of an assignment where it is possible to see each member doing something (i.e., presenting), thought needs to be given to the process of the presentation preparation, which also needs to feature in the assessment scheme.

Conclusion

Although the results of this survey only provide a broad snapshot of practitioner attitudes from a range of contexts, much more work needs to be done to understand the complex issue of collaboration in EAP, with further research into what we expect when we ask students to collaborate, how we can best support that collaboration and how it could be most fairly assessed. Collaboration is, and should be, a feature of EAP programmes. However, there is a wide variety of tasks and activities that fall under the umbrella of 'student collaboration' in the practitioner understanding of the term. This variety is problematic because if a term is loaded with too many meanings, it ceases to have value. While valuable work has been done in the literature to define student collaboration, there is a possibility that the literature perspective is too narrow for the realities of the EAP classroom. As such, the definition for student collaboration put forward in this paper aims to bring together research and practitioner conceptions and provide a definition which suits real EAP contexts. If such a definition exists, it provides a starting point for meaningful discussions to take place about the nature of collaborative assignments, how they can be designed, scaffolded and assessed.

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