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Collaborative Writing: A Review of Definitions From Past Studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews divergent definitions for collaborative writing provided by interdisciplinary practitioners and researchers. This is due to the fact that collaborative writing is a composite of dynamic components such as the goals, strategies and roles that are exchangeable among writers throughout the writing process. Besides, documents in collaborative writing can be composed by multiple writing activities, work modes and document control modes. The divergent definitions for collaborative writing add a complexity in providing a precise and common definition for collaborative writing. This plethora of divergent definitions does not mean that collaborative writing has been illustratively defined; instead, it reflects the lack of common consensus among practitioners and researchers in reaching a common definition for collaborative writing. Such lack of common consensus may lead to common lack of understanding of the real concept of collaborative writing, in turn, minimizes learners' ability in gaining beneficial progress in learning from collaborative practices and undermining practitioners and researchers' efforts in conducting reliable collaborative writing researches in the fields of academia. Furthermore, the divergence in having a common definition for collaborative writing adds to other confusion to the subject matter. As a result, it led researchers to diverse in reaching a common term for collaborative writing. Although collaborative writing is widely used expression among researchers and practitioners, it has been addressed variably. Thus, this paper reviews these definitions for collaborative writing in order to illustrate common interdisciplinary definitions for collaborative writing that will help in future researches especially in English as a Foreign Language writing.

Keywords: collaborative writing; writing process; consensus; interdisciplinary; English as a Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning is a social activity where all the members of the group collaborate to construct and develop ideas. Members' novice cognitive development then can successfully be enhanced through social interaction with expert members. This means that members who have a high level of experience can provide novice members with the needed level of assistance in order to stretch the latter beyond their current level of knowledge. In other words, it scaffolds learners with low writing ability to achieve their potential level of

development (Storch 2005). This learning perspective emerges when a group of learners aim to achieve common learning goals through collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is considered beneficial because it maximizes individuals' own learning achievement within the group on one hand and the group member's overall achievement on the other. This type of achievement normally exists when students interactively work with their peers in group or peer writing activities via mutual engagement rather than individually (Storch 2002, Auer 2006).

Based on this belief, Storch (2005 p. 145) insists that "learners should be encouraged to collaborate in writing activities that foster interaction and co-construction of knowledge. From a pedagogical perspective, the use of small group and pair work is further supported by communicative approach to L2 [second language] instruction and its emphasis on providing learners with opportunities to use L2". Thus collaborative writing has been adopted in many learning contexts because of its enhancing impact on learners' outcomes and accordingly was defined from different perspectives based on the needs and requirements of each learning context.

THEORETICAL REVIEW FOR COLLABORATIVE WRITING

COLLABORATIVE WRITING AS A COGNITIVE PROCESS

In its broadest sense, collaboration refers to the act of labour-sharing and thus collaborative writing (CW) is a collective cognitive process where multiple writers negotiate and share co-authority and responsibility for the production of a text (Storch 2013). Therefore, CW builds on the notion of cognitive process in single-author writing by involving multiple people (Lowry et al. 2004).

Such cognitive process of CW was described by Flower and Hayes (1981) as the process that consists of three main stages: a) planning stage (prewriting stage), interpretation or translation stage (writing stage) and reviewing stage (postwriting stage). These three main stages are depicted in Figure 1. Planning is the initial stage where learners work collaboratively in order to organize information, set goals, and generate information needed to the writing task. Interpretation is the intermediate stage that links the first stage to the final stage. It is also known as drafting stage where learners in groups start collaboratively to interpret plans and research notes into a written document. Finally, reviewing stage consists of revising the original ideas and goals, evaluating the written draft and editing the text. Thus, Flower and Hayes (1981) proposes that collaborative writing is a cognitive process that can be defined as a *group effort* towards performing a text.

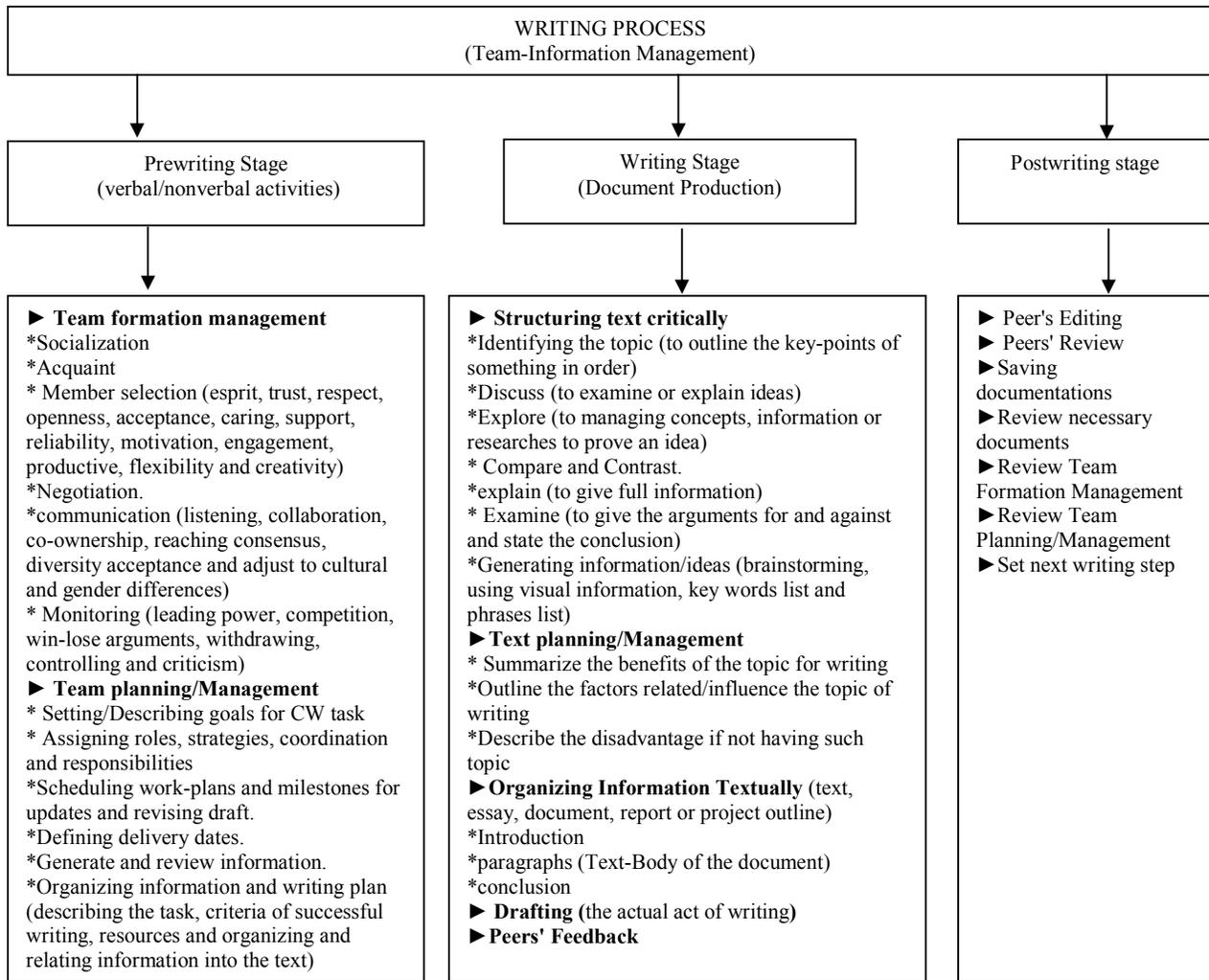


FIGURE 1. Stages of collaborative writing

COGNITIVE PROCESS AND DIFFICULTIES IN DEFINING CW

Defining CW as a cognitive process of *group effort* towards performing a text is in fact conditioned by some scholars. For example, Tammaro et al. (1997) and Lowry et al. (2004) argue that many collaborative written documents being executed by *group effort* contains activities which are often divided and conducted on an individual basis that might not undergo the term "collaboration". In addition, Storch (2013) claims that defining CW as a process carried out through *group effort*, involving peer planning, peer evaluating or peer editing do not qualify as CW. He justified that contribution of the peer who plans, evaluates or edits the text occurs only at one stage in the writing process. On the base of this understanding, Storch (2013) stated that CW does not include editing tasks where learners are required to reconstruct or edit a text which they did not compose. This view is in agreement with Hirvela (2007) who proposed that CW does not refer to the act of peer editing or peer

planning. Instead, he used the term collaborative approach to describe this act. Thus, Tamaro et al. (1997) and Lowry et al. (2004) insistently opined that CW in the true sense takes place only when all individual members of the group have reached the consensus and practice the whole stages of the writing process together including planning and editing stage. Moreover, Lowry et al. (2004) stated that although CW is cognitive, dynamic and often nonlinear, it can be carried out in a sequential order where there is a starting point and an ending point. Such exchange in the order of collaborative writing as a cognitive process may add a complexity in providing a precise and common definition for CW. What might add complexity to come up with a common definition is also that CW is a composite of dynamic components such as the goals, strategies and roles of students within the writing group (Miller et al., 2004). These components are exchangeable among the students throughout the writing process (Horton et al. 1991). Another factor of complexity in defining CW is that documents in CW can possibly be composed by multiple writing activities, work modes and document control modes (Posner & Baecker 1992, Calvo et al. 2011).

SOCIAL VIEW AND DIFFICULTY IN DEFINING COLLABORATIVE WRITING

What might add difficulty in reaching a common consensus in defining CW is that many scholars have defined it as a social interactive process rather than a cognitive process. They emphasize the social nature of CW (Snow et al. 1987, Galegher & Kraut 1994, Lowry et al. 2004, Storch 2005, Masoumeh Shiri Aminloo 2013). They defined CW as an act of processing a document where learners produce a written-shared document based on certain social concerns. These social concerns are negotiation about the meaning of facts related to the topic, fair and equal division of roles during writing, coordination of individual contributions, seeking one another's points of views about their writing and resolution of questions about co-authorship (Galegher & Kraut 1994).

This social view of CW is clearly reflected in the definition of other scholars like Lowry et al. (2004, p.75). They argue that CW is "...an iterative and social process that involves a team focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates, and communicates during the creation of a common document".

Moreover, other scholars extremely advocate socialism in CW. They argue that writing is inherently social (LeFevre 1987, Faigley 1982, Blyler & Thralls 1993, Petelin 2004). Accordingly, Nystrand (1989) defined CW as a social act that combines more than negotiation or discussion between learners when they write. Instead, it is an "episode of interaction".

"Writing involves more than the generation, organization, and translation of ideas into text ... each act of writing is an episode of interaction" (p. 70).

Although among the scholars who strongly support the social view for CW, it seems that they are also unable to reach a consensus about the nature of socialism in CW. They were unable to provide a clear and interdisciplinary definition based on whether CW is a social interaction process, a social act process, a social binary process or a social activity.

SOCIAL INTERACTION VIEW IN CW

The social interaction notion for CW has been supported by scholars like Colen and Petelin (2004) who stated that CW is inherently a **social interaction** where learners can reach a consensus. They propose CW is "... production of a shared document, substantive interaction

among members, and shared decision-making power over... the document" (p. 137). Such social interaction view is also reflected in other scholars' definitions as a social process. For example, Henderson and Silva (2006) stated that CW is a social process that comprises more than two authors writing together in producing a single text by and seeking one another's point of views about their written text.

In addition, social interactional view of CW has been seen largely as a platform where learners can create and develop their knowledge-pooling for writing. It also allows them to gain more understanding about social networking in writing. Based on this understanding, Rex et al. (2002) and Ritchie, Stephen and Donna (2007) argue that CW is an interactive process of understanding of self and others' thoughts within social relationships where interpreting these thoughts collaboratively into a written document has the potential to reflect our self-understanding and understanding for others in this writing-partnership.

SOCIAL PRACTICE, SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND SOCIAL BINARY PROCESS VIEW IN CW

Unlike those who viewed CW as social interaction process, other scholars have emphasized that CW can be categorized as a *social practice*. Such perspective usually perceives deferent meanings to deferent practitioners in the field of education particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) context (Lowry et al. 2004). Based on this perspective, CW has been seen as *asocial activity* (Ede & Lunsford 1990). Similarly, Spigelman (2000) also views CW as a social activity based on the concept of knowledge construction with the members of the writing group who are hopefully seeking to trust each other with co-ownership. Viewing CW as social activity rather than social interaction, in fact, led Rice and Huguley (1992 cited in Lowry et al. 2004) to offer another definition that underlines the primary activities for CW:

"Collaborative is any writing performed collectively by more than one person that is used to produce a single text; and we define writing as any activity that leads to a completed document, including brainstorming or idea generating, gathering research, planning and organizing, drafting, revision, and editing." (pp. 163-164).

Furthermore, some other researchers have a more comprehensible view toward CW. They proposed that CW is a *binary social process*; it is a social interaction process and social activity process at the same time. It is a *social interaction* among divergent ideas and perspectives of individual learners during collaborative *social activities*. Such process of binding these series of interactions among divergent perspectives via *writing activities* is clearly a *binary social process* (Puntambekar 2006). Likewise, the view of CW as a binary social process is further revolutionarily defined as not just a process that exists while learners within the same group work socially interact or perform an activity. It has, instead, been seen as a binary social process taking place between the readers and the writers. Accordingly, Thompson (2000) is more challenging in presenting such revolutionary definition of CW. He views CW as an interaction that does not inherently takes place among learners or collaborators while performing a document, but also between the readers and the writers of a particular text:

"The view of written texts as embodying interaction between the writer and reader is now well established...I argue that interaction can draw on both interactive and interactional resources: interactive resources can help to guide the reader through the text, while interactional resources involve the reader collaboratively in the development of the text" (p. 58).

DISCUSSION

In the light of this review of definitions for CW, the divergent views in defining CW add a complexity in providing a precise and common definition for CW. This plethora of divergent definitions does not mean that CW has been illustratively defined. Instead, it reflects the lack of common consensus among practitioners and researchers in reaching a common definition for CW. Such lack of common consensus may lead to common lack of understanding of the real concept of CW, in turn, minimizes learners' ability in gaining beneficial progress in learning from collaborative practices and undermining practitioners and researchers' efforts in conducting reliable CW researches in the fields of academia.

This fact makes CW an inconsistent and confusing term. This is due to the fact that CW is defined from different professions' perspectives where each profession focuses on a stage or views it based on either cognitive or social view which is not necessarily concerned by the others (Noel & Robert 2004). For example, defining CW as a cognitive process of *group work* from the science perspective, where learners usually collaborate in writing a document based on, for instance, problem solving that focuses more on the first stage of CW, defers from defining CW from social sciences and humanities perspective where CW is seen as social interactional activity more than it is co-authoring (Storch 2005). This had led Ede and Lunsford (1990) to use the term *group writing* as a broad definition of collaborative to minimize the confusion.

Assigning CW with such character as a complex, dynamic and confusing process makes it a slippery concept (Miller et al. 2004). This is because the majority of scholars and practitioners were unable to state related views about what the term "*writing process*" exactly means in CW, and what the nature of this process is following their definitions. For instance, a portion of the reviewed definitions in this article figure out the "writing process" in CW as just the process of actual act of putting ideas into a text form, ignoring that there are other integrated processes that happens before and after this process. Unsurprisingly, this character causes disagreement among researchers and practitioners in having a common consensus on the definition of CW (Beck 1993, Noel & Robert 2004). Accordingly, Lowry et al. (2004) stated that such disjoint among scholars caused contrasting definition of CW, leading to common lack of understanding and identifying the real concept of the process writing in CW. They also argue that such lack will minimize learners' ability; EFL students are included, in achieving successful progress in learning writing. It will also undermine practitioners and researchers' efforts in conducting reliable CW research works in the fields of academia particularly in eliciting information from what learners do when they write collaboratively (Duin 1990, Noel & Robert 2004). Therefore, a clear and comprehensive definition of CW should be primarily established before approaching it to the EFL context in order to guarantee both a high level of achievement in learning writing and high research quality.

Furthermore, the divergence in having a common definition for CW addsto other confusion to the subject matter. As a result, it led researchers to diverse in reaching a common term for CW. Although CW is the widely used expression among researchers and practitioners, it has been addressed variantly as: co-authoring/co-authorship (DuFrene & Nelson 1990, Spigelman 2000, Henderson & Silva 2006, Hunter 2011, Storch 2005, 2013), collaborative authoring (Kaye 1993), joint authoring (Thralls 1992), group writing (Trimbur 1985, Lay 1989, Ede & Lunsford 1990, Beard, Rymer & Williams 1989, Bosley 1989, Beard, Rymer & Williams 1989, Duin 1990, Kessler, Bikowski & Boggs 2012), collaborative editing (Higuchi & Takahashi, 1995), group work (Galegher & Kraut 1994, Storch 2005, Henderson & Silva 2006, Qiyun Wang 2009, Calvo et al. 2011; Mohammed Abdel HakimFarah 2011, Ayesha Heble & Sandhya Mehta 2013), collaborative composing

(Clifford 1981, Anderson 1989), joint writing (Posner & Baecker 1992, Colen & Petelin 2004, Calvo et al. 2011), joint composition (Farkas 1991, Lowry et al. 2004), joint activity (Onrubia & Engel 2009), team writing (Rice & Huguley 1994), shared document collaboration (Allen et al. 1987), Bodily co-present or side-by-side writing (Stephen & Donna 2007).

Despite the divergence in defining CW, scholars like Lowry et al (2004) have to a large extent provided an integral and comprehensive definitions of CW based on their believe that CW has an underlining structure which can be globally identified and can be easily derived. Accordingly, three definitions of collaborative writing will be adopted in order to provide a common definition of CW and screen the whole scene of CW. This will remove the lack of common consensus and contribute to better results in conducting future research in CW.

The first definition is offered by Lowry et al. (2004). They built up their definition of CW by leveraging six axioms:

- › Minimum activities: planning, drafting and revising
- › Multiple parties working toward a common task within a group and social act by reaching a consensus
- › Interaction: communicating, negotiating, coordinating, monitoring and so forth
- › Pre-task activities
- › Post-task activities
- › Group task (team formation)

In fact, Lowry et al.'s (2004) definition is an extension for the notion of Single-Author Writing that consists of minimum activities of planning, drafting and revising. This extension involves multiple parties of learners who work toward a common task via social act. Such social act, as they proposed, requires activities that help the multiple learners to reach a consensus which does not exist in Single-Author Writing. Based on this understanding, Lowry et al. (2004 pp. 72-74) depicted an overall model for CW as shown in Figure 2. They defined CW as:

"... a group act that does not solely rely on document production, even though document production may be the most central, highly dynamic activity... CW is an iterative and social process that involves a team focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates, and communicates during the creation of a common document... The potential scope of CW goes beyond the more basic act of joint composition to include the likelihood of pre- and post-task activities, team formation, and planning. Furthermore, based on the desired writing task, CW includes the possibility of many different writing strategies, activities, document control approaches, team roles, and work modes".

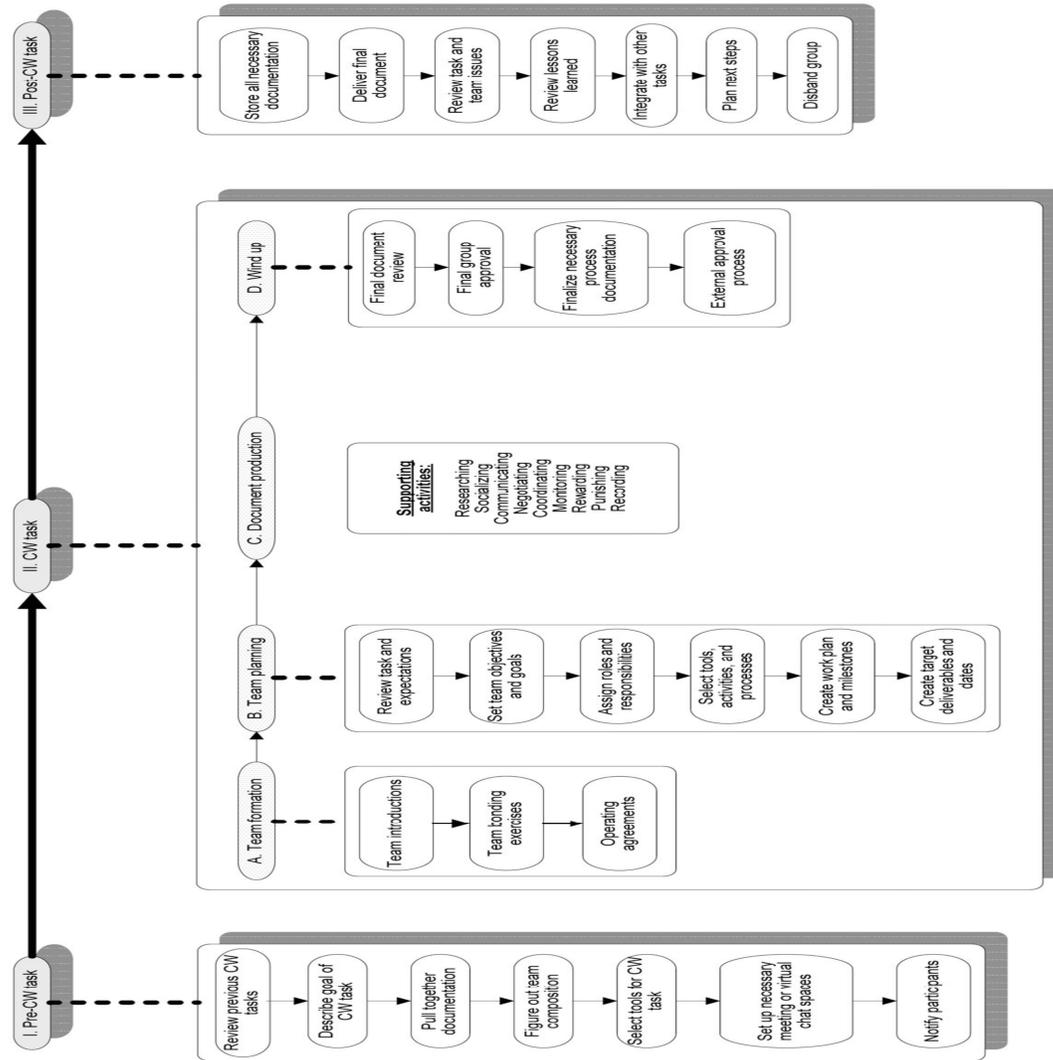


Figure 2. Tasks and Activities of Collaborative Writing (Lowry et al. 2004, p. 73)

The second definition was offered by Farkas (1991). It involves four basic forms of CW (p. 14).

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

Finally, Ede and Lunsford (1990) offered another definition of CW. They came up with a broad interdisciplinary definition that may suite many participants from different professions

including EFL profession. It was an attempt to minimize confusion among their respondents on one hand and help researchers and practitioners in having a common consensus on the definition of CW on the other hand (Noel & Robert 2004).

"For the purposes of this survey, writing includes any of the activities that lead to a completed written document. These activities include written and spoken brainstorming, outlining, note-taking, organizational planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Written products include any piece of writing, from notes, directions and forms to reports and published materials. Group writing includes any writing done in collaboration with one or more persons". (Ede & Lunsford 1990, p.14).

Storch (2013) stated that Ede and Lunsford's (1990) definition provided an alternative view of CW. Storch (2013) argued that such alternative view identifies three distinctive features that distinguish CW from other types of writings that are not collaborative: "...1) substantive interaction in all stages of the writing process, 2) sharing the responsibility for and power of decision-making over the produced text; and 3) the production of a single written document" (Storch 2013, p. 2).

Based on the reviewed of the divergent definitions, it seems that CW builds on three basic pillars namely: *group*, *writing* and *goal*. These pillars are the cornerstone across all definitions for collaborative writing. Nevertheless, these definitions were insufficient to reach a common consensus in defining CW because they were unable to extract the real concept of these pillars. Thus, in order to provide a common interdisciplinary definition it is worth primarily to identify what is the concept and the role of each pillar that in turn will help in conceptualizing the wholesale definition for CW.

In CW, *group* refers to sociocognitive interactional collaboration where two or more individual writers come together (not necessarily bodily) and exchange information, knowledge, ideas, skills attitudes, feelings etc. based on verbal or/nonverbal activities of team-formation and team-planning process. Team-formation process involves the ability of collaborators in the group in making a team through reaching consensus on decision-making and managing the social interactive behaviour that relates to socialization, selecting members, esprit, acquaint, negotiation, communication and monitoring. On the other side, team-planning involves the ability of collaborators to organize a team through setting goals, assigning roles, strategies and responsibilities, organizing information and writing plans, schedule work plans and milestones and defining deadlines for delivery. Based on this organization, team-planning process will help to develop the cognitive awareness of the individual members in the group towards the required tactics for constructing a document that in turn enhances the writing process and develops text. Hence, a group in CW is a team that consists of multiple collaborative writers and multiple social interactive and cognitive activities towards producing a single document.

The second pillar is *writing*. It is obvious that there is an equivocation in understanding the real concept of the writing. This is considered to be primer cause that leads to lack of common consensus in reaching an interdisciplinary definition for CW. For the purpose of defining CW, writing is a verbal or/nonverbal process activity that does not solely rely on the composing of the text-body for a document. It is a process activity combining multi-integrated elements that allow collaborative writers to construct a document. These multi-integrated elements are manifested in the interrelatedness of the writing stages (prewriting stage, writing stage and postwriting stage) required for executing a collaborative written document. Based on this understanding, collaborative writers need more than to be able to construct a text-body together. In fact, they need to share the experience of practicing the whole stages of such process starting from constituting a team writing, managing the team to identify or generate a topic or project writing, managing how the required information for

writing up a document should be gathered that usually takes place at prewriting stage, managing team consensus on how these information should be better drafted in the text-body of the document that usually occurs at actual writing stage and finally managing the individuals' decisions on the quality of the final-produced document that usually occurs at post writing stage through peers' editing and feedback. Thus, writing is a process activity of team-information management that includes either verbal or nonverbal interactive negotiation among multiple writers occurring within the three stages of writing that leads to a complete document based on common consensus on decision making and co-ownership of a document.

Collaboration in general is an act exerted by group of people who are working towards or sharing a common goal. In CW, writers usually work as a team to achieve a common goal. This common goal is to co-create a written work. In EFL writing context such definition of *goal* does, to a large extent, seem a parochial. The co-creation of a written document might be the primary common goal for collaborative writers but, in fact, it is not the solitary one. This is because when writers work collaboratively, they do not solely aim to perform a written document but also to develop their knowledge of writing. In other words, their goal in collaboration as a team will go in parallel ways. They will share the common goal of performing a written work on one hand and will also share the common goal of acquiring the craftsmanship of CW on the other hand. Such craftsmanship represents the individual contributions of each team-member in developing the written work and the benefit which each team-member will obtain to develop his/her knowledge. Thus, the goal in CW is a binary value that sustains even after finishing the written work. Based on this understanding of goal, CW is defined as a two-way-process where collaborative writers should integrate their individual contributions to the text and in turn they should get benefit from their involvement in such process. This leads to that any writing is only considered as a CW if such binary goal does exist.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, after reviewing divergent definitions for CW, we conclude that CW should have these maxims. Firstly, CW is a sociocognitive process that involves multiple writers towards single documents. Secondly, it is a sociocognitive process of Team-Information Management and Knowledge Building that includes either verbal or nonverbal interactive activities among multiples writers that occurs during practicing the three stages of writing, leading to a complete document based on common consensus on decision making and co-ownership. Thirdly, it is a two-way-process where individuals contribute their efforts in constructing a text collaboratively and as a result of this experience they benefit to build up and stretch their knowledge of writing. And finally, it is a process where multiple writers contribute information to construct but not reconstruct a complete text (i.e. editing others' works, rewriting a text, modifying a text, writing a text based on given instructions by other individuals who are not members in the writing team are not considered CW).

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