

Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal: Students' Views, Challenges, Coping Strategies, and Takeaways

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Abstract: The 'new normal' setup of education posed challenges on courses requiring learners' collaboration. Despite the proven advantages of collaborative writing, several challenges still confront the learners which may affect the quality of their output. Collaboration per se is already a challenge for learners in face-to-face classes, more so in online distance learning. Thus, this study explored the views, challenges, coping strategies, and takeaways of senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the 'new normal.' Thirty (30) reflective essays written by senior high school students from three (3) academic strands, namely Humanities and Social Sciences, General Academic, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics were analysed. Ten (10) sample essays from each strand were selected through Critical Case Sampling. Findings revealed that students view collaborative research writing in general as easy, while some see it as difficult. The students met challenges in research technicalities, communication, and collaboration. Varied coping strategies were identified, such as having a positive mindset, being patient, considerate and determined, seeking help from others, maintaining proper communication and collaboration, seeking spiritual guidance, and taking a break. Ultimately, the takeaways of the students were not limited to academics or cognitive aspects—they were also able to gain important values.

Keywords: collaborative writing, academic writing, senior high school, new normal.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis: it is affecting societies and economies at their core (United Nations, 2020). Based on the data of the World Health Organization (WHO), as of April 2021, there have been 150,220,310 confirmed cases of Covid-19, including 3,158,792 deaths. This phenomenon constituted the new normal in the way people live, especially in the field of education. As defined by the Department of Health (2021, p. 6), "The new normal is characterized by volatility and uncertainty. Thus, the government must implement interventions that will increase the confidence of society to optimise economic activities in the presence of Covid-19, support the population groups that are most affected, and deliver existing programs through efficient and effective approaches in light of the new normal."

The efforts to mitigate the threats of Covid-19 became detrimental in almost all sectors and industries including public health, food systems (World Health Organization, 2020), the pharmaceuticals industry, the solar power sector, tourism, and the information and electronics



industry (Haleem, et al., 2020). The Education sector was no exception. As reported by the United Nations (2020), the pandemic affected around 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries across continents, and was considered as the most severe cessation of education systems in history. Closures of schools and other learning facilities affected 94% of the world's student population. In the Philippines, school closures afflicted more than 28 million learners (UNESCO, 2020). The Department of Education (DepEd) implemented "blended learning" programmes, involving online classes, printed materials and lessons broadcast on television (DepEd TV) and social media to continue educating students despite the lockdown. Private schools, and higher education institutions also adopted varied forms of distance learning modalities. As emphasised by the Department of Health (2021, p. 8), during the 'new normal':

Digital technology and e-commerce will be used more extensively in order to maintain physical distance. Mobility of individuals and social gatherings have been limited by community quarantines, travel restrictions, and minimum public health standards. Digital technology has made processes of communication easier in the new normal. Social media and mobile technology can also make information dissemination and data collection more efficient, as long as it is used appropriately and within the bounds of data privacy.

The new normal setup of education, which is highly reliant on online and distance learning, posed challenges especially in subjects or courses that require intensive collaboration among learners. In the Philippine Basic Education Curriculum, Grade 12 senior high school (SHS), students are required to accomplish a full-blown research paper in their Inquiries, Investigations, and Immersion class. Research, as a form of academic writing, follows strict processes, rules, and conventions. Given its complexity, Roxas (2020) argued that academic writing at advanced levels is challenging and difficult, more so with SHS students. Thus, teachers utilised various strategies to address the difficulties relative to the demanding and laborious nature of research writing. For instance, research outputs in senior high school are most commonly done collaboratively. Collaborative writing further augments the knowledge bases of the learners as they tap into their peers' writing skills (Swain & Lapkin, 2001). In consonance, Torres (2020) emphasised that collaborative academic writing is beneficial for students as they can gain insights from their peers, which somehow lessens the burden of accomplishing the specific task. Storch (2011) suggested that collaborative writing can combine the merits of learner-to-learner interaction with the processes of writing, such as "testing hypotheses, receiving and noticing feedback, and focusing on accuracy" (p. 276). Montero, (2005) also averred that collaborative writing is a highly motivating learning experience for students, as well as a creative pedagogical tool for teachers. Writing collaboratively also encourages individual participation, increases self-confidence, and, most importantly, improves productivity. In other words, collaborative writing enables the generating and solidifying of shared knowledge (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012) as learners craft their writing pieces in cooperation with other students (Kormos et al., 2014; Storch, 2011). However, despite the cited advantages, several challenges still confront learners, which may affect the quality of their output, such as working with group members who are uncooperative or those with conflicting personalities (Torres, 2020). It can be noted that collaboration per se is already a challenge for the learners in face-to-face classes but more so in the context of online distance learning, which is a relatively new practice. Additionally, Tutty and Klein (2008) noted that students who were in face-to-face collaboration found it easier to share information than in the virtual

collaboration, Therefore, this study aimed at exploring the views, challenges, and takeaways of senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the context of the 'new normal.'

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the senior high school students' experiences in collaborative research writing in the 'new normal.' Specifically, it tries to answer the following questions:

1. What are the views of senior high school students toward collaborative research writing in the new normal?
2. What are the challenges met by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?
3. How did the senior high school students cope with the challenges in collaborative research writing in the new normal?
4. What are the important takeaways gained by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

Research Paradigm

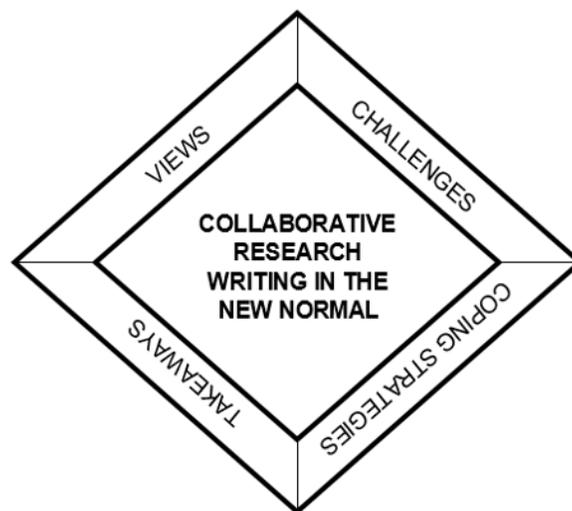


Figure 1: The paradigm of the study presenting the concepts explored.

The above figure shows the different concepts explored in the present study, which constitute the entirety of students' experiences in collaborative research writing in the new normal. The participants' experiences were explored in the context of four (4) aspects, which were:

1. The views on collaborative research writing in the new normal, which shed light on how senior high school students perceived collaborative writing based on their experiences of completing a research paper in the Covid-19 pandemic era;
2. The challenges in collaborative research writing, which described the hurdles and difficulties faced by the participants as they conducted their collaborative research in the new normal;
3. The coping strategies, which is imperative to discuss after identifying the challenges,

in order to understand how the participants managed the hurdles and difficulties they encountered in collaboratively accomplishing their researches in the new normal; and

4. The takeaways, which provide us with the salient learning gained by the participants as they experienced collaborative research writing in the new normal.

By looking into the aforementioned aspects, the present study provides a clear picture of how the participants perceived the totality of their research writing experiences. These concepts served as the basis for a deductive approach in data analysis, where coding and theme development were directed by existing concepts or ideas.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative research employed Content Analysis (CA) as a research design. As defined by Bryman (2016) CA is the study of documents and communication artefacts, which might be texts of various formats, pictures, audio, or video. This study focused on written reflective essays as a source of data.

Corpus of the Study

The study analysed thirty (30) reflective essays written by senior high school students from three (3) academic strands, namely Humanities and Social Sciences, General Academic, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

The following questions were given to the students as a prompt for writing the reflective essays:

1. How would you describe your experience in completing a collaborative research project in the New Normal setup (Online Distance Learning)?
2. What are the most important things or concepts that you have learned in PR2 and III? Why do you consider them important?
3. What are the challenges that you have met throughout the completion of your research project (from planning to completion of the final paper)?
4. How did you cope with those challenges that you have met? Explain specific instances/strategies.

Ten (10) sample essays from each of the three (3) strands were selected through Critical Case Sampling which is the process of using a small number of important cases that are likely to "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2001, p. 236).

The following considerations were observed in critically selecting the sample essays:

1. Number of words/lengths of the essays.
2. Completeness/adherence to the prompt.

3. Overall quality of the reflective essays.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which involves the process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development and revision. Moreover, a deductive approach was utilised where coding and theme development are directed by existing concepts or ideas. In the case of the present study, the themes and sub-themes were extracted and guided by the four elements elucidated in the research paradigm. To find the accuracy and validity of the findings, the four rudiments of methodological rigour, which are transferability, conformability, dependability, and credibility, were observed (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Transferability was exhibited as the students shared their experiences in collaborative research writing in the new normal through reflective essays, which were then translated into meaningful themes and sub-themes. The deductive approach to thematic analysis guided by the research paradigm established conformability of the findings. To ensure dependability, intercoder reliability was observed in extracting themes and sub-themes from the sample reflective essays. To guarantee credibility, member checking through an online focus group discussion (FGD) was also performed to confirm the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the analysis. Additionally, ideas or excerpts from the sample reflective essays expressed in Filipino were translated into English.

Ethical Considerations

The author sought permission from the participants prior to the conduct of the study, explaining the purpose, procedures, and possible utilisation of their reflective essays. The researcher kept the utmost confidentiality and anonymity with regard to the sample reflective essays' authors. The results do not necessarily reflect the overall quality of the teaching learning-process and the delivery of instruction offered by the university.

Findings and Discussion

What are the views of senior high school students toward collaborative research writing in the new normal?

Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal is Difficult

It was revealed that the new normal education setup made collaborative research writing more difficult for the participants. The participants did not find the online modality of learning efficient and engaging compared to face-to-face, due to the lack of physical interaction with their peers:

I think doing the research in this kind of crisis is difficult. I did not find it engaging and I cannot feel the thrill upon finishing it. It is more like I am obliged to do it for the sake of graduating. This whole Online Distance Learning is not really efficient for me unlike being with my friends, classmates, and teacher. I feel more tired than usual. (Reflection #24)

Furthermore, the participants experienced emotional and physical challenges, such as breakdowns, frustration, and tiredness or exhaustion caused by the online learning set up:

My experience in this research project was like a roller coaster ride. It was difficult for us to complete the paper, especially since we are in an online setup. I had a lot of breakdowns in the past two semesters. (Reflection #2)

The frustration came to me when I found out that we are still required to conduct a study despite the unusual and uncomfortable situation. I must admit that I once found it extremely disheartening, and just the thought of it made me feel countless things that words such as 'worried', 'intimidated', or 'alarmed' cannot precisely describe. (Reflection #11)

There's also a time when you'll feel exhausted because of the time that you're exposed to the gadgets and all your schoolwork takes place online. It can break you physically and it will break you more mentally. (Reflection #14)

This finding corroborates with the studies of Baticulon et al. (2020); Cao et al. (2020); Rajkumar (2020); Tandon (2020) and Copeland et al. (2021); where it was pointed out that the pandemic has given students uncertainty, stress, and anxiety. Juggling between academic tasks while in a pandemic was definitely a challenge, and may be detrimental to their academic performance.

Another participant also shared that the online class was really different from what they were used to and was definitely a new experience for them:

Online learning is a new experience for all students. I had a hard time adjusting because I lost the courage to learn and to attend classes because it just felt different compared to face-to-face classes. I had a hard time getting up in the morning and attending my 8:00 am class. (Reflection #27)

The participants also shared that there were various adjustments they had to make to cope with the new education setup, specifically online distance learning. It was revealed that the participants experienced pressure in accomplishing what was expected of them, which may have included performing well when facing the challenging times brought about by the pandemic:

I wouldn't say it was depressing, but I wasn't happy either. The adjustments we made mixed with the pressure of meeting the expectations as a student was not fun at all. As someone who is not "techy", I find it really hard to keep up with other students. (Reflection #19)

The participants also pointed out that these adjustments may not only be applicable to the students but also to the teachers:

The new normal setup was indeed a new experience for everyone not just us students but as well as teachers so we really had to adjust with each other and find a compromise to still effectively learn and deliver quality education. (Reflection #13)

Kerres, (2020) and Wang et al. (2020) supported this idea and claimed that teachers also had challenges in operating the system and in facilitating online learning.

Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal is Easy

On the other hand, some of the participants were able to see the positive side of the situation. It was averred that the online learning setup made the research process and tasks easier to conduct. This was due to the numerous technological tools and platforms that they could take advantage of:

It was much easier through the use of technology. It feels weird n some sort of ways or feelings that I tend to get all the time considering that this is a major subject to be taken seriously and not to be underestimated. (Reflection #30)

The said findings were consistent with the study of Ng (2012); Roblek et al. (2019) and Barrot et al. (2021), which divulged that the students encountered the least difficulties in technological literacy and competency as they belong to Generation Z, also known as digital natives.

Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal is Challenging but Fulfilling

It was also articulated that although the new normal education setup was challenging, the students were still able to learn many things. Moreover, they ended up feeling fulfilled after they accomplished all the requirements, especially their collaborative research output:

For me, it is indeed challenging and brings worries and fulfillment. Challenging because I never experienced conducting and finishing any research until I reached this group research study. It is fulfilling for the reason that we all know that we did our best together with my groupmates to finish our paper works. (Reflection #17)

I had many new experiences that gave me new knowledge since this was only my first time conducting research. It's not easy because you will have difficulties communicating with one another... and some things are easier to discuss in person. But I can say that even though we're facing a pandemic, I still got an opportunity to learn and experience writing a research paper. (Reflection #3)

This experience was memorable, meaningful, significant, helpful, and beneficial. It helped me to overcome many things, to be more responsible, more productive, stronger, and more confident. (Reflection #20)

What are the challenges encountered by senior high school students in collaborative research writing in the new normal?

Challenges Relative to Research Technicalities

Looking into the challenges encountered by the participants, research technicalities were one of the major concerns. They encountered difficulties in formulating a research topic and title. This was due to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic. For instance, in the STEM strand, experimental research topics were somehow challenging to conduct because access to laboratories was not possible:

First of all, we faced challenges in thinking of topics related to our strand (STEM). Especially since we were encouraged to conduct experimental studies, and we cannot really go out of our houses due to the pandemic. (Reflection #10)

Data collection was another issue, since the participants encountered difficulties in looking for respondents or participants, as well as administering research instruments, and performing experiments. Since the government implemented lockdown and physical distancing protocols, the participants were restricted to conduct their study at home. This made doing the data collection collaboratively impossible, thus causing difficulties and challenges:

The challenges we encountered as a group came mostly from the data gathering procedure... not all students tend to respond or answer the given surveys from researchers which causes insufficient data... (Reflection #30)

Interviewing virtually has also been one of our challenges while doing our research project. I think it became a hurdle for us because some people don't really answer the interview questions that we gave to them. Some say that they'll answer it later but do not really do so. (Reflection #25)

It is definitely risky for us to get the samples during the pandemic, but we have to take it for the sake of the research. (Reflection #28)

Numerous studies, such as those of Barrot et al. (2021), Day et al. (2021), and Kapasia et al. (2020) confirmed the detrimental effects of Covid-19 restrictions on students' learning experiences.

Challenges Relative to Communication and Collaboration Among Group Members

Another very prevalent problem that was revealed based on the experiences of the participants was inefficient communication and collaboration due to unresponsive or uncooperative group members. Efficient communication is one of the important factors that makes collaboration successful:

The challenges that we encountered throughout the completion of this research was probably the/those uncooperative members, as at first, they will ask for what they can help to accomplish the task and will ask so many questions regarding it, but at the end of the day, they did not make it, and did not know how to make it. (Reflection #17)

I think the biggest challenge was my group mates. I would constantly send messages to our group chats so we can talk about the things that we need to accomplish, but they rarely reply. I would distribute the tasks among my group members, but they do not accomplish the task on time. (Reflection #22)

Rotas and Cahapay (2020) and Sarvestani et al. (2020) affirmed that students encountered difficulties in communicating with their classmates, especially in group activities.

There were also group members who could not fully participate due to internet connectivity problems and lack of devices and other resources:

To be honest I find completing a collaborative research project quite a challenge and somewhat stressful and since this is collaborative, communication with other members is essential and not all members communicate effectively due to various reasons such as having a problem with internet connections and some are not always available during collaboration and due to this not all members contribute. (Reflection #8)

To be honest, we always do things at the last minute due to lack of communication and initiative... I understand that there are times that each member may encounter problems on their end, internet connection or loss of electricity for example... (Reflection #2)

The same finding can be gleaned from the study of Belgica et al. (2020) and Barrot et al. (2021) where it was reported that internet connectivity and the poor utility of tools were some of the major factors that caused difficulties in online learning.

How did the Senior High School Students Cope with the Challenges in Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal?

The student researchers utilised varied strategies to cope with the identified challenges. Having a positive mindset, being patient, considerate, and determined definitely helped the participants stay grounded on their goals. During challenging times like the pandemic, these values really helped in coping with the situation:

Being patient and considerate towards my other group mates. I didn't really know what they were going through, especially in this situation. (Reflection #2)

Patience, perseverance, and determination are really needed in order to finish the task because in the end, you would realize that it is really rewarding to accomplish a forty-page paper. (Reflection #3)

My strategy to overcome all the challenges and problems in making our research paper is to be strong and competitive. If I will not be strong, it may hinder the completion of our paper. Being competitive does not mean looking into others as competitors, but pushing yourself to go beyond the limits. (Reflection #9)

Seeking help from others, such as their peers, and teachers also aided the students in addressing problems relative to research technicalities:

Throughout the whole school year, I am able to cope with the challenges by asking for help from other people such as our Grade 12 adviser who gives our group very good advice in creating our paper. (Reflection #8)

Moreover, the students still did their best in maintaining proper communication and collaboration despite uncooperative group members. Some of them believed that efficient communication and collaboration are key to producing a quality research project:

It all boils down to proper communication. We reached out, and she also complied as well. And we took it from there. We made sure that each one of us is contributing equally and fairly. We make sure to listen and consider all ideas and thoughts from our group members before we proceed to the next step. (Reflection #13)

Communication, collaboration with your group members, and trusting yourself are the keys to being able to come up with a quality collaborative research project may it be in the New Normal setup or face-to-face classes. (Reflection #3)

Good communication is really helpful within your group since all of you are needed to work together to finish the paper. Accepting others' opinions and ideas on how to achieve the group's goals is a key to fully understanding each other's views. (Reflection #5)

Interestingly, the students did not forget to seek spiritual guidance despite the hardships:

We made it a habit to pray before and after every meeting to ask for the Lord's guidance since we know that it is only through Him that we can execute our tasks properly. (Reflection #12)

Another is praying, I think when you fully understand the fact that you are a spiritual being your life will be much clearer. Through this, I seek the counsel of God on how should I do this certain thing and ask for his strength to be upon me. In the end, we are always looking for the purpose in everything we do that's why my spiritual growth increased my academic performance as well. (Reflection #18)

Taking a break and maintaining a healthy balance between leisure and academic work was also observed by other students as ways to help them to cope with their difficulties:

Taking a break really helped me survive the school year. Whenever I feel overwhelmed with the things going on, doing something different aside from academics whenever I take a break really helped me cope up with the stress and burnout I'm feeling. Doing the things that I really love really helped me. (Reflection #2)

I coped with the challenges that I have experienced through being patient and balancing school priorities with the things I love doing... I just go outside our home to breathe and cool myself down... maybe continue reading a book, or playing with my dogs. If I am stressed, can't think clearly, or don't have the mood to do school tasks, I will eat, do some sketching, or take a nap to give my mind a rest. (Reflection #6)

Knowing when to take a break is also important. There were times I wanted to work, but my brain couldn't handle it; there were also times I needed to rest, but my brain wouldn't quiet down. Finding that balance and awareness kept my sanity levels relatively intact. (Reflection #16)

These findings were congruent with the study of Fawaz et al. (2020 p. 5) where it was emphasised that "students employ active-oriented coping mechanisms, as they acknowledge their situation and they try to deal with it rather than just give up on it."

What are the Important Takeaways gained by Senior High School Students in Collaborative Research Writing in the New Normal?

The findings showed that the participants learned many research-related concepts and skills such as avoiding plagiarism, using different citation formats, different data analysis procedures, and writing each part of the research paper:

I am able to appreciate the value of citations. This is a way of acknowledging and respecting the owner of the information that we have used in backing up our research. (Reflection #10)

The thing that I should really remember and never forget to bring with me up to college is the use of APA citation. (Reflection #12)

Third one is to avoid plagiarism, as a writer, I experience how hard it is for an author to make your own story copied by someone else without your consent, to which I never applied plagiarism in our research. For the past 2 years studying at this University, I developed my skills in summarizing, quotation and paraphrasing to avoid committing this crime of act. (Reflection #28)

Additionally, the students were also able to realise and appreciate the value of research in their lives. They were able to understand its practical applications about their future field of specialisation or work:

I also realized how important research is in the different areas or sectors of development, especially in our developing country. (Reflection #13)

The most important thing out of all these is learning and accepting the value of research itself. Most people or students tend to disregard the subject of research. Many would say that it is tedious, uninteresting, or even costly. But if you as a person fully understood the value of research in our lives, you would be very thankful that the whole idea of it even exists. Because without it, we would not be here where we are in our position today. And everything that we see around us, is a product of research. (Reflection #23)

Another that is simple but is worth mentioning would be the fact that research is really important. Sadly, this truth is still often overlooked... people forget that our today's needs are supplied by research, that certain solutions to global problems are the products of innovation, and that research is the origin of every new learning. (Reflection #11)

More importantly, student-researchers were able to imbibe important values such as patience, teamwork, collaboration, cooperation, and time management:

I learned to widen my patience and understanding to others because of the times that I need to let my members whenever they did not fulfill their task or when they admit that they cannot do it. (Reflection #4)

Be patient and diligent in doing your work. You must go through all the processes to make a great output and not make any rush moves to achieve the best results. (Reflection #17)

The participants also acknowledged that without teamwork and collaboration, they would not be able to successfully attain their goals, such as completing a group task. Everyone must be able to give their own valuable contribution:

I learned the importance of teamwork, having initiative in doing the tasks, and how to collaborate with other classmates in this kind of setup. It would be really difficult to complete group tasks without your members' full cooperation. (Reflection #2)

Being cooperative and responsible are the important values that I learned in making research because since it is group work, everyone is expected to contribute in doing it so it is really a big problem if a member is not responsible. (Reflection #7)

Time management and avoiding cramming was also necessary in successfully completing a task:

Having time management... This will help us stay focused on doing a specific task. I found it very important not just only for one subject but for all subjects as well. (Reflection #21)

I learned how important it is to manage our time wisely and do the assigned tasks as soon as possible because it is stressful when you cram. Also, your output will not be of good quality. (Reflection #22)

These findings suggest that the collaborative research writing experience developed not only the cognitive abilities but also the affective aspect of the senior high school participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

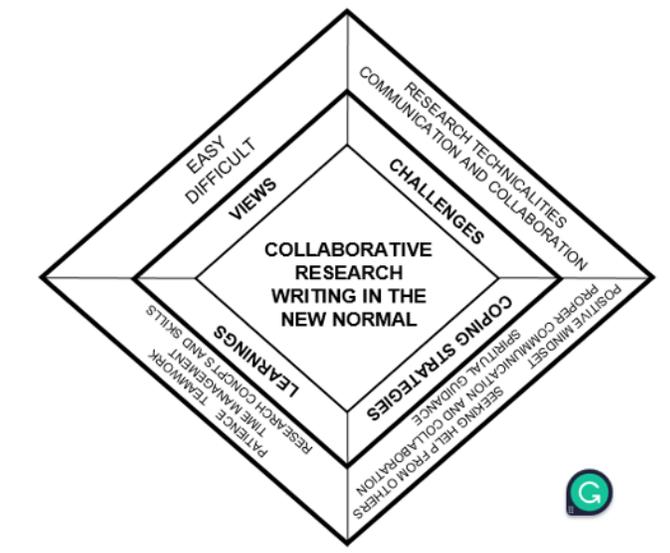


Figure 2: The major themes that emerged from the study's findings.

The study explored the collaborative research writing experiences of senior high school students in the new normal by analysing thirty (30) reflective essays. The themes derived from the corpus of the study shed light on the participants' views, challenges, coping strategies, and learnings relative to collaborative research writing.

Based on the findings, the participants of the study had different views on collaborative research writing in the new normal. Some viewed it as easy, and some regarded it as difficult. Various challenges were also encountered by the students, such as those associated with research technicalities, and communication and collaboration.

Varied coping strategies utilised by the participants were also identified, such as having a positive mindset, being patient, considerate and determined, seeking help from others, maintaining proper communication and collaboration, seeking spiritual guidance, and taking a break.

Ultimately, the learnings of the senior high school participants were not limited to academics or cognitive aspects—they were also able to assimilate important values.

Anchored in the findings yielded by the study, the researcher recommends that:

1. Teachers should devise ways on how to closely monitor students' participation and contribution in collaborative research writing tasks in the new normal. This is to minimise the overarching problem of uncooperative and unresponsive group members.
2. Students should be given only a reasonable number of tasks. This way, the students will be able to better manage their time and focus on producing quality output, rather than just for the sake of submission or completion.
3. Curriculum planners might also consider revisiting the Practical Research curriculum to check if the contents and competencies are still feasible for teaching despite the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.
4. Future researchers might pursue a quantitative exploration of the effectiveness of collaborative research writing in the context of the new normal or online distance learning setup.
5. Similar studies might be pursued relative to collaborative writing in the context of creative writing and other writing types.

Limitations

This study focused only on the experiences of three (3) academic strands in a senior high school in the Philippines; Humanities and Social Sciences, General Academic, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Other strands were not included since they were not under the tutelage of the author in the school year when the study was conducted.

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