

Social presence of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model on an online narrative writing platform via Facebook

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study that investigated the interactions of six students who learnt to write narrative essays in an online writing platform accessed through Facebook. The students were from an urban Chinese school in the state of Penang, Malaysia. Qualitative data in the form of online interactions in the collaborative learning environment by six students and a teacher were collected from a closed group created within Facebook. The interactions were coded based on descriptors related to social presence in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model by Garrison, Archer and Anderson (2000). The participants were also interviewed to investigate their experiences while they were engaged in the online narrative platform. Findings indicated that the social presence suggested by the CoI model was present in the interactions during students' engagement with the online narrative writing platform. However, there were certain descriptors suggested by the model that are not applicable in the context of this study. An additional descriptor was found to emerge in this study. This descriptor is termed by the researchers as social learning presence. Interviews revealed that the participants viewed the Facebook environment as a good avenue to improve writing.

KEYWORDS: Online writing, social presence, online collaboration, Community of Inquiry (CoI) model

Introduction

The viral speed of the use of Facebook has resulted in research related to examining Facebook as a pedagogical tool (Munoz & Towner, 2009). Facebook is a highly informal environment for learners to continue interactions outside the classroom (Mazman & Usluel, 2010). According to Mack, Behler, Roberts and Rimland (2007, p. 4) Facebook is an excellent mechanism for communicating with our students because it allows us to go where they already are as “it is an environment that students are already comfortable with”.

In Malaysia, more research is needed to determine if social networking sites such as Facebook can be used effectively and identify who takes full advantage of Facebook for the teaching of writing (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010). Findings from abroad (Reid, 2011; Shih, 2011 & Promnitz-Hayashi 2011) cannot be fully applicable to the local context as Malaysia is different geographically and socio-culturally. In response to the call for exploration in this field, this study investigates the social presence suggested by the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison, Archer & Anderson, 2000) while students worked within an online narrative writing platform. Researchers have indicated that building and maintaining an online community is pertinent to the enhancement of learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2010). According to Palloff and Pratt (2010, p. 29) “the learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online, without the support and participation of a learning community there is no online course”. Although a number of studies have been conducted on social presence and web-based environments, the online environment afforded by such a popular social networking site as Facebook warrants investigation. In this study, the examination of social presence will help educators to gain a better understanding of what and how students were interacting while engaging in the online narrative writing platform accessed through Facebook.

Online narrative writing platform in the Facebook environment

According to Oliveira, Camacho and Gisbert (2013), Information Communication and Technology (ICT) is rapidly evolving in education but pedagogical practices have not. In this sense, innovation is crucial. The innovation in this study refers to the pedagogical practices that use social interactions, online-collaboration, and Labov and Waltezky's (1967) narrative structure to support students to write their narrative essays. While all these happened within Facebook in this study, other social networking sites such as My Space, Google Docs, Bebo and newer platforms that may appear in the future are also possible sites for learning.

Facebook is complex in terms of the number of features it carries. This includes the features of *Like, Chatroom, Comments, Notifications, Messages, News Feed, Events, Groups, Apps, Friends* and others. To use Facebook, one need not necessarily use all the features. Suffice if it is used to accomplish the task planned. In the case of using Facebook to encourage narrative writing among students, it is sufficient to use features such as *Groups, Comments* and the *Walls* alone. A closed group discussion was also conducted to avoid uneasiness among students. In fact, Mahadi and Ubaidullah (2010) suggested that the use of social networking sites should be filtered and controlled by inviting only registered members to discussion.

In this study, two platforms were used in the Facebook environment. They are viewed as two types of pedagogical writing platforms. These two platforms are equivalent to Campbell's (2003) learner blog and tutor blog. Since the writing platform is created within Facebook, the tutor blog is adopted as tutor platform and the learner blog is adopted as learner platform. With

the use of tutor platform, the teacher controls the style and the format of learners' narrative writing. Following this, students are required to produce their individual essays based on the guidelines outlined in the learner platform. The essays are placed in the learner platform.

Additionally, the learner and tutor platforms are utilized to encourage collaborative learning. On both the platforms, students are given the opportunity to express their opinions and comments. The comments are provided by the teacher and the peers for the students to improve on their essays. There is a joint effort between teacher and students to improve students' narrative writing. Thus, the platforms were the main domain for all teaching and learning activities.

The investigation was guided by two research questions:

- 1) What are the prominent descriptors under the affective, interactive and cohesive domains of social presence of the CoI model?
- 2) What are the students' and teacher's experiences of using the online narrative writing platform?

Literature review

Social presence of the CoI model

The CoI model suggested by Garrison et al (2000) discusses three important presences. They are cognitive, teaching and social presences. This study has only considered the aspect of social presence. Short, Williams and Christie (1976) define social presence as "the salience of the other in interpersonal interactions" (p. 65). Social presence initiates group cohesion, which deepens interactions and encourages collaborative learning (Henri, 1992; Garrison et al., 2000). This is an important feature of meaningful constructivist learning (Akyol et al., 2009).

According to Garrison et al. (2000), three important indicators of social presence are emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2001) relabelled these three indicators to suit their study. Open communication is termed as interactive responses, emotional presence as affective responses and group cohesion as cohesive responses. The descriptors for social presence are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptors of social presence

Indicators	Definition	Example
Affective		
Expression of Emotions	conventional expression of emotion, or unconventional expressions of emotion, includes repetitious punctuation	“I just can’t stand it when” “ANYBODY OUT THERE”
Use of Humour	teasing, cajoling, irony, understatements, sarcasm	The banana crop in Edmonton is looking good this year!
Self- disclosure	Present details of life outside of class or express vulnerability	“Where I work, this is what we do...”
Interactive		
Continuing a Thread	Using reply features to quote others entire message or cutting and pasting selection of others’ messages	Software dependent, e.g. “Subject: Re” or “Branch from”
Quoting from others’ messages	Using software features to quote others entire message or cutting and pasting selection of other’ messages.	Software dependent, e.g. “Martha writes” or text prefaced by less- than symbol <
Referring Explicitly to others’ messages	Direct references to contents of others’ posts	“in your message you talk about Moore’ definition between...”
Asking questions	Students ask questions of other students or the moderator	“Anyone else had experience with WEBCT?”
Complementing expressing appreciation	Complementing others or contents of others’ messages	“I really like your interpretation of your reading”
Expressing agreement	expressing agreement with others or content of others’ messages.	“I was thinking the same thing. You really hit the nail on the head”.
Cohesive		
Vocatives	Addresses or refers to the group inclusive pronouns	“I think John made a good point” “John what do you think?”
Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns	Addresses the group as we, us, our, group	“Our textbook refers to ... “Oh think we veered off track...”
phatics, salutations	Communication that serves a purely social function; greetings, closures	“Hi all” “That’s it for now” We’re having the most beautiful weather here”.

Source: Rourke et al. (2001, p.11)

A number of studies found that social presence has positive impact on meaningful and effective learning experiences (Swan & Shih, 2005; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Picciano, 2002; Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz & Swan, 2001). Garrison and Anderson (2003) found that social presence provides an environment that is intellectually demanding and contains meaningful interactions that encourage critical thinking and higher levels of learning. In fact, Archer (as cited in Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 53) highlights that social presence provides the foundation for high level interactions rather than engaging in “pathological politeness” where students’ comments are not rejected or treated with uncertainty. Social presence exhibits an encouraging environment for affective, interactive and group cohesion for building understanding (Garrison, 2003).

Research on the CoI model

The descriptors and the sub-categories of the social presence were explored by a number of researchers (Annand, 2011; Cui, Locke & Meng, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). More recent studies found the element of collective efficacy as an important element in computer supported collaborative learning. Realizing this fact, Shea and Bidjerano (2010) postulated the concept of learning presence as the fourth component of the CoI model which is related to self-efficacy. According to Bandura's social theory, self-efficacy has been defined as "individuals' beliefs about their own agency and judgement of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). It is the interface between learner motivation and cognition. There have been calls for more studies related to the CoI model in areas related to collaborative learning in an undergraduate setting to investigate the differences that might appear (Toth, Amrein-Beardsley & Fougler, 2010). Therefore, the present study has focused on social presence in the CoI model in the Malaysian context.

Additionally, social presence demands due attention when learning is afforded by Facebook. Although a considerable amount of research has been conducted in various aspects related to Web 2.0 tools and social presence for language teaching and learning, there is relatively scarce research investigating social presence in the Facebook environment. Among the studies related to social presence and Web 2.0, the focus is on establishing social presence by incorporating audio, video, and posting introduction (Aragon, 2003), using text messages to improve social presence (DuVall, Powell, Hodge & Ellis, 2007) and Keil and Johnson (2002) using Internet based voice mail to encourage social presence. In an attempt to continue investigating social presence in language learning, the current study focuses on social presence using the closed group and comments found in the Facebook environment while participants were involved in completing their narrative writing tasks.

In the Malaysian context, Malaysian students' achievement for the writing component is still at the dissatisfactory level (Darus & Ching, 2009; Latifah & Ramli, 2010; Sarudin, Zubairi, & Ali, 2009). Students see continuous writing which includes narrative, factual and expository text types as a challenging task compared to directed writing (Marimuthu & Goh, 2005). One way to get them interested in writing is by providing a virtual "third place" where students have the opportunity to interact and write outside the classroom at their own pace. Moreover, they are thrilled and energized if they are able to deepen their interactions and work collaboratively (Oblinger & Hagner, 2005). With such convenience, students are likely to be more motivated, interested and less troubled (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010; Murray & Hourigan, 2008).

Methodology

Participants

Six Form 4 students and one English teacher in a secondary school took part in the study. The students have had nine years of formal education in ESL. Three students were of advanced level while another three were of intermediate level of English proficiency. The students from the advanced level obtained Grade A for their PMR English examination and the students from the Intermediate level obtained Grade B.

Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants with the following criteria. They must i) be able to access the Internet and Facebook either at home or at school, ii) secure parental consent, and iii) volunteer to participate in this study. Students were given pseudonyms as follows: S1- Valentini Belbo, S2- Monster Kblue, S3- Catelite Nina, S4- Peony Moon, S5- Deer Tommy and S6- Joyce Chee. The teacher's pseudonym was Nanthini Maniam.

Research procedures

A qualitative case study design was adopted in this study. A Facebook group account named Narrative Writing was created. The students and teacher interacted in this closed group to accomplish the writing tasks. The students were given three writing tasks by the teacher. The titles of the essays were based on the Form 4 syllabus. The students were instructed to keep the length of the essays to not less than 350 words, based on the SPM requirement. The selection of the materials was based on current topics that were related to students' experiences and interesting events that had potential to generate discussion. The sample essays were adapted from *Model Compositions and Summaries for SPM* (Sebastian & Roy, 2005) and *SPM Total revision Books* (Koh, 2005). The teacher guided the students with the Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure by utilizing the tutor platform. In this study, the researcher used the Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure as it is a productive model for the teaching of narrative writing (Toolan, 1988). According to Labov and Waletzky (1967), the six structures consist of Abstract, Orientation, Complicating Action, Resolution, Evaluation and Coda, which are temporally sequenced. The six stages offer information on the type of linguistic forms that each stage typically signifies. The systematically organized information helps students to write better and increase students' awareness of the criteria for good narrative writing. Students were supported with explanation and discussion of the topic. The discussion in the tutor platform was based on the titles below:

Task 1: Describe the most embarrassing experience you have had.

Task 2: Write a story beginning with "The students were excitedly unloading their luggage."

Task 3: Write a story ending with "... Tears welled up in his eyes."

For each task, the students were required to write an essay before and an essay after the interactions in the learner platform. The essay written after interactions was the second version (same title) of the essay written before interactions. Therefore, throughout the six weeks each student was engaged in writing six essays, that is, two essays per task. The six weeks were confirmed by the teacher participant to be a comfortable duration. The number of tasks (three tasks) was also agreed upon by the teacher participants. Eighteen essays were collected before the social interactions began on the online narrative writing platform and another eighteen essays after the social interactions were done in the online collaborative learning environment. A total of thirty six essays were collected from the learner platform. To show improvement an initial and final task were given. For the final task students were required to write a narrative essay entitled 'A Narrow Escape' in the classroom before they are engaged in the collaborative learning environment. The students were given one hour and fifteen minutes to complete their essays. Discussion and collaboration were not permitted when students were writing initial and final tasks. The final tasks was assigned after six weeks of instruction using online narrative writing platform. The title of the final tasks was 'Saved at the Eleventh Hour'.

Data collection

Data for research question one came from the participants' online interactions. The online interaction archives were coded based on the descriptors suggested by the CoI model. Miles and Huberman's (1994) percentage and Cohen kappa inter-rater reliability were used to measure the agreement between coders in categorizing the interaction patterns. The researchers coded the interactions. Two coders were trained by the researchers to use the coding schemes suggested by Rourke et al. (2001) for identifying and categorizing social presence. The researchers applied negotiated coding procedures with another two coders. The researcher and the two coders discussed and categorized the messages based on CoI model. The agreement between coders for the presence is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Kappa value for the Social, Teaching and Cognitive Presences

Presences	Kappa Value	Interpretation
Teaching	0.9	Almost Agreement
Cognitive	0.8	Substantial Agreement
Social	0.9	Almost Agreement

Based on Table 2 there is a high level of agreement between coders for social presence. The kappa value is 0.9. The result indicates that all coders were almost consistent in coding the online interactions. Thus, the results can be considered reasonably reliable.

To answer research question two, interviews were used. Interviews were transcribed and analysed into emerging themes. Two sets of questions were prepared for the students. One set for the focus group interview and another for the individual interviews. The focus group interview encourages talking and it is easier for participants to share opinions and experiences (Goldman & McDonald, 1987) whereas the individual interviews allow them to speak more openly on confidential matters. The focus group interview took approximately an hour while the individual interviews took one hour and thirty minutes. The teacher was also interviewed regarding the use of the platform. The interview data were interpreted based on Creswell's (2009) data analysis and interpretation procedures.

The steps are:

- Step 1: Organize and prepare the data for analysis
- Step 2: Read through all the data
- Step 3: Begin detailed analysis with a coding process
- Step 4: Use the coding process to generate themes for analysis
- Step 5: Advance how description and themes will be presented in the qualitative nature.
- Step 6: Make interpretation of the data.

Findings and discussion

The three descriptors of social presence under the affective, interactive and cohesive domains were present in the interactions. Table 3 shows their numerical distribution for Tasks 1, 2 and 3.

Table 3. Numerical distribution of social presence descriptors for Tasks 1, 2 and 3

Codes	Descriptors	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Total
SPA	Affective				
SPA1	Expression of Emotions	11	23	8	42
SPA2	Use of Humour	11	8	5	24
SPA3	Self- Disclosure	20	5	6	31
SPB	Interactive				
SPB1	Continuing the Thread	-	-	-	-
SPB2	Quoting for other messages	-	-	1	1
SPB3	Referring Explicitly to others' messages	-	-	-	-
SPB4	Asking Questions	-	-	-	-
SPB5	Complimenting, Expressing Appreciation	13	26	22	61
SPB6	Expressing Agreement	1	8	3	12
SPC	Cohesive				
SPC1	Vocatives	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
SPC2	Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
SPC3	Phatics Salutations	7	4	-	11

As Table 3 indicates, the distribution was found to be uneven. Some descriptors were more prominent than others. The most prominent descriptors were related to the affective domain. Within the affective domain, the expression of emotions seemed to take the lead. In the interactive domain, complimenting and expressing appreciation seemed to occur frequently. A number of descriptors for the interactive domain were not present at all while phatics and salutations from the cohesive domain had a considerable number of posts. For the cohesive domain, some of the descriptors were not useful and were not coded for this study.

In the affective domain under the expression of emotions descriptors, the students were involved in apologising, expressing mild regret for making mistakes in their essays. For example, “*Sorry for the mistake*” (Valentini Belbo) and “*Sorry for posting here a bit late*” (Monster Kblue). Students recognized the humour of a situation in the essays and were able to connect it with other personal experiences. One student responded to her friend’s essay with comments such as “*why I can’t understand it? Cz in my house the toilet switch is low enough for me to touch when I am 7... haha!*” (Joyce Chee). The teacher was also engaged in the social interactions. She commented that “*Joyce Chee and Peony Moon... are both blaming the toilet height now (hehe)*”.

In the affective domain under the self-disclosure descriptor, the students were found to be comfortable in sharing their feelings and ideas after reading their friends' essays. This implies that students were willing to share and support each other's ideas. For example, "*Next time I will be more careful of what am I doing*" (Valentini Belbo), "*I will cry if this happen in real life*" (Joyce Chee) and "*teacher too has similar experience... walking to the wrong car n tried to open the door...*" (Nanthini Maniam). In the interactive category, praise, admiration and approval were offered by the students and teacher after reading their friends' essays. These expressions were categorised as compliments. The students gave comments such as "*Valentini Belbo has a good command of English. Her essay really makes me shiver*" (Deer Tommy) and "*That's a wonderful real story*" (Valentini Belbo). Expression of agreement was limited in this study. There was only one student who explicitly agreed with a friend's opinion.

Phatics and salutations were widespread and included expressing gratitude to the friends and the teacher for their constructive ideas that helped them in writing their narrative essays. For example "*thanks for the correction!!*" (Valentini Belbo) and "*a useful tip indeed: D Thanks teacher!!*" (Valentini Belbo). Interestingly, greetings from the teacher were also evident before the teacher engaged the students in the writing task. The teacher wrote "*Hi students! How are you? Hope all of you are out of stress after the first term examination.*"

Overall, the informal interactions probably caused students to feel that there was somebody who acknowledged, took an interest in and was concerned about their learning activities. All these comments illustrated how they were connected with each other in the virtual community. Their relationships offline were extended online. Such connections very likely encouraged students' engagement and motivation in the task given to them.

In Task 2, the analysis of social presence shows students continued to appreciate their friends' essays by expressing positive emotions that further boosted their confidence. The teacher highlighted her sympathy when a student failed to post her essay by stating that "*I understand that girl. Thanks for the post*" (Nanthini Maniam). She also encouraged another student who failed to surf the Internet for appropriate resources to "*try to surf through any online dictionary which can suit the computer setting*" (Nanthini Maniam). The encouragement from the teacher was important for students to continue writing when they encountered problems.

On this online platform, one of the students was able to express her regret and made an apology. She said "*sorry for the late post as there were problems with my line recently and I am busy with my international camp*" (Joyce Chee). As students interacted with each other, one student was also curious about the idea put forward by another student and queried with "*I was wondering don't the passengers feel the impulsive force acting on d bus. Won't they lurch forward during d collision?*" (Peony Moon). The element of humour in this task was interesting as the student (Deer Tommy) made an attempt to share a short dialogue that was considered funny. Self-disclosure was also evident as students continued to comfortably express their experiences and ideas in their interactions. Self-disclosure allows students to reveal themselves and develop closer relationships. For example, "*I have been to Cameron Highlands more times that I can count...*" (Peony Moon), "*I feel like I am now being at the Cameron Highland enjoying big juicy strawberries beside the attractive scenery*" (Valentini Belbo) and "*I think if it happens in real life it's really a bad luck...*" (Monster Kblue).

Praises such as "*good description*" (Peony Moon), "*it's a nice essay*" and "*good use of vocabulary*" (Monster Kblue) made the social platform conducive for students to share their writing without fear. Students were also appreciative of the teacher's non-judgemental

suggestions. For example, *“thank you very much teacher for listing my many errors... I’ll pay more attention to all these!”* (Peony Moon), and *“thx a lot for the suggestion”* (Catelite Nina). The social presence analysis indicated that the students were actively reading one another’s essays, with the teacher in the background offering support. The students basically saw their friends’ essays as educationally worthwhile and valuable. More importantly they each had a role to play. Such experiences on the online platform had probably increased their interactions, comments and eventually led to essay completion.

The elements of social presence were also visible in Task 3. Sometimes students highlighted their disagreement with their friends’ ideas. They are able to show their disagreement. This indicates that they are truthful in their interactions. This was evident in the following post where the student expressed that *“hmmm imnt really understand ur story... you are not his brother!? This sentence sounds weird”* (Monster Kblue). The disagreement that the students expressed about their friends’ essays was also highlighted constructively and respectfully, as seen in *“but I think it is better to tell the reader about why he wants to leave his house”* (Catelite Nina) and *“I also think that this essay lack of feel, can you give me some suggestions on how to improve it?”* (Joyce Chee). Another student was frustrated with an obstacle she faced, as seen in the post of *“I hate my internet line~ SLOW+ always interrupted!!!”* (Deer Tommy). Students continued to share the amusement and laughter in their friends’ essays. For example, *“as close as adam and eve? Hehe~This reminds me about the story~ Two of them just steal the apple from the God~”* and *“That is wat we always do on birthdays... Haha”* (Deer Tommy). These examples, to a certain extent, initiated and maintained a warm, safe and a comfortable environment for students to actively engage in narrative writing.

As with the earlier two tasks, they were also able to share their experiences while they were composing their essays for Task 3. One of the students wrote that her post would be late since she was *“trying to post a better essay”* (Deer Tommy). Most of the interactions in Task 3 seemed to fall under the complimenting and expressing appreciation categories. Students and teacher basically validated and clarified that their ideas were appropriate in the essays via compliments and appreciation. For example, *“Well done, interesting story line”* (Nanthini Maniam), *“It was almost a perfect essay”* (Peony Moon) and *“I think this essay is interesting and more appealing to compare with two other essays”* (Catelite Nina).

The pattern of the online interactions for social presence for Task 1 was predominantly related to elements of expressing apologies, humour, emotions, complimentary remarks and salutations. They were able to relate their ideas and opinions without fear. As for Task 2, positive emotions continued to play a crucial role to engage students in their writing task. The teacher continued to express her sympathy and encouraged the students to continue writing. Humour and praises spiced up the interactions. Such patterns of social presence were found in Task 3. Similarly, previous research (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz & Swan, 2001; Swan & Shih, 2005) supports the idea that social presence has an impact on students’ satisfaction and engagement in learning experiences. It is interesting to note that the interactions related to social presence gradually decreased as they proceeded from one task to another. In the interviews, the participants confirmed that they were not able to be online as they were busy preparing for their exams. Table 4 shows the interaction patterns of the social presence

Table 4. Online interaction pattern of social presence

Codes	Descriptors	Example
SPA Affective		
A1	Expression of Emotions	
A2	Use of Humour	
A3	Self- Disclosure	
SPB Interactive		
B1	Continuing a Thread	-
B2	Quoting from others' Messages	
B3	Referring Explicitly to others' Messages	-
B4	Asking Questions	-
B5	Complimenting Expressing Appreciation	
B6	Expressing Agreement	
SPC Cohesive		
C1	Vocatives	-
C2	Addresses or Refers to the group using inclusive Pronouns	N/A
C3	Phatics, Salutations	

In essence, the interactions related to social presence show that the students were willing to share their experiences and encourage interactions that were related to the assignments given to them. Garrison and Anderson (2003, p. 67) highlight that social presence is an “important antecedent to collaboration and critical discourse because it facilitates achievements of cognitive objectives by instigating, sustaining and supporting critical thinking in a community of learners”. They also point out that students value “social presence as a means to share ideas, to express ideas and to collaborate” (ibid., p. 76). Furthermore, the social presence in this study provided the space for students to move to a high level dialogue instead of indulging in “pathological politeness” (Archer, cited in Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 53) which refers to the phenomenon that learners’ comments are not challenged and treated with uncertainty. In the present study, students were able to continue writing for six weeks as the social interactions were intellectually challenging. The fruitful discussion eventually led to the completion of three writing tasks.

As evident in Table 4, the scores for the various aspects of narrative writing in the initial and final tasks, evaluated by the three raters, are presented. The average scores for the initial and final tasks as provided by the three raters are shown in Table 5. The scores indicated that there was a marked improvement in the final essay that was written after the online interactions compared to the very first essay.

Table 5. Students’ average scores for initial and final tasks

STUDENT	AVERAGE SCORES FOR 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	60	17	17	23	18	7	82
S2	17	17	20	16	6	76	18	17	26	16	7	84
S3	14	14	19	12	6	65	18	19	24	18	7	86
S4	12	13	17	12	6	60	18	16	25	16	7	82
S5	13	12	18	12	6	61	17	16	18	15	7	73
S6	15	16	23	17	6	77	18	18	23	18	7	84

In conclusion, the online collaborative learning platform has helped the students to enhance different aspects of writing, namely organization, content, vocabulary, language and mechanics. Details of the improvement have been published in Annamalai, Tan and Abdullah (in press).

Emerging descriptors

There was also an emerging descriptor that was not given by Rourke et al.'s (2001) social presence. These emerging findings further enriched the literature as discussed below. In the present study, the examination of the nature of the interactions found that the social presence component of the CoI model can be further sub-categorized. It is felt that Garrison et al.'s (2000) social presence which was relabelled by Rourke et al. (2001) were not sufficiently inclusive in terms of definition. The meaning of social is rather fuzzy. It creates uncertainty of whether it is just about social communication alone or it extends to include social aspects and the learning elements in line with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of social learning. Realizing this, Shea and Bidjerano (2010) recommended a learning presence which is related to learners' self-

efficacy and self-regulation. A number of descriptors were suggested by Shea and Bidjerano (2010) but these were not found to be present in this study. The researchers believed that learning presence should not come as a fourth presence but be combined with social presence to produce a new sub category named as social learning presence under social presence (see Figure 1). The emerging instances of social learning are provided in the following Table 5.

Table 5. Social Learning Presence

Task 1	 <p>Joyce Chee dun try to translate Deer Tommy, it will be weird if you translate and you will face a lot of grammatical error July 1 at 9:53pm · Unlike · 👍 1</p>  <p>Catelite Nina u cn find the vocab in the www.dictionary.com by typing chinese and translate into English.. I use that in my essay too...</p>  <p>Peony Moon yup.. I agree with u... July 16 at 5:21pm · Like</p>
Task 2	 <p>Catelite Nina I think you can create some troubles in the essay to make it more interesting ... July 16 at 6:15pm · Unlike · 👍 1</p>  <p>Deer Tommy I agree that Peony Moon really knows how to describe well~ but it will be more interesting if she describe the roses in Cameron Highlands~ They have vivid colours~ try to briefly explain this phenomena? July 16 at 8:30pm · Unlike · 👍 1</p>
Task 3	 <p>Catelite Nina I will use the links to find suitable and creative idiomatic expressions in my essay next time ^ July 26 at 5:10pm · Unlike · 👍 1</p>

Participants' experiences

It was also interesting to hear the participants relate their experiences in using the online writing platform to accomplish a writing task. The next section discusses themes that emerged from the analysis of interview data.

Pleasant and enriching experiences

Students explained that their involvement in the online narrative writing platform environment was a pleasant and enriching experience with an abundance of information shared during the interactions. The students were able to refine their knowledge after being exposed to diverse ideas and opinions from their peers. This was exemplified in the following comments of “My friends comments about my essay and I can learn from them” (Valentini Belbo), “whenever I see someone’s post idiom or phrase. Then I learn a lot” (Monster Kblue) and “can learning tenses, improve my language, know other people’s thought” (Catelite Nina).

A student was impressed with her friend's essay and it pushed her to improve her own writing. She confided that she was happy that her friend's essay which *"is better than meso I am proud to have friends like they all... I want to improve my vocabulary. My friend's essay is good. I wish to be like them"* (Deer Tommy). The friendly competition gave her greater confidence and in turn motivated her to achieve a commendable level of writing. Additionally, there was greater flexibility in interactions with friends at any time as one student highlighted that *"I can look at my friend's essay anytime. Maybe midnight, get to know my mistakes... good one and bad one"* (Peony Moon). Students also agreed that they were able to understand the instructions uploaded by the teacher for Task 1, Task 2 and Task 3. They obtained adequate relevant information for the task given to them.

A convenient online writing space

The online narrative writing platform accessed through Facebook was a convenient writing space because of the flexibility in preparing their essays. Students stated that they had *"more time to prepare the essay in the Internet online...more time to think about points and the questions"* (Monster Kblue) and *"More days to think about the ideas"* (Catelite Nina).

Students found that they were able to plan and write their essays carefully before the essays were posted. The comments were *"...I can find some information. Normal class I have to rush. Rush, rush, cut, cut, cut...at the end normal story (laughter) no points, boring story"* (Joyce Chee). Another student stated that *"I have more time to write online. During there [in the class] there is a lot of distraction. I will chit-chat in the class"* (Peony Moon).

Fun and enjoyable

The students enjoyed commenting on each other's work in the closed group. Some of their views were *"Very fun comment on others' essays and they say thank you, thank you, feel very happy"*, *"to help them"* (Joyce Chee), and *"Fun. I think it is fun because I know my friends better"* (Deer Tommy). They agreed that jokes and humour were able to *"release stress"* (Valentini Belbo) and *"release tense environment and encourage us to write more freely and express our thought"* (Peony Moon). Generally, the students were more relaxed, positive and optimistic about the task assigned to them. On the online writing platform, they found an environment that could stimulate and develop their narrative writing skills and make their writing activity a successful one.

Teacher's experiences

The next section discusses experiences from the teacher's point of view. From the teacher's interview transcript, a number of themes were found.

An effective writing platform

The teacher revealed that the online narrative writing platform in the Facebook environment gave students the opportunity to communicate, give opinions, share materials and comments without restrictions. The teacher added that they wrote better as they were able to use various functions of the computer, in contrast to composing on paper in the conventional writing class. She commented that *"when they use the computer they can edit, rewrite ... With the computer, it is easy to write"*. She also realised that the students had the flexibility to work according to their convenience. She elaborated that *"students find it interesting and something new rather*

than doing it in class and they are doing it from home and it is additional exercise for them". The students' positive attitude in completing their essays was pleasant experience for the teacher.

Improving narrative writing

Regarding students' improvement in the different aspects of narrative writing, the teacher identified the areas of "*word choices, grammar, sentence structures.*" She also found that they "*started to use direct speech and indirect speech.*" The students were observed to "help each other. The good ones help the weak ones. So you can see in the initial task and the final task there is great improvement."

By interacting with and helping their friends, students were able to experience friendly competition which resulted in the improvement in their narrative writing. Overall, the teacher was pleased with the platform as it encouraged the students to work collaboratively.

Motivating online interactions

The most cogent finding from the teacher's interview was the idea that the platform was motivating as it involved a popular social networking site. This was reflected in the following comment that students were "*actively motivated as they are in Facebook as many students love Facebook. It becomes a trend and indirectly we are using it in Education and students are actually improving a lot*".

Students were less tensed as they were actively engaged in the interactions. They were less fearful of losing face or suffering from embarrassment in front of the class. In other words, the interactions related to teaching and learning activities were taking place in a non-threatening environment. In conclusion, the narrative writing platform on Facebook is a highly valued environment from the participants' (students and teacher) perspectives.

Implications and conclusion

This study supports and expands on the CoI model as a suitable model with added descriptors to understand social interactions that take place in the teaching and learning of narrative writing in the Malaysian ESL classroom. The descriptors suggested by the CoI model by Garrison et al. (2000) and relabelled by Rourke et al (2001) seem to be more applicable for online discussion in the Western culture. There is a need to relook at the descriptors for students who are engaged in the online learning environment based on the tasks given in the Malaysian context. In this study, the social learning presence can be a sub-category other interactive descriptor. The sub-categories such as 'continuing the thread', 'referring explicitly to others' message' and 'asking questions' can be deleted. This is probably because the nature of the task does not require these sub-categories. Future research can be conducted to investigate the robustness of the emerging findings from this study.

A worthy point to note is that students valued and viewed the online narrative writing platform positively. Its significant role as a satisfying and enriching platform was recognised by most of the students as the flexibility of time and location are usually not available within the context of traditional classroom writing. On this online platform, students were able to work at their own pace and interact at a time convenient to them. Mahadi and Ubaidullah (2010) and Weiler

(2003) have noted that students benefit from online learning since it enables them to learn at any time convenient to them based on their own preferred strategy.

When the teacher was interviewed, the teacher absolutely affirmed that the online narrative writing platform accessed through the Facebook made a positive impact on the teaching and learning activities 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. This finding corroborates the work of Cloete et al (2009) and Yancey (2009) on Facebook which offered space for students to interact and exchange information. The teacher raised the point similar in nature to Kabilan, Norlida and Jafre (2010), Reid (2011) and Munoz and Tower (2009), who found that popular social networking is a successful medium for language learning.

The students and teacher's experiences highlighted that the online narrative writing platform provided an innovative and creative way of nurturing narrative writing. Hence, educators should consider the use of online writing platform as suggested in this study to enhance and design their activities in teaching writing. This research was conducted in a very specific setting. The study was done on a small scale, and thus, is difficult to generalize. Therefore, it is important to replicate this study in other settings to investigate if similar findings do emerge. Similarly, future studies can also be conducted to study other aspects of language learning besides narrative writing.

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