Seven: A collaborative creative writing activity

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The paper describes a collaborative creative writing activity in which students work sequentially on a multi-chapter story over the course of a semester. The first half of the paper describes the activity and its theoretical basis. The second half presents the results of a survey of attitudes toward the activity, which students found satisfying and worthwhile. The survey results lend support to the use of creative writing in foreign language classes.

本稿は合作創作作文を説明する。合作創作作文は数人の学生は順次章を書いて学期の間に物語を作る。前半に本稿は合作創作作文のやり方を説明する。本稿の後半は世論調査を述べる。調査結果によると学生は合作創作作文が有利で満足だった。調査結果は外国語授業は創作作文を含むべきである。

MOST LANGUAGE instructors would agree that writing practice is valuable and necessary for their students. The catch is assessment, a time-consuming activity that has been described as "drudgery" (Haswell, 2006, p. 57). Collaborative creative writing (CCW) offers students the opportunity to tap their creativity and to practice composition on a word processor without encumbering the instructor with piles of paper to mark.

Collaborative creative writing is an activity in which multiple authors create a story. Chapters are written by individual writers, each basing their chapter on the storyline of earlier chapters by other writers. This collaborative creative writing assignment is called *Seven*, a story of seven chapters, each 100 to 200 words produced on a word processor. One story is written by seven students, who take turns adding a chapter. A class of 30 students would produce 30 stories, each commenced by one student and completed by six others over the course of a semester.

Students are given story prompts (Appendix 1) to get them started. Each student chooses a prompt, begins the first chapter with the words in the prompt, and writes 100-200 additional words. (Students provide a word count at the end of the chapter.) Table 1 shows how the story moves from student to student and grows chapter by chapter.

Table 1. Progression of story from student to student

Assign-ment #	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6	Student 7
7							**Chapter 7**
6						**Chapter 6**	Chapter 6
5					**Chapter 5**	Chapter 5	Chapter 5
4				**Chapter 4**	Chapter 4	Chapter 4	Chapter 4
3			**Chapter 3**	Chapter 3	Chapter 3	Chapter 3	Chapter 3
2		**Chapter 2**	Chapter 2	Chapter 2	Chapter 2	Chapter 2	Chapter 2
1	**Chapter 1**	Chapter 1	Chapter 1	Chapter 1	Chapter 1	Chapter 1	Chapter 1

Note. This table shows students adding a chapter (in **boldface**) to the set of chapters that they receive from the previous student, then passing the whole story on to the next student (arrows). Students submit the chapter that they write to the instructor for checking before passing it on by email.

After writing a chapter, students submit it to the instructor, who returns a printout of the chapter in class to the author. The printout shows the author how the text should have been laid out on the page and gives explanations of each layout error and the associated point deduction. Writers email their chapter and all previous chapters to the next writer. Stories are passed to the next writer on a regular basis. Chapters are assigned at regular intervals over the course of a semester.

Instructor response

Students receive no direct or indirect feedback on language errors. At the beginning of the semester, students are provided with guidelines on layout aspects such as font, font size, line spacing, indentation, and margins. The instructor deducts points for failing to follow layout guidelines. Lateness is penalized by 10% per day. In 2009-2010, average scores on chapters exceeded 90%, suggesting that students submitted their work in a timely fashion and gained a facility with the layout features in

Microsoft Word. Since students can examine the files that they receive from others and mimic their formatting, part of the up-take on formatting can be attributed to the collaborative aspect of CCW.

A handful of students try to circumvent the task through use of software translators. To discourage this form of cheating, the instructor penalizes incomprehensible prose by 1% per word. For example, a 105-word chapter that is entirely unintelligible would get a score of $100 - 105 = -5\%$. Students quickly learn that it is better to take a stab at producing something on their own, even if it has grammar errors, since language mistakes are not penalized.

As for time demands, the instructor has to process one email per chapter per student. The attached files have to be saved, marked for layout problems, and printed. At 5-7 minutes per file, a class of 30 students would require a total of $17.5 - 24.5$ hours per semester. Because students improve their layout skills over the course of the activity, the processing time for the instructor tends to drop for later chapters.

Discussion

Feedback

One striking feature of CCW is the absence of corrective feedback on the language. Instructors may find it difficult to resist the impulse to attend to the numerous glaring errors in student papers, and some would consider it irresponsible to provide no feedback (Casanave, 2004). Students believe feedback to be beneficial, and perhaps consider it part of the teacher's job (Holmes & Moulton, 1995).

These perceptions notwithstanding, research is still far from settling the question of the effect of response on student writing; indeed, there is scant evidence that corrective feedback improves student writing (Casanave, 2004). Guénette (2007) describes a jumble of studies that would probably leave most instructors unsure about whether the chore of correction is worth the time. Ferris (1999) expresses a sentiment that many writing teachers will share: "Like most people, I find responding to students' written errors time-consuming and mostly tedious. I also find that the time and energy I spend sometimes does not pay off in long-term student improvement" (p. 2).

Fluency vs. accuracy

The debate over feedback involves a tradeoff over accuracy and fluency. Accuracy is "a writer's ability to produce language that is free of language errors at the word and sentence level" and "usually measured by error counts" (Casanave, 2004, p. 68). In contrast, fluency is a "writers' ability to produce a lot of language (or to read) without excessive hesitations, blocks, and interruptions" (p. 67). Fluency and accuracy have an inverse relationship: "As attention to one goes up, attention to the other goes down" (p. 68).

Accuracy is a metric that appeals to language teachers. Errors can be readily identified and addressed in many ways: replac-ing the flawed text (direct feedback), indicating an error code (indirect feedback), or simply marking the location of the error. Gains in accuracy are easily demonstrable, but it is not clear that such gains persist. The instructor's investment in marking may bring about merely short-lived progress.

Instructors may not need to provide extensive, detailed feedback for student writing to improve. Numerous studies point out the accuracy gains that students make, even with minimal teacher response (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In particular, Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) found no significant differences among four groups of Japanese college English students receiving different amounts and kinds of feedback.

Though there is not much research on fluency (Casanave, 2004), there are promising findings. For example, Mayher, Lester, and Pradl (1983) found that reading and writing extensively without any teacher feedback led to gains in reading and writing scores.

CCW aims at promoting fluency, a decision made out of practical considerations. With regard to teaching writing, "teachers need…to realize they cannot, and need not, do everything at once" (Casanave, 2004, p. 67). This observation applies to students as well, who cannot devote full attention simultaneously to fluency and accuracy. For better or worse, accuracy usually takes precedence. Without the opportunity to work on fluency, it is questionable whether students will develop the ability to confidently generate prose.

The advantage of focusing on fluency is that it allays student apprehension of L2 writing: "Fear of making mistakes will hinder students' progress–they are less likely to experiment and more likely to be overly concerned with small language matters that prevent them from seeing the forest for the trees" (Casanave, 2004, p. 72). A calm frame of mind is more conducive to divergent thinking and creativity.

In light of the mixed evidence on feedback, it is not unreasonable to consider the alternative of no feedback. This choice has compelling justifications. One is feasibility. Time constraints imposed by collaboration make this activity ill-suited to the goal of accuracy. A back-of-the-envelope calculation shows why: In a reading class of 40 students, writing a seven-chapter story yields 280 chapters of 100-200 words. Correcting a chapter in 10-15 minutes translates into 46.7 – 70 total hours of correction per semester or 3 – 4.7 hours per week, an onerous quantity of marking for a course whose focus is reading, not writing. Should feedback not be provided in a fashion timely enough for students to make the corrections and pass the revised version to the next writer, the instructor becomes a bottleneck. If an instructor uses the activity for, say, five courses in a semester, corrective feedback would require four to six work weeks, time which the schedules of most university instructors cannot accommodate.

The second justification is that CCW furthers pedagogical objectives that may get overlooked in the L2 classroom: creative thinking, collaboration, and written fluency. CCW allows students to express themselves imaginatively while gaining facility with a word processor in English. They begin to understand the importance of audience as they read the writing of other students and write for other students, not just the teacher. At the same time, students develop written fluency without encumbering the instructor with the task of providing feedback of questionable pedagogical impact.

Many practitioners will undoubtedly remain skeptical of the learning value of a non-assessed activity. Accuracy, while important to L2 writing, need not be the focus of every assignment, and CCW is certainly not the first form of student writing that teachers deliberately refrain from assessing. For example, student journals have been a common feature in writing and L2 classes. Such journals are "usually uncorrected and unrevised" (Casanave, 2004, p. 72). CCW could be regarded as collaboration on a creative journal.

If feedback for every assignment seems important, it should be prioritized so that the instructor avoids getting inundated with prose to mark. For example, it would be beneficial to attend to tense errors, which are a glaring mistake in a story that should be consistently in the past tense.

Revision

One advantage of collaborative writing over solo authorship is that the audience becomes larger and "more authentic" (Crusan, 2010, p. 140). The drawback is that CCW, as presented in this paper, does not allow writers to revise the content of their chapters. The sequential nature of the activity means that earlier chapters are effectively written in stone. The restriction exists for good reason: In a collaborative story, later chapters are based on earlier ones. Revision would create a moving target and might tamper with ideas that later writers have used or are planning to use. Revising chapters may invalidate or make nonsensical other chapters. As an analogy, consider designing a multi-story building. If the upper floors are being built while the plans of the ground floor are under revision, the resulting structure will not be stable.

Reworking prose is an important part of the writing process. Murray (1978) claimed that "writing is rewriting" (p. 85). Revision is also an essential part of the creative endeavor. If revision is a high priority, then single-author creative writing would be more suitable since the prose readily lends itself to revision. However, the benefit of a wider audience is weakened, since collaborative writing entails a close reading in order to continue the story.

Creativity

Ken Robinson observed, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never produce anything original" (Robinson & Aronica, 2009, p. 74). Creativity entails the search for something novel, as well as the concomitant hazard of making mistakes. For instance, the act of brainstorming is meant to produce the maximum number of ideas without concern for their validity. CCW is meant to be brainstorming about a story and recording those ideas for others to see and use. CCW is based on the believing game (also called *methodological believing)*, "the disciplined practice of trying to be as welcoming or accepting as possible to every idea we encounter" (Elbow, 2008). In playing the believing game, we temporarily withhold judgment, disagreement, and criticism, aspects of the doubting game. CCW asks writers to accept and build upon the ideas of others, who in turn have their ideas accepted unconditionally.

Toward creative ends, written fluency is emphasized. Assessing L2 work for accuracy may stultify creativity and motivation to create. Corrective feedback underscores the shortcomings of a piece of writing and could make students more conservative in their creative expression and hinder the development of fluency. Collaborative creative writing is intended to encourage creativity and attenuate the fear of failure by freeing students of concerns over accuracy *for this assignment.*

Survey

The survey (Appendix 2) was distributed in the second semester of the 2009-2010 academic year. A total of 199 responses were collected from seven English-language classes for 1st-year Japanese university students: two reading, two writing, and three speaking classes. About two-thirds of the respondents were male, and the average age was 19.2 years. Each class had completed the same CCW assignment, and was asked to compare it to other assignments and class activities.

Table 2 shows how students perceived creative writing in relation to activities that were central to the nature of the course. Surveys for all sections included as one possible response *error correction exercises* (ECE), an activity about common errors made by Japanese speakers in English. Students were given homework and quizzes on identifying and correcting such errors. For the reading classes, respondents compared creative writing to ECE and reading quizzes. Writing classes weighed creative writing against ECE and analytical writing. Respondents in speaking classes compared creative writing to ECE and to a news article activity.

An interesting pattern emerges from the responses to Items 2, 3, and 5. Almost 60% of respondents chose the creative writing assignment as the most enjoyable (Item 3), while almost three-quarters indicated that it took the most study time (Item 5). However, a plurality of respondents identified the creative writing assignment as the least useful, though "other activities" were not far behind (Item 2). In short, although most students liked creative writing and dedicated time to doing it, many considered it less valuable than other forms of study. One interpretation of these data is that students considered creative writing a fun but impractical activity because it did not prepare them for high-stakes tests such as the TOEIC or TOEFL, or for real-world language situations. Corrective feedback might make the creative writing activity seem more useful to students.

The figures in Table 3 suggest that students enjoyed the collaborative aspect of the activity (Item 12), tended to find it useful (Item 11), and did not deem solo authorship to be a more enjoyable alternative (Item 10). They did not agree that more creative writing was necessary in the course (Items 9 and 13). Respondents seemed somewhat amenable to writing creatively in English in the future (Item 14), and were evenly split on

advocating creative writing across the university language curriculum (Item 15).

Table 2. Summary of survey data from all students (items 1-6)

Item #	Creative writing	Error correction exercises	Other activity*	Most common response
1	26.1%	41.2%	32.7%	**Most Useful** = Analytical writing
2	38.1%	24.9%	37.1%	**Least Useful** = Creative Writing
3	59.8%	18.1%	22.1%	**Most Enjoyable** = Creative Writing
4	16.6%	35.2%	48.2%	**Least Enjoyable** = Analytical writing
5	72.1%	2.0%	25.8%	**Most Study Time** = Analytical writing
6	2.0%	88.9%	9.0%	**Least Study Time** = Error Correction Exercise

Note. The labels on the Likert scale were *strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, agree,* and *strongly agree*, and were assigned the values 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, respectively.

Other activity varied by class. In writing classes, it was analytical writing. In speaking classes, it was an activity involving news articles. In reading classes, it was reading homework.

The responses to items 16, 17, and 18 revealed that the creative writing assignment provided a good learning opportunity to students. Thirty-eight percent had never used a word processor in English class, while 42% had never done creative writing in school. Over half (55%) had never done creative writing in an English class. Overall, CCW was a novel experience for many of the students.

Table 3. Summary of survey data for all students (items 9-15)

Item #	Average	Standard deviation	Item
9	3.06	1.19	The creative writing assignments should be more frequent.
10	2.42	1.23	It would be more enjoyable to write a story by myself.
11	2.63	1.15	It was not useful to write the story as a group.
12	4.68	0.99	It was enjoyable to write the story as a group.
13	3.01	1.15	The creative writing assignments should be longer.
14	2.78	1.05	I do not want to do creative writing in English ever again.
15	3.56	1.12	More university language classes should have creative writing assignments.

Note. Items 7 and 8 were not included because they varied by class (reading, writing, or speaking) and were not directly relevant to creative writing or the CCW assignment.

Table 4. Summary of survey data from all students (items 16-18)

Item #	Item	true	false
16	This is the first time that I have used a word processor in English class.	37.9%	62.1%
17	Before I took this class, I had done creative writing in school.	41.8%	58.2%
18	This is the first time that I have done creative writing in an English class.	55.2%	44.8%

Writing classes

As CCW is a writing activity, it is worth looking closely at the survey responses for the two writing classes, whose students probably had a greater interest in improving writing skills. The survey for the writing classes asked students to choose among creative writing assignments, analytical writing assignments, and error correction exercises.

Table 5. Survey results from writing class students (items 1-6)

Item #	Analytical writing	Error correction exercises	Creative writing	
1	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%	**Most Useful** = Analytical writing
2	27.8%	27.8%	44.4%	**Least Useful** = Creative Writing
3	0.0%	11.1%	88.9%	**Most Enjoyable** = Creative Writing
4	75.0%	25.0%	0.0%	**Least Enjoyable** = Analytical writing
5	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%	**Most Study Time** = Analytical writing
6	2.8%	97.2%	0.0%	**Least Study Time** = Error Correction Exercise

Table 5 shows that the analytical writing assignments were considered the most useful by 44.4% of respondents, while the same number considered creative writing to be the least useful. Almost 9 out of 10 respondents chose creative writing at the most enjoyable activity, whereas three-quarters considered analytical writing to be least enjoyable.

The pattern of responses suggests that respondents find utility in time-consuming, less enjoyable activities. It would be worth determining what respondents deemed *useful* to mean, particularly in a writing class.

Student comments

Written comments on the survey form showed that students considered the activity fun. Many indicated that they want corrective feedback from the teacher. As previously explained, such feedback would be prohibitively time-consuming. Student expectation of feedback could be met through other assignments.

Some students disliked collaborating. They would have preferred to write the story themselves instead of depending on classmates that were sometimes less than timely in passing the story along. Other students did not like the ceiling on word length and wanted to write longer chapters. A variation of CCW that would meet both of these desires would involve fewer authors writing chapters of greater length.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a collaborative creative writing activity, and argued that this L2 writing activity has clear advantages while incurring few learning disadvantages despite its lack of corrective response. CCW liberates students from the concern of accuracy, which can stultify creativity, and focuses on fluency. Students have the freedom to take a storyline wherever their imagination leads. CCW privileges student L2 voice in that students write prose for their peers to read and use, not for the instructor to grade.

The principal appeal of CCW for busy teachers is that it increases opportunities for students to read and write without imposing substantial time requirements on the instructor. An

attitude survey showed that students enjoyed collaborative creative writing and spent time on the assignment, but did not perceive it to be as helpful to them as other kinds of study.

Bio data

Christian Perry has a penchant for eschewing bio data.

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Appendix 1

Story prompts

Idea #1

When I woke up, it was still dark. The clock said 5:00 a.m. There was a note taped to the clock: "There is poison in your blood. Only I have the cure. You have one week to find me. Follow the clues."

"Who wrote this mysterious note?" I wondered. I had to find the antidote by midnight Saturday, or I would die.

Idea #2

"I hate this family!" I yelled as I packed my bag. I had to get out of that house, but where could I go? I had saved some money, but not much. I needed a place to stay and a job.

Idea #3

It was a warm day, a good day for gardening. I was digging a small hole to plant flowers when I found it: a small, shiny sphere, with two buttons, one red, the other green. I examined it carefully but couldn't tell what it was. I pressed the green button. Suddenly...

Idea #4

I had applied for the job over the Internet, and had got an offer without even an interview. It was my first time abroad. It had been a long flight crossing the ocean, and now at the airport, I could see that my life in a foreign country would be very different from what I imagined.

Appendix 2

Survey

1. Which was the <u>most useful</u> (improved your English ability most)? どれが一番役立ったか？（もっとも英語能力を上達させる）

- ❑ reading passages / quizzes (読解・読解クイズ)
- ❑ Error Correction Exercises / Quizzes (間違えを直す宿題・クイズ)
- ❑ creative writing (創作・作文)

2. Which was the <u>least useful</u>? どれが一番役立たなかったか？

- ❑ reading passages / quizzes (読解・読解クイズ)
- ❑ Error Correction Exercises / Quizzes (間違えを直す宿題・クイズ)
- ❑ creative writing (創作・作文)

3. Which was the <u>most enjoyable</u>? どれが一番楽しかったか？

- ❑ reading passages / quizzes (読解・読解クイズ)
- ❑ Error Correction Exercises / Quizzes (間違えを直す宿題・クイズ)
- ❑ creative writing (創作・作文)

4. Which was the <u>least enjoyable</u>? どれが一番楽しくなかったか？

- ❑ reading passages / quizzes (読解・読解クイズ)
- ❑ Error Correction Exercises / Quizzes (間違えを直す宿題・クイズ)
- ❑ creative writing (創作・作文)

5. Which required the <u>most</u> study time? どれが一番長い勉強時間で済んだか？

- ❑ reading passages / quizzes (読解・読解クイズ)
- ❑ Error Correction Exercises / Quizzes (間違えを直す宿題・クイズ)
- ❑ creative writing (創作・作文)

6. Which required the <u>least</u> study time? どれが一番短い勉強時間で済んだか？

- ❑ reading passages / quizzes (読解・読解クイズ)
- ❑ Error Correction Exercises / Quizzes (間違えを直す宿題・クイズ)
- ❑ creative writing (創作・作文)

7. The reading passages are too long. 読解の文章は長すぎた。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❑ 強く反対	❑ 反対	❑ やや反対	❑ やや賛成	❑ 賛成	❑ 強く賛成

8· The reading assignments / quizzes should be more frequent. 読解の宿題とクイズが増えるべきである。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❑ 強く反対	❑ 反対	❑ やや反対	❑ やや賛成	❑ 賛成	❑ 強く賛成

9· The creative writing assignments should be more frequent. 創作の課題・宿題が増えるべきである。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❑ 強く反対	❑ 反対	❑ やや反対	❑ やや賛成	❑ 賛成	❑ 強く賛成

10. It would be more enjoyable to write a story by myself. 一人で物語を書いたほうが面白いと思う。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❑ 強く反対	❑ 反対	❑ やや反対	❑ やや賛成	❑ 賛成	❑ 強く賛成

11. It was not useful to write the story as a group. 学生同士で物語を書くのは役に立たなかった。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❏ 強く反対	❏ 反対	❏ やや反対	❏ やや賛成	❏ 賛成	❏ 強く賛成

12. It was enjoyable to write the story as a group. 学生同士で物語を書くのが楽しかった。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❏ 強く反対	❏ 反対	❏ やや反対	❏ やや賛成	❏ 賛成	❏ 強く賛成

13. The creative writing assignments should be longer. 創作の文字数を増やしたほうがいい。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❏ 強く反対	❏ 反対	❏ やや反対	❏ やや賛成	❏ 賛成	❏ 強く賛成

14. I do not want to do creative writing in English ever again. 英語での創作はもう書きたくない。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❏ 強く反対	❏ 反対	❏ やや反対	❏ やや賛成	❏ 賛成	❏ 強く賛成

15. More university language classes should have creative writing assignments. 創作の課題・宿題がでる授業が増えるべきである。

strongly disagree	disagree	somewhat disagree	somewhat agree	agree	strongly agree
❏ 強く反対	❏ 反対	❏ やや反対	❏ やや賛成	❏ 賛成	❏ 強く賛成

16. ❏ T ❏ F This is the first time that I have used a word processor in English class. 英語の授業でワープロを使うのは今回初めてです。

17. ❏ T ❏ F Before I took this class, I had done creative writing in school. この授業を受ける前に、これまで学校の授業で創作を書いたことがある。

18. ❏ T ❏ F This is the first time that I have done creative writing in an English class. 初めて英語の授業で創作をした。

What class are you in?
❏ English 3 　　❏ English 4 　　Section: ....

Which are you?
❏ Male 　❏ Female

How old are you? …………

Additional comments (そのほか・質問・感想)