

## Teaching Presence in an Online Collaborative Learning Environment via Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the interactions of the teacher with her six students in an online collaborative learning environment to complete their narrative writing task. Data sources were the online interactions archives and the teacher's reflection. The interactions were coded based on the descriptors related to teaching presence in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model by Garrison, Archer and Anderson (2000). Findings indicated that the descriptors suggested by the CoI model were present in the interactions. The interactions related to the teaching presence encouraged students to improve their narrative writing. Additionally, other descriptors such as code-switching, exam-centeredness and teacher-centredness were also evident in the data. The teacher's reflection indicates that interacting in online collaborative learning is a good practice to encourage narrative writing.

*Keywords:* Online collaborative learning, online writing, CoI model, social interactions, CALL and teaching presence

### INTRODUCTION

With the advent of Web 2.0, a number of platforms are available to encourage online collaborative learning (Lim *et al.* 2010; Mercer *et al.*, 2010). The processing

power of these platforms permits learners to efficiently store, search and display information (Turoff, 1995), while they are engaged in an online collaborative learning environment. All these abilities are effective in closing the gap between the level of performance and the level of individuals' potential in collaborative and interactive learning processes (Rikki *et al.*, 2010). Collaborative learning involves sharing of thoughts, material, critical thinking, positive attitudes, group cohesion and social

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relationships. In other words, collaboration involves social interactions (Yeh, 2014). There is no collaboration without social interactions (Garrison *et al.*, 2000).

Any online collaborative teaching and learning activities require teachers' effective supervision (Koh *et al.*, 2010). Grouping students without appropriate instructions does not guarantee collaboration (Palloff & Pratt, 2010). For this reason, the presence of the teacher is pertinent in online teaching and learning activities. In collaborative learning environment, teacher is the facilitator, while teaching and learning activities are shared experiences (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). Garrison *et al.* (2000) have suggested an online learning model that encourages interactions between teachers and students with the objective of building, facilitating and validating understanding among student-student and teacher-student. The model is termed as the Community of Inquiry model (CoI).

This study aims to explore the interactions of the teacher with her six students in an online collaborative learning environment. The students were instructed to complete their narrative writing task. Their online interactions were categorised based on the teaching presence descriptors suggested by the CoI model. This online writing instruction is quite necessary in the Malaysian ESL setting as limited time is allocated in school for students to train and immerse themselves in the English language (Darus & Ching, 2009). Limited time does not provide the opportunity for the teacher to personally attend to the students' needs

and interests and more so in continuous writing (Marimuthu & Goh, 2005). It is hoped that the online environment will give opportunities to the teacher to guide the students effectively and help them enhance their narrative writing. There is also a pressing need for more research in Malaysian classrooms to explore the use of the online collaborative learning environment (Koo, 2008). Understanding what the interactions are when learners are online is valuable. The immense popularity of the Facebook, coupled with the amount of writing produced by the learners, illustrates the potential of Facebook as an effective writing platform. For this reason, students in this study were instructed to collaborate in the Facebook environment. Three researchers were involved in this study.

The objective of this study is to investigate the descriptors found under the teaching presence and the teacher's reflection in the online collaborative learning environment. The research questions are:

1. What are the descriptors of teaching presence found in the online collaborative learning environment?
2. What is the teacher's reflection of the social interactions in the online collaborative learning environment?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature concerning the online collaborative learning environment and the Community of Inquiry model will be discussed in the following section to situate the study in a broader perspective.

### *Online Collaborative learning Environment*

A more in-depth analysis of online collaborative learning needs to consider the community in the online learning environment. The importance of community to encourage collaboration has been emphasised by a number of researchers (Salmon *et al.*, 1995; Garrison *et al.*, 2000). A strong sense of community encourages information sharing, group commitment, collaboration and achievement of learning outcomes (Dede, 1999; Wellman, 1996). The community formed in the online teaching and learning environment is short lived and involuntary (Wallace, 2003). Rovai (2002) highlights important characteristics of the online community. They are “feelings of connectedness among community members and commonality of learning expectations and goals” (p. 322). He further elaborates that classroom community is successful when learners:

- feel connected with each other and to the instructor.
- manifest the immediate communication behaviours that reduce social psychological distance between people.
- share common interests and values.
- trust and help each other.
- are actively engaged in two-way communication.
- pursue common learning objectives.

(Rovai, 2002, p. 322)

Palloff and Pratt (2010) reported that students need ‘community’ to express their social, emotional, academic and intellectual experiences. One model that identifies the cognitive, social and teaching dimensions for studying the online collaboration is the model suggested by Garrison *et al.* (2000). The model is named as Community of Inquiry.

### *Community of Inquiry*

The Community of Inquiry model suggested by Garrison *et al.* (2000) fits ideally with the constructivism theory. The model has also been employed to get a better understanding of what is missing in the online learning environment (Perry & Edward, 2005). Additionally, it is used to understand the challenges faced by first-time online learners (Cleveland-Innes, Garrison, & Kinsel, 2007). Researchers found that the CoI model is an easy and effective model to illustrate communication (Batruff & Headley, 2009). The CoI model offers an environment for students to interact, share, receive feedback and learn together (Garrison *et al.*, 2000). Garrison *et al.* (2000) designed three presences to categorise the interactions. The three presences are social, cognitive and teaching presences. The present study focused on the teaching presence of the CoI model in the Malaysian context.

Researchers have recognised that the CoI model is useful in guiding research in the online learning environment (Cerbin, 2009). For example, a study by Kupezynski *et al.* (2010) found that appropriate feedback

is pertinent in teaching presence. Abas and Fadzil (2009) found that teachers need to be trained to pose questions and encourage students to carry out effective discussion while engaging in the online learning environment. However, more research is needed to document the challenges and issues that are useful for educational experience (Aykol *et al.*, 2009; Cerbin, 2009). Shea *et al.* (2010) reported that the studies have been more concerned about the level of the online discussion and surveys. Also, researchers rarely consider the work of the students and instructors in the undergraduate settings (Toth *et al.*, 2010). Thus, more research is needed to determine the appropriate indicators in a different context. It is for this reason that this study was undertaken to look into the nature of interactions in the Malaysian context. In this study, the researchers only considered the teaching presence. According to Anderson *et al.* (2001), teaching presence is “the design facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes” (p. 5). Teaching presence is necessary in stabilising the cognitive and social issues in the educational environment (Garrison *et al.*, 2000). Teaching presence consists of the coding scheme for instructional design and organisation, coding scheme for facilitating discourse and coding scheme for direct instruction. The codes and descriptors for teaching presence are illustrated in Table 1.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to explore the teaching

presence in the collaborative learning environment.

### *Participants*

The study was carried out in an urban Chinese Girls’ school in Penang. Six students and a teacher were involved in this study. Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants. These students were willing to participate and were able to access the Internet and Facebook either at home or at school. The teacher participant was a teacher in the school and took part in the study on a voluntary basis. She is an experienced teacher who is familiar with the expectations of the public examination format (*SPM* - Malaysian Certificate of Examination). Pseudonyms were given to the participants to ensure anonymity.

### *Research Procedures*

The researchers created a Facebook group account named Narrative Writing II. The two hypothetical terms of tutor and learner platforms are virtual spaces embedded within Facebook. In the tutor platform, the teacher provided instructions, as well as titles, model essays, tips and suggestions. In the learner platform, the students wrote their initial essays, interacted with their peers and teacher, and finally wrote their final essays. In both the platforms, students were given the opportunity to express their opinions and comments. The comments were provided by the teacher and the peers for the students to improve on their essays. The students had to write their own essays after their online collaborative learning

TABLE 1  
Descriptors of Teaching Presence

Codes	Indicators	Examples
TPA	Coding Scheme for Instructional Design and Organization	
TPA 1	Setting curriculum	“This week we will be discussing...”
TPA 2	Designing methods	“I am going to divide you to groups, and you will debate...”
TPA3	Establishing time parameters	“Please post a message by Friday”
TPA4	Utilising medium effectively	“Try to address issues that others have raised when your post”
TPA5	Establishing netiquette	“ Keep your message short”
TPB	Coding Scheme for Facilitating Discourse	
TPB1	Identifying areas of agreement/disagreement	“Joe, Mary has provided a compelling counter-example to your hypothesis. Would you care to respond?”
TPB2	Seeking to reach consensus/ understanding	“I think Joe and Mary are saying essentially the same thing”
TPB3	Encouraging, acknowledging or reinforcing student contributions	“Thank You for your insightful comments”.
TPB4	Setting climate for learning	“don’t feel self-conscious about thinking out loud on the forum. This is a place to try out ideas after all.”
TPB5	Drawing in participants, prompting discussion	“Any thought on this issue?” Anyone care to comment?”
TPB6	Assess the efficacy of the process	“I think we’re getting a little off track here”
TPC	Coding Scheme for Direct Instruction	
TPC1	Present content/questions	“Bates says... what do you think “
TPC2	Focus the discussion in specific issues	“I think that’s a dead end. I would ask you to consider...”
TPC3	Summarize the discussion	“The original question was ... Joe said Mary said... we concluded that ... We still haven’t addressed...”
TPC4	Confirm understanding through assessment feedback	“You’re close, but you didn’t account for... this is important because ...”
TPC5	Diagnose misconceptions	“Remember, bates is speaking from an administrative perspective, so be careful when you say...”
TP6	Inject knowledge from diverse sources, e.g. textbook articles, internet, personal experiences	I was at a conference with bates once, and he said... You can find the proceedings from the conference at <a href="http://www...">http://www...</a>
TP7	Responding to technical Concerns	“If you want to include a hyperlink in your message, you have to ...”

Source: Anderson *et al.* (2009)

sessions. The interactions involved student-student interactions and student-teacher interactions (Anderson, 2003). Students were given three writing tasks. They were given two weeks to complete each task. Table 2 indicates the schedule for the writing task. Before the interactions, the students were given initial and final tasks. For Tasks 1 and 2, the students were provided with model essays and suggestions to write their narrative essays. For Task 3, however, the students were not given any guidance. They were instructed to write their own narrative essays. It was hoped that the students would be familiar with the narrative writing style as they were guided for the earlier tasks (Tasks 1 and 2). The schedule for the writing task was published in Annamalai *et al.* (2013)

**DATA COLLECTION**

In the present study, the online interaction archives found in the closed group set up within the social networking site of Facebook were coded to identify the patterns of interactions based on the CoI model (2000). The online interaction archives were printed out and coded by the researchers and two other coders. The two selected coders were trained by the researchers to analyse the patterns of interactions based on the model. Miles and Huberman’s (1994) percentage and Cohen kappa inter-rater reliability were used to measure the agreement between the coders in categorising the interaction patterns. The kappa value for teaching presence was 0.8, which is a very high agreement. In analysing the patterns of interactions, the researchers analysed all the messages posted by the

TABLE 2  
Schedule of the online interactions, initial and final tasks

Week	Task	Platforms		
	<b>Tutor Platform</b>	<b>Learner Platform</b>	<b>Learner Platform</b>	<b>Learner Platform</b>
Week 1	Writing in class	INITIAL TASK		
Weeks 2-3	Task 1 Title Material 1	First draft (1)	social interaction in the online collaborative learning environment	Final draft (1)
Weeks 4-5	Task 2 Title Material 2	First Draft (2)	Online Collaboration with peers and teacher	Final draft (2)
Weeks 6-7	Task 3 Title No materials	First Draft (3)	Online Collaboration with peers and teacher	Final draft (3)
Week 10	Writing in class	FINAL TASK		



teacher. All these messages were analysed based on the descriptors and sub-categories of the teaching presence. The teacher wrote the reflections in the 12th week after the interactions in the online collaborative learning environment. The reflections were interpreted based on Creswell's (2009) data analysis and interpretation procedures. The steps are: 1) organise and prepare the data of analysis, 2) read through all the data, 3) begin detailed analysis with a coding process, 4) use the coding process to generate themes for analysis, 5) advance how description and themes will be presented in the qualitative nature, and 6) interpret the data.

## FINDINGS

### *Descriptors of Teaching Presence*

The most frequent descriptor in teaching presence was related to facilitating discourse, followed by direct instruction and instructional design and organisation. The prevalence of teaching presence for facilitating discourse was clustered most heavily on encouraging, acknowledging or reinforcing students' contributions. The data revealed that the teacher was able to maintain the interest, motivation and students' engagement by regularly reading and attending to their doubts and comments.

In Task 1, the teacher commented that "*I will read through your essay and comment*". The teacher acknowledged the students' contributions and assured the students. She wrote, for example, "*don't feel so bad Deer Tommy. You are doing great*" and "*We are here to help each other and improve to be*

*better... You can improvise your essay better. We are here*".

In Task 2, the teacher made concerted efforts to continue giving confidence and encouragement by complimenting their work. She has been actively supporting and scaffolding the students to extend their ideas and improve their narrative writing. This was eloquently expressed in the following post:

*interesting story yet you could make it better by developing more details. I find that the story is kind of dry without development.*

*You can use similar story but add on some interesting development into paragraph with idiomatic expression and higher level vocabulary.*

*Interesting story girl but I feel you have the potential to write even Better than this. This narration lack of creativity. Try to improvise in your improved draft later. HERE ARE SOME ERRORS.....*

The teacher also responded well to the students' individual ideas and meaning making. The teacher remarked, "*you have provided good vocabulary*", "*good suggestion*" and "*I noticed that you have minimised your errors in tenses. Good job done, girl!*". When the teacher experienced limited students' engagement in the discussion, she provided more opportunities for them to interact by writing, "*Peony Moon, Catelite Nina, Joyce Chee, Valentini*

*Belbo and Deer Tommy, what do you think about Monster Kblue's essay?"* and *"Maybe you could improvise your essay to be more interesting"*. The teacher was actively supporting and scaffolding students' ideas to extend their learning. She even recommended a few websites to improve their writing. She asked the students to *"Try to practice on this simple exercise by finding meaning of the idiomatic expressions"*. The teacher also stimulated the discussion by drawing in students and prompting discussion. For example, *"Joyce Chee, Monster Kblue, Valentino Belbo and Peony Moon and Catelite Nina... read through deer Tommy's essay and check into her word choices, expressions used, tenses and punctuation. Please give your comments by comparing Deer Tommy's previous essays"...* There was no post that was related to assessing the efficacy of the process category.

In the domain of direct instruction, most of the interactions were related to focusing discussion on specific topics. The teacher responded well in the individual ideas, meaning making and the organization of the essays. She stated that a good essay *"should be well structured (the organization of your ideas)"* and *"an excellent essay should have good paragraph organization so use the Labov and Waletzky's Narrative Structure"*. In fact, she identified the students' weaknesses and scaffolded them in the use of tenses. For example, *"all of you are having problem in knowing the correct tenses to use in your essays. Here is a link which contains variety of online exercises and tests all of you"*.

The next frequent type of post in the domain of direct instruction was the one where the teacher injected knowledge from diverse sources such as textbook articles and personal experiences. The teacher was able to provide learning materials linked to narrative writing to assist the students in their construction of knowledge. The links provided by the teacher were related to proverbs, colloquial expressions, vocabulary, grammar, famous phrases and idioms. The teacher also corrected the wrong assumption of the students that writing a narrative essay is a difficult task. She explained that *"narrative essay is easy to write because factual essays need true facts as substance to make your essay to be outstanding. in narrative writing you need to be creative..."*.

Within the direct instruction domain, there were more posts focusing on specific issues and injecting knowledge from diverse sources. The posts related to instructional design and organisation domain were moderate in number. The teacher specifically encouraged all the students to read their friends' essays and provide ideas from various perspectives. For example, *"Joyce Chee, Deer Tommy, Monster Kblue, Valentini Belbo and Peony Moon read through Deer Tommy's essay and look into her word choices, expressions used, tenses and punctuation. Please give comment by comparing Deer Tommy's previous essays"*. Additionally, the teacher demonstrated the desire to provide supplementary exercises that were related to narrative writing to encourage students' learning and discussions. These websites



offered exercises related to idiomatic expressions, tenses and sentence structures.

The teacher was seen focusing the discussion on some specific issues of narrative writing. She emphasised that “... *a good essay not only should have good expression words and phrases, variety of sentence structures... It should be well structured (organization of ideas)*”. The students were encouraged to reach an understanding by exposing and encouraging them to consider their friends’ ideas and opinions. This point was exemplified in the following comments, “... *you can use the suggestion of Peony Moon to describe the situation when students and teachers lurch forward during the collision*” and “*Joyce gave some word choices...*”. The teacher also took the responsibility to summarise and give confidence to the students to continue writing by stating, “*it is o.k .... you can add the part in your improvised version*”. To tap into the world of knowledge, the students were exposed to ideas from various links and websites and not only confined to text and reference books. The references were basically adjectives, phrases, proverbs and colloquial expressions. All these links had helped the students to improve their narrative writing. The teacher had a highly visible role in the online learning environment to encourage students to write.



The descriptor related to instructional design and organisation had the least number of posts. The teacher, as the subject matter expert, injected instruction by setting the titles as well as giving tips and

suggestions for them to write their narrative essays. The teacher also provided model essays based on the Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure. The time parameter for the students to complete their writing task on time was also established by the teacher. The sub-categories on utilising the medium effectively and establishing netiquette were not found in this study. In Task 3, the teacher continued to set the title, suggestions and tips. The teacher reminded the students to complete their essays much earlier they would be busy with their examination soon. Some examples of the descriptors of teaching presence are shown in Table 3.

#### *Other Emerging Descriptors*

There was also a number of interactions that were not directly related to the teaching presence. The interactions were related to code-switching, teacher centredness and exam-centredness. Malaysian students are exposed to a unique language environment as Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural society. Therefore, code switching is quite common in Malaysian school settings. For example, “*stayed at school means tinggal di sekolah*”, *its better to write “stayed back at school”*, *stunned means terkejut n donno what to say*”. In this study, the students and the teacher were able to convey and explain certain ideas in the essays to accomplish their narrative writing task using code-switching. Nonetheless, the use of code switching was not evident in their narrative writing. Evidently, the students were aware of the examination genre and avoided code switching while composing their essays.

TABLE 3  
Online Interaction Pattern of Teaching Presence

Codes	Descriptors	Example
TPA	Instructional Design and Organization	
A1	Setting Curriculum	 <p>FIRST TASK :</p> <p>The title of this week's essay is: Describe the most embarrassing experience you have had.</p>
A2	Designing Methods	-
A3	Establishing Time Parameters	 <p>Hi students. Hope all of you are fine. I had read through your essays and all of you had also read your friends essays and commented while helping each other to correct the mistakes and recommending each others to improve in your writing. Please review your essays respectively and upload your final draft essay by Saturday (7 July 2012). ALL THE BEST</p>

Exam-centredness was evident in this study as the teacher was seen reminding the students to consider certain aspects of writing expected in the *SPM* examination. Thus, the students were constantly reminded to maximise their scores by looking closely at the *SPM* requirements. The teacher was seen to be predominantly concerned about the lexical and grammatical errors instead of helping the students to explore and discover other areas of narrative writing. Malaysian students are generally trained to pass their public exams for them to be able to enrol at tertiary education institutions. Some of the examples are “students, in *SPM* an ‘A’ essay must have good sentence structures, good use of higher vocab” and “that how your essay will be graded as an ‘A’ band essay”.

The element of teacher-centredness is very much related to exam-centeredness in the Malaysian context. There were glimpses of interactions where the teacher often stepped in during the discussion to indicate

errors without detailed explanations about the errors. Meanwhile, clarification was only given for certain errors. Basically, we could see the teacher’s effort in editing and revising their essays without giving any detailed explanation related to vocabulary, sentence structures, organisation and content. Similar errors were very likely to occur in the students’ future essays because the teacher did not explain any further by relating to vocabulary, language and organization aspects. Furthermore, the students were not encouraged to negotiate and construct meaning with their friends. The teacher was more inclined to be in the commenting mode rather than encouraging critical thinking in the collaborative learning environment. Hence, the role of the teacher is rather authoritative and distancing the students interactions in constructing ideas and knowledge. Table 4 illustrates descriptors related to code-switching, exam-centredness and teacher-centredness.

TABLE 4

Emerging themes related to code-switching, exam-centredness and teacher-centredness

Code-switching	
	<b>Nanthini Maniam</b> Joyce Chee ... stayed at school means tinggal di sekolah, its better to write "stayed back at school" July 4 at 10:05pm · Like
	<b>Monster KBlue</b> stunned means terkejut n dono what to say? July 29 at 7:47am · Unlike · 1
	<b>Deer Tommy</b> 其实那个小孩是男主角回忆里的自己. . . July 31 at 3:09pm · Unlike · 2
Exam-centeredness	
	<b>Nanthini Maniam</b> Students, in SPM an 'A' essay must have good sentence structures, good use of higher level vocab and expressions. Not only that, students must know how to write their essay interestingly because the reader's interest should be aroused to read further and the interest must be sustained through out the essay. Do more reading and write good and creative essays. Like · Comment · Unfollow Post · July 4 at 10:08pm
Teacher-centredness	
	<b>Nanthini Maniam</b> Peony Moon....Interesting story girl but I feel you have the potential to write even better than this. This narra lack of creativity. Try to improve in your improved draft later. <b>HERE ARE SOME ERRORS MADE:</b> After head counting at the scr gate, we were (set) off to go!  We sat (on) our school bus and I think (thought) there was (we around four buses on (for) that trip.  So (never begin a sentence with 'so' because it is a conjunction. Conjunctions are used connect ideas of two sentences and it wo function as a sentence connectors).  We have (had) our breakfast in a coffee shop of (in) Ipoh.  My tummy was bloated after I (had) finished my meal as the fo was too delicious.  After 2 hours and a half (two and a half hours), we had finally reached the top of Cameron highlands.  The bus made its first stop in (at) a strawberry shop.  The strawberries were made into fine cakes, (and) tarts with appealing decorations which were very appetizing desserts.

*Teacher's Reflection*

The teacher expressed her satisfaction in using the social interactions in online collaboration as a learning strategy. She explained that the students were basically excited and curious when they were asked

to write their essays in the collaborative learning environment. They were able to overcome their fears as they were engaged in the interactions with teacher and students. In addition, the teacher pointed out that the students in the traditional classroom were usually shy when they interacted and had the

tendency not to speak confidently. Another point given by the teacher was that they shared the resources when they were engaged in the social interactions in the collaborative learning environment. The teacher also pointed out that she had encouraged students to use idiomatic expressions, proverbs, word choices, compound sentence structures, metaphors and personification that made the narrative essays to be outstanding. She found that the students improved their tenses, word choices, sentence structures and story line. She concluded by stating that the social interactions in the online collaborative environment as an effective learning practice for writing.

As mentioned earlier students are required to write an initial and final task. In the initial task the errors made by students were related to organisation, content, vocabulary, language and mechanics. However, in the final task there were improvements in all these aspects. Table 5 indicates the scores for the initial and final tasks. Table 5 has been published in Annamalai *et al.* (2013). The letters O, C,

L, V, M and T refer to organisation, content, language, vocabulary, mechanics and total, respectively.

**DISCUSSION**

In terms of teaching presence, the teacher being the subject matter expert was seen to direct the students’ attention to the important aspects of the tasks. She successfully set the title and the time frame for the task to be completed by the students. The teacher constantly encouraged, acknowledged and reinforced students’ contributions. This motivated and encouraged them to stay engaged in their tasks. Similarly, Koh *et al.* (2010) and Murphy (2004) claimed that teachers must consider and comment on their students’ post to encourage them to engage in the interactions. The teacher’s effort of scaffolding by providing materials, sub-tasks and exercises related to narrative writing helped the students as well. There was also evidence that the teacher had incorporated the sub-tasks that were involved in teaching narrative writing such

TABLE 5  
Scores of initial and final tasks

STUDENT	SCORES FOR THE INITIAL AND FINAL TASKS											
	INITIAL TASK						FINAL TASK					
	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	12	12	18	12	6	<b>60</b>	17	17	23	18	7	<b>82</b>
S2	17	17	20	16	6	<b>76</b>	18	17	26	16	7	<b>84</b>
S3	14	14	19	12	6	<b>65</b>	18	19	24	18	7	<b>86</b>
S4	12	13	17	12	6	<b>60</b>	18	16	25	16	7	<b>82</b>
S5	13	12	18	12	6	<b>61</b>	17	16	18	15	7	<b>73</b>
S6	15	16	23	17	6	<b>77</b>	18	18	23	18	7	84

as grammar, mechanics, vocabulary, idioms and phrasal verbs. In fact, she instructed the students to complete extra online exercises related to narrative writing. This encouraged students' critical thinking and aligned them with the task given to them. Consistently, literature supports the view that introducing sources of information and giving directions for useful discussions assist students' knowledge to higher level (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Ice *et al.*, 2007).

Thus, interactions related to teaching presence encouraged students to continue writing in the online collaborative learning environment. In other words, the teaching presence is an "online instructional orchestration" (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010, p. 17), where the teacher successfully brings together elements of cognitive and social presences harmoniously in an attempt to achieve the learning outcome (Anderson *et al.*, 2001). The social interactions had indeed increased the students' awareness of the importance of the comments.

The emerging descriptors found in this study indicate that the existing CoI model and the descriptors for teaching need to be modified according to the context. As the descriptors suggested by the CoI model are more applicable for online discussion in the Western culture, there is a need to add and subtract certain descriptors for students who are engaged in the online learning environment based on the task and context. For example, in the Malaysian context descriptors such as code switching, teacher centeredness and exam-centeredness can be included.

The teacher absolutely affirmed that the online collaborative learning environment made a significant difference in the teaching of narrative writing. The interactive nature of the environment, in terms of sharing ideas and giving comments, was appealing to the teacher. It was a medium that allowed students to share opinions and ideas without much restriction. The students were more confident and independent when they were engaged in the social interactions online. Such an environment afforded an opportunity for teaching and learning activities to be carried out accommodating various "individual traits based on their knowledge, background and interest" as suggested by Danchak (2004, p. 93). This is in fact a positive departure from the traditional teaching learning activity specifically related to the aspect of narrative writing.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the CoI model is suitable for studying a community in the online virtual environment and it is a simple as well as efficient model. The teacher must know his /her pedagogical role to play in the online environment. The teacher must also know when to intervene and what to intervene about. In this study, the teacher played a dominant role and this behaviour is an extension of teacher-centred behaviour in the traditional learning environment to the online learning environment. In the online environment, students should be encouraged to ask questions that motivate them to seek new insights.



The emerging descriptors point to the social and cultural differences. Although the CoI model is an established and tested model in many studies in the past decade (Archer, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Akyol & Garrison, 2008), it does not mean that this model is completely refined and applicable worldwide. In fact, there are always opportunities to further refine the model. Whenever models are used in different settings and for different types of tasks, there are always new emerging findings that can be used to improve the model further. Such a situation has arisen in this study. This study is considered different from the previous studies as it explored the experiences of teachers and students in the Malaysian ESL context. Most of the previous studies related to the CoI model centred on undergraduate students in institutions of higher education (Toth *et al.*, 2010). This study placed the model in a new environment and attempted to break new grounds involving the application of the CoI model in a specific secondary school. The study found conformity as well as divergence from the principles and application of the CoI model. It should be noted that the study was conducted in a specific setting with a small number of participants. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to other English teaching contexts. More studies should be conducted to investigate the robustness of the findings.

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