Collaborative Student Writing in the Literature Classroom

Ayesha Heble
Sultan Qaboos University

Sandhya Rao Mehta
Sultan Qaboos University

Abstract

Many schools and colleges today encourage collaborative work in disciplines such as science or geography projects, but the study of literature generally seems to discourage the collective process, perhaps because literary production itself is seen as an act of individual creativity. Could one apply the principles of collaborative work to writing about literature, and if so, would it increase both the understanding and appreciation of the literary text, and also improve the writing skills of students, especially in the case of second-language learners? This paper is a study of two groups of Arts major students at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, to discover whether the same sets of students, at two different levels, perform better in an individual or a collaborative writing exercise on literary topics, and also to compare their experiences of the two different types of writing. It was found that although some students did express reservations about collaborative writing, most were enthusiastic about the experience, and felt that it had improved not only their understanding of the literature but also their academic writing skills. However, as there were so many other variables involved, in terms of differences in the linguistic competence and personalities of the members, it would be difficult to come to any final conclusion about the benefits of collaborative writing and language improvement.
Keywords: academic writing, collaborative writing, literature, second-language learning, Sultan Qaboos University

Introduction

Collaborative work is usually associated with the sciences. As Natalie Angier (1988) observed in her review of David Hull's book, *Science as a Process,* "Modern science has become too broad and complex a venture for any one researcher to go it alone; scientists need other scientists". Writing, on the other hand, is normally considered a solitary activity (Bruffee, 1973; Ede and Lunsford 1990; Le Fevre, 1987); this is especially true of writing in the Arts and Humanities, and particularly writing for literature. The novelist Paul Coelho once famously said, "Writing is one of the most solitary activities in the world" (The Zahir, 2005) and he was probably talking from personal experience. This image of the solitary writer locked away in his/her study has unfortunately also spilled over into the academic world and especially the teaching of writing and composition. As Le Fevre (1987) notes, "In contemporary composition theory, rhetorical invention is commonly viewed as the private act of an individual writer for the particular event of producing a text, typically a theme or an essay" (p.1). Most writing composition classes focus on individual student performance; there may be collective brainstorming of ideas, or peer-review and editing of preliminary drafts, even peer-evaluation of finished tasks, but the actual act of writing is most often done alone, either in class or in even greater isolation as a homework assignment, with individual students grappling with their own solitary attempts to put down in words what exactly they want to say on the subject. Ede and Lunsford refer to James Moffet's "theory and method in his influential *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* [which] rest largely on the assumption that 'the most critical adjustment one makes [in learning to write] is to relinquish collaborative discourse, with its reciprocal prompting and cognitive cooperation, and go it alone'." (Moffet, 1968 as cited in Ede and Lunsford, 1990: p.7).

As Hill (2003) has pointed out, it was only in the early 1970's that English and composition professor Kenneth Bruffee began arguing that students produced better work when they wrote essays and fiction in groups than when they worked alone, but by and large the teaching of writing, and especially writing about literature, has remained an individual exercise. A lot of schools and colleges nowadays do encourage collaborative work in other disciplines, such as science or geography projects, and individual instructors may also give their students opportunities for oral group presentations, but the study of literature generally seems to discourage the collective process, perhaps because literary production itself is seen as an act of individual creativity. Could one apply the principles of collaborative work to writing about literature, and if so, would it increase both the understanding and appreciation of the literary text, and also improve the writing skills of students? This is what we set out to discover with our two groups of Arts major students at Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman, one a 6th semester class studying a course in Modern Drama and an American Survey course, and the other a graduating class studying courses in World Literature and the Modern Novel. All of them were, needless to say, second-language learners of English. In the two earlier courses they were asked to write term papers on texts provided by the instructors, and on topics of their own choosing in the two advanced courses, the crucial difference being that, at each of the levels, they would have to write the actual essays individually in one course and in groups the other. The aim was to discover whether the same sets of students, at two different levels, perform better in an individual or a collaborative writing exercise on literary topics, and also to compare their experiences of the two different types of writing.

Literature review

In his seminal work on collaborative learning, *Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models* (1973), Bruffee makes the point that although collective functioning was replacing more traditional ways of working in many social and political fields in the early '70s, this was still not the case in the field of education; "[i]ndeed, classrooms remain today one of the few places where people do not organize themselves for collaborative activity" (Bruffee, 1973, p. 634). In fact, students were encouraged to compete rather than collaborate with each other, and interact almost exclusively with the teacher; very rarely were students expected, or indeed even permitted to interact with each other, such instances often being penalized as "cheating": "We do not ordinarily recognize collaboration as a valid kind of learning. Traditionally, indeed, collaboration is considered irresponsible; in the extreme, collaboration is the worst possible academic sin, plagiarism" (Bruffee, 1973, p. 636). He goes on to cite various examples of successful collaborative learning experiments, mainly in the teaching of literature, and then to see whether these principles (of collaborative learning) can be applied successfully to the teaching of writing, where "the possibility that collaborative learning is a case of the blind leading the blind is more apparent" (Bruffee, 1973, p. 640). Here again most of the case studies he describes were all successful to a marked degree, because by helping each other the students were also improving their own skills; "[p]eople themselves learn, when they teach others" (Bruffee, 1973, p. 641). In a later work, written more than ten years later, he goes deeper into the philosophical implications of collaborative learning and concludes that the main reason for its success is that it is, in a way, an extension of conversation, which in itself is closely related to thought, and further, "[i]f thought is internalized conversation, then writing is internalized conversation re-externalized….Writing is a technologically displaced form of conversation" (Bruffee, 1984, p. 641).

It must be noted that the students Bruffee was talking about in the examples he mentions were mainly "native speakers of standard English"; we wished to examine whether these principles would work with second language learners, as most of our students are. But before we can go into this question it is necessary to define what exactly we mean by collaborative writing. Hill (2003) refers to David Farkas' "limited but practical" definitions as a working model to start from: "David Farkas offers four possible definitions useful in approaching collaboration through an analysis of processes. For his purposes, collaboration is:

- o two or more people jointly composing the complete text of a document;
- o two or more people contributing components to a document;
- o one or more person modifying, by editing and/or reviewing, the document of one or more persons; and
- o one person working interactively with one or more person and drafting a document based on the ideas of the person or persons. (Farkas,1991 cited in Hill, 2003, p. 14)

Whereas all the above possibilities imply "synchronous and fully consensual group work", Hill himself goes on further to see all literary writing [i.e. "literature" rather than writing *about* literature] as "collaborative" in an asynchronous manner, in that "it implies connections between, and unity among, different written works over time and between authors in a way that "writing" does not" (Hill, 2003). We must make it clear that in our case we are talking specifically about students writing collaboratively *about* literature rather than collaboratively creating literary pieces of writing in this later sense, and it will be interesting to see which of the above strategies they use.

Apart from the question of logistics in the actual process of writing, i.e. who does what, another very real problem in collaborative work of any kind is undoubtedly the human element involved. Sapsomboon et al (1997) have observed that as collaborative writing includes all "activities involved in the production of a document by more than one author, then pre-draft discussions and arguments as well as post-draft analyses and debates are collaborative components. Based on this definition, the collaborative authoring process includes the writing activity as well as group dynamics*"* (Collaborative Writing section, para. 1). The authors further elaborate:

> The acts of collaboration and writing as they relate to collaborative authoring include: … identifying writing tasks and dividing those tasks among group members, tracking individual idea generation, defining rules for document management, identifying roles for group members, communicating ideas, and managing conflict. Collaborative authoring, therefore, requires effective communication between members of the writing group. (Sapsomboon et al, 1997, Collaborative Writing section, para. 2)

Farrah (2011) emphasizes the psychological as well as the cognitive benefits of collaborative writing by pointing out that "[c]ollaborative learning is an efficient learning process as it helps students to learn by discovery. It encourages them to take a more dynamic role in their own learning, develop their interpersonal skills and collaborate with other learners to accomplish certain tasks" (p. 139).

We will also be addressing some of these issues and examining how our students managed the interpersonal aspects of group work, whether there were any conflicts among group members and how they dealt with these. We were interested in finding out about the students' perceptions of collaborative writing as a whole, not only in terms of their actual achievements but also in terms of the process involved. A similar study was carried out with ESL students by Neomy Storch at the University of Melbourne in 2005 where students were given a choice to write in pairs or individually. Although most chose to work in pairs, some chose to work individually. The conclusions she came to were that "[c]ollaboration afforded students the opportunity to pool ideas and provide each other with feedback. Most students were positive about the experience, although some did express some reservations about collaborative writing".

The third aspect of collaborative writing that many researchers have talked about is whether it actually leads to better learning. Quoting studies done by Collins and Guetzkow and Le Fevre, Hill (2003) concludes, "These researchers have demonstrated that collaborative writing could, at least in ways that can be tested empirically, produce *better* work and teach people quantitatively *more* than in situations where the same individuals write alone" (Chapter 1, Introduction). We were also interested in examining whether collaborative writing would lead not only to better understanding of the texts, but also to better *writing* among our students, our hypothesis being that while it would certainly result in the former, we weren't too sure about the latter. As all our students are second-language learners the development of their language skills is always an underlying component of all their courses, and as instructors who also teach language development courses in academic writing to the same students, we often despair at how many of them seem unable to transfer the skills they learn in these courses to their literature assignments. Would the act of collaboration perhaps encourage them to be more careful about aspects of academic writing such as formatting, referencing, organization of ideas, as well as improve their basic language skills of grammar and vocabulary?

More recent studies in collaborative writing (Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs, 2012; Sapsomboon et al., 1997; Ward, 2009) have focused on the impetus given to such projects by Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs and online tools like Google.docs. Elola and Oszoz (2010) conducted a study at the University of Maryland focusing specifically on the use of wikis and chats in the writing class, coming to the conclusion that although "learners' opinions about the benefits of wikis for grammar improvement were evenly divided between agree and disagree … [w]ith regard to content development, all the learners agreed or strongly agreed about the usefulness of the wikis (p. 60). Kessler, Bikowski and Boggs (2012) have observed that "[c]ollaborative practices are increasingly being advocated in second-language classrooms largely in response to the collaborative potential of Web 2.0 tools" (p. 91) and they demonstrate through a detailed case study how their "highly proficient non-native English speaking students who were engaged in a collaborative writing project using Web-based word processing tools …. successfully collaborated in groups and developed their own process towards writing" (Kessler et al., p.106). Today's students being "digital natives", to use Mark Prensky's (2001) expressive phrase, the ease with which they are able to use such networking tools no doubt facilitates the act of collaboration; we will not, however, be focusing on this aspect, taking it, instead, as a given. Within our overarching research question – Does collaborative writing improve students' understanding of literature as well as their academic writing skills? – we will be focusing mainly on three aspects: their understanding as well as implementation of the process; the interpersonal problems, if any, they encountered and how they overcame these; and whether they benefitted academically from the exercise in terms of understanding and performance.

Methodology

As stated earlier, we had two groups of students – one from the 6th semester and the other an 8th semester graduating class – many of whom are doing the same two courses at each level with the same two instructors. As one of the instructors had asked her class to write individual term papers in the two courses she was teaching - American Survey (6th semester) and the Modern Novel (8th semester) – and the other had asked her class to do group projects and write collaborative term papers in her courses – Modern Drama (6th semester) and World Literature (8th semester) – this provided us with an opportunity do a comparative study of the two strategies. We had a total of twenty-six respondents, all girls, all Omani, all majoring in English from the College of Arts at Sultan Qaboos University. Most of the students were the same in both classes at each level, though a few of them in the World Literature class had done the Modern Novel course in an earlier semester. We gave them a questionnaire at the end of the semester, focusing on each of the aspects mentioned earlier, and followed this up with interviews with individual students to get a more complete picture of their assessment of the experience. We asked them to submit their earlier drafts of the essays along with the final versions, and also compared the grades they achieved at the end in the two courses.

In keeping with the three aspects mentioned earlier that we wished to focus on,the questions asked in the questionnaire [see Appendix 1] were divided into background information about their earlier experience, if any, of collaborative work, their experience while doing the project, and their achievements at the end. The background questions dealt with any previous experience they might have had of collaborative work, either in Arabic or English as we wanted to find out whether it was an entirely new concept. of the second set of questions were about the organizational strategy they followed; they were asked to choose from five alternatives, adapted

from the seven strategies suggested by Ede and Lunsford (1990, cited in Sapsomboon et al., 1997):

1. the group discussed the topic, divided the various aspects and then each member wrote his/her part; the group compiled the individual parts, and revised the whole document at the end
2. the group discussed the topic and outlined the writing task, then one member prepared a draft; the group edited and revised the draft
3. one member of the group planned and wrote a draft, the group revised the draft
4. one person assigned the tasks, each member completed the individual task, one person compiled and revised the document
5. Any other? (Please specify)

Some of the other questions dealt with group dynamics, whether they felt the work was divided fairly among the members, whether they felt they had done more than their fair share, or whether any other member had not contributed enough, and how they had dealt with these problems. Finally, the third set of questions were about their achievements; whether they felt their writing skills had improved through this exercise, and comparing their grades for the individual term paper and the collaboratively written one. The last question asked them which type of writing they preferred and the reasons for their choice.

Findings

Of the twenty-six respondents who answered the questionnaire, only six said they had no experience of collaborative study at any time in their education; of the twenty who said they had, most said that they had done group work in subjects like Art or Arabic – two students had written a collection of Arabic folk tales in Arabic - but only four had done any actual collaborative writing in English, and that was in linguistic courses. One student said that she had done some collaborative writing in English outside her courses – "I wrote booklets, part of a research paper and some cover stories for newspapers". None of them had ever done any collaborative writing in literature; in another literature course they had done a group project which involved doing research and discussing various, but the actual writing was done individually. In terms of the method they employed in dividing the work among group members, of the four possible alternatives, nineteen (73.07%) chose a., the most democratic method, while only two (7.69%) chose d., the least democratic one.

The responses regarding group dynamics were interesting. On the question of whether they felt the work had been equally divided among the group, only five (19.23%) out of the twenty-six felt that it had not, and interestingly all of these were from the junior group – i.e. from the 6th semester – one student went so far as to say, "I had to do all the work regardless waiting [sic] for my team. I just did it. I need to score a high grade, so I do not care if I did the job as the most or not [sic]". There were also comments about one particular member of the group not doing their fair share: "One of the members did not care when we put a deadline for handing the work. She kept giving excuses and she gave us the work after asking her several times". The instructor had told them that needed to work these problems out by themselves - which also resulted in a feeling of being unfairly treated – "All of us kept silent and never told the instructor about it and all of us got the same mark". Interestingly, out of these five respondents, two still said they preferred the collaborative writing exercise to the individual writing one and would like to do such a project again, "even though this idea, of collaborative paper, has many

disadvantages. One of them: not all the students work hard in the paper". Most of the students in the senior group, i.e. from the 8th semester, on the other hand, seemed to have ironed out these difficulties among themselves and to have divided the work fairly in their groups, which could be because they had been together for longer and knew each other better.

Regarding the question about whether they felt that their writing skills had improved as a result of collaborative writing, an overwhelming majority (80.76%) said they had, mainly because of the process of reviewing and editing each other's writing. Most of them said they had benefitted from working together; one of the students elaborated on this: "For me, whenever I revise my work, I hardly notice my grammatical or spilling [sic] mistakes, so the cooperative work allows the chance to get the help from my friends and checking my mistakes which really help[ed]". This was very much in line with the findings of Elola and Oskoz (2010) in their study conducted at the University of Maryland: "when working collaboratively, learners realized that the analysis and critique of their ideas enhanced not only the content but also the overall quality of their essays. Learners became aware that everybody brought to the projects a unique set of skills and that often they could learn more from correcting their partner's grammar and critiquing their ideas than from their own work" (p. 59).Three students, on the other hand, said their writing had not improved, though one qualified this by saying "I saw others writing and shows [sic] me how they work"; one said she did not know yet, adding quite frankly that it "depends somehow on the grades we get in each of the works [sic]". However, the general impression was that they had benefitted from the process mainly because it required them to reread and revise their writing – something that we urge them to do in their writing assignments anyway, but which they usually neglect to do.

Chart 1. Comparison of final grades in individual and collaborative writing exercise in 6th semester courses.
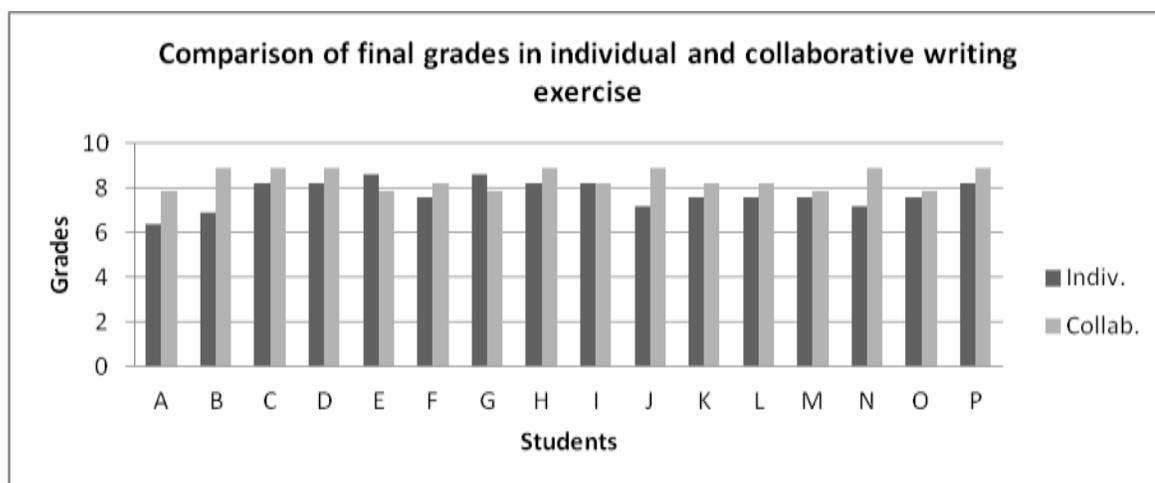
It must be pointed out that we have not attempted any detailed linguistic or quantitative analysis of the errors in their final essays but rather, have compared them in terms of their final grades. In the 6th semester class (see Chart 1.), we found that out of seventeen students, an overwhelming majority (82.35%) got higher grades in the collaboratively written paper than the individually written ones, marked by the same instructor; only two (11.76%) got lower grades,

and one (5.88%) got the same. This was further corroborated when we compared their grades in individually written term papers in the other course, marked by a different instructor. Of the twelve students who were in both classes, only three (36%) did better in the individual essays, one (12%) got the same grade, and nine students (84%) got higher grades in the collaboratively written paper. A closer analysis of individual student grades revealed that while the weaker students benefitted from the collaborative writing exercise, some of the better students unfortunately fared worse – two of the students who had received an A- (90–94%) in the individually written paper came down to a C+ (77-79%) in one case and a B+ (87-89%) in the other, and the third came down from a B+ (87-89%) to a B- (80-82%). In the 8th semester courses, there were only five students who were common to the two courses, and a comparison of the final grades also revealed that the two better students did better in the individual writing exercise, while the two weaker ones benefitted from the collaborative process. Only one student, who could be called a middle level student, got exactly the same grade in both term-papers.

When asked which type of writing they preferred, individual or collaborative, and whether they would like to do such a project again, seventeen out of the twenty-six (65.38%) respondents said they would, although some of them were rather equivocal in their appraisal of the two methods:

> I benefit from collaborative work more than individual work but I don't feel the paper is mine because there are many modifications by other students. On the other hand, the individual work gives me the opportunity to write freely without restriction.

Some of them felt that the collaborative writing exercise was better because "it lightened the work burden" or "because I found it easier to conduct and [it] needs shorter time and effort", but quite a few remarked that it helped them "understand the topic more than individually", and "each one can come up with new ideas and think critically about the plays or poems". One student remarked, "I prefer the collaborative term paper, because it is easy for us to discuss the topic from different perspectives if we are in a group". This was in keeping with Farrah's (2011) findings that "the general attitudes of the students revealed that collaborative learning enhances communicative skills, critical thinking skills and motivation. Furthermore, it makes students responsible for their own learning, thus it makes them autonomous learners" (p. 156).

On the other hand, eight students (30.76%) said they preferred to work individually, but this was mainly because of the problems they had with their other group members. One student said,

> I prefer to work individually because I will do whatever I want without any argument. All what I like in cooperative work is the sharing of ideas and correcting some mistakes which in fact I can get by asking my friends anytime to check my works without any cooperative in works [sic].

Another respondent commented, "writing individually is the good one because I can finish it in less than two days unlike the term paper that we did collaboratively…", but she went to say, "to do a presentation with a group is good". One student also commented on the unfairness of the assessment process: "I do not think that students are evaluated fairly because some work harder than others". Two students felt that their identity/voice was lost in the collaborative paper: "Because everybody has his/her own style of writing which makes it hard to decide [on a] thesis statement when doing collaborative work" and "individual writing gives more freedom to us, and

[we] write according to our point of view". This was in line with the observations of Elola and Oskoz (2010): "[r]egardless of how useful or valid the collaborative exercises may have been, there is no doubt that learners still feel more comfortable when writing individually for several reasons: they retain more control over their writing, they establish their own personal style, and they are not dependent on the input of others (p. 64). One student also felt that language develops when worked on individually, which was in marked contrast to most of the other respondents who felt that their language skills had improved in collaborative writing, whether they preferred it as a process or not. One respondent did not answer this question at all, but did say, in response to the earlier question, that she felt her writing skills had improved "somehow yes because we have different ideas and skills and we tried to share them during the editting [sic]". Two students were equivocal about the two types of writing, but leaned towards the collaborative effort; one said, "I prefer two [sic] of them. I gained more benefits from the collaborative writings", while the other was more specific:

> I prefer both depending on the topic ... If the topic can have a wide discussion and carries many ideas then collaborative writing is useful because one person cannot cover all points and he/she may not come up with new points that others have.

She later clarified that she included literature as being one of the subjects that would benefit from this process.

Conclusion

It seems from our findings that most of our students did benefit from collaborative writing on purely literary topics, especially in terms of sharing ideas and pooling resources, even though some of them expressed reservations about the process. Even in terms of their writing skills, most seem to have benefitted, mainly because the process forced them to re-read and revise their own as well as others' writing. This was reflected in the final grades they achieved for their writing assignments in the two courses, especially at the 6th semester level, although this was more so in the case of weaker students who obviously benefitted more from the process of collaboration. The reservations that some of them had about the process were more due to the practical problems of arranging meetings, time constraints etc, but also in some cases due to inter-personal problems between members, which can probably be said of group dynamics in any situation. This corresponded largely with the conclusions that Storch (2005) came to in her experiment at Melbourne University mentioned earlier. However, although we could say that writing collaboratively on literary topics is possible and can also be beneficial, especially for second-language learners in terms of improving their understanding of literary texts and also forcing them to be more critical about their writing skills, there are so many variables involved in terms of personality/linguistic competence/group dynamics, that it is difficult to come to any conclusive understanding about the benefits of collaborative writing for actual language improvement. The main benefit seems to be terms of making students more conscious about the writing process itself and therefore more likely to be careful about correcting their mistakes and producing a better final product, but whether this would be true only for this particular paper, or would spill over into work done on their own at a later stage is not clear at this stage. Further research into the long-term benefits of collaborative writing needs to be done to examine whether it does indeed result both in deeper understanding of literary texts and in fundamental language improvement.

About the Authors:

Dr. Ayesha Heble is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. She has a doctorate in English Language Teaching (ELT). Her research interests include the role of technology in enhancing classroom teaching, and teaching academic writing.

Dr. Sandhya Rao Mehta is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. Her Ph.D on post-colonial literatures has led to an interest in the areas of ELT and emerging Englishes. She has most recently co-edited a collected anthology entitled *Language Studies: Stretching the Boundaries* published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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Appendix 1

Collaborative Writing on Literature

Questionnaire

We are conducting a survey to find out whether collaborative writing on literary topics helps students to understand the topic(s) better and also to improve their academic writing skills.

We request you to answer the following questions as honestly as possible. We assure you that the answers will be confidential and will not affect your grades in any way.

Background information:

Semester: _____   No. of literature courses completed: _____

What do you understand by collaborative writing?
_____
_____

Have you ever done any form of collaborative study during your education? Y/N

 If Yes, describe what you did (It may have been a school project, in English/Arabic):
_____
_____

Have you ever done any collaborative writing (in English/Arabic) before this? Y/N

If Yes, describe what you did:
_____
_____
_____

You were asked to write a term paper collaboratively with your group. Please answer the following questions about your experience.

1. How many people were there in your group? _____

2. How did you divide the work among yourselves? (Choose from the options)

   i.   the group discussed the topic, divided the various aspects and then each member wrote his/her part; the group compiled the individual parts, and revised the whole document at the end
   ii. the group discussed the topic and outlined the writing task, then one member prepared a draft; the group edited and revised the draft
   iii. one member of the group planned and wrote a draft, the group revised the draft
   iv. one person assigned the tasks, each member completed the individual task, one person compiled and revised the document
   v.   Any other? (Please specify)
        _____

3. Do you feel the work was divided equally between all members?   Y/N
4. Do you feel you had to do more than the others?   Y/N
5. Do you feel that one of the members did less than their share?   Y/N If Yes, how did you deal with this problem?
   _____
   _____

6. What were some of the other problems you faced in doing this exercise? How did you overcome these?
   _____
   _____
   _____

7. Do you feel your writing skills improved at the end? In what way?
   _____
   _____
   _____

8. You have written one term paper individually and one collaboratively in two of your courses this semester. Which did you prefer? Give reasons for your choice.
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____