The Collaborative Classroom: Digital Tools for Academic Writing

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Abstract
Collaborative learning has its roots in Vygotsky’s early 20th Century theories of the social nature of learning, which diverged from the traditional individualistic approach. A hundred years later, and the introduction of iPads and mobile devices has provided us with new and powerful collaborative learning tools that were scarcely imaginable even a decade ago. Online platforms such as digital walls, applications (apps), and Open Education Resources are providing students with unprecedented collaborative learning possibilities. This paper examines such tools currently implemented on a tertiary level academic English Writing Foundations Programme, showcasing examples of students’ work and addressing pedagogical and technological considerations. One of the most potent aspects of online learning is the provision of shared virtual platforms which allow students and teachers to collaborate, brain-storm and learn/coach collectively. It has been found that collaborative digital approaches to academic writing tasks are highly beneficial to students who have previously found this skill challenging when approached on an individual level, especially given the profile of our students who are generally of lower intermediate level, with little or no experience of academic writing—even in Arabic, their first language. Readily available tools to promote real time and asynchronous collaboration on a variety of academic writing essay topics will be examined, including mind-mapping applications such as Popplet and Mindomo, sharing tools such as Padlet walls and Lino stickies, and Open Education Resources like those available on the “readwritethink” website.

Keywords: iPad, Academic writing, EFL/ESL/ELT, Collaborative learning
Introduction

iPads are commonly regarded as individual learning devices in the literature, designed for single users (e.g. Benson 2013, Melhuish and Falloon, 2010), and not suitable for group activities or collaborative learning. In addition, many in the field have criticized the iPad for not being a suitable device for academic writing activities, particularly extensive writing (e.g. Woykes, 2011, Gilksman et al, 2011, Weider, 2011, and Atallah et al, 2015, the latter specifically focusing on academic writing at universities in the UAE).

However, here at the Higher Colleges of Technology, we have found iPads to be useful tools in a number of collaborative writing activities, most notably brainstorming, scaffolding and planning. Particular apps that we have used include Padlet, Lino Stickies, Mindomo and Open Education Resources such as “readwritethink.” These are discussed in more detail later.

Given the academic profile of our students who are largely lower intermediate level and have little experience of academic writing, it has been found that working collaboratively serves to enhance their confidence and expand their skillset in tackling the IELTS Academic Writing Test, which is their exit point from the Foundations course. Though the Academic IELTS Writing Test is a paper-based, individual assessment, nevertheless anecdotal evidence is that students report greater confidence in tackling the paper and gaining the skills necessary through the less stressful learning experience of working with peers.

Our experience is our learners can achieve far more when working collaboratively, as they capitalize on one another’s resources and skills. By contrast, working individually students can often find the difficulty of the academic writing tasks overwhelming, especially at the beginning of the course.

Background

The teaching context is a Foundations Programme at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT). All federal universities (Zayed University, UAE University, and HCT) have foundations programmes, which are pre-Bachelor’s courses of up to two years to prepare students for their university majors. With the exception of a few courses such as Arabic and Sharia Law, all courses are taught in English. The gatekeeper for foundations programmes is an Academic IELTS Band 5 – students can then progress to their Bachelor’s course. Most students who enter Foundations correlate to an IELTS band 4.0/CEFR B1, so their level of English is low, and most have little or no experience of academic writing, even in L1. Many also have a low academic level in other subjects and general knowledge (O’Sullivan, 2004), and thus have no schemata to draw on when tackling academic writing questions, and these difficulties are compounded by their limited reading either in L1 or L2 (Peel, 2014: 135).

Academic writing is thus a great challenge for students, and based on our experience the collaborative model helps by reducing the anxiety some students experience during individualistic learning, and instead fosters an atmosphere of non-threatening cooperative engagement.

Literature Review

Much of the theory of Collaborative Learning derived from the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky from the early 20th Century. Vygotsky’s theories of the social nature of learning were largely forgotten till the 1980s, when social interdependence theory and collaborative learning became popular (Wertscht, 1985). Vygotsky’s theories stressed the importance of personal relationships, and considered the mood of a learner to be an important
affective factor in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, like Krashen’s much later input theory (Krashen, 1977). Vygotsky also maintained that different members of a group may have different perspectives/knowledge to offer, and, as a collaborative partnership, improve learning outcomes. Probably the most important of his theories was the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – where learners can do tasks with guidance or peer support that individually they would be unable to do.

![Figure 1. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development](image)

As social interdependence theory and collaborative learning developed in the 1970s/80s, many of the aspects of modern English Language Teaching methodologies emerged largely derivative of this theory, such as the Communicative Approach, and Task Based Learning.

The Collaborative Learning Model stresses that strong interpersonal relationships are important, and that individuals depend on and are accountable to each other. Knowledge is created as members interact, sharing experiences and possibly taking on asymmetrical roles. Many mediums are possible from traditional ways of interacting such as face-to-face group discussions, to digital discussions such as online forums and chat rooms.

**Collaborative Learning Research Findings**

More than 1200 studies comparing collaborative, competitive, and individualistic efforts have found that collaborative and cooperative learning methods improve students' time on tasks and intrinsic motivation to learn, as well as students' interpersonal relationships and expectations for success (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Lower and intermediate students appear to benefit the most from this approach, which matches the profile of the students here at public tertiary institutions in the UAE. In collaborative learning, student interpersonal relationships are strengthened, and it has been found there is a strong correlation between the latter and academic achievement (Roseth, Johnson and Johnson, 2008).

Collaborative learning is already widely used in contemporary English Language Teaching via the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) paradigm which emerged in the
1970s, and since its inception has remained the dominant methodology in ESL/EFL (Richards, 2006: 1). CLT is the approach used in pre-service training courses such as the Certificate of English Language Training to Adults (CELT Syllabus, University of Cambridge, 2010, p.15), and collaborative learning activities such as group and pair work, brainstorming, mind-mapping are typical of CLT activities. Collaborative learning is also firmly embedded in related teaching approaches such as Task Based/Project Based Learning.

Though collaborative theory is nothing new, our students, as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), and the emerging digital landscape and apps, have given collaborative learning an entirely new perspective. In the 21st Century Academic Forum (November 13 – 15, Dubai, UAE) a number of Apps used for collaborative learning were showcased. These included Padlet for brainstorming, Lino stickies for creating and sharing groups of lexical/grammar functions, and Popplet, Mindomo and Open Education Resources such as “readwritethink” for collaborative planning and mind-mapping of academic essays.

Some of these examples are featured below:

![Figure 2. Student collaboration - cause and effect essay example - Padlet](image)
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Figure 3. Student collaboration - compare contrast lexis example - Lino stickies

Figure 4. Student collaboration - sharing and creating groups - Lino stickies
Figure 4. Student collaboration - plan for an opinion essay - Popplet

Figure 5. Another plan for an opinion essay – Popplet
Figure 6. Students’ third plan for an opinion essay – Popplet

Figure 7. Students’ plan for an opinion essay – Mindomo
Figure 8. Completing a map - compare contrast – “readwritethink”

Figure 9. A completed map - compare contrast – “readwritethink”
In conclusion, our institution has found iPads to be highly effective collaborative writing tools for learners at the beginning of their English writing courses, particularly in the early stages of planning and mapping academic essays. Our mainly lower intermediate level students find academic writing extremely challenging, and this is exacerbated when working individually at initial stages of the Foundations Programme, when students are new to the College, perhaps nervous and unsure of their surroundings. Cooperating closely together provides valuable social bonding at this early stage of their academic career.

The digital platform is one students generally feel very comfortable with, and, working together, students capitalize on each another’s resources and skills, brainstorming and evaluating each other’s ideas. This process enhances their confidence and skills in tackling the IELTS Academic Writing Test, which is the gatekeeper to their Bachelor’s degree, and future academic success.
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References


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