

Writing is Culture; How Some Indonesian Students Do a Collaborative Writing by Using Social Software.

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Abstract

The significant use of writing in learning process is not hesitated. Writing is a best way for a student in learning something. Nevertheless, social software development as an alternative technology for collaborative writing still needs a deeper research. This research explored how some Indonesian undergraduate students do a collaborative writing by using social software. The important findings in this research are; 1). Group cohesivity is important in keeping group communication, 2). External factors such as environment affects qualitatively to writing condition and collaboration among the members. While, observed personal behavior and non verbal factors are more affected by informant resistance in group working speed, 3). Observation features are needed to keep group awareness, 4). Informant preferences and background also supports social software usage behavior in collaborative writing. Two recommendations from this research are internet mobile use trend in collaborative writing and the need of application which has conversation features.

1. Background

As I found how web technology like social software had affected teaching and learning process in state universities in Indonesia (Faizal 2009b). Also, the price of a notebook is available for the students and the rapid growth of Open Source Software makes undergraduate students in developing country as Indonesia afford to have personal notebook and they start to show a better internet adoption (Wahid, 2007). This significant development and the shifted array of learning pattern that needed to be anticipated, therefore, I suggest that we need to redefine the term “writing”. Writing, in my simple understanding, is a human expression activity in a written text, in its broader sense. Text is Artifact and history was built by it. Nevertheless history supports culture, thus writing is the foundation, so to speak, of all cultures. With a better understanding in writing praxis and the way we apply it recent learning, hopefully this will encourage some new methods in fostering knowledge.

The significant use of writing in learning process is not hesitated. Writing is a best way for a student in learning something. Writing not only helps to develop ability to remember but also develop the interpretation and perception of a student. Students accept the information and manage it to be knowledge, and if they able recall it, then the knowledge will be their ability. Hence, if the knowledge is applied in a social level, then it will be the person’s wisdom. Some of us assumed that writing is a manifestation of personal activities (Storch and Wigglesworth, 2009). Sometimes, we define the ‘author’ as the one, who work alone and almost does not have social interaction. Even though, many studies approved that by collaborating with other writers, with or without supported application, then we can produce a better writing (Faizal, 2009b; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2009).

One practice of the group writing is collaborative writing. My interested is how social software which based as collaborative writing application enables to be used effectively and freely by the students in developing country. One particular aspect that can be researched to see the affectivity in using the application is the communication model among the collaborative writing application users. As I argued before, that writing is foundation of the culture building, thus by act of writing the intercultural gap can be bridged. Speaking of

intercultural communication, there are two interactions that can be defined separately. First, the communication between one culture to the 'other' culture, an external relation. For an instance is international collaborative writing by students in dispersed spatial. Second, it is the communication that occurred among the culture components or subcultures, the intra-cultural communication. For the second one, the instance can be looked at micro level such as communication among students who worked in a group assignment in a same class.

In relation with bridging the gap by the use of technology, with emphasized in the internal cultural communication aspect. In this article I investigated, how Indonesian students do a collaborative writing by using social software. After the background, I will continue with literatures review between main concepts that I used in the research. Afterward, the research finding will brings forth as well as the discussion.

2. Literatures review

2.1 Culture, technology, and education

Culture is an endless-debate term, so to speak. The discussions can be brought from many perspectives and multiple point of views. Nonetheless, the term 'culture' that being used in this article referred to acknowledgement of culture in social level. Raymond Williams (2001) pointed an understanding of culture from its social context. For him, culture, in its social definition, is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values and not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. I could not agree more with the definitions, learning is the culture as such. The reception and integration process of information needs activities that involve and cause culture to be acknowledge. How students write or work together in collaborative writing basically is a transaction process and attributes caused by it. Because of that, learning style is effected by the students themselves.

Charlesworth (2008) investigated the relationship between learning style and students preference backgrounds. She compared the variables among Indonesian, Chinese and French students who studied at International Institute of Higher Education, Switzerland. Her research found that there are relationship between learning style preferences and cultural background at the outset of a program of Higher Education. Moreover, she found the nature of each student does influence their learning outcomes. She pointed that for Indonesian students it is of extreme importance that they have time to plan, implement and carry things out. There also seems to be certain deference to authority, or to teachers operating here. The question of time also seems to be something of pertinence. Although both respect and time seem to place a role in how the Chinese students go about their learning it seems to be of lesser importance than for their Indonesian colleagues. For the French group neither of these aspects seems to carry a lot of weight.

Hence to culture and educational technology diffusion, Young (2008) pointed the importance of involving culture element in developing information and communication technologies that going to be use for education. Young (2008) understand that conventional method in human-computer interaction (HCI) and instructional design method is too narrow in holding the users' behavior together. Based on her literatures review, she concluded a couple of point; first, it is apparent that integrating culture in the design of ICTs serves a broader scope, from the generic or culture-neutral, to the specialized or culture-specific. Second, Young's review indicated that design has not caught up with technology and that to create for diverse audiences, for instance international students, then the process must be deliberate. By leveraging the social interactions to be accommodated within the technology, it is consequently supporting the development of a user-friendly and motivating application

such as E-Learning (Niemelä, Pekkola, & Wahlstedt, 2008). In global sense, despite the adoption of specific technology, cultural considerations also played a role to enhance the technology absorption and wide spreading, especially in educational field (Gong, Li and Stump, 2007).

2. 2 Collaborative writing, social software, and computer-mediated communication (CMC)

CMC can lead to an impersonation communication since the mode has lack of non verbal cues and the user 'social presence' (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). The user might display more selective and yet exaggerated social information sharing online. Even so, a research by Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield (2007) about Facebook use by undergraduate students found a strong association between the use of Facebook and the undergraduate students will to build social capital. Regardless, more intensives CMC even lead to personalized relationships characterized by intimacy (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). More effective communicators exchange more intimate questions and disclosures than they would in similar face to face contexts, and acquaintanceship develops in CMC as it does face to face. The advantage of such communication mode has been applied in education, such as online business writing class (Mabrito, 2006) or to test the connection between teachers and students via CMC (Paulus and Phipps, 2008).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be defined as interaction between two or more intelligent agents that relies on ICT—usually a personal computer and networks—as its primary medium (Ess, 2007). Godwin, Richardson, & Thorpe (2008) pinpointed that the usage pattern of computer mediated communication (CMC) for the students in distance learning program can give positive experience for the students itself. Focus of their research was to understand the learning effect in using CMC quantitatively. However, they recommended that the actual benefit for the students appear more closely by using qualitative approach. For instance, is how the differences in students education qualification has more effect than the quantity of interaction and integration during the learning process.

Harrise and Park (2008) showed the use of podcast, one of the social software, in teaching and learning process. The use of podcasting emerges three perspective in using it. For the lecturers, podcast passes beyond spatial and temporal limitations of conventional face to face communication. For the students, the empowering ownership of accommodating user preference (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2004) helps to satisfy individual needs of knowledge ownership. The flexibility and affordability of podcasting cater to diverse student's needs by enabling repeated learning and offering an opportunity for the effective use of time. Finally, from the University's perspective, podcasting is a communication enabler, reaching out to a wider community. With the same assumption for the rest of social softwares, the more practice of social software use in education were shown by many education experts worldwide (Anderson, 2007; Virkus, 2008).

Lowry, Curtis, & Lowry (2004) have done a splendid work by proposing a taxonomy of collaborative writing (CW). CW likely the extensive of single-author writing activities with involves multiple parties and diverse task distribution to the text. They differed individual writing activity assisted by some else and collaborative writing. So for them, the editing process of a peer reviewed journal article is not a CW. By resuming some references, Lowry, Curtis and Lawry (2004) highlighted the collaborative writing stages such as brainstorming, outlining, drafting, reviewing, revising and copyediting. They emphasized that CW is dynamic activity where one stage can be moved backward and forward to others' writing stage. For instance is the brainstorming stage, the group able to review the writing anytime without changing the passed stages.

In relation to the CW technologies, the application should support more than basic communication and coordination. Because CW is a complex group task with many activities, hence needs to be based on group support systems, not simpler computer-mediated communication software such as e-mail (Lowry, Curtis, & Lowry, 2004). Moreover, it should support mutuality, that is not only support interactions between group members and with the work artefacts, but increase awareness of others' work and changes to the artefacts. It should give users control over the local aspects, help members coordinate and negotiate their work together (Noel & Robert, 2003). At university level, it ain't enough by just providing the writing workspace. Students' awareness is built by helping them acknowledge the role of the workplace itself. By equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to write successfully in particular contexts. If that happens, the technology has shifted from merely space into 'place' (Niemelä, Pekkola, & Wahlstedt, 2008).

3. The research methodology

The research was done from September to December 2009, and the validity was done in January 2010. Eight under graduate students were chosen in this research, 4 men and 4 women. All of them major in communication who took sociology of mass communication class in academic year of 2009/2010 at Lampung University, Indonesia. The informants were separated in two groups consisted four students each, equal in gender. They were volunteer participants. Faizal (2009a); pointed the importance to build informants criteria in qualitative observation since there are too many human behaviors that emerges from interaction between human and computer thus might confused the final analysis. Hence, the informant criteria in this research were, first, they are internet and computer literate, second, they have personal laptop, third they had willing to involve in the research after the scholar schedule. I was assisted by two field officials who did the observation in detail. Besides as the analyst I also took place as the second observer for the officials.

This is an explorative research with qualitative approach. Non participative observation is the main data collection technique combined with interview. All of the research activities were documented in literally and video record. Data collection divided in three stages, which are:

- a. Pre observation; this stage consists of choosing informants, making questionnaire, briefing with the informants about the research and determining the schedule. This stage is part of the research because it determines the limits of the research and expected result scope.
- b. Observation; in this stage both groups were placed in the same room without any separation. Each group sat in a circle with their laptops. The field official sat next to each group. Internet access between the informants and the observators was using wi-fi connection in the multimedia laboratory at Lampung University where this research was done. Each group was freed to meet each other, minimum two times and the duration was one hour and a half. So, the total duration for the meetings was three hours to each group. The reason why only two groups were observed is as a complementary ratio to each group. While, the replacing four informants in one group is to fulfill the element of group communication with adequate network in the research. I expect there will be enough communication between the groups to be analyzed.

Before the observation was begun, each informant was asked about their internet adoption and their knowledge about social software. Even though, it will not influence their placement into the group, this information will enrich the result. Each group was asked to make an essay of 1200 words about cyber culture. They were assigned to use at least two social softwares, one was determined by the researcher and the other was picked by the informants themselves. The determined software is Writeboard, a web-based application for real time collaborative writing. This is based on the ability of internet access for each informant's laptop. This was a

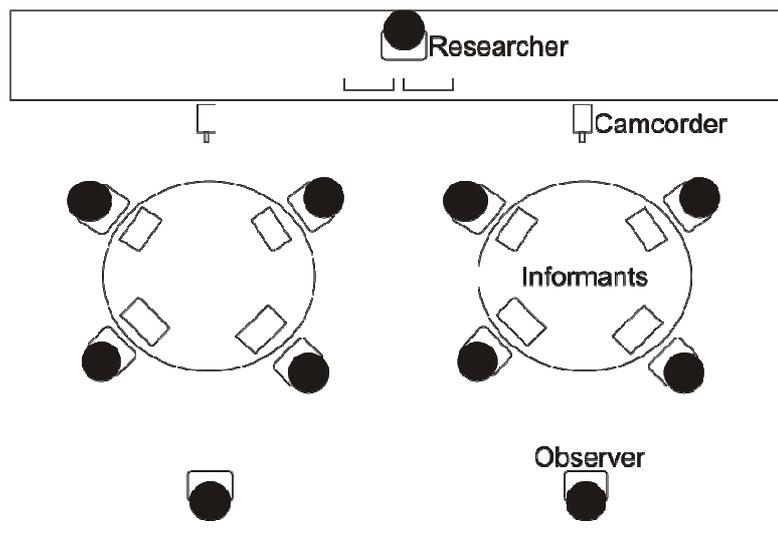
cooperative agreement. Besides, Writeboard is an open source software. After the last meeting, each group was asked about the process of collaborative writing and their perception of the co-working.

c. Post observation; in this stage, there would be a cross check to the result of the observation, confirming talk transcript and validity. This stage is also a research evaluation.

4. Findings

Observation was done in a closed room; however the room was not soundproof. Observation was done in two meetings which had been approved before by each group of informants. The group was named group A and B. All informants had known each other before, even some of them have had collaborative experience before, and so it would not need further explanation. The composition and position can be seen in Figure1. Each group sat on the same table. Their activities were observed by an observer for each group and recorded by camcorders. The researcher position was in the next room, connected with couple of computer screens which showed the groups CMC conversation. The arrangements of this position were determined by the available facility in the laboratory where the researcher did the research. The researcher did not use certain software to observe and analyze data, everything was done manually.

Figure 1. The observational condition



Before the observation, the informants were asked about their internet adoption, the use of social software and their experience in collaborative writing. Most informants can access internet 5 – 20 hours per week. Only one informant can access internet more than 50 hours per week. Informants activities when accessing the internet were watching, MP3 downloading and chatting with friends. Two informants have personal blog and only one informant likes to play online games, such as Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG). All informants use SNS, IRC and Wikis as social software types. One informant who had access to internet up to 1 Mbps is uses of Blogs, MMORPG, social bookmarking and virtual world. All informants also experienced in collaborative writing at least two times since they were registered as undergraduate students. Time period needed by the informants to do the collaborative writing was between 1 – 3 weeks, all of them were part of informants' task in their study.

At the first meeting, the two groups started their writing idea in a good way. Group B was attended by its entire member, but group A only two members attended early, the two others came half an hour later. First problem which appeared was the weak Wi Fi connection because the laboratory was far from the internet router. Group B agreed to use Facebook application in their cell phone to have some chats. While they wrote the writing, they kept trying to be connected with in the internet. Because of the late members; group A was a little bit left behind comparing with group B in doing the writing. The brainstorming process went well. Internal group conversation was dominated by discussion of how to use the Writeboard application and the references they would use in writing. The researcher highlighted that the conversation in both group were dominated by two members, while two other on responded the conversation without any significant contribution to the writing. The surrounding factors as sounds and the observer position dominated the informant and make the informants works distracted.

The second meeting was held a week later with the same condition. Nevertheless, group A was not attended by its entire member again, but those who not attended the meeting were online in somewhere else outside the campus. In the early meeting, group B had finished their essay draft and begin with editing process. While, group A still working with their draft. The condition surround the room was intruded and affected informants working speed. This external factor was highlighted. Both group members seemed that they had a look to the other group. The interesting part was, internet mobile was used more by two groups than the first meeting. They use it if the Wi Fi connection hangs or they need faster access to download the Wikipedia Indonesia pages. Conversation which recommended or contributed to the article was still dominated by 1-2 informants, while the others only responded it with agreement words or with emoticons such as smile (☺) or :D.

After the second meeting, each group was interviewed. The purpose was to look up group understanding, and groups' perception to each member contribution. Group A complaint about the absence of the members, but not the inequality contribution given by the members. Informants who gave a little contribution admitted about their ignorance about Cyberculture which affected their will to say their opinion. According to them, the most important part was that the group could finish the task on time. They attempted to cohesive by keep the good communication among them. Conversely, group B did not accept if there was any member who did not contribute directly to the article. Even though, they admitted the tolerance to each other and negotiation role from each member to contribute to their writing as the important part. All groups said they did not choose a chief for the groups. They also said that the role was played by each member. In the end of the meeting, both group collected their essay according to the given task.

I noted some observed external factors that affected collaborative writing work. The factors were divided in three parts, which are the environment factor; non verbal factor and personal behaviors factor (see Table1.). The explanation has been validated by the informants and observers. External factors complemented the internal factors effect such as cohesivity feeling which was kept by the member so the working process and communication still had done well. Preferences and each informant's style in their previous collaborative writing also affected the working speed and ideas transaction among them. There was no conflict appeared, both informants' conversation and gestures. Group and personal awareness and short meetings made informants focused more to their computers screen. Social software used beside the Writeboard, are Social Networking Sites (Facebook) and its IRC facility, Blogs, Wikis, and Instant Messaging (IM), like Yahoo Messenger.

Tabel 1. The external factors observed.

Factor	Condition/Activity	Effect
Environment	Room temperature	Not concentrated
	Noise, phone and sms ringtone	Not concentrated, distracted
Personal behaviors	Change sitting position	Uncomfortable
	Moving legs/restless leg	The informants were confused or unsure in what they were doing
	whistling	More relax
	Head scratching/face wiping	Distraction from computer screen
	Looking to the other group	Distraction from computer screen, making the informants more relax
Non verbal	Using emoticon such as ☺ and :D	Verbal expression substituting in conversation
	Showing handphone to other member.	Strengthening opinion
	Claping	Opinion agreement.

5. Discussions

Experience and background influenced informants, both in group discussion and technology used in collaborative writing. If William (2001) said that culture is an expression, then the statement was approved in this research. Idea and meaning transaction in writing is a common thing, but sometimes we are unaware that there is a reception every time we agree on something, and it is vice versa. If the reception itself is a concrete thing such as norms and values in society, then collaborative writing is not so different with society development itself. In a group, communication model shown by the informants is a daily activity by most undergraduate students in Indonesia. Well, not every student has personal laptop but they choose to use internet café (Wahid, 2007). Facebook chats, Yahoo Messenger and mobile internet use is not a difficult access for them if compares to Wi Fi connection.

There are some similarities in what is pointed by Charlesworth (2008) about Indonesian student typical. Such as their appreciation to time, even it did not affect the group working. For them, tolerance is a common thing as long as the group members aware of the task that must be finished. Nevertheless, the next question to be address is how are we going to accommodate this tolerance in ICT, more over in collaborative writing technology? As Young (2008) pinpointed that it is important to involve culture element in developing ICT. Informants who have known each other cause the fading of impersonation communication (Tidwell and Walther, 2002) which affects directly to the writing. Different result may be found on different pre-setting condition. The use of emoticon as a non verbal expression has been understandable by the informants.

Even though the final quality of the given tasks is not part of the research, I assured you that essay conditions that must be done by the informants were fulfilled, such as writing structure, quotation and references were appropriate to the scientific writing. Process speed in doing the task was different one group to another. As showed in Godwin, Richardson and Thorpe (2008) research about the quality of student's experiences in collaborative writing. Simultaneous conversation can develop their awareness and the most important is to keep the group stays cohesively. The united feeling makes writing process can be finished excellently. The informants agree to their group opinion more than their personal opinion about their working group distribution. In validating data, I repeat the questions I have asked before through an individual questionnaire. Some informants thought that there was conflict among

them, but they did not want others know about it. The most important of all is they finished their tasks right on time.

This research does support Lowry, Curtis and Lowry (2004) opinion about collaborative technology must be accommodating more than just email. I recommend two communication features from this research, mobile internet use trend and collaborative writing application. Finally, collaborative writing is more than measuring final result. If we want our students to understand the material that we delivered in class and in the same time they get positive experience in interacting, then writing activity is more than a typing activity. Culture identification and reception, both in between group and internal group is a cultivation of a social perspective where the students exist. The relationship showed assimilation which in the end will establish new opinion, and hopefully, a new culture.

6. Conclusion

If basically writing is a human expression activity in a written text and culture is human view expression, then writing is culture. The benefits of collaborative writing have been approved to be important for students' learning process. In addition, the development of social software as alternative technologies for collaborative writing feels it still needs deeper research. This research explores how some Indonesian undergraduate students do a collaborative writing by using social software. Important findings in this research are:

1. Group cohesivity is important in maintaining the communication in the group. Group agreement is also an important point for the informants to keep the group working on its track. Informants attempted to avoid uncertainty in working condition with a group of casual conversation.

2. External factors such as environment affect the writing condition qualitatively and collaboration within group. As for personal behaviors and non-verbal factors noted from the informant is influenced more by the informant resistance to the group working speed.

3. Regards to the collaborative writing technology, an observation feature that enables the group in keeping the group awareness and supports is necessary. Group awareness has direct relation with group motivation to finish the task given.

4. Informants' preferences and backgrounds contributed to the behavior of social software use in working collaborative writing.

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