

Writing Together: Storming to Success

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Writing language training materials is challenging. Writing language training materials with someone else is a different kind of challenge and writing materials with a group of people poses a different kind of challenge again. When we wrote *Develop EAP: A Sustainable Academic Skills Course* in 2017, we built a framework to support students through a collaborative essay writing assignment and it encouraged us to reflect on how we work and what it is like to develop materials with other people. Based on our experiences in various materials development teams across different contexts, there are some steps or strategies recommended in this paper to help lead to a successful collaboration, where the sum of the parts is greater than anything an individual could achieve alone. The particular focus is on advice for the earliest stage of team development, the storming stage, which sets the course for the whole materials development project.

Perhaps the first thing to stress is that materials development is always, arguably, a collaboration - a collaboration between the materials developer, the training context and students and the teacher who operationalises the materials. As argued by Harwood (2005) and demonstrated in Bolster (2015), materials are not a fixed script. They are rarely used as designed by the materials developer but rather undergo a process of adaptation by the teacher. Materials development is an ongoing, fluid process and the materials developer plays an important role, but a role as part of a larger whole. Materials development does not stop when the materials developer stops writing, it continues through every time the materials are used.

Some materials development collaborations we have worked on together and with others include:

- working with technical trainers in Azerbaijan to develop English language courses to support engineers in the petrochemical industry.
- working with academics to produce support courses for specific cohorts of EMI (English-medium instruction) university students in China.
- working with other EAP tutors to develop reading and writing courses, lectures, academic skill and employability workshops in China.
- developing a blended EAP course in Macau as part of a curriculum working group.
- developing online training materials for IELTS with experienced examiners.
- developing training materials for Saudi educators in a project in Finland with four other ELT tutors in three different institutions and cities, with input from content specialists.

Later in this paper we will be discussing the importance of collaborators developing a shared understanding of terminology at the outset of a project and so too is it important at the start of this paper to define what we mean by 'collaboration'. Storch (2013) articulates the difference between 'cooperation' and 'collaboration' in relation to L2 writing. Cooperation is a process where students work together to a common goal but may have distinct roles and responsibilities. Collaboration describes a closer working relationship where there is a shared responsibility and ownership throughout the process. In *Develop EAP* we draw the analogy between three chefs preparing a three-course menu. In the cooperative kitchen, each chef takes responsibility for one course and prepares it by themselves. In the collaborative kitchen, the chefs discuss the menu and work together on each of the dishes. Applying this to materials development, during a MaWSIG (Materials Writing Special Interest Group) workshop we attended at an IATEFL conference, there was a lot of discussion about working with publishers and working to their brief. Some of the anecdotes shared showed that writers on a project may be working to the same brief but are writing very independently of each other, illustrative of cooperation, each writer serving up their own dish with little or no contact with the other writers on the team. The focus of this paper is collaboration, which happens in language training organisations and projects around the world when teachers and materials developers are working together, developing new course materials or revising old ones.

The rationale for developing a framework for student collaborative writing in *Develop EAP* was the potential of additional learning gains from the collaborative process. Collaborative writing has been shown to improve the quality of writing, both in terms of ideas (Mulligan & Garofalo, 2011; Talib & Cheung, 2017) and

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language accuracy and complexity (Shehadeh, 2011; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Aside from benefits for writing, group writing helps foster collaboration skills (Thomas, 2016; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) which are invaluable in the modern world. However, collaboration is a complex issue and does not just happen. Teacher support is needed (Zheng & Warschauer, 2017) and so we developed a framework which made use of a variety of e-tools and online collaborative spaces to support students through the different stages of the essay writing process - brainstorming, outlining, drafting, editing and proofreading (Levrai & Bolster, in press). The resulting multi-modal, multi-platform framework is reflective of how modern teams work and how modern materials developers may work.

The benefits for students when writing collaboratively are also benefits for materials developers, especially in terms of generating better ideas. Different developers have diverse approaches or may favour different methods. While this could potentially lead to confusion in the training materials, there is space for more than one approach to language training and diverse views should not be seen as a source of disagreement but as opportunities for discussion. Schumann reflected in reference to the opposing theories of Krashen (that language acquisition is an unconscious act) and McLaughlin (that language learning is a conscious one) that, 'Neither position is correct; they are simply alternate representations of reality' (Schumann as cited in Jordan, 2004, p.101). While Jordan then goes on to argue that both theories cannot be correct, we would hold that both can be, at different times, for different learners, for different language points.

Oxford and Anderson argue that materials have to cater to the varieties of ways that students learn (in Tomlinson, 2007) and, following from this, different learners will benefit from different approaches, so competing approaches can be simultaneously valid and integrated into the same materials. Consider two materials developers, one preferring an inductive approach to grammar teaching and the other a deductive approach. These approaches could be interwoven through a course, providing variation and choice for both teachers and learners. As argued by Levrai (2013), training materials need to offer choice to expand teachers' practices and provide flexibility. Materials developers working in collaboration and considering multiple perspectives is one means to achieve this.

Coursebooks have been criticised for being methodologically unsound and for failing to embrace the implications of the most up-to-date research (Harwood, 2005, Saraceni, 2007). Given that a materials developer should bring together expertise of researchers and classroom practitioners (Swales, cited in Harwood, 2005), collaboration can be an excellent way to draw on different proficiencies and competencies. As an individual, it can be daunting to

keep up with the latest research and stay active in the classroom (both in terms of teaching and observing others teach) and seeing how materials are utilised and the students' response to them. Bringing together a team with disparate but complementary skills and individuals with different experiences enriches the materials development process. Expanding the collaboration beyond language experts to content experts can result in more effective training materials.

As a practical illustration, when we write materials we favour 'backward design' (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), a three-step process of

- identifying desired results
- developing the assessment tools to evaluate the learning of the desired results
- writing the course materials to help students attain the results.

In the vital first step, we discuss what we are aiming for, who the materials are for and what we want them to achieve. Both our courses, *Academic Presenting & Presentations* (2015a) and *Develop EAP* (2017), were developed after researching what particular skills and competencies students would need in their degree studies. Talking to content lecturers about their expectations and looking at the materials and activities students would need to do as part of their degree studies helped focus the language training materials we developed. To demonstrate the way we work (as tried and tested in developing the above courses), once we have a clear conception of the aims of the course/materials, one of us will start to develop something and when it is in a rough draft, the other one will take a look and start working it into shape. Materials usually pass between us a few times as we each take a run through them, tweaking activities or adding new ones. This process has become much more fluid thanks to online word processors, such as Google Docs, which means that texts no longer have to be emailed or stored on drives with ever-increasing complex names to indicate which version it is. Writing collaborators can now edit a document online (a)synchronously and without worrying about saving it every few minutes. Throughout the process we seek each other's perspectives, getting feedback from other teachers when possible, and by the end it is almost impossible to point to a specific set of materials and claim individual ownership. However, it is clear to see how ideas and materials were strengthened through the process.

After collaborating on developing different training materials for so long, we work together smoothly, although no materials development is without its tensions. Reflecting on our experiences in various writing teams, we have drawn up some suggestions for helping a materials development collaboration run successfully, be it collaborating face-to-face, online,

with ELT colleagues and/or content experts. At the outset of any collaboration it is essential to spend time moving through what Tuckman identified as the 'storming' and 'norming' phases of team development (Bonebright, 2010). Even if you know someone well as a teacher or a colleague, you need to spend time discovering who they are as a materials developer and how you can best work together. In the same way student collaborative teams benefit from team-building activities in the storming stage (Burns, 2016) so too do materials development teams. Outlined below are various strategies that can help early stage materials development teams work together effectively.

Test the technology

There are a range of tools available to facilitate online collaboration, allowing people who would never otherwise meet to work together in a shared online space or acting as an active workspace to complement face-to-face meetings. The options are growing, with Google Docs and Microsoft Office 365 being joined by other collaborative tools like Dropbox Paper, Ether Pad, Zoho or Thinkfree. Files can be shared in an increasingly wide range of spaces, including free platforms like Mediafire, Hightail, Box and Amazon Drive in addition to the better-known Google Drive, Dropbox and OneDrive. However, before starting a project it is recommended to find which tools collaborators use most often, are most familiar with and, crucially, can all access. Technical hitches at the beginning can throw off the entire collaboration as people can move out of sync on the project.

Establish communication channels

As there are a wide range of collaborative tools available there are even more ways to communicate. Is the project going to have a Whatsapp group, a Trello board, Skype meetings, Adobe Connect meetings, a Slack workspace, a Twitter group or a Flock channel? Will selected channels of communication have particular uses? As well as how you are going to communicate, it is also important to establish early on when you are going to communicate.

Your time is not your own

Working with others takes longer than working alone and it usually takes even longer than you anticipate. If you need the pressure of the deadline to get the creative juices going, your team needs to know that and plan accordingly. When you have deadlines in a collaborative group, try to complete what you have to do and leave enough time for peer review and additional changes. Not everything can be anticipated but some discussion about expectations can greatly help reduce issues later. What is your expected turnaround time for

feedback and what form should that feedback take? Our preference is to provide feedback directly in the materials by leaving comments, notes and questions. In word processing documents we also use 'track changes' if we edit something so any changes can be reviewed and approved. However, it is important that any written feedback is consolidated with a discussion about the materials as well. It is also worth remembering the importance of positive feedback – if something works really well, say so.

Develop a shared language

Terminology can be a slippery thing. When we were working on a curriculum review with a group of colleagues this came into sharp relief. During a lengthy discussion of assessment types, it eventually became clear that when the group was discussing 'rubrics' we were talking about very different things. For some, 'rubrics' were the assignment instructions for students whereas for others they were the assessment grading criteria. Do not assume your colleague understands the same thing from the same term and spend the time to develop a shared understanding. For example, decide if you are going to talk about 'objectives' or 'outcomes', know why and be consistent.

Conduct a critique

A good way to understand someone's approach to materials is to see their critique of a set of materials. Tomlinson (2007) advocates a criteria-driven approach to materials evaluation, which involves developing criteria at different levels, such as

- universal criteria, which reflect your general beliefs about materials e.g. 'Do the materials provide clearly stated aims?'
- content-specific criteria, which focus on the particular requirements of the content e.g. 'Reading texts demonstrate citing from sources.'
- local criteria, which are relevant to a particular training context e.g. 'Activities support student collaboration.'

When we were developing *Academic Presenting & Presentations* (2015a), we had the opportunity to interview faculty lecturers about their expectations of student oral presentations which enabled us to develop criteria. This meant that when considering potential content, we could ensure it would fit with the expectations lecturers had for their students and so genuinely help students deliver more academic sound and appropriate presentations. For a full review of the development of the course and criteria used, see Levrai & Bolster (2015b).

While a criteria-driven approach encourages an

objective and rational evaluation of material, in the first instance it would be advisable to conduct an impressionistic evaluation. Look at the materials separately and then discuss them together. This can throw light on different aspects of materials that interest you and help you understand points of congruence and of differentiation in your attitude to materials. Following this impressionistic evaluation, developing criteria together as Tomlinson suggests, is an excellent way to build a shared vision of what you want in the materials you are developing. Developing universal (general criteria for all training materials), content-specific (criteria specific to the particular materials being developed) and local criteria (criteria context specific for a particular learning situation and set of learners) also gives you a tool to fall back on if/when you reach a disagreement about some materials later in the process, as you can go back to the criteria and see how well they fit with your original shared conception of the course.

Write something together

Early in the collaboration process it is important to write something together. This is the best way to see how your individual approaches fit together and can best complement each other. It does not have to be something connected to the project you are working on as the purpose is not to see what you come out with in terms of materials but rather how you develop them. An easy way to generate a target for some 'trial materials' is to develop a table similar to the one below. Randomly choose one item from each column and have a tight timeframe to develop a relevant lesson.

Content	Skill	Focus	Mode
Business	Integrated	Word formation	Paper-based
Environment	Speaking	Conditionals	Blended
Relationships	Reading	Expressing ideas	Digital
Culture	Writing	Developing autonomy	
	Listening		

Another useful materials development challenge is taking an input (a recent news article, an interesting photo, a piece of music), developing as many different activities possible connected to it and then whittling those down to the most effective materials. Better still, take two separate inputs, generate as many activities as possible and then determine which activities could be used together as a purposeful lesson with a concrete learning aim for a specific set of learners. The process of selecting and eliminating activities is very enlightening and good practice for later in the materials development

project when something you have put work into has to be dropped as it is not considered fit for this particular purpose or an alternative is better.

Drop the ego

One of the hardest aspects of collaborating is giving up ownership and control of ideas. It can be a challenge to put effort and time into a piece of material and have someone else change and amend it. This is where the clear communication channels and initial agreement on the scope and focus of the materials becomes invaluable. No materials are perfect and there is always space for a constructively critical voice. Through dialogue and discussion materials are strengthened. Another useful strategy at the start of a collaboration would be to critique materials written by each member of the teaching team, including a self-critique. Discussing what you have written before, what you would change, and listening to feedback from others can set the scene for later discussions about materials you develop together.

Conclusion

The early stages of a collaboration are vital. It is possible to overcome a rocky start but it is preferable to get an understanding of who you are working with and how you can work together effectively from the beginning. The activities and suggestions in this paper are means and methods to try and establish positive working patterns and clear expectations during the storming stage of team development. Through collaboration with others, we can develop better training materials and make better contributions to our communities of teachers and students.

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