Chapter VIII
Enlivening the Promise of Education: Building Collaborative Learning Communities Through Online Discussion

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ABSTRACT

An important dimension in education is interaction, that is, the coming together of a number of people to discuss, debate, and deliberate about issues of common concern. In distance education, such social environments are as much present in online learning contexts as they are in face-to-face learning contexts such as tutorials. This chapter expands the notion of teacher-student interaction to focus on integrating human computer interaction in the curriculum. This is done through the use of online discussion forums at Open University Malaysia that help build collaborative online communities using common principles of teaching and learning. Citing a recent case in point, this chapter demonstrates how the Open University Malaysia-Collaborative Online Learning Model for online interaction helped cultivate learner-centric virtual discussions and supported an interactive online community that showcased characteristics of social interdependence and instructional support. This chapter takes a social constructivist view of human computer interaction by proposing an instructional model supported by collaboration, guidance, interdependence, cognitive challenge, knowledge construction, and knowledge extension. The Introduction section of this chapter provides the rationale for human computer interaction and gives an overview of current-day perspectives on the online classroom. This is followed by a trenchant review of recent research on online interaction with a view to outlining the theoretical premise for the use of computers to develop thinking and collaborative or team skills. This section also provides a rationale for the use of online forums and gives a frame of reference for the role of the instructor in this enterprise.


In the next section of this chapter, the Open University Malaysia-collaborative online learning model is described, with details on The Learning Context as well as Group Learning Outcomes, which may be seen as inherent parts of the model. Under the sub-section Knowledge Construction, the chapter carries a qualitative analysis of online interaction for one Open University Malaysia course using a comprehensive list of indigenous categories and sub-categories as well as examples of interactions that match each sub-category. The chapter ends with a Summary, a statement of Acknowledgement, a list of References, and an Appendix. The appendix contains the Task that was used for the course for which online interaction in this chapter was analyzed.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient Roman cities, a forum was an assembly place for judicial activity and public business. Such assembly often took place in a public square or marketplace. This is where orations were delivered, and public meetings and open discussions were held by various people. Similarly, in ancient Greece, a place of congregation—like a marketplace—was known as the agora. Such movements in history have given rise to the human need for discussion, debate and deliberation for the explication of ideas and facts before one can promote or dissuade an idea or event.

As extensions of the forum and the agora, today's online forums and online discussion groups have given rise to various discourse communities (Jonassen, 2002), collaborative learning groups (Dillenbourg and Schneider, 1995) and learning networks (Harasim, Hiltz, Telen, & Turoff, 1995). In these virtual classrooms (Hiltz, 1995), tutors, learners and experts come together to discuss content-related topics, debate on issues of common interest, share resources and deliberate on best solutions to various issues or problems. Such developments in educational practice have had an enormous impact on the way we teach, and on the way we interact with our students. We now view the online or virtual classroom as an extension of the traditional face-to-face classroom, and conversations begun in the latter are continued in the former, and so on. The role of the tutor or teacher has been redefined to include online facilitation, support frameworks and dialogue (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker, 2000). In tandem to this, the learner is expected to play a constructive role in the knowledge s/he builds and in the online learning process s/he is engaged in (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999). In sum, the historical premise for discussion, debate and deliberation for the explication of ideas and facts remains significant in the classrooms of today.

The brief discussion above demonstrates the way the online classroom has become a significant part of educational practice today, and how human computer interaction has transformed current conceptions of the role of the teacher and the learner. In order to provide a framework for understanding these developments, the next section of this chapter presents a review of research on online interaction and outlines recent developments in the theory of online pedagogy.

(Note: In this chapter the term tutor also refers to a teacher, instructor or facilitator.)

ONLINE INTERACTION

Recent research on constructive pedagogy has drawn attention to the use of online networks to improve thinking and to develop team skills. The thrust of the work in this area comes from the social constructivist view of learning (Bruner, 1986; Shaw, 1994), where learning is perceived as a "personal, reflective and transformative process" leading to the co-construction of knowledge through collaboration, inquiry, invention
and knowledge-building activities (Sandholtz, Ringstaff & Dwyer, 1997: 12-13).

One application of this perspective is the use of computers to develop thinking learners (Jonassen, 2002). Referring to selected applications as mindtools, Jonassen encourages learning with computers so that the whole enterprise of learning “becomes greater than the potential of the learner and the computer alone” (Jonassen, 2002 p. 4).

Another perspective is forwarded by Anderson’s (2004) theory of e-learning which espouses Bransford, Brown, and Cocking’s (1999) four credentials of effective learning environments: learner-centredness, knowledge-centredness, assessment-centredness and community centredness. These perspectives recognize the power of collaboration, which is a critical component of interactive online learning.

The work of socio-psychologists who have researched constructive pedagogy (Bruner, 1986) and peer-led instructional support (Keefe, Zeitz, & Resnick, 2000) has shown that collaboration is a powerful learning tool. Research indicates that collaborative activity such as online peer tutoring and team projects increases the knowledge learned and the satisfaction derived from the process (Clark, 2000). Collaborative tasks in online forums are also effective learning tools as they involve discussion and debate, processes which are crucial to understanding the many elements that influence a situation (Laurillard, 1993).

Other studies have shown that online collaboration strategies increase students’ communicative ability (Andres, 2002), their self-efficacy and academic performance (Sandholtz, Ringstaff & Dwyer, 1997) as well as their motivation to work (Turoff, 1999). Online forums also facilitate discussion, which is significant to learning as it paves the way for the use of domain-specific language and allows learners to generate their own explanations of what is understood or learnt (McKendree, 2002).

Although the use of online forums for discussion and team skills is a relatively recent phenomenon, it has become a part of many teaching and learning programmes in post-secondary education (Spatariu, Hartley & Bendixen, 2004). Many educationists (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker, 2000; Kearsley, 2000; Liao, 1996) have extolled the value of online forums in the teaching-learning process because they facilitate transparent discussion, offer direct accessibility to learning resources or materials and utilize learner-centric instructional values. To understand the widespread use of online forums in delivering the promise of education, one must recognize their enormous potential as drivers of learning and as channels of meaningful communication.

To begin, online forums provide the space for individual contribution toward a topic of discussion in a way that traditional classrooms do not. Tutors or facilitators use online facilities to provide fodder for discussion, and learners access these forums as an anytime-anywhere learning facility (Twigg, 2001). Learners can also access the forum as many times as they wish and independently contribute to the discussion. Tutors can examine each and every learner’s contributions and provide feedback to groups or to individuals depending on the nature of the task. Learner-led discussions in online forums give learners the latitude to say what they think (and what they mean) without feeling the pressure of adult presence (Johnson, Aragon, Najmuddin & Palma-Rivas, 2000). The teacher as a custodian of correctness or truth (Balester, Halasek & Peterson, 1992) phenomenon diminishes as learners exchange information in learner-led online forums. More importantly, one person’s online contributions are accessible to all participants in the learning event, in a way that individual written products in an exercise book are not.

This, above all, is the most liberating influence of the forum: the ability to communicate in an unrestricted time and space, under less restrictive conditions, and to deliver one’s thoughts to one or many as a matter of choice. For tutors, this offers an opportunity to exercise group activity and
interaction in a way that they can help realise the learning potential of each participating member of the classroom.

Despite the learner-directed nature of online interaction, it is important to realize that the role of the tutor is not attenuated as more and more computer-mediated instruction is used in a learning programme. Tutors play a very active role in designing tasks that are appropriate for collaborative and constructive activity and in participating in online discussion by moderating, modeling, questioning and providing learning support. This active role played by the facilitator, as it were, is summed up by Anderson (2004:271) when he describes what an online teacher has to do: design and organise the learning experience; devise and implement activities to encourage discourse between and among students, between the teacher and the student, and between individual students and groups of students and content resources; add subject matter expertise through a variety of forms of direct instruction; and fulfill a critical credentialing role that involves the assessment and certification of student learning. Thus, while online forums have changed the landscape of teaching and learning in terms of space and process, especially in higher education, it is also significant that the role of participating individuals has been redefined to include meaningful interaction and knowledge construction.

The review of literature above sheds light on the social constructivist view of learning and the theory of e-learning with specific reference to human computer interaction. Of significance is the influence of socio-cognitive processes such as collaboration, discussion and learner-centredness, all of which may be imbibed through carefully selected online tasks and tutor-facilitated online activity. The next section of this chapter presents details of a model for collaborative online learning which was implemented at Open University Malaysia. The implementation of this model helped to realise the ideals of social constructivism and helped build an interactive online learning community using online discussion and collaboration.

A MODEL FOR COLLABORATIVE ONLINE LEARNING

The theoretical premise for a constructivists' view on teaching and learning served as an impetus for the design of a model for online discussion at Open University Malaysia (OUM). This model, which is referred to as the OUM Collaborative Online Learning (COL) Model (Kulidip & Zoraini 2004), was developed to enrich the learning experience of Open University Malaysia's distance learners. Further, it was envisaged that computer-mediated communication would be the most effective way of providing instructional support for distance learners.

In the following sub-sections of this chapter, three aspects of the Open University Malaysia-collaborative online learning model are presented. These are: The Learning Context, which provides a description of how collaborative online learning was implemented; group learning outcomes, which outlines the learning design and the instructional outcomes of one course; and Knowledge Construction, which provides examples of online discussion utilizing principles of collaborative online learning pedagogy.

We begin with The Learning Context, a subsection that describes the learning environment at Open University Malaysia, and provides details of the five components which serve as interactive dimensions of the model itself.

The Learning Context

Learners at Open University Malaysia are required to participate in online activity as part of the total learning solution for a programme of study. For each course they are registered in, learners attend ten hours of face-to-face tutorials, engage in autonomous learning activity using a printed
module and participate in online discussions. The online discussion forum is housed within Open University Malaysia's learning management system known as myLMS, which also serves as a repository for teaching-learning resources or sample tests and as a communication channel for all administrative matters. Throughout the year, Open University Malaysia tutors from various learning centres are trained in the finer points of online collaboration and online tutoring. Training of learners incorporates guidelines on the use of the forum to communicate with peers and tutors about academic matters, collaborative strategies, as well as access to online learning resources and notices on administrative matters.

Under the collaborative online learning model, online discussions may be led by a tutor or a learner, but the focus is on an assignment which carries 25% of the marks for the final grade. The assigned task is expected to be completed in six to eight weeks, and often requires extensive reading, deliberation, as well as some amount of research and application. Students are assigned to tutorial groups led by a tutor, and the same group functions as a virtual class in myLMS. Asynchronous discussions on the task begin at the beginning of each semester and learners access myLMS from their home, workplace or an Open University Malaysia learning centre. Either the tutor or a learner may begin a threaded discussion, but both parties are expected to play an active role in the online discussion forum. Using the assignment as a point of departure, tutors and learners focus on explication and inquiry leading to deliberation on best solutions, possible outcomes and findings of individual research. In this way, collaborative online learning helps to build an interactive online learning community aimed at providing instructional support to distance learners.

The fulcrum of the collaborative online learning model is collaboration, which may be defined as a communal process encouraging learners and tutors to work together as part of a larger system rather than as individuals (Kuldip & Zoraini, 2004). This interactive and recursive process draws on characteristics of four other components of the model, namely the task, instructional or learning support, discussion and knowledge construction. The following description of the five components of the collaborative online learning model illustrates its role in shaping the learning experience at Open University Malaysia.

1. **Online collaboration:** Learners and tutors using myLMS to work together toward common goals, which in this case is to co-construct understanding of the requirements of a task, deliberating on ways to perform the task, sharing findings based on task performance and evaluating outcomes of a task;

2. **The task:** An assignment such as a problem, a case study, a debate or a project, designed for learners to apply course content in a real-world situation, or to engage in critical examination of theory and findings of past research;

3. **Learning support:** Provision of online instructional support for the task from the tutor and subject matter expert, and encouraging participation from all learners and guidance on the use of online/printed learning resources;

4. **Discussion:** Active tutor and learner participation through asynchronous threaded discussions, a way for peers to help each other, and for the tutor to facilitate the collective solving of problems or work related to the assigned task; and

5. **Knowledge construction:** The intended outcome of a task which is characteristically (a) something the learner is unable to do independently and (b) represents new knowledge or new learning.

The above components are viewed as interactive dimensions in the Open University Malaysia collaborative online teaching and learning pro-
cress. Thus a discussion group in Open University Malaysia's myLMS functions as a virtual classroom (Hiltz, 1995) where collaborative activity among tutors, learners and experts is encouraged, as well as deemed necessary. Using guidelines provided by Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker, (2000), collaborative online learning is designed for tutors to play a significant role in the facilitation of learner deliberations, provision of instructional support frameworks and modeling ways to engage in meaningful communication. In turn, the learner plays a direct role in the construction of knowledge and in gaining new learning experiences (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999).

The sub-section above has described in detail the instructional environment that is part and parcel of the Open University Malaysia learning experience. It has also outlined the salient aspects of the implementation of the Open University Malaysia-Collaborative Online Learning Model. In the next sub-section, group learning outcomes for one course for which the model was implemented are described. Of particular importance are the four categories and 16 sub-categories of online interaction that were derived through a qualitative analysis of the data from the discussion forum, myLMS.

### Group Learning Outcomes

After an initial round of pilot testing and evaluation (Kulid & Zoraini, 2004), the collaborative online learning model was implemented for two teaching English as a second language (TESL) courses for in-service teacher trainees at the Open University Malaysia in the year 2005. This chapter uses data from one of the two courses, Introduction to Novels and Short Stories, which was conducted over a 15 week semester. There were 462 students registered in the course in multiple teaching sites. Each of the 21 student groups were led by a tutor and instruction was based on a prescribed module. Five tutorial sessions, totaling ten hours of face-to-face interaction, and self-regulated study were required for the course. In addition to the interaction during face-to-face tutorials, online discussions—another course requirement—related to the contents of the module and a take-home assignment contributed to the bulk of discussion that was held on the contents of the course. The assignment (Appendix A) required students to read and write reviews of texts assigned in the course and to hand in a bound portfolio based on their reading and reviews.

Although threaded discussions in myLMS were held by all 21 groups, this paper utilises data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributions</th>
<th>Number and Percentage of Contributions by Tutorial Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of contributions analyzed: 288 (100%)</td>
<td>Group 1 total: 85 (29.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of tutor contributions analyzed: 117 (41%)</td>
<td>By tutor 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of student contributions analyzed: 171 (59%)</td>
<td>By 25 group 1 students</td>
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</table>
Table 2. Categories and sub-categories of online interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category I: GUIDANCE</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Guidance on how to begin an assignment</td>
<td>Tutors work with learners to show how something is done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Guidance on how to ask questions</td>
<td>Tutors help learners use printed and online resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Guidance on use of reference materials</td>
<td>Tutors provide support through questions, leads, and simplification of difficult subject matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Guidance on concepts related to course content</td>
<td>Tutors direct learners' attention to a particular point/topic or area of discussion</td>
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<tr>
<th>Category II: INTERDEPENDENCE</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vi. Peer coaching</td>
<td>Learners collectively answer questions, solve problems, or discuss solutions with assistance from the tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vii. Peer tutoring</td>
<td>Learners help each other by answering questions and providing direction without the assistance of a tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>viii. Sharing</td>
<td>Learners share ideas and a variety of learning materials by telling each other what they know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ix. Utilizing learner expertise</td>
<td>Learners recognize and use each other as a knowledge source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x. Vocarious learning</td>
<td>Learners learn by reading, watching, or 'lurking' without directly contributing to a discussion</td>
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<tr>
<th>Category III: CHALLENGE</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xi. Designing tasks that require multiple skills</td>
<td>Tutors design tasks based on a broad idea of learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xii. Pushing the boundaries</td>
<td>Tutors encourage learners to go beyond what they have done or what they think is sufficient for the task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiii. Inspiring learner ability</td>
<td>Tutors think of ways to inspire learners' attempts at performing a task when the task proves too difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xiv. Redirecting to encourage greater autonomy</td>
<td>Tutors redirect learner attention to other resources in order to encourage autonomous learning</td>
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<tr>
<th>Category IV: EXTENSION</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xvi. Recasting content learned in course</td>
<td>Learners recast, rephrase, or reformulate recently acquired content Learners seek feedback on content and ideas presented in their own words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xvi. Application of concepts learned in course</td>
<td>Learners use meta-cognitive strategies to analyze and apply theoretical views learned in course Learners view concepts from the social perspective or they relate real life experiences to course content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
drawn from by the four most active groups. In addition, only contributions related to the assignment part of the course are used in the analysis. Thus, 4 tutors' (19% of all tutors) and (their) 66 learners' (14% of all students) contributions in the online forum related to the assignment were analysed. As shown in Table 1, a total of 288 contributions were analysed, of which 117 were from the 4 tutors while 171 were from the 66 students. The tutor-student ratio of contributions was 1:1.46; the average number of postings per tutor was 29.3 while the average number of postings per student was 2.9.

The 288 contributions from the four groups were analysed qualitatively to examine the nature of discussion during collaborative online learning. It was found that discussion threads could be classified under four categories of interaction: guidance, interdependence, challenge and extension. These four data-driven categories are not mutually exclusive, i.e., a single thread may present evidence for one or more categories of interaction. The analysis also revealed that the four main categories could be further divided into 16 subcategories as learners and tutors engaged in a lively discussion on the assignment. The descrip-

**Figure 1. Interaction within the collaborative online learning model**
tion of categories and subcategories that emerged from the data is presented in Table 2.

The four categories and 16 subcategories categories are linked to all five components of the collaborative online learning model in terms of the specific thinking and learning processes that are brought to bear upon the discussion (Figure 1). In terms of collaboration, guidance was provided by both tutors and learners, and learners were interdependent in terms of their need for input on content, procedure and application of theory. Additionally, the assigned task appeared to have posed a challenge to learners, and learner activity provided evidence of skills extension. In terms of the four quadrants of the collaborative online learning model in Figure 1, guidance and challenge may be viewed in terms of an active tutor role while interdependence and extension may be viewed as an active learner role.

To summarise, the sub-section above has given the labels and operational definitions of the various categories and sub-categories of online interaction that are directly related to the Open University Malaysia-collaborative online learning model. These categories were derived from the analysis of online discussion during one course at Open University Malaysia. In the following sub-section, Knowledge Construction, vignettes taken from myLMS demonstrate the power of tutors’ and learners’ discussions in constructing meaning through co-construction and social interdependence.

Knowledge Construction

In order to demonstrate the viability of online interaction in creating a meaningful learning environment for distance learners, this sub-section is focused on discussion during the course Introduction to Novels and Short Stories. In the following pages, the analysis of online interaction is organised by category, viz. guidance, interdependence, challenge and extension (Table 1). Each category is then further explicated using descriptions and vignettes that fall under each sub-category. A ‘cue’ refers to the comment or contribution that triggers a threaded discussion, while cueer refers to the person who has triggered the thread. Unless otherwise indicated, all cues cited below were provided by learners.

(Note: The names of all contributors have been changed to protect their identity. Excerpts have not been edited for grammatical accuracy and italics in the data are the chapter author’s.)

I. GUIDANCE

The collaborative online learning-based interaction showed that tutors play an active role in the discussion by providing instructional support or guidance to learners. This means that they show how a task can be done, help identify and glean information from printed and online resources, use questions and leads to direct understanding, simplify difficult subject matter, and model ways for learners to work together. In many classrooms or other educational contexts, this role of the teacher is oft-times not evident; teachers may get lost in a myriad of paperwork and evaluation-based activity, forgetting that they ought to play a role in showing how to do something—e.g., how to do a sum, write a paragraph or draw a diagram.

Below is a description of the tutors’ role in providing guidance is illustrated with examples related to each of the five subcategories of guidance provided to include: how to begin an assignment, how ask questions, the use of reference materials, concepts related to course content, instructions by focusing learner attention.

i. Guidance on how to begin an assignment. In the following vignette, Aris seeks guidance on how she should begin the assignment on the novel The Pearl by John Steinbeck. Her tutor, John, tells her to begin by answering
the given questions in sequence, and gives her pointers on what she should not include in her paper.

Cue 1.
Dear Sir, How do we begin the assignment? Should I start a little bit about the review of the Pearl or we just start by answering task 1. That is by just listing down the title, author...? Aris

Response from tutor.
Aris, just start by answering the questions in sequence. The second and third questions form the introduction to your who assignment. You are not required to write things not related to the assignment questions. Rgds., John

Feedback.
Dear Sir, Thank U for shedding some light to me. Aris

ii. Guidance on how to ask questions. In contrast to Aris, another student called Ravin asks a question that is rather vague (Cue 2). As shown in the extract below, the tutor responds by requesting for more specific information. This is an important move to encourage learners to learn how to communicate effectively, and to make students aware of the need to define a problem that they want resolved. Further, as Open University Malaysia assignments may be lengthy or contain several parts, online tutoring is effective if learners are more focused and concise when they raise questions.

Cue 2.
Dear Sir, Please explain about our assignment. Thank you.

Response from tutor.
Dear Ravin, Thank you for your attempt but you can’t ask general questions like this. What or which part of the assignment don’t you understand? Be specific please so that I can be of help to you. John

iii. Guidance on use of reference materials. In the example below, the tutor, Tuan Hj. Idris, provides a reference and dictionary-based explanation for terminology used in the course. The tutor goes a step further by drawing attention to how the student can deduce the meaning of a concept. Initiatives such as these often benefit more than one student at a time, and have the effect of modeling study skills or information retrieval skills.

Cue 3.
Tuan Hj Idris, What is meant by using stylistic approach in teaching literature in the classroom?

Response from tutor
Pari, My previous answer was a little hasty. Sorry.

Martin Grey’s A Dictionary of Literary Terms, explain the term under style. Style – the characteristic manner in which a writer expresses himself... may be a combination of many different factors... describe by analysis of syntax, tone, imagery, point of view and linguistic features. As such we can always deduce that SA is like DA also Neo-RA i.e., looking at a literary work through the use of words. Is that OK? Bye.

iv. Guidance on concepts related to course content. In response to questions posed by one student (Cue 4 & 5), a tutor explains concepts that are related to the course. Often such explanations are given when a concept is complex, or if it is new or difficult. If the term is found and well explained in the printed module, or if it is available in an
online source, tutors may direct a learner to that specific source.

Cue 4.
Dear Sir, Please explain what the term 'generic conventions' is? Thank you.

Response from tutor.
Hi Nadine, Sorry for the late reply. Well, generic means the class origin - i.e belonging to a class and conventions means the basic characteristics. Therefore generic conventions would be the basic features of a certain type of writing or style or language used etc. For example what are the generic conventions of Shakespearean sonnet. So here you have to talk about the sonnet and what are the special conventions of the sonnets written by Shakespeare. Boleh faham kan? John.

Cue 5.
Dear Sir, What does the term 'contemporaneous appeal' mean when explaining short stories? Thank you.

Response from tutor.
Hi Nadine, Contemporaneous appeal refers to the current or present day readers/critics' appeal. As opposed to traditional or orthodox preferences. Rgds, John.

v. Guidance on instructions by focusing learner attention. Very often, students ask questions about a task because they have problems interpreting directions or instructions for the task. In the example below, the tutor focuses Salmah's attention on the language used in the directions for the task so that she better understands what she is required to do.

Cue 6.
For question no. 8, do I have to write an analysis of 3 reviews/essays altogether OR do I have to write it separately thank you

Response from tutor.
Dear Salmah, The question specifically stated. Write a 300 word analysis on THESE reviews... so obviously you have to write on them as one. OK? Bye.

II. INTERDEPENDENCE
The analysis of the threaded discussions also showed that learners work interdependently on the task at hand. They do this by collectively solving problems, discussing solutions, sharing learning materials, answering questions and providing direction as well as by recognising and using each other as a knowledge source. In the case of this course, Introduction to Novels and Short Stories, learners appeared to have had difficulty with the critical review of assigned texts and in accessing material from the internet. Here is how learners demonstrated interdependence during their discussions.

vi. Peer coaching. In the following example, Cue 7 is a call for help on writing a critical review. The tutor responds by referring to an announcement he has posted. However, the students go further to take on the role of a coach or guide by making suggestions, as well as seeking and providing clarification on the task. In the threaded discussion below, four students (including the cuer) are involved in one such coaching event.

Cue 7.
Hai everybody!
I'm having problem to write my critical review of The Pearl. Does anyone has any tips on how to write a good critical review? TQ
Response from tutor.

Chong. Last night I posted an announcement concerning this kind of problem. Refer to the announcement, visit the web and then...? OK? Bye.

Response from peer 1 to cue.

Saudari Chong. Voice your opinions at the end of every paragraph (6 paragraphs- 6 chapters)!
Suggestions:
Chapter 1- author constructs Kino as an eg. with concerns typical of persons of all social circles, couple symbolic of the Mexican-Indian community
Chapter 2- canoe as provider of income, describe to audience whether in reality will a diver find a big pearl coincidentally
Chapter 3- tempt the readers whether they want to be rich and famous, just like striking a gold mine in real life!
Chapter 4-6: Request responses from readers by asking realistic Qs!

Response from peer 2 to peer 1.
I thought critical review is writing about the background of the author and the books he had produced. Someone please correct me if I'm wrong.

Response from peer 3 to peer 2.
Lai Fong, a critical review is to write the main events of a text, the ups and downs of life the main character faces. we may include the moral value behind the story; whether the book is worth reading or not; the background info. of the author can be included. hope it helps. all the best. Kim Wee

vii. Peer tutoring. In some instances, the tutor does not get involved in the discussion and learners assume the role of tutor. The analysis of the data showed that peer tutoring is evident in collaborative online learning as a number of learners' views are colligated to refine understanding of a concept. However, it must be noted that peer tutoring does not always cover the full range of questions posed by a cue as learners focus on what they know and on issues where they have some experience. In the following vignette, Chew, (cuer) gets a satisfactory response to only one of the two questions that he poses. The first question raised by Chew is addressed by a peer (peer 2) but this does not provide a solution to Chew's problem.

Cue 8.
Dear Tn. Haji Idris, 1. Q7 is a headache It requires us to find 3 book reviews on the selected text. I have searched the net but in vain. Must the book reviews be written by well-known critics or just anybody? 2. For our assignment, are we suppose to present the portfolio in an essay form or in point form according to the steps given as below? Eg. Title of book: The Pearl, Author: John Steinbeck, Year of Publication. 2. Plot Summary: The Pearl is a story.....

Response from peer 1.
Answers Question 2: I think we can write both ways.

Response from peer 2.
Addresses Question 2 but does not give a satisfactory answer:
Saudari Chong,
Book reviews concern with research done on the book regarding the plot of the novel like what the researchers think and voice their opinions! Different researchers from different universities explain the contexts from various views! Haji Idris, pls correct me if I'm wrong!

Response from cue.
Thanks Selvam and Tek Boon. I still cannot find the book reviews.

viii. Sharing. In some instances, two or more learners facing the same problem with the
task share their problem in the online forum. This is when multiple level communication and collaboration was evident showing a strong sense of group interdependence. As shown in the threaded discussion below, learners (Cuers 9 & 10) share information on how or where the cuers could get the information they need. For example, cuers trigger a discussion and other classmates exchange information on the topic, aiming to provide as much assistance as possible. Like tutors who use phrases such as have you tried..., learners help the cuers by giving directions e.g. with statements like Try typing in different keywords... However, it must be noted that as in this case, sharing does not always help every learner access the information needed, even though the discussion on this topic spanned four days.

Cue 9.
11 Oct 2004 02:52:36 AM
Dear Sir and friends,
I’m doing the assignment on short story, “The Pencil”. I’ve tried looking for the book reviews as required but it seems that I”m not successful yet. Can someone help please?

Cue 10.
12 Oct 2004 10:01:33 PM
Hello Sir,
I’m doing the “The necklace” for my assignment but I’m facing problem searching for the reviews. Please give some tips on how to get the reviews. I’ve tried using google and yahoo.
Eng L.P.

Response from cuer 10 to cuer 9.
12 Oct 2004 10:04:04 PM
Dear Philo, It seems that both of us are in the same boat as I can’t find any reviews for the short story I’m doing. Hopefully, both of us will be able to find the reviews soon.

Response from tutor to cuer 9.
14 Oct 2004 03:13:00 PM
Hi there,
Have you tried another search engine, maybe Google? Type different keywords too - eg, Book review + The Pencil, etc. Give it a try.

Response from tutor to cuer 10.
14 Oct 2004 03:15:14 PM
Hi Lai Peng,
Have you tried the search engine recommended by Janice during T3? Try typing in different keywords - Book review of The Pencil, or the author’s name, or Book review + Malaysian literature in English, etc.

Response from peer 1 to cuer 10.
15 Oct 2004 03:44:29 AM
Eng,
Just type ‘Book Review: The Necklace’. I’m sure you’ll see reviews there.

Response from peer 2 to peer 1.
15 Oct 2004 06:07:03 PM
For my case, I’ve typed book review: The secret life of Walter Mitty”. The feedback is very disappointing. I just manage to access a few reviews on that particular story.

The three postings below (Cues 11-13) illustrate how learners shared resources among their peers and with their tutor—purely as a matter of personal initiative.

Cue 11.
Hi tutor and course-mates, I managed to get hold of the texts; Welcome and Return to Malaya. I don’t mind making copies for all those interested but I have no idea how many copies to make. Enlighten me please. BTW I am still waiting for Hemmingway’s text.
Response from tutor.
Hi Lily! You bring wonderful news. Hurray for you! Kindly make one set for me. I'll pay you later, thank you very much.

Cue 12.
Dear all, I found this interesting story on this website: do read and let's enjoy the stories. http://reading.englishclub.com/short-stories.htm

Cue 13.
Dear sir,
http://incontinet.com/two_drugs_fail.htm
The above website is one the sites that offers critical review. What do you think of it. Is it ok enough for our assignment. TQ.

ix. Utilising learner expertise. An important dimension of learner involvement in a discussion is the recognition of the learner as a knowing, able and knowledgeable individual who is capable of providing informed responses to a peer's questions. In the following exchange, the tutor raises this point by validating the ideas that have been put forward by two classmates and by acknowledging that their explanations were indeed 'good.' Learner involvement of this nature is necessary for learners to get feedback on the input they provide and to motivate them to take part in more discussions of this nature.

Cue 14.
Hello Mr Anthony and course-mates,
I'm quite confused and blurry on writing critical review of the text. Could anyone of you please elaborate more on the requirements of the question (3). What is the specific guideline/s needed to answer this question. Thanks for your worth reply.

Response from peer 1.
Hello, Just to share what I understand about it. It is your respond toward the story. You can also tell what is it that you like in the story, the moral values and setting. You can also tell the part of the story that attract you the most and give reasons.

Response from peer 2.
Can I add in some viewpoints here. You can also touch on why you like/dislike the characters in the story. Apart from that, you can also briefly elucidate on the author's writing whether his/her writing of the particular book awesome, breathtaking or even overwhelm. List out the interesting part/s you like most or may bring hatred to you.

Response from tutor.
Hi Marisa, Philomena & Jonathan have given a good explanation about this. Have their explanation helped you a little? It's giving your own personal response to the text and not writing a summary of the story.

x. Vicarious learning. Learning in many contexts can occur when learners are not involved in the exchange, or are not providing input on a topic of discussion. This is something that may be present but is often not obvious in a traditional classroom. The threaded discussion below is an example of vicarious learning: is evident as two classmates – Bob and Vimala – have benefited from a response from Mahera. As another facet of peer interdependence, in myLMS, these learners learn from each other and express their satisfaction about the sharing of individual expertise.

Cue 15.
Hi there tutor and course-mates, I've chosen a short story "The secret life of Walter Mitty" for my assignment. Is it okay if I write these points for my blurb of the story. a. It portrays the stupidity and mild- mannered of a husband by the
The name of Walter Mitty who merely dares to show his valiant only in his fantasy world. Read more to attain joyfulness and suspense of the story. The story is full of humorous and fantasy. The story is very entertaining and catchy. Readers are motivated and seemingly enjoy their reading entirely. [Bob]

Response from Peer 1.  
Hello dear Bob, First of all, I would like to elucidate on blurbs which means a praising word/s to foster a novel or short story. Therefore, the word stupidity is not really recommended for writing blurbs. Anyway, I do agree with your third viewpoint about the blurbs of the story. Nice of you selecting a Walter Mitty secret life for your assignment. Hope to meet your requirements. [Maheera]

Response from peer 2 to peer 1.  
Hello Maheera, I was not sure on how to write the blurb a moment ago. At least your comment for Bob had given me some ideas. Thanks. [Vimala]

Response from cueer to peer 2.  
Me too Vimala. Now, I've a picture on how to write the blurbs of the story. Hopefully our tutor will go along my path. [Bob]

III. CHALLENGE

At the Open University Malaysia, tutors are encouraged to design goals that challenge learners so that new knowledge is constructed, and learning is extended beyond current ability. The assignment for the course Introduction to Novels and Short Stories appeared to have been a challenging one as evidence by learners' deliberations on the many things that they were required to do for the submission of the portfolio. The subcategories below demonstrate the many areas in which learners were challenged, and how tutors helped by scaffolding the many demands of the task.

xi. Designing tasks that require multiple skills. In the following example, the tutor draws attention to the many skills that will be required to perform the assignment to satisfaction. The posting (Cue 16) was forwarded at the beginning of the semester, and appears to serve as an advance organizer for the tutorial group. It appears too that the tutor is making learners aware of the many cognitive skills that learners will have to exercise in undertaking the task.

Cue 16 from tutor.  
After doing an internet search on a keyword form the selected text, choose 2 items about the keyword which you think are useful. Explain why it would be useful to the reader if he/she knows this information when reading the text or how it would help the reader understand the text better. For instance during T3, Nyet Fah gave us an example. She liked the word 'pearl' in The Pearl. So she did an internet search and came up with many things related to the word pearl. But she decided to choose only 2 items, that is, how pearls are formed and how people dive for pearls. Now ask yourself, if you were reading The Pearl, how would information on these 2 items help you understand the text better? You would be able to imagine the difficulty Kino goes through every time he dives into the sea to look for pearls. You would also know how he holds his breath, how he cuts the pearl from its shell, how long a diver can hold his breath, etc. Does this help you a little?

xii. Pushing the boundaries. Apart from assigning tasks that challenge learners, tutors also encouraged learners to work harder on their assignment. In the following example, Cue 15 is told that he has done a good job with part of the task, but he has to do more. It must be noted that the tutor scaffolds the sub-tasks with the use of questions, which will indeed guide Nicholas in the presentation of the paper for the assignment.
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Response from tutor to Cuer 15.
Dear Robert, These are nice blurbs you have written. But you can further improve on them. Be more specific. (b) It is humorous and full of fantasy. So what? Why should people read the story? (c) What is catchy? Do you mean catchy? How can readers be motivated and enjoy the reading? This is not clear. Try and improve them, Bob.

xiii. Inspiring learner ability. For difficult tasks, learners sometimes need a great deal of encouragement and direction. In the example below, Rahim has a problem with part of his assignment and asks for help. His tutor responds by providing a set of guidelines Rahim can follow, and use to structure his answer. More importantly, the tutor uses a series of questions to inspirit Rahim's efforts by outlining the kind of information the examiner would like to see in the answer. Notably, Rahim also gets a response from his classmate something he gratefully acknowledges.

Cue 17.
Dear sir & fellow course-mate, Could explain a little bit more on question No.3 & 6. I'm still blurry about these two questions. TQ.

Response from tutor.
Dear Rahim, Hi there. May I know what text you have chosen? Q3 requires you to write a critical review about the text which you have read. Writing a review is not writing a report about the story you have read. Notice the word 'critical' here. You should mention things like - what did you like/dislike in the story? Do you think the story managed to convey its values/message clearly to the reader? Which character did you like/dislike? Were the characters effective in the story? What were the strengths/weaknesses of the story? etc. Q4 requires you to write three 'blurbs' of the story which you have read. (to help promote, encourage other people to read the story) Please refer to the module/dictionary for the meaning of the word 'blurb'. We have discussed this before. Hope this has helped you a little.

Response from peer 1.
Hi Rahim. Critical review is about in simplest form what you have read, you try to summarise it according to your understanding (the context should be directly from the book) You suppose to sum up according to your own words. Just as Mr. Wong wrote, what you like/or dislike. The 200-250 will inspire you to write a well-compacted review (of course reading and understanding the book helps a lot, no short cut) After your critical review, you need to analyse which caption that fascinates you and see whether that caption were in the form of authorial or neo-rhetorical criticism and elaborate further. From, Sophia

Response from cue.
Thanks for the replies. It helps a lot. TQ, again.

xiv. Redirecting to encourage greater autonomy. In the online forum, it was found that several postings were either repetitions or not very well thought out. Generally, questions in these postings had already been dealt with on another occasion by the same tutor. Thus, tutors sometimes redirected learners to sources where they could find the information, or to an earlier response by the tutor or student. This appeared to be a way to challenge learners to seek answers on their own, or to use more self-reliant measures in seeking answers to their questions, as demonstrated in the following examples.

Cue 18.
Dear Mr. Roshan, can you please explain what are the elements that I should put in this critical review? besides the author do I have to write about all the literary devices such as the theme, setting and mood of the text?
Response from tutor:
You may criticise on the use of literary devices, you may see some critical reviews on http://www.
pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/ba4rrons/peqr15.asp
Regards. Roshan

Cue 19.
Sir, Can you please explain in detail how to to the assignment in our next tutorial? TQ

Response from tutor:
Got some techniques on writing a review from the forum. You may want to read them. It comes as an attachment. [Attachment]

Response from cuer.
Dear Sir, Thank you for the notes given on writing a review I am sure it will help me and others to write our assignment very well. Thank you Sir. That's all for now. Goodbye.

Cue 20.
Sir, Can you please explain what is authorial criticism and neo-rhetorical criticism? Dear Sir,

Response from tutor.
Please refer to Janita's and Gerry's question on this forum Regards. Roshan

IV. EXTENSION
An important—albeit highly desirable—outcome of active learning is the extension of learners' skills or current thinking-learning ability. The analysis of the data showed that learners own attempts at extending their knowledge led to various ways of using course content. In this category, extension, the learner is in focus again as s/he works actively toward the recognition that s/he has to show his understanding of course content. The following examples illustrate learners' efforts at extending their cognitive reach through recasts and application, and their tutors' requests for extension of learner effort.

xv. Recasting content learnt in course. As learners came across new ideas, concepts and issues in their reading, they engaged in sense-making by way of rewording or restating what they read in their own words. Often these recasts, as it were, were accompanied by requests for feedback on their understanding of course content. In the following vignettes, Cues 21 and 22 recast ideas to show what they have understood from their reading, and request for feedback from the tutor.

Cue 21.
Hi friends and tutor, Generally, the process of literary reading involves: a. pre-reading, b. while-reading, c. post-reading. Based on the process above, I would like to emphasize on pre-reading stage which involves identifying assumptions, interest and pre-conceptions. For this reason, I've chosen a questioning method activity that a teacher can carry out for literary learning.

Response from peer 1.
Jo, I agree with you about the process of literary reading. I also have the same idea like you. Me too state the pre-reading, while-reading and the post-reading as the process of reading literary text. Are we two right?

Response from tutor.
Hi Jo, Your answers are acceptable, but elaborate more in your paper. Be more descriptive. OK?

Cue 22.
Dear tutor and course-mates, A review of a novel is also a response since it normally includes an evaluation of the work. It requires analytic skill but it is not identical with an analysis. Some retelling of the plot is necessary, however, the review is primarily concerned with describing, analysing, and evaluating. Do you agree?
xvi. Application of concepts learnt in course. Another subcategory of extension is the application of theoretical concepts or approaches to what learners are reading or to matters related to their life. In the first case cited below, Putri seeks guidance on understanding the discursive approach to analysis literary discourse (Cue 23). Putri gets a response from the tutor, but another student, Rajesh, is unable to apply the discursive approach to the text he is reading, i.e. The Pearl by John Steinbeck. Rajesh’s request on the same topic (Cue 24) is responded to by a peer, Yeo, who is from another OUM learning centre altogether. Finally Putri (and hopefully Rajesh too) is able to apply the discursive approach to The Pearl.

Cue 23.
01 Oct 2004 06:04:38 PM
Dear Tuan Haji Idris, according to question 5, we are supposed to give a brief definition of both criticisms. But it’s not easy to understand about the discursive approach. Can you please explain it? [Putri]

Response from tutor to cuer 23.
01 Oct 2004 08:14:10 PM
Assalamualaikum Putri, Page 34 of the module, try to say something about discursive approach [da], but does not really make you understand it. Well I don’t blame you. When you talk about da, you are actually looking at analysis of discourse in literature i.e. you want to see how sense, meaning, idea, fact, truth is built by language, produced by institutions, discipline-science, history etc. Every discourse is situated in an ideology/context; such as political, gender, class etc. When you talk about literary discourse, remember about imagination/imaginative, rhetorical. Historical discourse has to be based on fact/factual. I hope this is easier to understand. Good luck. Wassalam.

Response from cuer 23 to tutor.
01 Oct 2004 08:31:04 PM
Thank you very much Tuan Hj. Idris, At least I have an idea what the da is.

Cue 24.
01 Oct 2004 09:04:33 PM
Dear Tuan Haji Idris, Can you give an example on how to view “The Pearl” according to discursive analyses. I think this examples will make me understand and apply the method [Rajesh]

Response from peer 1 to cuer 24.
04 Oct 2004 12:47:51 AM
Rajesh, Yeo again fr Seberang Jaya Centre! Discursive approach is classified under Neo-Rhetorical Approach according to the module which the second app. The first app. is the study of genres which consists of Poetry, Drama, Short stories & Novels as we have learned during Jan. semester (Intro. to Literature). For the module, it seems to me that discursive app. is regarding the possibility of the readers’ perception. Thought & action that depends on the minds’ structure of a certain meaningful field. It reflects as sense as opposed to incoherent nonsense of the literary texts!

Response from cuer 23 to peer 1 and to cuer 18.
04 Oct 2004 03:38:22 PM
Or can I say it in a simple way, discursive approach is the beauty of the language used in order to convey the message. For example, when the writer wrote ‘Kino awakened in the dark night’ -the first line of the first page tells you something sad or a tragic scene may happen through out the story as he was awaken in the dark-forwarding. While the last line in the last page mentioned ‘And the music of the pearl drifted to a whisper and disappeared’ is actually telling us the power of the pearl of the desire towards the pearl is no longer in Kino as it was thrown back to the sea. The author conveys message through his creativity
in playing with words and gives deep meaning to the reader. Am I right Tuan Hj Idris? [Putri]

Application of course content was also seen in relevance to matters beyond the classroom. In the following excerpts, we see how two students see the relevance of ideas picked up in the course in terms of personal experience (Cue 25) and in terms of metaphor (Cue 26) related to a short story with a Kelantanese setting (in the north-eastern part of West Malaysia).

Cue 25.
Dear Sir, as I discussed with you earlier I pick up the theme (no 10) caste in my assignment. As I go on doing, it is becoming a very sensitive matter to talk about. What you think? Can I continue with the same theme? I have almost towards the end of the product.

Response from tutor.
You don’t have to worry. When we are discussing caste, we are looking at an academic point of view. Go ahead with the assignment. Regards

Cue 26.
Dear Sir, Here’s what I understand of the title of the story of "Pak De Sammad's Cinema". The word 'cinema' tells me of many things such as his life and struggles, entertainment, fantasy or maybe a place. Am I right? Thank you.

Response from tutor.
Wow! That’s the way to go. You have the basic idea. Expand on that idea in your exam ok. John

The above sub-section on tutor-learner discussion has shown the many ways in which learners have benefited from participation in the online discussion forum. True to the historical premise of the forum, students in this course (that was the focus of the analysis) engaged in a process that involved inquiry, debate and collaborative activity for the purpose of learning from their tutors and peers. The vignettes also demonstrate the authenticity with which the players approached the task, as well as the integrity that accompanies tutor feedback and peer-led interaction during online interaction. Below, the summary section presents an overview of the chapter, and links the aims of the chapter to the implementation of the model and related outcomes.

SUMMARY

This chapter is centred on the role of online discussion forums in creating meaningful learning experiences for learners in distance learning programmes. The use of a collaborative learning model that helped create an interactive online learning community at Open University Malaysia has been discussed. Within this model, task-directed collaborative activity provided authentic learning experiences and helped learners achieve specified learning outcomes. The chapter also presents exemplars of threaded discussions related to four categories: while guidance and challenge show how tutors play an active role in collaborative online learning, interdependence and extension demonstrate how learners play an active role in task-directed collaborative activity.

The Open University Malaysia-collaborative online learning model is premised upon the understanding that knowledge construction is a result of learners employing many skills simultaneously to carry out authentic, complex and less-structured tasks in culturally relevant learning environments. Thus, learners' skills are developed as they think of ways to resolve issues, define and solve problems, focus on ways to present newly acquired knowledge and actively strive to complete tasks and to achieve learning goals. As an instrument for learning, the discussion on the implementation of the Open University Malaysia-collaborative online learning model has shown how interactive online communities are instrumental in enlivening the promise of education in distance education programmes.
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Enlivening the Promise of Education

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APPENDIX A: THE TASK

This assignment aims to evaluate your grasp of the discussion in Unit 1 of the HBET4303 module and to facilitate hands-on experiential learning. To answer this question satisfactorily, you will need to (a) conduct library and/or internet-based research; (b) participate in online discussion to share resources and clarify ideas; and (c) apply the theories you have learned in Unit 1 on a literary text of your choice.

The specific aim of this assignment is to evaluate your understanding of the authorial and neo-rhetorical means by which a literary text is given coherency, that is, how we produce meaning from or weave it into a text. Online discussions based on steps (1) to (12) below are important to create an understanding of this task, as well as the process involved in putting together your portfolio.

Bear in mind that unacknowledged use of quotes or extracts constitutes plagiarism, the penalty of which will be severe.

To prepare a bound portfolio for submission to your tutor, follow these steps:

1. Pick a literary text of your choice. List down the title, author, and year of publication. Choose a text discussed in your module or one that is used in the school where you teach. The text you select will form the basis of your research.

2. Write a plot summary of the text you have selected. Your summary should be between 50-60 words.

3. Write a 200-250 word critical review of the text as though you would submit it to a newspaper for publication. Don’t just summarise the story in this section. Tell your readers something about the author and the place of the text in the author’s oeuvre. Share with your readers your view on why it is worth reading (or not). Highlight standout moments in the text (if they exist in your opinion).
4. Produce three blurbs from your review to be used to promote (not disparage!) the text. Remember that while a blurb always says something positive, the full text from which it is extracted need not be thoroughly so.

5. Write a brief definition of authorial criticism and neo-rhetorical criticism.

6. Reread your review of the selected text in (2) and analyse whether you have written an authorial and/or neo-rhetorical criticism. Substantiate your answer with appropriate quotes from your review. Your analysis should be between 150-200 words.

7. Conduct a library and/or internet search to find three book reviews (of reasonable length) and/or critical essays on the selected text. Marks will be given on the appropriateness of your choice, i.e. the reviews/essays should be scholarly and varied in response. Photocopy or print them out and compile them in your portfolio.

8. Study the three reviews/essays you have selected and photocopied or printed out. Write a 300-word analysis of these reviews/essays, in the same way that you analysed your own review in (2) above. Remember to think in terms of authorial and neo-rhetorical criticisms.

9. Decide on one keyword which, in your opinion, captures an important thematic aspect of your selected text. Examples: pearl, Mexico, imam, Malaya, colonialism, cross-cultural relationship, gedeber, modernism, love, evil, old age, Japanese occupation.

10. With that one selected keyword in mind, conduct a library and/or internet search for articles, essays, book chapters, and the like which not only revolve around the keyword you have selected but which also probes, unpack and shed light on it. From the mountains of material you are likely to find from various disciplines including history, sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, and politics, select two items which best illuminate the fictional world of your selected text. Photocopy and/or print them out and append them to your portfolio.

11. Write a 400-word essay on the ways in which the two items in (9) are useful in adding depth to your appreciation of the literary text you selected in (1).