

Why Students Do (Not) Want to Use Roles in Collaborative Writing

Karen Putzeys, Bram De Wever

karen.putzeys@ugent.be, bram.dewever@ugent.be

Tecolab, Department of Educational Studies, Ghent University

Abstract: Collaborative writing is challenging for university students. Using roles may improve their texts. This study focuses on how students perceive using roles. 21 groups of 3 university students wrote a theoretical framework in 8 sessions and answered questions about whether they enacted their role and why. Most students did not entirely enact the roles because they resisted, struggled or forgot. Others enacted the roles because of autonomous or controlled motivation.

Problem statement

Collaborative writing has a prominent place in the curriculum of university students. By writing collaboratively, students learn first of all how to collaborate, but also develop their critical thinking skills, vocabulary and grammar, paraphrasing, and writing coherently (McNamara, 2013). However, collaborative writing processes do not always go smoothly. Students need support in terms of both writing and collaboration. One way to offer this support is providing roles. A role is a set of prescribed functions guiding individual behavior and group collaboration. This way, each group member has their own responsibility and is individually accountable for performing each specific function (De Wever et al., 2010; Slavin, 1995). These roles should be designed carefully, taking into account the self-determination theory (SDT) which states that the psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence must be fulfilled. This could augment the chances that students adopt the roles as intended (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The roles should be useful, for students to keep feeling they are a valuable member of the group. If they are formulated in a very loose way, students might feel insufficiently competent, and might implement the roles other than intended. If the roles are offered too coercively, chances are that the psychological need for autonomy is not fulfilled and students might drop the roles throughout the process (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Dillenbourg, 2002). Students' experiences using roles are often overlooked, despite that students' perception of roles can affect the way they implement them. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate how university students perceive the use of roles when collaboratively writing.

Method

63 students (mean age 20 years, $SD = 0.4$) were divided into 21 groups of three. The study took place within the context of a third year bachelor's degree course on academic writing at a Flemish university. All groups wrote a theoretical framework on a chosen topic during eight sessions of 2.5 hours each. Previous to the task, all groups received writing instruction. In the groups, three a priori designed roles were distributed. The provided roles were developed based on earlier research (Wise et al., 2012) and aimed to enhance collaboration and text quality. Students received a list of the roles, their functions and possible prompts. The *initiator* was responsible for the planning, task distribution and the agreement on a task approach. The *moderator* mainly asked opinions and compromised. The *proofreader* revised the text and provided feedback. The roles were distributed at the start of the first session and were not rotated. Students answered the following question at four time points throughout the sessions on a 4-point Likert scale: "To what extent did you enact the role as described?", followed by the open-ended question: "Why did you enact the role as described?" when students indicated score 4, or "Why did you not (...)" when they indicated a lower score. The answers were coded using the procedure of thematic analysis, each answer inductively received one or more codes. These codes were clustered into several categories.

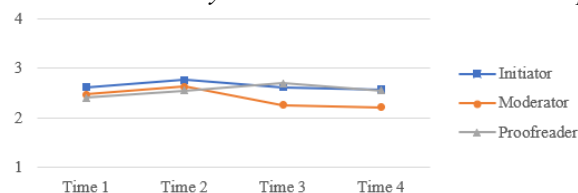
Results

The answers to the question: "To what extent did you enact the role as described?" followed a similar pattern for each of the four time points: almost no students answered 'not at all' (n respectively 4, 0, 1, 2), almost half of the students answered 'almost not' (n respectively 26, 26, 29, 32), the other half 'almost entirely' (n respectively 26, 30, 29, 25) and almost no students answered 'entirely' (n respectively 5, 6, 2, 3).

Using a repeated measures ANOVA, the evolution of role enactment for each role was investigated (Figure 1). Only the difference between moderators and proofreaders at time 3 is significant ($t(18) = -2.37, p = .021$).

Figure 1

Evolution of: “To what extent did you enact the role as described?” per role.



The reasons why students did not entirely enact their role fall into four categories. The first is *struggle* ($n = 99$). Students mention that they enacted functions from other roles, or that they experienced an excessive cognitive load as they perceived the roles as an extra task on top of the challenging writing task. The second is *resistance* ($n = 64$). Students did not use the roles because they felt useless or unnatural. The third is *not applicable* ($n = 57$). Students stated that they could not yet enact the roles in this stage of the process. The fourth is *forgotten* ($n = 38$). Some students simply forgot to use the roles. The reasons why students enacted their role entirely can be clustered following the two motivation types in the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The first category is *autonomous motivation* ($n = 18$). In line with the SDT, autonomously motivated students used the roles because they really wanted to. They valued the roles because they felt they were useful, or fitted their personality. The second category is *controlled motivation* ($n = 5$): students used the roles because group members or teachers expected them to do so.

Discussion and conclusion

This study reveals that university students do not naturally adopt roles as collaborative writing support, even though these roles were carefully developed with the aim of improving collaboration and writing. The majority of the students did not enact the roles as described, because they struggled so much that they eventually gave up, the role did not fit the writing phase, they forgot, or they resisted to use them. For these students, the roles violated their need for relatedness and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Strijbos and Weinberger (2010) point out that roles can conflict with spontaneously emerging roles and Chiu and Kuo (2009) note that students often distribute the functions dynamically. On the other hand, a small proportion of the students enacted the roles as described. Their reasons collide with those of the not-users, as the users perceived the roles as useful and natural. For these students, the roles seemed to fulfill their needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The present findings seem to suggest that instructors should design the roles in such a way that the functions are useful, show students why they are useful and closely align the functions to students' needs. This might result in a higher degree of role enactment. However, the degree of role enactment was assessed using self-reported measures. An additional quantitative content analysis could generate different findings regarding the extent to which students adhere to their role. Further research can focus on finetuning these roles to align them even more with students' needs.

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