

EFFECTIVE  
TEACHING  
AND LEARNING:  
DEVELOPMENT  
PROJECT REPORT

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## Collaborative writing

**Sue Grief**

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National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy



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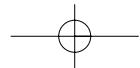
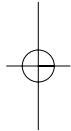
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This is one of several linked publications arising from the five Effective Practice Studies carried out by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) from 2003 to 2007. The five studies explored effective teaching and learning in reading, writing, numeracy, ESOL and using ICT.

NRDC has produced three series of publications from the Effective Practice Studies: the research reports, published in February 2007; the practitioner guides, published in partnership with NIACE in Autumn 2007; and the development project reports, published in Autumn 2007. For titles in the first two series, please see the back cover.

These development project reports focus on specific elements of effective classroom practice in these areas:

- Oral reading fluency in adults
- Collaborative writing
- 'Bestimation': Using basic calculators in the numeracy classroom
- Using voting technology for assessment
- Reflection and action in ESOL

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## Introduction

In this paper we share the findings of a small development project that grew from the NRDC Effective Practice Study in writing (Grief et al. 2007). The focus of the development project was collaborative writing.

We look at:

- some of the collaborative writing activities that teachers and learners undertook
- the responses of teachers and learners to these activities
- the value of the activities in terms of learners' writing
- the role of the teacher in supporting collaborative writing
- the role of teaching and learning resources
- the wider benefits for learners of collaborative activities.

## Why study collaborative writing?

### A literature review

In a literature review on the teaching of writing to adult literacy learners, published by NRDC (Kelly et al. 2004), working collaboratively on writing was identified as one of a number of teaching approaches that could potentially help learners to develop as writers. Studies covered by the review provide some convincing arguments for encouraging learners to write collaboratively (see insert below).

### The findings of the Effective Practice Study in writing

As part of the Effective Practice Study on the teaching and learning of writing we attempted to test out the hypothesis that collaborative approaches were beneficial to learners' development in writing (Grief et al. 2007). The findings were not clear-cut:

### Views on the value of collaborative writing from the literature review

It helps learners to combine their strengths rather than focus on their weaknesses.  
*(Bishop 1995)*

A supportive and co-operative group can provide a safe audience that gives learners the security to take risks with their writing. *(Phillips 1992)*

It provides an immediate audience and feedback which helps learners become aware of the need for clear messages. *(Porto 2002)*

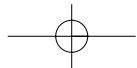
It can provide opportunity for the 'dialogue' that single authors have to create for themselves. It helps learners to anticipate the potential reader's responses. *(Clark and Ivanić 1997)*

It can make the process of revision more meaningful. *(Hodges 2002)*

It can help to empower learners. *(Robinson 2001)*

It can promote learner autonomy. *(Hodges 2002)*

Full references provided in Kelly et al. 2004.



## What we did

- in interviews learners told us that they enjoyed and valued opportunities to work with other learners
- the correlation analysis showed no link between collaborative writing activities and learners' progress in writing
- the analysis indicated a negative correlation between working in this way and learners' confidence in writing at work or in public.

These findings suggested a need for further investigation.

### **Further reasons for looking at collaborative writing**

Although writing is often perceived as a solitary activity, in fact, in everyday life, it is very frequently a shared task. As teachers and researchers, those of us involved in the project had experience of collaborating with colleagues on a range of documents. The learners we interviewed for the research study also told us how they worked with others on writing.

New technologies both support and encourage collaboration. The ease with which documents can be shared by email and tools such as 'track changes' facilitate co-operation in the creation of written texts while social uses of the web offer a new range of opportunities for online collaboration.

Recent research in the field of mathematics teaching and in the use of ICT with Skills for Life learners has demonstrated the value of learners working collaboratively (Swan 2006; Mellor et al. 2007).

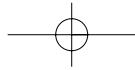
Seven teachers took part in the project, four working in South Yorkshire and three in London. Their classes covered a range of contexts and included young learners referred to a Training Provider from Connexions, and adult learners at a residential college. Some classes were at Entry level and others included learners at Levels 1 and 2. Two of the classes were made up predominantly of learners whose first language was not English.

At the start, the teachers met in two groups with the project manager. We discussed the findings of the literature review and the research study and shared our own experiences of encouraging learners to collaborate on writing.

We identified the following questions to shape our enquiry:

- Can writing collaboratively help learners to develop as writers?
- If so, in what ways?
- What features of collaborative writing help learners to develop as writers?
- How can we best support these?

The teachers introduced collaborative writing activities into their courses during the autumn term 2006. They planned activities that would fit into their existing schemes of work and suit the needs of their learners. They took care to explain to their learners that they would be introducing collaborative writing activities and that they were part of a research project.



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**Some of the collaborative writing activities used by teachers in the project**

**Drama bag**

In the pre-writing activity each learner was invited to pick an item out of the bag and describe what they saw. At this stage no value judgements were allowed.

*'As in previous weeks the learners joined in the pre-writing session confidently.'*

*think this was because in the tasks I have set there are no "right" and "wrong" answers.'*

In groups the learners then had to use the evidence from the bag to describe the character who owned it.

**Creating a survey**

The teacher planned a three-week project to create a survey about cafés. The plan was that the learners would use this with learners in another class. The learners worked collaboratively on selecting, structuring and sequencing the questions.

The group were mainly learners who's first language was not English working at Entry 2 and the project provided opportunity to improve their use of questions.

**Starting from a picture**

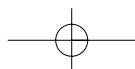
As a stimulus the teacher took in a picture of three women feeding chickens. In the whole group she asked the learners what questions they could ask which would give them useful information about the people in the picture. This discussion produced a list of questions that included:

Where are they?  
What country, town, village?  
Why aren't there any men?  
What have they just been doing?

At this stage there were lots of suggestions and they were all accepted.

*'I feel this was important. It meant everyone felt able to make a contribution even if it was short.'*

After this the learners worked in pairs to produce a draft profile of one of the characters.



**Retell a story**

The task was to work in a small group to write a modern version of a favourite children's story.

As a pre-writing group activity, the teacher shared pictures from a range of fairytales and well-known children's stories such as Postman Pat and Thomas the Tank Engine.

The group discussed their characteristics including themes and symbolism and shared their own experiences of children's stories. They also discussed updating tales for children today.

**Creating personal statements**

Learners on a course, 'Skills for Work and Study', worked together to compose a personal statement for a job application.

Pre-writing tasks included reading and discussing job specifications and case studies of candidates.

**Instructions for making a cup of tea**

Learners were introduced to examples of instructional text and analysed the features of these in the whole group. In pairs they then worked on instructions to make a cup of tea using an interactive web-based quiz.

**Different styles of writing**

The tutor introduced the concept of different styles of writing and facilitated a class discussion, asking for examples and talking about aspects of these different styles.

Following this the learners worked in pairs to create pieces of writing in a particular style. The tutor selected the style but the learners chose the topic. They worked together on a flipchart and presented their writing to the group at the end of the activity.

*'This activity enabled learners to put into practice the ideas about style that they had been introduced to in the whole group. Prescribing the style in which they had to write but not the subject gave them a framework but did not hamper their creativity. Their work was their own; it was relevant to them, used a context of their choice and meant they were more fully engaged with the task.'*



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The teachers:

- took opportunities to observe the learners as they worked in small groups or pairs on the planned activities
- recorded their observations
- recorded their reflections on the sessions
- devised opportunities for the learners to provide their own feedback on the experience.

Most collected oral feedback from learners, two used questionnaires and one used a learning diary on computer.

Early in the spring term 2007 the teachers met with the project leader to share their experiences, their own reflections and the responses of the learners who took part in the activities. This meeting allowed us to analyse how far the project had begun to provide answers to our research questions.

*'The progress made by P in the structure of her writing is very encouraging, even after such a relatively short period of time. When working with her partner they discussed at length the organisational aspects of their task. They discussed the use of paragraphs and when a new one should be started.'*

*The responses of teachers*

All the teachers who took part in the project were positive about the experience and felt that their learners had benefited from taking part in the collaborative writing activities. Several expressed surprise at how effectively the learners worked together and how well they organised themselves. Two teachers noted that working collaboratively helped learners to focus on writing for a longer period.

They also remarked on the way their own roles changed. As learners worked together they had the opportunity to stand back and observe learners, something they realised that they usually had little or no time to do. In the Effective Practice Study the teachers we observed generally maintained firm control over activities in the classroom. To varying degrees in this project the teachers loosened this control. They took on the role of facilitator rather than director of the class, allowing the learners greater autonomy, but offering support when necessary.

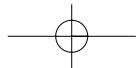
The sessions were not without their challenges and the teachers' thoughts on the management of group activities are shared in a later section of this report. Given a choice, the learners did not always wish to work together and erratic attendance sometimes meant that plans had to be changed or abandoned.

## What did we learn?

### How well does working collaboratively on writing help learners to develop as writers?

It was not viable to measure change in learners' competence in writing over such a short period. It was however possible to observe their behaviour as writers, to look at the writing they produced collaboratively and to listen to their thoughts on the value of working together on writing.

Two teachers noted improvements in the writing that learners did together when compared to writing undertaken individually. The teacher of a group of learners whose first language was not English, who were writing questions for a survey, observed an improvement in the structure and order of the learners' questions when they worked as a group. In another class the teacher provided evidence in the form of two pieces of writing by the same learner and commented:



*The responses of learners*

The majority of learners spoke or wrote positively about their experience of working with other learners on writing. Their comments support the view of Bishop (1995)\* that writing together in this way shifts the emphasis from the weaknesses of the individual to the combined strengths of the group. It encouraged the learners to value each other's knowledge and to learn from one another.

**I found working in groups helpful as it highlights your own strengths and weaknesses and makes you feel you are not on your own.**

**What I liked was working in pairs which meant there were two people to put their ideas across instead of having to think of something on your own.**

**It benefited me a great deal because in a group you are talking to each other and sharing ideas rather than working on your own.**

**I really enjoyed bouncing ideas about and listening to other students' comments. Working with someone helps to stimulate the thinking process and also helps to build confidence.**

These comments also suggest that writing alone can be an isolating and possibly stressful experience. In contrast collaborative writing was felt to be both supportive and creative.

A minority expressed doubts about working

together. One learner felt that it was difficult to judge how well you were doing when you worked with other people. Another felt uncomfortable about having to make compromises about something she felt strongly about and a few expressed concern about contributing more to a task than a partner. The need to constantly obtain the consensus of the group was also mentioned.

In one organisation the results of a 'before' and 'after' questionnaire indicated a considerable increase in confidence in writing over the period of a short course and in particular an increase in response to the question, 'How confident are you for others to read your writing?' In another organisation a questionnaire showed that learners identified more strongly with the following statements by the end of the course:

- 'I am confident making suggestions for writing.'
- 'I think writing a first draft is useful.'

The latter tallies with the observation of the teachers, that working together helped learners to recognise the value of drafting.

\* Full reference provided in Kelly et al. 2004.



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## Which features of collaborative writing help learners to develop as writers?

We noted a number of specific ways in which working collaboratively helped learners with their writing. These are set out below.

### **Writing collaboratively encouraged learners:**

#### **- to be willing to take risks with their writing**

'For me the most significant difference between their individual and collaborative work was their willingness to take a risk with structures when working collaboratively.'

(Teacher)

#### **- to value the process of planning and drafting a text**

Teachers felt that the process of planning and drafting a piece of writing was more 'real' to learners when they worked on this together and that they recognised its value more clearly.

The planning stage helped you make the story in your head.

I can work things out better because I can ask the other person.

#### **- to think carefully about vocabulary**

Working together raised questions around vocabulary. Two learners spent a considerable length of time discussing the difference between the meanings of the words 'house' and 'home' and 'pebble' and 'stone'.

In the same class two learners who were discussing the precise word to use initially wrote a few down to see if they 'looked right'. They then decided to use a thesaurus which they had previously never done even though it had been available in each session.

What I enjoyed most was when we were writing different words to find the best word to use.

#### **- to check their grammar**

'I found it amazing how much learner-centred discussion there was about technical aspects of writing and language. I didn't ask or direct them to discuss these things.' (Teacher)

In one group, a learner who's first language was not English, shared her understanding of grammar. She was able to correct a subject-verb agreement. She and her partners also had a discussion about the need for consistency in using the narrative voice and the difficulty of doing this when they were writing in the first person but using 'we' as they talked.

What I enjoyed most was having a new person look and give their opinion.

You're more conscious who you are writing for.

#### **- to take more account of the reader**

Writing collaboratively gave opportunity for immediate peer feedback. This appeared to be more empowering than teacher feedback and also helped learners to become more aware of the needs of the reader of the writing.

## Supporting collaborative writing: The role of the teacher

Based on the experience of the teachers who took part in the project, we drew together the following advice for teachers who want to introduce collaborative writing in the classroom.

- **Plan collaborative writing activities carefully** including pre-writing activities.
- **Think carefully about the materials** used for collaborative writing activities. [See next page]
- **Think carefully about groupings.** While in some classes learners were left to create their own groups, many of the teachers placed learners in groups. In doing so they noted that it was important to know the learners well and to take account of personalities and group dynamics.
- **Group size is important.** Small groups worked best and three appeared to be the optimum number of learners.
- **Talk explicitly with learners about working together and set some simple ground rules.** One teacher noted how certain learners wanted to take on all the roles in a group. She had to remind the group what working collaboratively meant.
- **Be prepared to step back** and leave the learners to work on their own. Some teachers found this difficult, especially when learners were slow to get going.
- **Be sensitive to what is happening in the groups** and recognise when it is necessary to intervene and offer support. Learners in one class needed a lot of support to work without the teacher.
- **Use questions carefully to support groups without taking over.**
- **Respect what the learners choose to write.** One group chose to write a very violent version of a fairytale modelled on a Japanese film genre. The teacher wrote: '...it is their story, they are the authors. Let them question who the reader is and whether it is appropriate.'
- **Decide whether the class is ready to work in this way.** Two teachers felt they would not have asked their learners to write together in the first half term. Others felt working in this way helped the learners to come together as a group.





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## Supporting collaborative writing: The nature of the teaching materials

The following materials worked well:

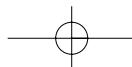
- Materials which learners can move around, such as cards, work better than worksheets. Choices made using cards are not permanent and learners are more inclined to change decisions using cards than when they are required to write on a worksheet. Also, sharing one set of cards draws learners together whereas learners can hide behind worksheets.
- Computer software that allows learners to drag and drop elements on the screen can work in the same way, encouraging the group to experiment and discuss choices.
- Large sheets of paper allow two or more learners to read what is being written and to contribute to this. Pairs in one group created mindmaps together, both writing in their ideas on the same sheet.
- Carefully chosen pictures can provide a good focus for group discussion and a stimulus for writing. One teacher encouraged the learners to identify questions about the scene depicted as a starting point for their discussion.

## Wider benefits

The teachers also noted other benefits not directly related to learners' writing. Working collaboratively:

- exposed learners to different viewpoints and experiences: learners were observed correcting misconceptions and sharing knowledge of their own cultures.
- encouraged some learners to contribute more fully than they did in the larger group.

- helped new members of the group to integrate more quickly.
- developed understanding, trust and respect between learners.
- helped learners to gain an understanding of other learners' specific needs.



## Conclusion

The evidence of this project suggests that encouraging learners to write collaboratively can have positive outcomes, not only in terms of learners' confidence to write, but also in the level of their engagement with the whole process of writing from decisions on topic or style to the checking of grammar and vocabulary. It is an approach that deserves the attention of adult literacy and language teachers and teacher trainers.

Whether or not the use of well-planned collaborative writing activities could, over time, make a measurable difference to learners' competence as writers will need to be the subject of a different and much longer study.



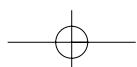


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