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Report**

**An investigation into using collaborative writing  
in the Religious Education classroom: Action  
research in the Portuguese context**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports an action research inquiry into implementing collaborative writing in a Portuguese Religious Education classroom. Combining collaborative writing with small group discussion, the study aimed at understanding the role of collaborative writing in enhancing students' co-construction of knowledge.

Multiple research methods were used for collecting data, namely individual and focus group interviews, classroom observation and audio-recording of student-student interactions, students' reflections and the teacher-researcher's reflective journal. These allowed collecting rich data on students' collaborative writing experiences, the nature and role of student-student talk while writing collaborative texts, and students' accounts of their collaborative writing experiences.

The findings suggest that collaborative writing is a complex social activity and its implementation entails several challenges concerning friendship grouping, ground rules for discussion, power relations and conflict, requiring the teacher to be a careful planner and organiser of authentic collaborative writing tasks while building an emotionally safe classroom environment. The findings also indicate that combining collaborative writing and group discussion is an effective strategy to help students to plan their writing, engage in productive discussion and provide critical peer feedback. The report concludes by stressing the potential of collaborative writing in promoting content learning and development of interpersonal skills.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

School writing is often viewed as a silent, solitary and circumspect activity restricted to the language classroom. Such a perspective is, however, limiting since as a powerful means of expression and communication, writing is closely linked with thinking (Applebee, 1984) and plays a key role in learning (Emig, 1977). It should therefore constitute an integral part of the school curriculum (Bazerman et. al., 2005).

My interest in the relationship between writing and learning emerged from my engagement with narrative enquiry during the Leading Learning module. The experience of narrating my exploration of student talk in group discussion led me to discover that writing not only involves what Britton et al. (1975: 39) have described as “the dialectical interrelationship of thought and language”, but that in the process of composing a text there is a continuous dialogue with others. In other words, writing, including that undertaken individually, resembles a conversation: between the writer and herself and her text, the writer and those whose contributions are imprinted in the text, and the writer and her community of readers. This means that learning derived from writing occurs in dialogic activity with others, an area also reflected in my first exploration of classroom talk in my Understanding Teaching coursework.

At the end of my MTeach journey, having strengthened an understanding of writing as a dialogic and collaborative learning process, I set out to investigate the learning potential of collaborative writing in a Portuguese Ismaili Religious Education (RE). Distinct from my report, which claims a single authorship, my inquiry focused on writing undertaken by two or more authors (Haring-Smith, 1994).

## **Context**

During this research, which was conducted in Lisbon, Portugal, I was teaching the IIS (Institute of Ismaili Studies) Muslim History and Civilisations module, which focuses on the historical experiences of Muslim societies, while also relating “the religious component with social, scientific, literary and philosophical perspectives” (IIS, 2013: 6). Within this framework, teachers are expected to guide students in developing key skills and competencies including collaboration, discussion, and the articulation of ideas in oral and written forms, which provide the rationale for this inquiry.

My data was collected from a single class consisting of 12 students aged 15-17 years. Classes were held on a weekly basis during a 10-week period, from January to April 2016.

## **Research questions:**

My study was grounded in a sociocultural framework and explored the role of collaborative writing in enhancing students’ co-construction of knowledge. As such, it examined the following research questions:

1. What challenges are encountered by both students and teacher when collaborative writing is implemented in the classroom?
2. What is the nature and role of student-student talk in the process of writing collaborative texts?
3. What do students have to say about their experiences of engaging with collaborative writing?

### **Aims/Purpose**

The main purpose of this research was to gain insights into the opportunities and challenges of using collaborative writing in the classroom that could inform my future practice. Although aware of the contextual specificity of my study, I hoped the study to highlight the role of collaborative writing and group discussion in students' learning.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter provides the theoretical framework for my study and discusses relevant literature and research into writing and collaboration. It first situates the topic within the sociocultural learning theory, which provides the rationale for combining collaboration, writing and student-student talk, and then elaborates on the concept of collaborative writing followed by a critical review of research on the topic.

### **Learning as a social process**

Emerging from a Vygotskian perspective of learning, sociocultural theory views knowledge as constructed within people's interactions with others and later within the self when it is appropriated and becomes part of individual knowledge (Wells, 1999). Underlying this premise is the idea that by taking part in shared activities learners are exposed to ample opportunities for learning from each other (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996). Sociocultural theorists also argue that knowledge construction is shaped by the social, cultural and historical contexts in which learning occurs (Rojas-Drummond, et al., 2008). Therefore, learning can only be understood as an activity integrating person and context (Rogoff, 1995), thus implying the uniqueness of students, classroom settings and the wider contexts in which they operate.

A key assumption of sociocultural theory is that language, written or spoken, is interactive (Nystrand and Himley, 1984) and has the potential of "promoting thinking, developing reasoning, and supporting cultural activities" (Darling-Hammond., 2003: 126). The relationship between thought and language and the educational power of dialogue have been extensively noted by Alexander (2006) in his proposition of *dialogic teaching* where teacher and students engage in ongoing

talk by asking questions, presenting points of view and commenting on one another's contributions, which serve as resources for extending thinking and promoting learning. While Alexander's (2001) research has shown asymmetrical relations in teacher-student talk with the teacher exerting tight "control over the right to speak" (Cazden, 2001: 54), Mercer (2004) has analysed student-student dialogue and proposed the idea of *exploratory talk* where students critically and constructively engage in joint discussion and decision-making, by challenging and counter-challenging one another's arguments which, according to Rudnitsky (2013: 2), is "a crucial ingredient in the kinds of learning environments that support deep learning". The most significant inference from Alexander (2006) and Mercer's (2004) concepts is that knowledge is something people construct together by communicating with one another, by sharing, negotiating, solving problems and making decisions. However, as Wells (1999) has rightly pointed out, communication is not restricted to oral language, it includes writing as well.

For Vygotsky (1986), the process of writing implies transforming one's internalized speech and thought to outer speech. Describing this as "the dialectical interrelationship of thought and language", Britton et al. (1975: 39) have argued that it is through writing that learners explore alternatives and engage in the process of constructing knowledge. Therefore, they suggest that writing should not be an activity restricted to the language classroom only since it allows students to assimilate new information, incorporate it into their existing knowledge and build new meanings (Langer and Applebee, 1987). In the RE classroom focusing on history then, writing about a topic will require students to explore and examine, to compare and synthesise relevant facts and resources (Emig, 1977), thus leading them to internalize and appropriate subject-specific concepts (Kennedy, 1980).

In comparing oral and written modes of communication, Tishman and Perkins (1997: 371) observe that writing, because it is permanent, “invites the kinds of reflection not so natural to oral exchanges”, which reflects the openness of a text to reviewing, revising and improving (Wells, 1999). While noting that writing reflects more abstract thought, elaboration and explicitness, Rivard and Straw (2000: 568) emphasise that however powerful writing may be for consolidating knowledge, “talk is still important for generating, clarifying, sharing and distributing ideas”. As Britton et al. (1975: 29) have suggested, “the relationship of talk to writing is central to the writing process”.

Within the sociocultural perspective, writing does not consist of applying linguistic rules in text composition, but a social practice where factors such as the context, “the social meanings and values of writing” (Ivanič, 2004: 234), as well as the tools and discourses privileged in the context (Gee, 1996) play a critical role in shaping learners’ personal experiences of writing. This view closely relates with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conception of learning through ‘apprenticeship’ in communities of practice, a process of participating and engaging in activities where, by observing, interacting and practicing common activities, learners develop from legitimate peripheral to full participation in the community. Accordingly, in the RE classroom, learners would be required to write texts specific to the disciplines reflected in the curriculum, namely history and literature, by taking account of their particular styles, forms and audiences (Benton, 1999). Langer and Applebee (1987: 173) encapsulate this by stating that “one does not simply learn to read and write: one learns to read and write about particular things in particular ways”. This means that there are different kinds of writing serving different functions for different people at different times (Bazerman, 2012), a view that challenges the notion of context-free texts

encoding a single message that the reader is required to make sense of; instead, as Spivey (1990) points out, meaning is understood and interpreted within the context where texts are read.

If writing brings writer, reader, context, and tools to interact and converse, it should be seen, as some argue, a collaborative activity, even when it is an individual enterprise (Rojas-Drummond et al., 2008; Bruffee, 1984). While this is true of the writing I have undertaken in this paper, which I describe as a continuous dialogue with myself, my text, my academic sources and research participants, as well as my discourse community, the nature of collaborative writing I aimed to explore in my action research was writing co-authored by two or more contributors (Harring-Smith, 1994), and the significance of student-student dialogue in supporting their co-construction of knowledge.

### **Collaborative writing**

Collaborative writing has been understood in many ways and its definitions have referred to isolated tasks such as planning, drafting, revising, peer feedback and even the writing of separate sections of a collective text (Dale, 1993). However, looking at the process of writing through its distinct stages suggests the idea of partial collaboration and fails to encompass the notion of *intersubjectivity*, that is, a shared conception of tasks (Rogoff, 1990) and joint-ownership that should characterise a collaborative endeavour (Harring-Smith, 1994). As Allen et al. (1987) have proposed, collaborative writing entails meaningful oral exchanges, joint decision-making and responsibility between collaborators in the writing of a collective document. In other words, it involves all stages of the writing process, that is, when formulating ideas, clarifying positions, putting forward arguments, making decisions,

composing, editing and reviewing. While interacting with one another, students attempt to understand ideas based on their prior knowledge and experience and together determine how the topic will be tackled. It therefore provides an alternative approach to the competitive environments typical of many learning contexts (Dale, 1994).

Supporting learning as collaboration and writing as a social practice mediated by dialogue clearly articulates with Vygotsky's (1986) concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), "the zone in which an individual is able to achieve more with assistance than he or she can manage alone" (Wells, 1999: 5). This construct is relevant to my research since it allows drawing important insights for teaching-and-learning. Firstly, writing within the ZPD involves collaboration, an idea often associated with peer tutoring where the teacher or a student capable of mastering the task provides support to a peer. While the interaction involved in this process allows both students to learn from the tutoring process, it nonetheless promotes asymmetrical knowledge-transmitter and knowledge-recipient relations, more resonant with cooperative rather than collaborative learning. Although often used interchangeably in the literature, these are clear differences between the two concepts.

According to Darling-Hamond et al. (2003), cooperation is more in line with Piaget's cognitive theory and focuses on pooling together individually written sections of a text (Dillenbourg (1999); collaboration, on the other hand, draws insights from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and refers to the collective composition of a text (Roschelle and Teasley, 1995). As Jacobs et al. (1997) have pointed out, unlike cooperative learning, where tasks are highly structured and group members are assigned fixed, hierarchical roles, collaborative learning tasks and participants' roles are flexible in that by drawing

on one another's strengths and weaknesses, they jointly attempt to accomplish a task. Another distinction between these two concepts is that cooperative learning is more concerned with the end product whereas collaborative learning values the process of sharing information, developing social skills and fostering motivation (Benton, 1999). This involves students relying on one another to scaffold the writing process by asking questions, providing feedback and assistance in the course of linking what they know and are capable of doing with new ideas and skills (Darling-Hammond, 2003). As such, collaboration means taking "responsibility for working together, building knowledge together, changing and evolving together" (Dooly, 2008: 21).

Secondly, dialogue is essential in the process of constructing knowledge (Alexander, 2006). As a means by which people engage in thinking (Mercer, 2004), dialogue entails sharing ideas, considering multiple perspectives and negotiating meaning, which contributes to building knowledge (Wertsch, 1991). According to Webb (1995), the quality of student-student interaction depends on the nature of tasks, which should create motivation for all group members to participate and opportunities for real collaboration to occur (Dillenbourg, 1999). In other words, open-ended tasks potentially promote disagreement, a vital component of successful collaboration (Dale, 1993) as it requires participants to provide explanations, give reasons, and justify their positions.

Finally, knowledge construction occurs by encouraging students to participate in tasks that go beyond their current experiences (Wells, 1999). This means that tasks such as note-taking, since they focus on isolated aspects of concepts, promote lower level thinking, thus leading students to use knowledge-telling writing strategies (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987), that is, to reproduce the content they have learned

but have not incorporated into their thinking (Newell, 1984). In contrast, in completing challenging tasks, such as extended writing, since they require thinking and analysis, students are encouraged to use knowledge-transforming writing strategies (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987), where they will draw connections between bits of information and articulate with their prior knowledge of the topic (Newell, 1984: 10). This is in line with Vygotsky's (1978: 118) assumption that for writing tasks to promote development and empower students as writers they must allow authentic and purposeful use of language, that is, they "must be relevant to life". In the RE classroom, this would entail opportunities to use different kinds of writing, namely transactional writing, used to convey information through tasks such as reports, essays or explanations; and expressive writing, used to explore thoughts, feelings and ideas through tasks such as narrative, letter, drama or journal writing.

### **Evidence from Research**

Researchers from both educational and professional contexts embracing different views of learning, and operating under different research paradigms, have made many claims on the benefits of collaborative writing in a variety of subjects. It has been argued that collaborative writing promotes reflective thinking and explanation of ideas (Bruffee, 1993); planning in writing (Dale, 1997); discussion of writing strategies (Daiute, 1986); and critical thinking (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987).

It has also been suggested that combining collaborative writing and talk helps students to generate new knowledge. For instance, Rivard and Straw (2000) conducted an investigation on the link between oral interaction and writing in two Canadian science classrooms. They reported that while talk helps students to retain simple concepts, writing allows retaining more complex knowledge. Their study also

suggests that writing alone does not enhance learning. Furthermore, Ede and Lunsford (1990) claim that, since collaborative writing helps learning about the writing process itself, students produce richer texts and with fewer errors.

The most significant benefit of collaborative writing has been associated with the social process of group interaction. In her study on collaborative writing interactions in the ninth-grade classroom, Dale (1994) found that co-writing allows developing social relations and a shift from individual achievement to valuing peers' contributions to the group. Dale (1993) also reported that in the process of writing together conflicts may emerge when group members offer alternative points of view. Rather than a limitation, disagreement is an important element in collaborative experience since dissonant opinions promote the awareness of other possibilities that students would not have thought of before and the enhancement of their problem-solving abilities (Ede and Lunsford, 1990).

In addition, since workplaces are increasingly adopting collaborative writing practices, classroom activities of such kind arguably provide students with useful experiences for later professional writing (Ede and Lunsford, 1990).

However, the benefits of collaborative writing have not gone unchallenged. For instance, in a study of second language learners' opinions of collaborative writing, Storch (2005) reported that it was harder for some students to focus on collaborative composition; as a result they showed preference for individual writing. Furthermore, Nixon (2007) noted students' lack of enthusiasm for this mode of learning particularly to what regards overcoming disagreements. In addition, studies on peer feedback have suggested that this kind of activity may be compromised in the

classroom since students are more inclined to include feedback from teachers rather than from peers (Nelson and Carson, 1998). A further drawback with using collaborative work emerges from power struggles where members who assume an authoritative role can intimidate and discourage other members from participating (Ede and Lunsford, 1990).

It should be noted that some of the above studies have relied on questionnaires and statistical analysis assuming that social processes can be measured and quantified. By viewing learning as uniform across contexts, this kind of research largely disregards the complexity and uniqueness of each learning environment. Although they do provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of implementing collaborative writing in the classroom, they leave out the voices and lived experiences of participants (Hammersley, 2007) that the current qualitative study sought to investigate.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods**

This chapter provides the rationale for the research approach and outline the research methods used in the study. It then critically discusses the strengths and challenges of the data collection methods within the context of this inquiry along with an explanation of the sampling procedure. Lastly, it explains the ethical considerations observed throughout the research.

#### **Methodology**

As discussed in the previous chapter, studies on collaborative writing has tended to operate under different learning theories and research paradigms depending on researchers' theoretical orientations and guiding questions. Within the socio-cognitive perspective, studies have used laboratory research and experiments (Slavin, 1991) to investigate independent variables of collaboration, such as group size, group composition or the nature of tasks to establish causal relationships between such variables and student learning (Dillenbourg et al., 1996). Schofield (1990) states that the experimental tradition seeks to show that research measures what it meant to measure and that findings can be generalised across populations and times. However, as Marton (2012) has rightly observed, since classrooms are permeated by complex specificities, theories that fit facts cannot respond to all the nuances involved in educational processes. These require a different approach that allows making sense of the world and how it shapes people's actions (Krauss, 2005).

Within a qualitative paradigm, sociocultural research is more concerned with examining the processes involved in students' negotiation, argumentation and attainment of shared understanding concerning collaborative tasks (Dillenbourg et al., 1996). Hence, from this point of view, collaboration is observed in students'

interactions, from what they do and say to each other in the writing process. Furthermore, it is interested in collecting students' own accounts of their experiences of collaboration. Therefore, in this kind of research, qualitative methods are used since they allow gaining in-depth insights into students' views, thoughts and feelings (Hammersley, 2007). As such, research emphasises participants' individual realities (Gage, 1989) and produces richly descriptive accounts that provide a narrative of the context, the people and the situations that were observed (Denscombe, 2007). Researchers do not seek to generalise their findings; instead they acknowledge the context-specificity of their studies as well as the fact that their findings result from their own understanding of the social realities they observed. This has led critics to question the validity and reliability of findings generated from this kind of research since they are filtered between the researcher's own and their participants' perspectives (Hammersley, 2007). However, one can also question whether quantitative studies can be totally objective since they also require the researcher to make judgments, which involves some kind of subjectivity (Ercikan and Roth, 2006).

Considering that my inquiry on collaborative writing was grounded in sociocultural theory with the aim of understanding the role of collaborative writing in students' co-construction of knowledge, and due to its practice-focused nature, I chose to carry out a qualitative action research since this approach allowed me to link the research focus with my teaching practice and situate it in my context. Action research has been defined in many ways. A common emphasis in most of the definitions is the idea of learning about teaching-and-learning. For instance, Johnson (2005: 21) has proposed the following definition: "the process of studying a real school or classroom situation to understand and improve the quality of actions or instructions". Noting the considerable divorce between educational research and practice, McNiff

(1997: 1) highlights that “here teachers are encouraged to develop their own personal theories of education from their own classroom practice”. In this assertion also the idea of making action-research public, that is, available to other teachers is implicit.

While Freeman (1998: 3) refers to “the doing and wondering” of the teaching practice, implying perhaps the discovery process the teacher goes through while doing research, Cohen et al. (2007) note that action research develops through an ongoing process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. As the authors further highlight, and my research experience clearly showed, this process is, however, different from teachers’ routine practices as research involves doing all those activities but “more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously” (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1981: 10). Hence, my study entailed methodically collecting data, analysing it, revisiting the implemented teaching-learning strategies, revising and planning again so as to implement improved strategies informed by the learning I drew from it.

Since action research requires the teacher-researcher to take a participant role, I was aware of the notion of reflexivity as my values and attitudes, opinions and actions could play a role in influencing the situation I was investigating. Therefore, Cohen et al. (2007: 310) advise action researchers to “apply to themselves the same critical scrutiny that they are applying to others”. This is reflected in my choice of multiple methods and the ethical principles I observed throughout my research.

### **Data collection methods**

My data was collected from a single class of 12 students aged 15-17 years, of which 8 students were girls and 4 students were boys. I chose a mixed methods approach

consisting of individual interviews and a focus group with students, classroom observation, students' reflections and my own reflective journal. My choice of a mixed-methods design was aimed at addressing my three research questions as well as bringing together distinct viewpoints and impressions from the same context (Denscombe, 2007) so as to enable triangulation. This contributed to the validity and reliability of my research findings (Anderson, 1998).

### **Individual interviews**

Consistent with a sociocultural stance, Kvale (1996) observes that interviewing is a method that views knowledge as generated among people through dialogue. It allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of how people see the world and their reasons for acting in the way they do (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). For my research, in order to gain knowledge about my participants' context, a semi-structured interview resembling a conversation seemed appropriate. This allowed students to project their own ways of describing their experiences and hence enabled me to look at issues in more detail, a kind of data not afforded by a structured tool (Cohen et al., 2007).

I conducted four individual interviews at the beginning of my research. Hearing students' voices enabled me to understand the role of writing in their learning experiences, the kinds of writing tasks they undertook in their mainstream and RE contexts, their experiences of and views on collaborative learning. I had anticipated that this could be a constraining experience for my participants considering my dual role as their teacher and researcher. As I was aware that this might affect the truthfulness of their responses, I interacted with the students in a manner that

conveyed to them the idea that their cooperation and opinions were a valuable contribution to my research (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

While I had constructed a set of questions to guide me during the interview (Appendix 1), I remained open-minded and let the conversation move to a different direction whenever I sensed I could draw interesting research-related responses from the students (Anderson, 1998). This flexible arrangement posed a particular limitation. For instance, when transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, due to the different ways of phrasing and sequencing the questions, the responses were at times substantially different and therefore difficult to compare (Patton, 2002).

### **Focus group interview**

This is a socially-oriented method that enables participants to engage in dialogue and therefore allows their views to emerge in their interactions with each other (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Since it allows discussing topics in detail, and gives voice and control of the interactions to the participants (Kvale, 1996), this method can be gratifying for them and produce “quality in-depth interactional data” (Arthur et al., 2012: 26). However, Kvale (1996) has noted that due to its interpersonal nature this method may raise power issues among the participants and between the researcher and the participants (Lewis, 2003). Therefore, in the course of my inquiry I made efforts towards establishing rapport with the students and building an environment where they not only felt safe to freely express their opinions among themselves and with the researcher, but also respected one another’s contributions.

My focus group interview (Appendix 2), in which five students participated, enabled me to collect their personal accounts of their collaborative writing experiences and

gain insights regarding the meaning they attributed to this experience, the challenges they faced, the strategies they used to overcome them as well as the value of writing with others for their learning.

Both the individual as well as the focus group interviews were audio-recorded which allowed me to take additional notes, to ask further probing questions as well as to observe non-verbal occurrences (Morrison, 1993).

### **Sampling**

While all students were willing to participate in the individual interview, due to timetable constraints, I used a sample consisting of two girls and two boys who were available at the time set for the interview (McMillan, 1996). As for the focus group, five students, including the ones that took part in the individual interview, showed availability to participate. In both individual and focus group interviews the sample was appropriate since my research data was collected from and corroborated with other methods (Mason, 2002).

### **Observation**

The role of a participant observer implies “firsthand involvement in the social world the researcher has chosen to study” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006: 100). Immersion in the context represents a unique opportunity for the researcher to observe social processes in a natural and unobtrusive manner (Silverman, 1993).

As a data collection method, observation allows to focus on the physical setting, on the participants and their interactions, their non-verbal communication as well as the researcher’s own behaviour (Merriam, 1988), its value residing in the fact that it

allows for the discovery of “complex interactions in natural social settings” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006: 99). During my research I relied on unstructured, open-ended field notes, writing down whatever seemed relevant and using whatever natural language that seemed appropriate (Hammersley et al., 2003: 44). While my intention was to capture ‘the whole picture’ (Mulhall, 2003) of student-student dialogue and write a detailed description of students’ actions while working together (Myers, 2000), in the process of making sense of my notes I became conscious that the information resulting from my field notes was not only partial, but was also permeated with my opinions; thus, making sense of the material involved making personal judgments on what I was observing. As Mulhall (2003) has pointed out, open-ended field-notes are potentially biased since the recording of events is selectively guided by the researcher’s own beliefs and is therefore imbued with their personal worldview.

Since I was aware of the potential bias that the role of a participant observer entails, I had initially planned to video record the lessons. However, due to students’ discomfort concerning the presence of the equipment and the idea of constant surveillance it represented (Cohen et al., 2007), I revised my plan and opted for another tool. Given that I was interested in observing students’ talk while co-writing and specifically to record their verbal interactions, and because this was impossible to capture fully through field notes, I opted to audiotape the group tasks that involved collaborative writing. This allowed me to keep a permanent record of the interactions and thus enabled me to go back to retrieve important forgotten details or something that had been said in a particularly interesting way. While a valuable tool for catching students’ exact words, audio-recording does not register non-verbal communication or silent activities that could be relevant for understanding their

interactions. My field notes became a helpful tool for providing the contextual and visual elements not captured in the audio-recordings. They were also useful to help me recollect events when writing my reflections.

For the students, the presence of an audio-recorder seemed less obtrusive. I observed them gradually acting more naturally and getting used to the presence of the equipment. Further, while the transcription was particularly time-consuming, I could listen to the material as many times as necessary and had different opportunities to try to make sense of the data and gain new insights each time I revisited the audio-recordings.

All my audio-taped data were transcribed in the students' language (Portuguese), but only selected excerpts were translated into English for the purpose of including them in my report.

### **Students' reflections**

Student reflections allow collecting holistic perspectives concerning their perceptions (Robson, 2011) and can be viewed as a dialogue between students and the teacher-researcher which renders this data collection method collaborative (Duke, 2012). However, Marelli (2007) has observed a potential disadvantage of using this method since participants may lack motivation to complete reflection tasks. Moreover, issues concerning confidentiality and anonymity may also discourage them from writing in a truthful manner. I addressed these drawbacks by building a caring relationship with the students making them feel their reflections were of utmost importance for my study. This, along with the freedom I gave them in terms of making their reflections anonymous if they wished to, allowed me to obtain rich data from this method.

The end-of-class reflection questions prompted students to make explicit their thoughts and feelings about their experiences of the collaborative writing process, the learning they derived from such experience, the challenges they encountered and the strategies they used to overcome them. Hence, this data, while serving as a triangulation strategy, also provided a meaningful way to make sense of my field notes as well as feedback on how effectively my classroom strategies had been implemented (Cresswell, 2007).

### **Teacher-researcher's journal**

Teaching and observing entailed constantly reflecting in-action, that is, in a spontaneous manner dealing with the here and now of situations. Retrospective reflection on-action (Schön 1983) was the moment when I thoughtfully considered my classroom experiences, critically examined them and planned for improved practice. This after-class writing helped me to keep my research questions to the fore in my mind, often mixed with feelings about the course of events. My field notes helped me to recollect the events, to record them and reflect on my experience of implementing collaborative writing tasks, the challenges I encountered in the process as well as to think about the way forward. In the course of interpreting and making meaning of my work, I developed new learning about collaborative writing and the process of investigating it which became relevant for my subsequent lesson-planning and inquiry actions (Cresswell, 2007). While my reflections may be viewed as data collected in a retrospective form and data that relay an insider's point of view, the use of this method, together with the methods discussed above, ensured that I was able to view the same situation from multiple perspectives. It also provided me with sufficient data to look for similarities and differences within the rich data I was able to collect during my research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Cohen et al. (2007: 57) have pointed out that “ethical considerations pervade the whole process of research”. This requires the researcher to observe a set of personal and procedural norms. Personal norms refer to their conduct based on their own values and those of the context they will work in. Procedural norms refer to key principles in research practice.

In order to carry out my research under sound ethical principles, I discussed all relevant research details with the students. They were clarified that their involvement in the research was voluntary; they could decline to participate and to withdraw from the study at any time. They were also informed that there would be no negative outcomes if they chose not to participate. Participant confidentiality was ensured in terms of keeping responses and transcriptions anonymous at all times and by using pseudonyms in the research report. With regard to audio and video data, I explained that transcripts would be reproduced in whole or in part for use in the research report. However, neither names nor any other identifying information, such as voice or images would be used in the research report (Flewitt, 2005).

Furthermore, students were ensured that all the research data would be kept secure and would not be used for any purposes other than those related to this specific study (BERA, 2011). Lastly, students were informed that all data collected throughout the research would be destroyed upon my graduation.

I sent the informed consent form (Appendix 4) home which allowed students and their parents/guardians time to consider if they wanted to be involved in the study (Bell 2010).

## **Chapter 4: Findings and discussion**

### **Data analysis**

My study aimed at investigating the role of collaborative writing in students' co-construction of knowledge. The data collection methods that I used resulted in a considerable amount of data that I analysed extensively as an ongoing and iterative part of the research process (Lewis, 2003). As McNiff (1997: 19) has highlighted, "action research should never be perceived as only about actions, but also as about thinking, and how a particular form of thinking informs a particular form of action". This meant repeatedly going through my field notes, frequently rewinding the audio data, constantly revisiting my students' reflections and my own journal in order to attempt to make sense of the emerging data.

Along the way, I transcribed and coded the themes that were emerging and attempted to unitise them in terms of themes. This was a continuous process of revisiting key events, making connections and interpretations which ultimately allowed me to draw conclusions (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

For my individual interview I did a pilot test with a student of a similar age to my participants' and this provided me with two types of guidance. Firstly, it allowed me to refine my interview questions in order to align them more coherently with my research questions; and secondly, it provided me with the first insights on the themes that might surface during the interviews with my participants. The interview data, which I first transcribed to a word file, were transferred into an Excel spreadsheet with questions written in each row and students' pseudonyms (as will be used in the findings section) on the columns. While reading the answers, I first colour-coded ideas that appeared recurrently and later categorised them into themes. I used a similar approach to analyse

my focus group data. Analysis of student-student talk was based on Mercer's (2000) discourse analysis framework. Wherever relevant, findings have been corroborated with data from students' reflections, my field notes and reflective journal. I only translated the excerpts that I perceived relevant for presenting and discussing my findings.

At this stage, in the process of making public my research findings, I intend to provide an insightful account of my context, my participants, the collaborative writing tasks I implemented in the classroom, the situations that I observed as well as my students' and my own accounts of our collaborative writing experiences (Hammersley, 2007). For this purpose, in the next section I provide an overview of my classroom intervention and discuss the three major themes drawn from my data:

1. Challenges of implementing collaborative writing
2. Talk for collaborative writing
3. Collaborative writing and student learning

While extremely aware that my analysis reflects my personal interpretation of the people, events and situations I observed, I hope it will provide a broad picture of students' collaborative writing experiences and its role in their co-construction of knowledge.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Intervention**

During the period of this research students' were learning the unit focusing on the Abbasid dynasty. The unit begins with an introduction to Mesopotamia as the historical and geographical context where the Abbasid caliphate was established; it draws on the influence of the city of Baghdad, the institutions of administration, the trade networks

and the interactions between diverse groups of people; and focuses on Baghdad as the centre of literary, scientific and cultural achievements. These themes allowed me to bring different kinds of collaborative writing tasks: news article on the rise of the Abbasid dynasty, letter as a traveller to 9<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad, role-play script on social interactions in Baghdad, and fable writing.

## **1. Challenges of implementing collaborative writing**

### **1.1. *Ground rules, friendship groups and power relations***

In one lesson, after reading two media articles, as a class, we discussed the features of this kind of text by identifying the lead, the central themes and their elaboration, the linguistic features and framing techniques. We further considered how these aspects affect the interpretation of the content by the reader (Silverblatt et al., 2014). I then suggested the students worked in self-selected pairs to write a news article on the rise of the Abbasid dynasty. I chose this method for forming groups based on Zarjac and Hartup's (1997) suggestion that when students know each other, they are aware of their similarities and differences, and therefore tend to put across their suggestions, explanations and criticisms more appropriately. This, they argue, allows developing mutual commitment and a sense of trust, which not only encourage a collaborative mode of learning, but also act as a support for cognitive development (Wegerif, 1998).

However, from my observation of the four groups engaged with the task, I noticed that Nazim and Rahoul had chosen to split responsibilities. While drawing information from the book, Rahoul would tell Nazim what to write.

Rahoul:	First let's see the lead, right?
Nazim:	Yes, we need to find this information on page ...
Rahoul:	Ok. So, let's do this. I can read and tell you what to write, and you write.
Nazim:	Hum... okay.
Rahoul:	What?
Nazim:	You could let me read as well...
Rahoul:	You will know what it's about while you're writing... Come on...

This dialogue suggested that while both students appeared to be active, there was, however, no indication that they were working collaboratively. Their dialogue was a clear example of what Mercer (2000: 98) has formulated as *disputational talk*, in which partners show some kind of disagreement with each other, but do not show attempts to “pool resources, or to offer constructive criticism of suggestions”. Furthermore, Rahoul, instead of scaffolding his peer and valuing his participation, preferred to take the lead and was motivated to complete the task as the sole contributor and a more powerful voice, which discouraged Nazim to offer his input (Dale, 1994). In addition, my observation of the above event indicated that working with friends does not necessarily mean that ground rules need not be established.

When I later revisited students' interview responses, I became aware that the need to negotiate such rules was evident. Students had described that group work in their mainstream school resonated more with cooperative rather than collaborative learning since it involved discussion of initial ideas, splitting up the work among group members and later bringing together everybody's contribution (Dillenbourg, 1999), but where, according to Alyssa, “*not everyone is aware of what the other has done*. Therefore,

based on their prior experiences, Rahoul and Nazim had clearly defined their hierarchical roles and responsibilities (Jacobs et al., 1997) with an obvious focus on the end product rather than valuing the process of working and learning together (Benton, 1999). Since they were not engaged in performing the same kind of actions, this affected their unequal access to the topic information (Dillenbourg, 1999), thus affecting their learning.

Surprisingly though, in their reflection, both students claimed that they had worked well and that the task had helped them learn about the Abbasids' rise to power. Nazim did not acknowledge Rahoul's appropriation of "his version of 'teacher's voice'" (Dale, 1994: 37) and Rahoul was not aware that his attitude might have discouraged his peer.

### ***1.2. Expository tasks***

The above episode allowed me to draw an important inference on another challenge associated with implementing collaborative writing which I noted in my journal:

“While the media literacy activity had been useful for helping students to understand the genre and the kind of language used in this type of text, the task I invited them to accomplish was not open-ended as it just required them to reproduce the textbook information” (13<sup>th</sup> February).

In addition to promoting the use of a knowledge-telling strategy (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987), my expository task did not value the potential of interaction and dialogue for learning and thus led one student to take the burden of doing most of the work (Randall, 1999). In other words, it was a kind of task that did not promote genuine

interdependence since it did not necessarily require both members to accomplish it (Wells, 1999).

### ***1.3. Conflict***

In a collaborative letter-writing lesson I observed that one group that was seemingly involved in fruitful discussion and exchange of opinions throughout the task, when orally reflected on their experience, mentioned how hard it had been for them to think together and to arrive at a consensus on how to write. Nalina stated: “Writing is an individual activity... one can discuss ideas, but the way we write is so personal... Sarah decided to use the word ‘anguish’ in our text. I would never use this word in my writing”.

Although Nalina and Sarah did engage in joint composition, they did not perceive their text as a collective product. Nalina did not view it as *her* text since the final version contained at least one element that was not shared by both. Therefore, the conditions for successful collaboration, that of joint ownership, had not been accomplished (Haring-Smith, 1994). Felder and Brent (1996) have noted that when students are not used to active learning it is common for the teacher to feel awkward and for students to show hostility towards the introduction of different ways of learning. However, this occurrence allowed me to confirm that this kind of conflict could have been avoided if ground rules for group discussion had been negotiated with the students. While conflict is viewed as critical in learning (Daiute and Dalton, 1988) for allowing students to understand different perspectives and providing opportunities for negotiation (Ede and Lunsford, 1990), in this case, none of the students were open to compromise.

As a teacher, this became a critical incident since it was a highly charged moment (Tripp, 2012) that challenged my perception of how I had planned for the activity and my confidence in enacting it. Nevertheless, it was also a moment of change, one that made me become more conscious and sensitive towards emotional aspects playing out in the classroom since they may impact students' motivation, collaboration and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2003). Thus, helping my students to learn to regulate their feelings, to handle conflicts and to relate to their peers in a supportive manner became present at all stages of my teaching.

## **2. Talk for collaborative writing**

### ***2.1. Talk for planning***

The following extract illustrates how, having themselves established the ground rules for peer discussion, a group of students productively and interdependently achieved shared understanding of the provided scenario and began to co-write a role-play script on social interactions in 9<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad.

Alyssa:	Do you think we should first decide the role we are going to play?
Nazim:	Can be, what do you think, Sarah?
Sarah:	I don't know if that matters right now...
Nazim:	How so?
Sarah:	So, I think we should first write the script and then see who plays what role, no?
Alyssa:	Oh! I thought ... Yes, maybe you're right. We should first think about what to write. Do you also agree, Nazim?
Nazim:	Yes and no...

Alyssa:	Tell me why.
Nazim:	Well, we could decide the role of each first and when we write, each says according to that.
Sarah:	But, what is more important, the script or the role?
Nazim:	Both.
Alyssa:	Maybe Sarah is right. After we have written the script, we can decide who plays which role.
Nazim:	Ok, so we can then see who has more talent for the role.
Sarah:	We can even decide the role as we write...
Nazim:	So let's start...

The above episode reflected the planning stage where students were mutually engaged in negotiating and making decisions on how to go about the task. This was an authentic example of Mercer's (2000: 98) notion of *exploratory talk* in which participants "engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas", by offering opinions and suggestions, which others may challenge and offer alternative ideas. There were instances of disagreement, but different from the previously described episode since in this case students provided options that helped to keep their interest in the task (Dale, 1994). Furthermore, there were requests for explanation and a genuine attempt from their part to achieve consensus, which made this discussion very productive. A significant aspect my field notes revealed about this interaction was that group members felt comfortable with each other and discussed ideas without apprehension (Dale, 1994). This supportive environment was helpful for achieving interactivity, that is, group members influenced each others' thinking, as well as negotiability, a kind of situation where members did not impose their views on others, but rather all group members worked toward a common understanding (Dillenbourg, 1999).

## 2.2. Talk for learning content

The extract below was taken from the same group interaction:

Samir:	We could start with the father saying ‘no, I won’t allow my son to go the caliph’s court’. What do you think?
Nazim:	Why would his father not allow it? I don’t understand...
Sarah:	Maybe he thought it wouldn’t be a good environment for him.
Nazim:	But the <i>majalis</i> [gatherings held at the caliph’s court] was where he could meet all the important musicians, no?
Sarah:	And the caliph himself, he was the patron of arts, right? I would be really excited if my child had this chance...

Mercer (1996) has pointed out that the quality of group interaction is closely associated with task characteristics. This means that when tasks are complex and open-ended they motivate all group members to participate. While in the previous attempt I had not been successful in designing a challenging task, the role-play script provided students with a scenario which had no clear or correct solution (Webb, 1995) and therefore required them to think more deeply about the ideas they encountered, to draw on knowledge of the content, to make connections with their own lives (Peterson and Irving, 2008) and to work on their social skills to complete it (Matthews et al., 1995). Furthermore, it offered ample opportunities for students to engage in extended dialogue. According to Dillenbourg (1999), when tasks have only one possible answer, there is nothing about which to disagree and hence fewer opportunities to observe real collaboration. In other words, different perspectives and disagreements can be important from a learning point

of view since they encourage students to put forward arguments and provide explanations to clarify their positions (Bruffee, 1993).

The next example, while showing students' attempts to attain joint understanding of how to go about the writing task, also reflects the links they were making between the learned content and their own lives:

Malik:	I have a suggestion...
Rahoul:	Yes...?
Malik:	How about a modern market?
Alyssa:	You mean like the <i>Alvalade</i> market?
Malik:	Yeah...
Rahoul:	Actually markets then weren't that different...
Malik:	Exactly.
Nalina:	... and the <i>muhtasib</i> [supervisor of public order, markets and trade] could be the <i>ASAE</i> [Economic, food and Safety Authority in Portugal]. What do you think?
Rahoul:	But then how would we show that the <i>muhtasib</i> was acting according to the Qur'an?

The discussion illustrates how students were attempting to make their own interpretation of a historical aspect (Social interactions in Baghdad: in the market) showing their understanding of the past as shaping the present. Rahoul's question then made his peers realise that the *muhtasib* acted the way he did based on the context of the time period they were learning about (Jensen, 2008). This was a significant example of learning within the ZPD and scaffolding. Firstly, Malik's initial suggestion offered his

peers opportunities to think creatively by linking the past and the present and making relevant connections with places and figures they were familiar with. Secondly, when Rahoul realised his peers might deviate from the aim of the task, intervened to introduce a critical point that led the group to eventually locate their role-play in the Abbasid period.

## ***2.2. Talk for feedback***

The following extract reveals students giving feedback on the fables they had written in the previous lesson. As a class we had read a fable by al-Jahiz, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim writer, and analysed it for its themes, characters, the moral and its purpose. Students were asked to work in groups and write their own fable. I had modelled the task by drawing on the fables they read in their childhood and provided them with the structure for the story and criteria for giving feedback. This was intended to help them to see “how closely specific features of their [peers’] writing match[ed] the expectations for that writing” (Peterson and Irving, 2008: 4). Students would act as expert reviewers and provide a commentary on their peers’ initial drafts. Harris (2001: 276-7) has observed that in peer reviewing “there is back-and-forth conversation intended to offer mutual help as writing groups work together in a give-and-take relationship”.

In their individual interviews students’ had reported their lack of experience in this kind of activity, made clear in Sarah’s response: “My Portuguese teacher did it once, but it didn’t work. See, students are not always fair to one another”. Bearing this in mind, when planning my lesson I wrote the following note in my journal:

“Although I have observed students are becoming more comfortable working in groups, with different peers, and ensuring to follow the rules for group discussion,

I am apprehensive about implementing peer reviewing since this will require from their part to be critical of one another's stories. I am to make certain that their comments are constructive and that they support their ideas with arguments that will help improve their peers' texts" (18 March 2016).

However, as students' interaction makes evident, they took their role of peer-reviewers with sense of responsibility and were able to critically read the stories and provide very useful ideas for improvement.

Nalina:	I think the story is well written, but the moral shouldn't be so explicit.
Alyssa:	Why do you think so?
Nalina:	If it's not so clear, the reader has to make an effort to reflect on its meaning.
Rahoul:	But our story was written for children and kids need an explicit moral, don't you think?
Alyssa:	And if it is supposed to educate, then I think it needs to be as clear as possible to have the effect we want...

As another example of *exploratory talk*, the above dialogue reveals that Nalina was able to identify an area that according to her could be improved in her peers' story and offered a valid argument to support her comment. On the other hand, Alyssa and Rahoul explained that the fable was written for children and therefore claimed that the explicitness of their moral was adequate for addressing their audience. This was a rich example of talk that helped students to learn, not only in terms of giving and receiving peer feedback, but also to critically reflect on their own writing (Elbow, 1999). In the

end-of-class reflection, Nalina highlighted the role of feedback: “When we shared our fables, we could discuss and get feedback from our peers and make our story better”. For Rahoul, the feedback activity was an opportunity for self-assessment and critical reflection: “After reading Sarah and Nazim’s fable, we realised that our own story could be improved. Actually, we changed some parts, especially the language”.

### **3. Collaborative writing and student learning**

Data from students’ reflections and the focus group interview allowed drawing evidence of the kind of learning afforded by their collaborative writing experience. This theme will be divided into three sections to provide a clear picture of students’ accounts.

#### ***3.1. Learning the content***

When asked whether collaborative writing had helped them to learn the course content, students’ journal reflections suggested that they developed historical empathy by engaging cognitively and affectively with historical characters that helped them to understand “how people from the past thought, felt, and acted within a specific historical and social context” (Endacott, 2013: 41). Nalina reflected in the focus group: “When we were writing the role-play script we had to know what markets looked like in that time, the products they sold, the role of the inspector, and put ourselves in their shoes”.

Learning the content during joint script writing was also reflected in Samir’s end-of-class reflection: “We had to think on the reasons that might make parents not to send their children to the caliph’s court”. Similarly, in the focus group, Nazim found perspective taking useful because: “When we had to take the role of a traveller to Baghdad, we had to feel as people would have felt in that time... so we had to know

what Baghdad looked like”. In addition, in her reflection on the news article, Farah wrote: “I learned that one can write a news article from different perspectives...”

When talking about their fable writing in the focus group, two students made explicit that they understood the role of *adab* literature in Muslim societies as a ‘course’ for learning good manners (Irwin, 2004). While engaging with this kind of literature, Alyssa seemed to have grasped this understanding quite clearly when she mentioned she had learned how stories fulfilled an ethical function in Muslim societies: “For us fables are children’s stories, but in that time they were for adults, so they wrote to tell Muslims how to follow the teachings of the Qur’an and behave in an ethical way”. Nazim, on the other hand, was extremely aware of how al-Jahiz’s ideas were persistent in certain behaviours in contemporary times: “My grandfather thought like al-Jahiz... for him it was like the proverb like father, like son”.

Dyson (1991) has observed that developing control over written language is dependent upon social interaction. Sarah’s comment in the focus group seemed to concur with this idea when she referred that writing the fable had stimulated their creativity while also thinking about the genre: “We were also concerned about being creative and chose our words carefully”. However, Shazia was the only one who specifically mentioned how she evolved in terms of language: “I feel I’m good at giving ideas, but not at writing sentences and using the right words. So, yes, it was useful, I learned lots of new words too”.

### ***3.2. Developing social skills***

According to Vygotsky (1978) the purpose of working within the ZPD is to promote change and individual growth. This means that while working with peers, that is,

through mediation and assistance, students not only gain deeper understanding of concepts but also develop new skills (Doolittle, 1995). Change was visibly expressed in all students' reflections and focus group responses. For instance, to the question on the skills they had developed from their experience of working with others, while three students from the focus group reported that they developed a greater sense of responsibility through collaborative writing, they all expressed that this experience helped them to get along with others. As Nadia reflected: "I had never worked with Alyssa before, but I realised we have lots of things in common". Nazim mentioned: "When listening to other people's ideas, we can improve our own viewpoints". Sarah went further and appeared to have developed a positive outlook on this form of learning: "I learned to accept other people's opinions, but also to put forward my own". This finding supports Johnson et al.'s (1993) proposition that learning in collaboration not only allows students to engage deeply with the content but also helps them to build interpersonal skills. Furthermore, in her focus group reflection on the letter writing task, Sarah expressed the idea of joint responsibility: "Because it was a collective work, we tried harder to write a good letter".

Three students also commented on the disagreements and difficulties in achieving shared meaning along with the strategies they used in overcoming them. This became clear in Nadia's written reflection: "We had different opinions and it was not always easy to come to an agreement". Whereas, Nazim confidently stated in the focus group: "We did not always agree with each other, but tried to reach consensus in a pleasant and respectful manner". For Alyssa, "working in groups is not always easy, but it can be a good communication exercise".

In addition, Nalina, who was initially reluctant to compose a joint text, reflected on how her perceptions had changed: “Honestly, I have always preferred to work on my own... the different activities helped me to discuss points of view and how to merge them with my own ideas to create an original piece”. The idea of change was also evident in Rahoul’s reflection during the focus group when he commented: “I learned to listen to others and became aware that they can also help me learn”. Shazia appeared to have become more confident about sharing since her ideas were valued by her peers: “I am normally reserved, but was able to share my opinions... I was happy that they accepted them”. As Milner and Milner (2008: 36) have pointed out, collaboration “allows students to generate ideas, use language, learn from each other, and recognize that their thoughts and experiences are valuable and essential to new learning”. Lastly, only one student explicitly commented on the value of writing as a mode of learning which was expressed in the focus group interview: “This was the first time I realised that when we are writing we are actually making connections in a way that we will remember later” (Nadia).

### **The teacher’s role**

In my collaborative writing project I felt like a backstage actor in a play. It was as if I were present, but not totally there. This means that I was able to allow students to take the role of active learners during their co-writing experiences: by providing them with an environment where collaboration and interaction prevailed; by making the learning tasks gradually interesting and challenging and allowing multiple interpretations and explanations; by providing structure and modelling classroom activities (Bruner, 1985), by negotiating rules for collaboration. I was able to allow my students to learn to think and work together, build trusting relationships and develop confidence in negotiating with their peers and helping each other to set

common goals and achieve shared understanding of the tasks and the content. When dissonance occurred, they tried different strategies and learned to overcome their disagreements, to build responsibility and to take ownership of their own learning. Within such a complex social activity, I was able to help my students to think and learn about learning (Watkins, 2001) and grow as learners. Thus, a backstage role actually means to be active in interpreting the curriculum, planning learning, guiding and leading the learning process. And to fade away to allow students to discover their own learning.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research set out to explore the following research questions:

1. What challenges are encountered by both students and teacher when collaborative writing is implemented in the classroom?
2. What is the nature and role of student talk in the process of writing collaborative texts?
3. What do students have to say about their experiences of engaging with collaborative writing?

The findings suggest that implementing collaborative writing may pose several challenges for both teacher and students. As novice writers, when students are confronted with classroom tasks requiring them to share and negotiate viewpoints, the lack of ground rules ensuring equal participation and equal rights to speak hinders real collaboration; friendship grouping is not necessarily an effective strategy and may lead to struggles over leadership, unsettled conflicts and peer discouragement; expository writing, because it is structured and offers clear solutions, hinders group discussion, joint writing and shared ownership of texts.

The findings also indicate that combining collaborative writing and student-student interaction provides authentic opportunities for building knowledge. It allows students to focus on their tasks, engage in productive discussion to generate ideas, offer opinions and suggestions, request clarifications and reach consensus on what and how to write. This is closely linked with the nature of the writing tasks. While expository writing allows students to accomplish goals individually, expressive writing, due to its more authentic and purposeful nature fosters *exploratory* discussion on how to go about writing and collectively make meaning of the content.

The study further revealed that when collaborative writing is implemented within a supportive environment, with clear rules and open-ended tasks, it promotes different kinds of learning. The process of joint writing enables learning the curriculum topics which was evident in students' role-play script writing, as well as genre-specific aspects manifest in the fable writing task and subsequent peer-reviewing activity. The findings showed that peer reviewing encourages students' reflection on and assessment of their own work since it raises awareness of potential improvements to their own writing.

Finally, the findings demonstrated that co-writing helps students to build interpersonal relationships, to develop a sense of responsibility for supporting each other as well as the ability to listen to and accept different perspectives, while becoming confident on their language abilities.

### **Reflections on the research process**

Doing action research prompted me to undertake a deep exploration of the theoretical and methodological frameworks that underpinned my study and to learn the teaching-and-learning strategies that supported collaborative writing in my classroom. In the course of my inquiry the opportunities to reflect in action and in retrospect allowed me to critically examine my teaching strategies, to remain focused on my research questions and data collection tools. The new questions that emerged from my data suggested new ways of looking at my topic and prompted a deeper understanding of my classroom practice and the research process. This represented for me an opportunity to be a kind of teacher I had not been before, learning not only about how to teach collaborative writing and about doing research, but more importantly, learning about my students and how they learn.

### **Limitations of the study**

While the benefits of taking a new approach to teaching and doing practitioner-research seem evident, there are two main limitations to my study. Firstly, as in any qualitative action research, my findings were filtered through my own interpretation of the data I collected as a participant observer. Therefore, since my dual role of teacher and researcher pervades my inquiry, the findings here reported should be read as constructed from my personal experience, intuition and tacit knowledge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Secondly, my inquiry was conducted in one specific setting, during a relatively narrow time frame and with a small number of participants. As such, my findings, while soundly drawn from multiple data collection methods, and can therefore be assessed as valid and reliable, they pertain to the particular context where the study took place and hence cannot be generalised to other contexts. However, I hope other STEP teachers will engage in some kind of dialogue with my report, consider its ‘transferability’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) or ‘relatability’ (Bassey, 1981) and assess what aspects can be applicable to their contexts. As Pring (2000: 131) has observed, “no one situation is unique in every respect and therefore the action research in one classroom or school can *illuminate* or be suggestive of practice elsewhere”.

### **Recommendations for future research**

In this research sociocultural theory of learning provided the conceptual framework of how social interaction and collaboration are related to meaningful learning through participation in a community of practice. Since social networks play a significant role in students’ lives through text-messaging, blogging and e-mailing, they resonate with the idea of community building. Therefore, investigating online

collaborative writing may provide insightful understanding on the role of technologies in enhancing learning.

### **Final thoughts**

This inquiry allowed me to intertwine two kinds of collaborative writing: co-authored student writing in the classroom and single-authored writing in this report. Both have opened windows into the value of collaboration, dialogue and writing for learning. Writing about collaborative writing engaged me in different kinds of talk in my imaginary and real interactions with myself and others. Throughout my exploration of the topic, and especially in the act of writing, when I was led to pose questions: Does my understanding of collaborative writing make sense? Does my writing reflect critical engagement with the topic?, new dimensions of the topic were made visible to me. Moreover, another kind of learning was enhanced: the process of writing up a research report. When considering my choices on issues concerning the planning and organization of the report, I had further questions: Does my writing comply with the nature of a research paper? Will my readers make sense of my writing? While my ideas were becoming explicit in my text, the constant reviewing and reflecting led to multiple drafts that resulted in the current paper. This has ultimately allowed me to become aware that talking with those who have contributed to my research and writing about the process has enhanced my learning on the power of writing as a unique mode of learning (Emig, 1977).

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

15 January 2016

Dear parents and guardians,

As part of my STEP (Secondary Teacher Education Program)/MTeach (Master of Teaching) work, I am conducting a small-scale research in the Portuguese Religious Education Centre. My research aim is to understand how the use of collaborative writing can enhance students' co-construction of knowledge.

I would like to conduct my study with students currently attending STEP Class 4. If as a parent/guardian you agree to your child's participation in this study, this will involve your child taking part in the following activities:

- Individual interview lasting about 20 minutes;
- Keeping a reflective journal;
- Being observed and video recorded in five lessons; and
- Focus group interview lasting about 30-40 minutes.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary and they may withdraw from it at any time. I can assure you that there will be no negative outcomes if they choose not to participate. You may also withdraw your consent for your child to be involved in this research at any time and again I can assure you that there will be no negative outcomes if you choose to do this.

I assure you that I will keep my research data safe, confidential and anonymous and will use pseudonyms in my report. I will transcribe the data from the audio and video recordings, but neither names nor any other identifying information, such as voice or pictures will be used in my report. Upon completion of the STEP, I will destroy all data concerning this research.

Thank you in advance for your help and cooperation. If you agree on your child's participation, please sign the attached consent form.

Sincerely,

Shabnam Gulamhussen  
STEP Student  
Institute of Ismaili Studies/Institute of Education  
[sgulamhussen@iis.ac.uk](mailto:sgulamhussen@iis.ac.uk)  
Mobile: +351 925411397

### **Informed Consent Form**

I understand that the purpose of this study is to understand how the use of collaborative writing can enhance students' co-construction of knowledge.

I confirm that my child's participation is entirely voluntary. I understand that I may withdraw my child's participation at any time during this research.

I have been informed of the procedures that will be used to collect data and understand what will be required of my child as a participant.

I understand that my child's responses will remain completely anonymous and that their real name, voice and images will not be used in the research report.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of the informed consent form.

I acknowledge that I have been given the researcher's contact details for any queries regarding this research.

I wish to give my voluntary consent concerning my child's participation in the research.

**Student's name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Parent's name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/2016

## **Appendix B**

### **Individual Interview Questions**

1. Do you enjoy writing?
2. What is the role of writing in your learning experiences?
3. At school in which subjects do you have writing assignments?
4. What kind of writing do you engage with at your secular school?
5. What is the nature of writing tasks in your Religious Education context?
6. Are writing tasks individual or in group?
7. How would describe working in groups?
8. Who reads what you write?
9. What kind of feedback is given to your written work?
10. Are there writing activities using technology?

## **Appendix C**

### **Focus Group Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe your experiences of collaborative writing?
2. Did collaborative writing help you learn? In what ways?
3. What challenges did you encounter while writing joint texts?
4. How did you overcome them?