**Interdisciplinary collaborative writing for publication with exiled academics: the nature of relational expertise**

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# Abstract

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This paper aims to provide insight and guidance for developing and leading interdisciplinary collaborative writing groups when working with researchers in Centre-Periphery contexts. The participants in this study were exiled Syrian academics domiciled in Turkey working in interdisciplinary project groups with their UK-Turkey-based academic mentors and UK-based workshop leaders. The groups were at the writing for publication stage of the project. In exploring the processes involved in writing in such groups, the study identified a key dimension to successful collaborative writing - that of relational expertise. The study found that authorial identity played a significant role in the process of writing and that relational expertise was evidenced through confidence in knowledge, positive attitudes to others’ knowledge and willingness to negotiate. We argue that explicit articulation of authorial identity and power differences are necessary first steps in establishing interdisciplinary collaborative writing groups in Centre-Periphery contexts.

Keywords: Syrian academics; Centre-Periphery; collaborative writing; relational expertise; authorial identity

# Introduction

Collaborative authorship of research publications is increasingly widespread in academia (Çakır, Acartürk and Akbulut, 2019; Kuld, Lukas and O'Hagan 2018; Kweik 2020), including by interdisciplinary and international teams (Cho and Yu 2018; Henriksen 2013; Nature 2015). There is an established literature on collaborative student writing, in particular for students who have English as a second language (e.g. Li & Kim, 2016; Storch, 2011; 2019), as well as studies which highlight the processes of interdisciplinary student writing (e.g. Wolfe & Haynes, 2003). The burgeoning literature on interdisciplinary co-authorship amongst academics has tended to focus on network analysis (e.g. Fagan et al, 2018) and efficiency. However, what is rarely considered in these studies are the power dynamics which may arise from interdisciplinary collaborative writing (Author 2018; Author, forthcoming; Tardy 2009). This potential power imbalance is further emphasised when the composition of the group reflects Centre-Periphery power relations. In this paper, we examine the nature and process of interdisciplinary collaboration in research writing by international teams on the Council for At Risk Academics (CARA) Syria Programme. The teams comprise Centre academics and Periphery Syrian academics in exile. Through analysis of a mixed data set comprising focus group interviews, questionnaires, and transcripts of group discussions from writing workshops, we seek to identify facilitators and barriers to, as well as the processes involved in interdisciplinary collaborative writing in a Centre-Periphery context. We use the theory of *relational* expertise, which comprises both confidence in one’s own professional knowledge and ability to recognise the expertise of others (Edwards 2011), to inform our examination.

We begin by outlining the context of Syrian academia in exile, and the specific locus of the CARA Syria Programme. We then review existing literature on collaborative writing, in particular within a Centre-Periphery context, and introduce the concept of relational expertise (Edwards 2011). We then set out our research questions and methodology and outline our approach to thematic and discourse analysis, before presenting our findings within themes of facilitators and barriers to collaborative writing. In the subsequent discussion section, we return to our research questions, synthesising insights from the findings with current conceptions of relational expertise. We conclude by offering an extended notion of relational expertise as a heuristic to understand and cater for interdisciplinary collaborative writing groups.

# Collaborative research writing by exiled Syrian academics and international counterparts

In this study we focus on CARA’s work with exiled Syrian academics in Turkey. Cara is a UK-based charity that has supported academics across the world at risk of war or persecution since 1933 (see<https://www.cara.ngo/>). CARA’s Syria Programme was established in late 2016 ‘to provide innovative and effective support to academics who are working in their country despite the risks, or who have been forced into exile nearby’ (CARA 2019a). The principal aims of the programme are to facilitate networking among Syrian academics and with their international counterparts; to provide instruction in English for academic purposes (EAP); to build capacity in research, teaching and related areas of academic practice based on needs analysis; and to support Syrian scholars in disseminating their research through peer-reviewed publications. It is delivered through a combination of weekly online tutoring (for EAP) and webinars, bi-monthly workshops in Istanbul, two-month research collaboration visits to UK institutions, a competitive research grant scheme and mentoring.

Through ongoing consultation and needs analysis, capacity building in research skills, collaboration, and specifically writing for publication, have been identified as critical priorities by Syrian academics on the Syria Programme (see Author 2019), Prior to 2011, research publication was not a priority for most academics working in Syrian HE. There were numerous constraints on research activity including lack of funding, few opportunities for international collaboration and limited access to international research databases, in addition to restrictions imposed by the National Security Services on various aspects of research and intellectual freedom (CARA 2019b). Accordingly, most academics in Syria only considered undertaking research for promotion purposes. However, nine years of conflict have brought about the world’s largest academic displacement, and thousands of academics have fled Syria to neighbouring countries or Europe (King 2016). For those now in exile, undertaking and publishing research is essential for securing academic work, sustaining Syria’s displaced intellectual capital, and communicating with international research audiences.

Collaborative research writing is a key area of activity on the Syria Programme. Support is delivered within the framework of the research grant scheme, offering research teams funding to support empirical research, and access to a programme of support throughout the lifespan of their projects—typically one year—including mentoring by an experienced international researcher. Research proposals are reviewed by Cara’s ‘peer review college’ of volunteer reviewers. Mentors with relevant disciplinary and/or contextual expertise are identified through the Scholars At Risk network of UK universities, or by recommendation from those already engaged on the Syria Programme, and subsequently invited to mentor and collaborate with successful research teams. It is made clear to mentors that their role is to support Syrian colleagues in their development as researchers by collaborating with them on the research and co-authoring the research outputs, and that the benefits should be reciprocal. As we discuss under findings, while this mentoring model supports an integrated action learning approach, our data suggests that the parallel aims of capacity building and successful publication might not always be complementary, and in some instances might work against each other.

A programme of intensive workshops brings together teams and mentors at critical junctures in the research journey. We focus on the final set of workshops focusing on writing for publication. Although this study is situated in the experiences of exiled Syrian academics, relational expertise as a key facet of interdisciplinary collaborative writing is a universal concern and will resonate with writers and workshop leaders engaged in similar academic writing activities.

## Context of the study

As noted, multi-author collaborative writing is becoming increasingly common as is interdisciplinary research. Lowry, Curtis and Lowry (2004, 72) define collaborative writing as an ‘iterative and social process [involving] a team focused on a common objective that negotiates, coordinates, and communicates during the creation of a common document’. Similarly Storch (2019) highlights the difference between cooperative writing and collaborative writing, defining the latter as an activity which requires all authors to be involved in all stages of the writing process and share equal responsibility for the final product. Clearly, successful negotiation and communication in groups are vital to achieving the final written product, and the aim of this study was to explore how this manifested in practice. Common working patterns observed in our workshop were parallel writing, in which the work is divided into units, and in particular horizontal-division writing (Lowry et al. 2004) whereby each member takes responsibility for a particular section of the document. These patterns were not static however, and changed depending on stage of writing; members might work in parallel for a period, but reconvene later as a group to work collectively in a reactive writing pattern, verbalising reasoning, dictating and scribing, and making edits based on suggestions, referred to as *interventions* in this paper.

The context for this study was a three-day writing retreat whose aim was for research groups to begin writing research papers for publication. In the current climate of high expectation of academic productivity in the form of scholarly publications (Kempenaar and Murray 2016) writing retreats have become increasingly popular and are part of the funding landscape (e.g. British Academy 2019). Although studies have identified a number of benefits of writing retreats (Kempenaar and Murray 2016; Lee and Boud 2003), few consider how writing retreats work when the intended written outputs involve collaboration. How do experts come together to effectively write a paper of a standard high enough to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal? What group dynamics emerge, and what does the collaboration entail?

## Literature review

In seeking to understand the processes of collaborative writing in this context, we drew on Edwards’ (2011) concept of relational expertise, which describes experts’ confidence in their own topic knowledge, as well as an ability and willingness to recognise differences yet still respond to others’ experience and knowledge. Through examining various professional contexts, Edwards suggests that ‘professional[ly] multilingual’ collaborators work in boundary spaces where ‘resources from different practices are brought together to expand interpretations of multifaceted tasks’ (p.34). In other words, differences constitute a collective resource, rather than a hindrance, and facilitate collaborative work. In professionally multilingual boundary spaces, successful collaboration in pursuit of common goals rests upon participants’ development and enactment of relational expertise. Considered in the context of a collaborative writing task, where experts from a variety of disciplines work together, issues of confidence may impact upon ‘authorial conceptualization’ (Author 2018; Author, forthcoming), specifically in terms of how writers position themselves within the group and their sense of agency in the writing project. An ability and willingness to compromise and synthesise one’s expert knowledge with collaborators lies at the heart of this aspect of authorial identity. Writing identity is ‘the sense a writer has of themselves as an author and the textual identity they construct in their writing’ (Pittam et al. 2009, 154), is both conceptual and textual (Hyland 2002; Ivanic 1998) and central to developing relational expertise.

Furthermore, the management of ‘boundary spaces’ in interdisciplinary work is critical to the success of collaborations and thus warrants dedicated attention (Edwards, 2011). In our study, collaborative writing group members took on various ‘leadership’ roles. Aside from disciplinary differences, there were also differences in research experience, writing for publication experience and linguistic proficiency. Each group was assigned a UK / Turkey-based mentor, nominally responsible for guiding and ‘managing’ the research group; however, our findings suggested management hierarchies in constant flux, co-constructed, and dependent on both academic and sociocultural factors. In interdisciplinary boundary spaces, where authors differ in background and experiences, group members might intervene in writing the academic text in a range of ways using their disciplinary, literacy, or publishing knowledge (Author, forthcoming). Similarly, workshop leaders draw on their own academic literacy knowledge and experience in providing a range of academic textual interventions.

Similarly, sociocultural factors cannot be ignored in the context of this study, where authors can be considered what Wallerstein (1991) and others call ‘Centre’ and ‘Periphery’ academics (e.g., Hyland 2016; Lillis and Curry 2010). Applications of the Centre-Periphery model across various disciplines focus on structural inequalities in the distribution of power and resources. In line with this, there are obvious power imbalances inherent to research collaborations between Anglophone, Global North-based academics and non-Anglophone, Global South-based academics (Lillis, Magyar and Robinson-Pant 2010; Trahar et al. 2019), especially in the case of academics currently in exile, whose circumstances can adversely affect their self-esteem and self-efficacy, in addition to presenting other challenges such as language barriers, unrecognised qualifications, psychological trauma, and inability to find jobs in academia in exile (Author 2019).

Moreover, collaboration can be precarious when we consider sociocultural factors such as contextual background, personal beliefs and motivations, professional status and hierarchy. In this study, the collaborative writing groups were not only professionally ‘multilingual’ (Edwards 2011), but also linguistically multilingual, and variously ‘translanguaged’ using Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish and English. Negotiating language, culture, and authorial identity inevitably impacts on interdisciplinary collaborative writing and the ability of groups to produce a manuscript for publication. As such, the development of relational expertise, evidenced by confidence in one’s own knowledge and ability to recognise the expertise of others, may be compromised in a Centre-Periphery research group where issues stemming from inherent power imbalances are at play. We were therefore interested in how relational expertise might manifest in a Centre-Periphery collaborative context: how disciplinary experts in these multilingual groups use their knowledge to navigate not only *disciplinary* boundary spaces, but also *sociocultural* and *power-related* boundary spaces in pursuit of a common goal, and how these negotiations are managed by members of the group. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

* *What are the facilitators and barriers to collaborative writing in a Centre-Periphery interdisciplinary research group?*
* *What is the nature of relational expertise in this particular context?*

# Methodology

## Participants

The participants of this research study were Syrian academics (n=20) exiled in Turkey already engaged in interdisciplinary research studies across five groups, five academic mentors based in the UK and Turkey, who joined the groups to support the writing-up process and the first three authors who were the workshop leaders. As workshop leaders our roles included setting clear goals and expectations, navigating relevant literature, encouraging participation, keeping groups on track, and fostering community (Marquis, Mårtensson and Healey 2017).

The disciplinary composition of the groups is summarised below:

Table 1: The interdisciplinary groups

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Group 1 | Sociology, Economics, History |
| Group 2 | Chemistry, Civil Engineering |
| Group 3 | Business Administration, History, International Relations |
| Group 4 | Agriculture, Biological Sciences |
| Group 5 | Psychology, Islamic Studies |

## Methods

This was a qualitative study employing focus group interviews, transcribed recordings of group discussions, and open-ended questionnaires. Having worked with the participants on a number of previous workshops, we acknowledge the potential for bias in analysis stemming from our dual role as researcher-workshop leaders, and our prior knowledge and experience of the context. Rather than undermine the integrity of the findings, however, we feel that this contextual familiarity affords us a crucial emic perspective and a greater understanding of the data (Holliday 2016). To offer transparency we ‘show the workings’ (Holliday 2016) in our description of sources and analysis below.

### Focus group interviews

Two semi-structured focus group interviews, each lasting 90 minutes, were conducted in Arabic on the final day of the writing workshops. Focus groups were conducted for several reasons. Firstly, participants felt comfortable with each other due to the structure of the workshops (collaborative writing groups, group social activities) and we felt that a group approach would encourage “snowballing” whereby a comment from one participant will trigger further comments from other participants (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014, 46). Secondly, use of focus groups allows for more efficient use of time. We were committed to obtaining feedback and ideas from all participants, but the interviewer (third author) was also facilitator in the workshops and acted as a translator for the other two facilitators, so it was felt that time spent on research would compromise the quality of the workshop input. Whilst we recognise that there are certain limitations to using focus groups, such as domination from certain participants and potential embarrassment or fear of honesty, we felt that the multiple sources of data and opportunities for triangulation could mitigate some of these scenarios. To facilitate Syrian participants’ open reflection on their experiences of working together and with their mentors, the focus groups comprised Syrian writer-researchers from across project groups, but not the international mentors. The third author facilitated the focus groups using a flexible question schedule to stimulate inductive discussions of writing strategies, group dynamics, experiences of collaboration, distribution of labour/responsibility, and the role of mentors. Focus group interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated.

### Audio-recordings of discussions

On the final day, discussions from each of the five groups were audio recorded. Lengths of discussions ranged from two minutes to 20 minutes. In order to make the recording as unobtrusive as possible, small audio recorders were placed on the group’s tables. The third author, an Arabic and English speaker, listened to the recordings and identified ‘critical moments’ (Myhill and Warren 2005) where participants either engaged in exploratory talk (Mercer 1995) or closed it down. These were transcribed and translated verbatim (Knight and Mercer 2015; Rapley 2007). As one group experienced technical problems and spent the recorded period phoning for support, we draw on data from four writing groups discussions.

### Questionnaires

An open-ended questionnaire was developed for mentors. A semi-structured design was chosen due to the small participant number, and to enable free and open responses (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2013). Four mentors completed the questionnaires within two weeks of the workshops. These were not returned anonymously, but were subsequently anonymised.

## Analysis

Data from the focus groups were analysed thematically following a staged approach employing both deductive and inductive analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006), informed by literature review but also allowing fresh insight to emerge. Analysis was driven by the research questions, with Edwards’ (2011) concept of relational expertise as a guiding framework.

We began by identifying features that facilitated and hindered the writing process, informed by our literature review and in particular Edwards’ (2011) constructs of relational expertise and professional multilingualism. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the first and second authors coded a sample from focus group A transcript separately, before comparing their coding. Consistency in analysis was evident, and we coded the remainder of focus group data separately. During the subsequent checking stage, we identified *a posteriori* codes relating to authorial conceptualisation, authorial resistance and textual interventions, and opted to explore these further, as they accounted for collaborative writing in arguably precarious social and professional relationships.

Questionnaire data and discussion transcripts were coded concurrently with focus group data, into the same codes, thus embedding data triangulation at the coding stage. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a ‘foundational’ qualitative method that can be synthesised with other forms of analysis, particularly discourse analysis (p.76). Accordingly, we subsequently undertook close discourse analysis (Willig 2013) of the discussion transcript data to focus on language used and elicit further nuance relating to group dynamics. We subsequently revised our thematic coding in light of insight arising from discourse analysis.

**Findings**

Findings are presented thematically, focusing on facilitators and barriers to interdisciplinary collaborative writing. In the subsequent discussion section we draw these themes together to explore the nature of relational expertise in a Centre – Periphery collaborative writing context. For focus groups we use the identifiers FGA, FGB; for mentor questionnaires M1, M2, M3, M4; and discussion transcripts WGA, WGB, WGC, WGD.

## Facilitating interdisciplinary collaborative writing

## Academic roles and responsibilities

There were nuanced differences between the roles participants assumed, explicitly and implicitly, and the responsibilities or moral obligations they felt towards their final output. Group processes were facilitated when these roles were respected and accepted. Roles were fluid and centred on editing and making suggestions to the text—what we refer to as academic textual interventions. These included literacy, disciplinary, and publishing dimensions key to the writing of the paper and were performed by all group members including mentors, and also workshop leaders. A number of intervention roles were identified in the data, all constantly in flux. Interventions were often welcomed by participants, specifically those relating to literacy:

*There’s a British expert to help us with writing. He gives us the general structure, labels each part [and] highlights positive points and what we should write in this part. This is in addition to another person teaching us grammar. Even some British people fear academic writing, because it’s written in the highest level of language. So, it’s difficult to find an expert in grammar and another in structure, where could you find them if it wasn’t for CARA?*  *(FGB)*

The quote above also highlights the power dynamics of Centre-Periphery collaboration, the Centre represented by ‘a British expert’. In the case above, the knowledge and experience from the Centre was perceived positively, with a blurring of Centre-Periphery boundaries seen in the comment: ‘*even some British people fear academic writing*’. One mentor felt his role was ‘*to take the lead in writing the paper as the only native speaker in the group, and someone with relatively more paper-writing experience*’ (M2). Again, although this responsibility is crucial to the success of the written output, Centre-Periphery dimensions are at play with the mentor referencing their own linguistic capital as *‘the only native speaker in the group*’. The mentor’s statement reflects a tacit assumption that this linguistic capital equates straightforwardly to leadership responsibility, and also that output production was the priority over capacity building. Interestly, this power imbalance relating to linguistic proficiency is reflected differently in the quote below from a Syrian participant, where it is couched as a learning opportunity:

*In addition, we would sometimes come across terminology which we can’t determine which one is the accurate term to use, so he [mentor] helps us and provides the accurate term. He also reviews what I’ve written and of course that of the person writing in Arabic and translating on Google. (FGA)*

Although the mentor appears to see writing leadership as his primary role, the Syrian participant’s observation instead foregrounds learning arising from close collaboration in the writing process (language and reviewing opportunities). This hints at potential tensions between process (capacity building) and output (publication) aims, and suggests that although the Syria Programme mentoring model assumes capacity building and research collaboration to be inherently complementary, their relationship can be rather more ambiguous. These statements also highlight that the extent to and manner in which capacity building occurs is evidenced in the perspectives of the participants, and thus illustrate the importance of gathering data pertaining to these perspectives.

### Authorial recognition

Authorial recognition of one’s contribution is essential to how academics view their knowledge in collaborative work. While Nelson and Castelló (2012) relate the term ‘authority’ to disciplinary knowledge, data revealed that authority can derive from knowledge associated with other types of intervention, such as literacy and publishing (Author, forthcoming). Recognition of group members’ knowledge was reflected across the data in a number of ways. Participants were aware of the distribution of different forms of knowledge across the group and how each member contributed:

*We probably benefited from the experience of others. The methods they applied to their work. We have gained additional experience from the methods they applied to the part they worked on. There is also the terminology related to this project or to this side of knowledge. It is possible that we have added more terms to our scientific terminology. We have also provided others with our research-related terminology, so there was collaboration. There was input from all participants. (FGA)*

It is noteworthy that the Syrian collaborators benefitted from each other’s and their mentor’s literary and disciplinary textual interventions. Also significant is awareness of the possibility of ‘transfer[ring] the learning’ (James, 2006), evidenced in their “*add[ing] more terms*” to their linguistic repertoire. This participant is also aware of the value of their own contribution, with this being a key feature in ensuring “*there was collaboration*”.

As well as relational expertise, writing expertise (Tardy 2009) was also developed through working in disciplinary boundary spaces (Edwards 2011), and there was appreciation that interdisciplinarity results in alternative ways of writing:

*The fact that the team is made up of various disciplines is good, we know that each discipline has a certain way of writing. The variety of disciplines enabled us to see new ways of writing research. (FGA)*

As well as displaying positive attitudes towards interdisciplinarity in the focus group interviews, participants drew on their relational expertise in moment-by-moment dialogic interaction. In the exchange below, two group members co-construct a common understanding of a disciplinary construct (‘dominants’) (M= Mentor, R=researcher):

*M: I am not so sure how to interpret the dominants.*

*R: In reality, there’s no dominants. We cannot say anything about the*

*dominants or….*

*M: So, when it is one to three…*

*R: Ah, one to three? Yeah, I should remember the model (WGD)*

Here, the mentor acknowledges his lack of knowledge in his interpretation of ‘dominants’, which is then explained by the researcher. The mentor’s response then prompts the researcher to remember the model. Common understanding is built through the trajectory of the exchange, with mentor and researcher both comfortable interrupting each other within the interdisciplinary boundary space (Edwards 2011).

A closer examination of small group discussions illuminated issues of authorial identity and power dynamics. In the exchange below, the mentor (M) asks a tag question, ‘don’t they?’. Although this might seem a technique for inviting the opinions of co-researchers, the mentor is arguably asserting their own opinion and indicating their stance towards the answer (Kimps & Davidse, 2008). However, neither R1 or R2 agree with the mentor, and the discussion continues with R1 claiming power (Freed & Ehrlich, 2010) by asking further questions. Through these questions, R2 is positioned as the expert. This short exchange thus demonstrates how the Syrian researchers demonstrated their authorial identity on a moment-by-moment basis in the discussions, and how at this point, Centre-Periphery power dynamics do not prevail.

*M: I think some of the gene flower really early, don’t they? In the results, as early as 70 days.*

*R1: I think earlier than 70 days. Do you know any type that flowers in 70 days?*

*R2: Not 70. Maybe 85.*

*M: 85 is the earliest.*

*R1: 85 is the earliest one?*

*R2: yeah, yeah*

*R1: Semi-early*

*M: Is the term we use super…?*

*R1: super early (WGD)*

Here both the mentor and R1 defer to the disciplinary knowledge of R2, who is confident in his knowledge that the earliest a gene can flower is 85 days. This exchange reflects mutual recognition of each other’s respective disciplinary knowledge (Edwards 2011). However, elsewhere the data revealed tensions that challenged the interdisciplinary collaborative writing, and ultimately risked the potential outputs. These are explored below.

## Barriers to interdisciplinary collaborative writing

### Managerial conflict

Collaborating in groups assumes that one member will adopt an ‘administrative’ role, which must be accepted by all members to be successful (Edwards 2011). This proved challenging and was a source of conflict in some instances. Mentors felt responsibility to manage groups, not only at the levels of process and task, but also interpersonally. For example, one mentor spoke of challenges arising from ‘*the personality and ‘psychological’ attitude with which my group members were relating to the task’ (M3).* This challenge of managing personalities and attitudes can be seen in the following brief exchange, in which one group member questions the mentor about another’s perceived lack of work:

*R: What’s he doing? Why doesn’t he [another group member] brief us on his*

*work?*

*M: He will [contribute to the discussion]. Everyone has his own way of working. If he has a question, he will come. (WGA)*

Similar frustrations also came to light in the focus group interviews. One researcher asked *‘how do you solve the issue when you assign a task to a person, but he doesn’t do it?’ (FGB).* Another mentor (M1) described his approach as ‘*pragmatic’,* yet described having to *‘convince’* his collaborator of his preferred approach to writing the paper, again highlighting a tension in the workshop’s dual objectives of capacity building and producing a collaborative written output.

Participants were conscious of roles, and largely acknowledged and accepted the leadership role of the mentor. Interestingly, as an aspect of potential Centre-Periphery dynamics, what might be considered Periphery-Periphery tensions surfaced in the quote below. The mentor’s advice was accepted, yet divergences arose amongst the Syrian researchers:

*We succeed when the team leader is foreign; we listen to him, say fine, excellent, and as you please. I went through the experience of leading a team; I wouldn’t dare speak to [name of collaborator], for example, (Laughter). He would say; “don’t be bossy brother”. I’m not really being bossy, but I do have to coordinate and organise the work, I’ll be putting many more hours than he would, but because I’m from his country and of the same discipline there’s sensitivity in work and it’s taken personally. As for the foreign person, we all agree, politely accept and invite him for a coffee and a shisha. (FGB)*

This quote reveals the potential for precarious and sensitive relationships between authors, and highlights the importance of recognising sociocultural factors in collaborative writing group dynamics. Furthermore, lack of negotiation and an insistence on one’s own knowledge caused managerial conflict in the writing process, with some members perceiving ideas as being ‘imposed’ upon them:

*One challenge was that each member of the team tried to impose his vision on the others. This is a big challenge. All should arrive at a point of agreement; all must reach a consensus*. *(FGB)*

The importance of reaching agreements was discussed at length in focus groups, with one participant suggesting it was the task of mentors to ‘*divide tasks correctly and organise the team correctly’ (FGB).* However, not all participants were able to work towards agreement in moment-by-moment interaction, as can be seen in the exchange below:

*M: [speaking Arabic]: Or if there’s anything missing. So you can write the conclusion.*

*[...]*

*R: This conclusion, I don’t know what you do with it. We only write results and discussion. I’ll read how other colleagues write it. (WGB)*

Here, the researcher rejects the mentor’s suggestion of writing a conclusion, and thus their leadership, declaring that they will seek advice outside of the writing group (‘other colleagues’). A further aspect of this rejection stems from authorial resistance, described below.

The data highlighted a need for administrative leadership, and while many participants placed the onus on the mentor alone to oversee distribution of labour, in practice the responsibilities of taking a lead or managing the group were highly fluid and contingent on various factors, including stage of writing, respective backgrounds and other sociocultural factors.

*Authorial resistance*

As already noted, groups who accepted that aspects or phases of the writing process called for different knowledge and experience, and fluid leadership and management, were able to achieve momentum in writing. However, anxieties surrounding relinquishing control of the writing process and the final output hindered effective collaboration in other groups. One dimension of anxiety can be traced to authorial identity (Ivanic 1998).

One focus group participant felt that attempting to write collaboratively jeopardised the quality of the output, and that writing alone would have allowed them to retain control, and questioned the quality of literacy interventions by co-authors:

*Some parts are written well, others are less clear. Had I been writing on my own, it would have been done well. Everything would have been under my control. (FGA).*

Another aspect of resistance was evidenced by one participant doubting the Western / Centre academic’s literacy interventions but nevertheless accepting them because “*we are obliged to accept their ideas because they are the advanced party and the leading culture*” *(FGB)*. It is not clear what is meant by ‘advanced’; it might be relate to linguistic proficiency or academic seniority (in terms of career stage). Yet the reference to ‘leading *culture*’ suggests it relates to the mentor’s being Western, and therefore depicts a perceived hierarchy of academic cultures, and a felt pressure to acquiesce to it. This negative positioning of themselves and their culture in relation to their Centre academic collaborators, and their feeling ‘obliged’ to adhere to a dominant writing culture, suggests cultural-based authorial resistance.

Leadership or management of aspects of the writing process are closely intertwined with authorial conceptualisation, as can be seen in the example below. The participant talks of how his leadership role allowed him to reflect his authorial self in the writing, and in so doing resist the Western mentor’s intervention in the text:

*At the same time, being a leader of the research team enables one to direct the writing as one would wish, not as (the foreign mentors) would, because in the end the research has its own identity, so directing the research as you would wish raises the quality of the research. (FGB)*

Authorial resistance was also evident when participants had different perspectives of the writing process. One mentor identified lack of shared vision concerning publication plans as a factor leading to impasse in the writing process, and spoke of ‘*struggl[ing] to convince*’ their group to write to a particular journal’s requirements:

*The challenge has been different ideas and visions around what to do with a draft article. My approach was pragmatic, turning the draft into a submittable article by shortening it and improving its focus. My mentee did not agree entirely with this strategy. [...] It was a bit of a struggle to convince my mentee that this a reasonable approach (M1).*

This led to ‘*a breakdown of relationship between the different researchers*’ (M1) over the course of the workshop, with mentor and mentee ultimately opting to work independently, on separate sections of the paper at separate tables, with little active discussion concerning how to align or integrate the sections, and without achieving consensus regarding aims and outcomes. This breakdown in working relationship can be seen in the following interaction, recorded towards the end of the workshop:

*PI [speaking Arabic]: If you have any questions, ask me.*

*SA: [speaking Arabic] I don’t have any questions, thank you. (WGB)*

Despite earlier examples where the Centre-Periphery power dynamics result in Syrian researchers acquiescing to their mentor’s suggestions, the example above reveals a resistance to this normative relationship, with a firm but clear refusal to engage in further discussions and collaboration. In this case, again the tensions between capacity building, which would have allowed more time for discussion and agreement, and the need for a final product resulted in failure to either produce a draft paper or build capacity in terms of relational expertise or common knowledge.

Authorial resistance towards disciplinary interventions was also identified, as one participant observed:

[*...] each discipline attempted to highlight its work to show it as the outstanding feature of the research. This, of course, is a natural inclination because every person loves his speciality and wants to highlight it. It happens that each side attempts to hinder the other until a balance is reached. (FGA)*

Here the participant highlights the inextricable link between discipline and identity which in this instance transcended any Centre-Periphery relationship. Authorial resistance was demonstrated between Syrian researchers and their Western mentor in terms of leadership, as well as amongst the Syrian researchers themselves in interdisciplinary terms. It is striking that the participant saw this resistance manifesting as *deliberate obstruction* (‘attempts to hinder’) of others’ disciplinary norms or agendas, rather than simply forthright assertion of one’s own. This suggests that the balancing of authorial identity within collaborative groups can be achieved through conflict, competition and even sabotage as much as through collaboration and compromise.

### Time and space

Tensions between capacity-building and the production of an output were seen in the theme of time and space. Time restrictions were noted by several participants. Despite literature supporting a more structured, lock-step approach to writing retreats (Petrova and Coughlin 2012), we found evidence of push-back in the data. Although some found the structure and dedicated time provided beneficial, there was also a counter-narrative regarding the expectations of a finite time period:

*It is a scientific type of writing and is based on so and so, but in the end, writing requires inspiration. I can’t write at any time. (FGA)*

Another participant, referencing the ‘expert’ status of the mentor and highlighting Centre-Periphery dynamics, stated:

*You can’t write an introduction in half an hour, who can do that? Not even the British can do it. (FGB)*

Interestingly in this statement the researcher positions the Western mentor as an example of the ideal with the use of the word ‘even’ and uses this to justify their own position. One participant commented that, where members’ disciplinary knowledge can differ markedly, discussing ideas can seem a ‘waste of time’:

*The idea is, for example, clear to you and let’s say unclear for another. You must leave the idea behind and explain to the other team member how, in your opinion of course, this work should be carried out. So, the time you spend delivering the idea, which might or might not convince the other researcher, lengthens the period of writing. In my view the achievement was slow. (FGA)*

Another participant identified barriers to writing relating to place, as well as time:

*Requiring you to achieve by restricting your writing to a certain place at a certain time, for me personally, is very difficult […] it requires one to be in the mood. (FGA)*

Push-back on time and place were likely a result of the dual purpose of the workshops. While the workshops were explicitly rationalised in terms of supporting research development, successful publication of participants’ research in international, anglophone, peer-reviewed journals was understood to be the ‘key performance indicator’ (KPI) against which to validate the workshops, the small grant scheme, and the Syria Programme as a whole, and to demonstrate effectiveness to the funders. Indeed, the funder-commissioned independent evaluation of Phase One of the Syria Programme (2016-2018), while positive, noted a lack of clear indicators for successful capacity building in academic development, in contrast to English for Academic Purposes where improvements in participants’ language proficiency could be evidenced in periodic test scores. As such, funders’ expectations that the Syria Programme meet normative KPIs of academic success (in this case, peer-reviewed publication) which enshrine the norms of the academic Centre, may have exerted a pressure to prioritise output over capacity building and thus implicitly assert the Centre’s authority over the Periphery.

**Discussion**

Previous research has shown that relational expertise can facilitate successful collaboration within ‘professionally multilingual’ groups (Edwards 2007, 2011). In this study we sought to understand the nature of relational expertise in, and to identify facilitators of and barriers to, interdisciplinary collaborative writing by Centre-Periphery academic groups.

While relational expertise manifested in various ways, a common element was participants’ willingness, openness and ability to recognise and accept others’ experience and writing interventions. When participants demonstrated relational expertise, groups worked well and progressed, while non-enactment of relational expertise led to barriers. Furthermore, we noticed that relational expertise was not a ‘state’, or a fixed attribute, but rather a fluid dimension of expertise that changed in the minutiae of collaboration. In light of our findings, we propose that relational writing expertise is not a singular attribute of individuals, but a co-constructed asset influenced by various sociocultural factors. We address our research questions in more depth below.

Collaborative writing can stimulate thinking (Author et al, 2020), encourage interdisciplinary conversations and reciprocal learning, result in more complex and coherent research outputs, and contribute to academic, research, professional and personal development. It can also drive authors to take stronger positions to assert and protect their different types of knowledge and experience. Our findings suggest that acknowledging its benefits was a facilitating factor, as were explicit management of the project and acceptance of an often fluid and moment-by-moment approach to leadership. Mutual recognition of each other’s knowledge and experience, and openness to learning also supported the writing process. Participants both welcomed the guidance of Western academic mentors where it was felt to be appropriate and useful, yet were also confident asserting their own experience and knowledge when working with mentors. With reference to Author’s (forthcoming) conceptualisation of academic textual interventions, we found that where relational expertise was enacted, multiple group members confidently provided disciplinary, literacy, and publishing textual interventions at different points in the writing process.

However, the rich resource of multifaceted experiences and knowledge represented in interdisciplinary Centre-Periphery groups can also result in obstacles to learning and outputs, such as threats to authorial conceptualization and, in a workshop setting, tensions between output and learning. As evidenced by this study, while academic writers are more likely to feel confident about their authorial identity in their own discipline, this position is challenged in interdisciplinary work not only at the disciplinary level, but also the literacy level, as evidenced here by a participant reporting how he ‘knows’ how to write in his field, but that interdisciplinary work challenged his authorial positioning as an experienced academic writer. A further barrier was seen in comments related to time. Participants in general felt that time was inadequate for the writing of a publishable paper, again reflecting the conflicting workshop aims of capacity building (learning) and production (of written outputs).

Where members recognised limitations in their own background and strength in others’, they were more likely to accept questions, comments, feedback and suggestions. Knowledge here may be disciplinary, but methodological, literacy and publishing knowledge was also applied. Approval of a variety of academic textual interventions took place at a macro level, as seen in positive statements about working in interdisciplinary and multicultural / multilingual groups, but also at the micro-level in moment-by-moment interaction. Conversely, fewer positive attitudes towards others’ interventions and leadership were seen where members felt a threat to their authorial conceptualisation, and authorial resistance was enacted. Whilst authorial resistance can signify positionality and contribute to exploratory talk (Mercer 2000), it could also close down the discussion. With respect to the precarious positions many of the participants find themselves in both professionally and personally, projecting confidence and experience through their writing positioned themselves as credible researchers and academics (Hyland 2002). It is therefore not surprising that the collaboration and negotiation of the writing process is imbued with elements of resistance to perceived threat of authorial identity. Personal writing styles as dimensions of authorial identity were further threatened in some spatial elements of the writing workshop. Discussing options and engaging in the boundary spaces was not always seen as optimal use of time, perhaps contributing to anxieties around finishing the paper.

Relational expertise in this context was found to be fluid, co-constructed and contingent on sociocultural factors and pragmatism. We might, therefore, extend Edwards’ (2011) concept of relational expertise to reflect a context-dependent group dimension. Such boundary spaces may be characterised by historical or cultural sensitivities and linguistic, epistemological and resource disparities.

**Conclusion**

Going forward then, what insights does this paper offer for those who work with interdisciplinary collaborative writing groups in the role of academic facilitator? Crucially, we recommend that initial activities focus on eliciting explicit references to professional and academic values. As the data revealed, participants struggled with feelings of inadequacy around cultural and linguistic capital, as well as tensions between acknowledging the ‘expert’ and safeguarding their own authorial identity. At the same time, ‘Centre’ collaborators, engaged as ‘mentors’ on the basis of research experience, also felt a responsibility to take a lead in writing owing to their linguistic capital as native speakers. Our data highlights that these tacit assumptions and affective encounters on both sides of the Centre-Periphery boundary can influence individuals’ approaches to—and thus configure the dynamics *of*— Centre-Periphery collaboration even where, as in the case of the Cara Syria Programme, working against Periphery academics’ marginalisation in research is an explicit aim.

Allusions to culturally-situated practices and knowledge, and to conditions deriving from conflict and displacement, suggest that the Centre-Periphery relationship may have a bearing on collaborating researchers’ confidence and self-efficacy, and should be explicitly acknowledged.

Building on the concept of relational expertise assisted us in looking at the Centre-Periphery dichotomy from a different lens. Although this dichotomy is used to refer to the geopolitics of knowledge production (Lillis & Curry, 2010), and whilst the ‘Centre’ still represents the locus of resources (funding), our conceptualization of relational expertise suggested there were potential learning opportunities for all parties involved in the collaborative writing process.

Although this study explored Centre-Periphery relationships and dynamics, the notion of relational expertise is germane to any writing group in which members hold varying levels of academic, disciplinary and publishing knowledge. Lowry et al (2004) suggest two key stages before working on the written collaborative output: team formation and team planning. The former requires emphasis on relational activities such as team bonding, and the latter involves articulating timeframes, targets and importantly, assigning roles and responsibilities. While these aspects occurred at group level at various points *throughout* the writing process, they were not attended to systematically, or in advance.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire to mentors

**CARA research project: Building knowledge in collaborative writing groups**

NB: All responses to be about the work **during** the workshop

1. What were the benefits of working in collaborative writing groups?
2. What were the challenges?
3. How did you perceive your role in the group?
4. How did you distribute responsibility and / or roles in the group during the workshop?
5. What do you feel you learnt during the workshops?
6. In what ways could the workshop have been enhanced for a better experience of writing collaboratively?