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A dilemma of harmony and honesty: insights from Indonesian university students on social presence in peer evaluation

¹Ignatius Indra Kristianto, ²Monica Ella Harendita

¹Accounting Department, The Faculty of Business and Economics, Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta, Jl. Babarsari No. 43, 55281, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

²English Language Education Study Program, The Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Jl. Mrican Baru, 55281, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author: indra.kristianto@uajy.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Peer evaluation can enhance learning outcomes, interpersonal skills, and student engagement in higher education. However, while factors like ability levels and gender influence peer evaluation dynamics, the role of social presence—projecting individual identities and connecting with peers—remains underexplored. Additionally, there is limited research on how culture affects peer evaluation in non-Western contexts, such as Indonesia. This study examines the intersection of social presence and peer evaluation in Indonesian higher education, focusing on students' perceptions, benefits, and challenges. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the study involved surveys and interviews with 69 students in an English for Specific Purposes course at a private Indonesian university. After completing online peer evaluations, participants completed an online survey with closed- and open-ended questions. Five students were also interviewed for additional insights. The findings highlight that peer evaluation provided benefits such as changed perspectives, closer relationships, and opportunities for self-reflection. However, challenges, including reluctance to provide honest feedback, were also identified. From a sociocultural perspective, these challenges may relate to Indonesia's collectivist culture. Recommendations for improving peer evaluation include conducting evaluations in class, justifying scores, and providing task evidence. This study emphasizes the potential of peer evaluation to enhance social presence and educational outcomes when properly guided and supported while also underscoring the importance of considering cultural context in its implementation.

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1. Introduction

Peer evaluation, often used interchangeably with peer assessment or peer feedback, has emerged as a widely utilized method in educational settings. It offers a mechanism for students to assess and provide feedback on their peers' work. The existing literature on peer evaluation in education highlights its multifaceted nature, emphasizing its potential to enhance learning outcomes, foster interpersonal skills development, and promote student engagement (Johnston et al., 2022; To & Panadero,

2019). Considering the nature of adult learning, peer feedback has been extensively used in higher education (Gao et al., 2024; Saborido et al., 2024; Wei Diong et al., 2018).

The dynamics of peer evaluation depend on multiple factors. Two of the most explored factors influencing the dynamics were students' ability level and gender (Gao et al., 2024). However, social presence seems to be underexplored. Social presence is defined as the ability of students to project their individual identities in order to connect and identify with the community and engage in interpersonal interactions (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The Community of Inquiry (CoI) maintains that social presence is just as important as teaching presence and cognitive presence in fostering meaningful learning experiences (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Stewart et al., 2021). Since its introduction, CoI has called for more context-specific applications in different cultural settings (Stewart et al., 2021).

In the higher education setting, peer evaluation offers some benefits, such as enhancing learning outcomes (To & Panadero, 2019) and self-learning ability (Sun, 2020) and facilitating collaborative learning and active participation (Huisman et al., 2019; To & Panadero, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). Furthermore, it develops interpersonal skills (Johnston et al., 2022) and promotes skill acquisition (Zhou et al., 2020). Peer evaluation also plays an important role in promoting overall student engagement (Harendita & Kristianto, 2022; Johnston et al., 2022; To & Panadero, 2019) and fostering a sense of accountability among students (Zhou et al., 2020). Previous research also shows that peer evaluation may be more effective than lecturer evaluation, particularly when anonymity is assured through online platforms (Iglesias Pérez et al., 2020). For instance, students stated that they learned more and produced better work because of the Poll Everywhere application's anonymous peer feedback process (Sitthiworachart et al., 2023).

Along with the advancement of technology, peer evaluation could be given through different media. In addition to simple written text, feedback could also be multimodal, including memes, GIFS, and photos (Van Dellen, 2024). Many studies have found online peer evaluation to be more beneficial than offline (Jongsma et al., 2023; Kerman et al., 2024). With this shift, students can interact more dynamically with their peers, which enhances their overall learning experience. Furthermore, the variety of media formats can cater to different learning styles, making feedback more accessible and impactful for a diverse group of students.

However, despite the potential of peer evaluation, scholars have identified its implementation challenges. One of the biggest challenges is the quality of peer feedback (Haughney et al., 2020; Huisman et al., 2019; Sun, 2020). The quality of feedback is crucial, with factors such as positivity, specificity, and timeliness being important (Haughney et al., 2020). Furthermore, providing critical feedback has been found to be challenging among students. In their longitudinal study, Wang et al. (2023) found out that students were hesitant to critique their peers' work critically, often providing more positive feedback. Students frequently expressed that most of the feedback they received was unhelpful. Consequently, students feel they did not gain much from the experience due to the lack of constructive feedback.

The above-mentioned limitations call for the crucial role of the teacher in guiding the process (Sun, 2020). Therefore, the key components to making peer assessment a highly effective practice to improve student performance are high levels of structure, such as providing students with evaluation training, using explicit and quantitative criteria, and using computers to mediate the process (Pellegrini,

2020). When using online peer feedback effectively, it is necessary to consider student characteristics, learning processes, environmental factors, and outcomes (Kerman et al., 2024).

The impact of culture on peer evaluation within the educational context could shed light on how cultural norms shape students' attitudes toward feedback provision and assessment processes. In his study, Hu (2019) examined cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward peer evaluation, revealing variations in students' willingness to provide critical feedback based on their cultural backgrounds. This study underscored the importance of considering cultural factors when designing peer evaluation strategies, as cultural norms play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of feedback processes.

Cultural values also play a crucial role in shaping interactions and group decision-making processes within educational contexts. Huisman et al. (2019) conducted a mixed-methods analysis to explore cultural influences on feedback provision in peer evaluation, highlighting the role of cultural values in shaping students' attitudes toward feedback processes. Likewise, Abele et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative analysis to explore how cultural values influence social interactions during peer evaluation, highlighting the role of cultural norms in shaping feedback expression and group dynamics.

Wei Diong et al., (2018) employed Hofstede's cultural theory to examine Malaysian Chinese perceptions of peer assessment from a cultural perspective. According to the findings, the participants showed strong power distance, high levels of uncertainty avoidance, and a preference for long-term benefits. Popular classmates also scored higher than those the students believed to be friends. They also engaged in face-saving techniques when providing them with criticism so as not to embarrass them. Similarly, Ofte and Duggan (2020) investigated the influence of power distance on peer evaluation practices, revealing cultural differences in students' perceptions of fairness and hierarchy within peer assessment processes. Moreover, Kunwar (2021) provided insights into how cultural norms impact students' preferences for collaborative versus individualistic approaches to feedback provision.

Overall, the literature on cultural influences on peer evaluation underscores the importance of considering cultural factors when designing and implementing peer evaluation strategies in educational contexts. By understanding how cultural norms shape students' perceptions of feedback provision and assessment processes, educators can develop culturally responsive approaches to peer evaluation that promote fairness, inclusivity, and effective learning outcomes.

Integrating social presence theory with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework makes understanding the dynamics of peer evaluation possible. The three interconnected elements that comprise the CoI framework are the social, teaching, and cognitive presences. According to CoI, learning happens when these three presences come together. The study focuses on social presence, or the capacity of students to project their unique identities to connect and identify with the community and engage in interpersonal connections (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Phirangee and Malec (2017) examined strategies for enhancing social presence in learning, emphasizing its role in facilitating effective peer evaluation processes. The study underscored the importance of social interactions in promoting a sense of community among learners and fostering meaningful peer feedback exchanges. Additionally, Chatterjee and Correia (2020) examined the connection between peer evaluation and social presence in group projects. They emphasized how social interactions affect peer feedback quality in learning and promote group cohesion using the CoI framework.

Social presence is necessary to establish and sustain relationships; it is not a fixed state and takes time to develop (Stewart et al., 2021). Different amounts of presence might be required in various phases of teaching and learning. In their study, Feng et al. (2017) found that a significant level of social presence was mostly required in the initial learning phase and could be withdrawn gradually. Meanwhile, the intensity of teaching presence was more important in the mid-phase and the cognitive presence in the final phase.

Despite the potential of the CoI framework in fostering learning outcomes (Martin et al., 2022), some studies found limited empirical evidence supporting its claim of fostering deep and meaningful learning (Pinto et al., 2022). The conceptualization of social presence has been questioned, with suggestions to differentiate between social presence, social comfort, attitude, and social learning (Stewart et al., 2021). Additionally, the framework has been criticized for its limited understanding of emotional presence, with proposals to expand this concept using emotional intelligence theory (Majeski et al., 2018). Some researchers have proposed adding a fourth component, learning presence (Wertz, 2021), to represent students' self-regulation. These criticisms draw attention to the necessity of further developing and modifying the CoI framework to adequately represent the intricacies of virtual learning environments.

Little is known about how social presence and peer evaluation are interlinked in an Asian context like Indonesia. Moreover, Hu (2019) discovered a declining interest in peer evaluation research on cultural issues over the past few years. Also, previous research on cultural influences on peer feedback tends to produce mixed and contradictory findings (Hu, 2019). Thus, in filling the gap, this study aimed to explore the intersection between social presence and peer evaluation in Indonesian higher education. The research was centered around the following questions:

- How do students perceive social presence in peer evaluation during a group project?
- What are the benefits and challenges of peer evaluation?

2. Method

This study aimed to examine how social presence in peer evaluation was perceived by university students, as well as the benefits and challenges of peer evaluation. A descriptive qualitative method was employed to achieve the purpose of the study. This research methodology aims to investigate the participants' understanding, including their attitudes, viewpoints, and beliefs (Nassaji, 2015). This study involved 69 students taking three classes of the English for Managers unit at Atma Jaya University Yogyakarta, Indonesia, during the first semester of the 2023 - 2024 academic year. This compulsory unit was designed as an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course.

During the course, four peer evaluations were conducted by each student during the class. The peer evaluation was done after the students completed each of the four lesson units: 1) Business Meeting Simulation, 2) Business Presentation Simulation, 3) Handling Complaint Simulation, and 4) Business Negotiation Simulation. Each unit was project-based, where students were allowed to create their own groups, consisting of a maximum of four students. For each project, the students had to make a simulation video where each member played a role in a company, business, or government. Therefore, prior to the recording, they had to create a script that suited the material. The length of the video must be between eight to 12 minutes.

After completing each project, students were invited to fill out the peer evaluation form on Microsoft Forms. The peer evaluation was anonymous and allowed students to assess the performance of group members in completing each group project. The peer evaluation consisted of two types of questions. The first type consisted of five Likert scales that asked for the group members' participation, assistance, contribution, how much work was completed, and the quality of the work completed. The second type was an open-ended question asking about general feedback or recommendations for the friend being evaluated.

Data collection took place at the end of the semester, following the completion of all peer assessments by the students in the course. The participants took an average of eight minutes to complete the survey through Microsoft Teams. The questionnaire comprised a nine-item Likert-type scale and seven open-ended questions. The reliability analysis was conducted on the Likert-type items using online software by Wessa (2023). The analysis demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.93 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). To gain further insights, interviews were conducted with five participants through purposive random sampling. Two female students and three male students took part in the interviews. Bahasa Indonesia was used for the interviews in order to provide the participants greater freedom to express themselves. Prior to analysis, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English.

3. Results and discussion

The questionnaire results indicate that students positively perceived social presence in peer evaluation, as reflected by an overall average mean score of 4.17. The highest mean score of 4.45 for the statement "I take time to think before giving peer evaluation" suggests that students were conscientious about providing thoughtful feedback. However, there seemed to be a slight decline in positive responses for statements related to feeling connected to classmates ($M = 4.16$) and feeling helped or motivated by peer feedback ($M = 4.14$). Notably, two statements scored significantly below the average: "I give peer evaluations that are critically constructive to my friends" ($M = 3.97$) and "I read the peer evaluation results that my friends gave" ($M = 3.75$). Table 1 below presents the analysis of the questionnaires, which showed their perceptions towards peer evaluation.

Table 1. Students' perceptions towards social presence in peer evaluation

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
1.	I take the time to read/watch/understand my friend's work before giving a peer evaluation.	4.29	0.60
2.	I take time to think before giving peer evaluation.	4.45	0.56
3.	And another entry	3.97	0.87
4.	I feel involved when giving a peer evaluation.	4.28	0.68
5.	I feel connected to my classmates when giving a peer evaluation.	4.16	0.70
6.	I feel like I am contributing after giving a peer evaluation.	4.30	0.65
7.	I read the peer evaluation results that my friends gave.	3.75	1.14
8.	I feel helped/motivated after receiving a peer evaluation.	4.14	0.79

Table 1 shows evidence that the overall perceptions were positive, as seen from the analysis of the closed-ended items. However, some statements having lower mean scores may indicate potential areas for improvement in the engagement and utility of peer evaluations. In particular, peer evaluation's critical and reciprocal aspects need to be emphasized to strengthen its effectiveness.

The second part of the questionnaires included open-ended items, to which the participants could provide short written responses. Table 2 below summarizes the responses in accordance with the question items.

Table 2. Summary of the Responses to Open-Ended Items

Themes	Sample Excerpts from Questionnaires
Types of group work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating Power Point for presentation, creating scripts for videos and taking videos. • Creating an interview text, then working on creating a video according to the requested task (e.g. interview, etc.). • Preparing presentations, getting together to script and cast roles, creating assignments via Ms Teams. • Any assignment such as discussion, plan making (Job interview) assignment and video assignment.
Mode of meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offline meetings at the coffeeshop for some assignments and some only through WA group discussions. • In-class and out-of-class discussions. • Discussions through Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp groups and face-to-face meetings.
Feeling involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling more able to play a role in the development of friends. • It's nice to be able to make suggestions or comments that motivate your group mates. • Feel connected to the group.
Upholding objectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A medium that can provide a true assessment of the peer group. • I'm telling the truth. • When giving peer evaluation, I don't have to worry about the unfair distribution of marks because each other cannot read the assessment and it is very helpful in conveying the contribution in group work. • Objective. • It feels good, because the data provided is in accordance with the contributions of friends. • I feel included because I can rate my friends according to their performance. • I'm happy because I can judge my friends according to reality.
Feeling reluctant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maybe sometimes I feel reluctant. • Have a sense of reluctance or uneasiness. • Feeling reluctant because I myself am not good enough, either.
Being reflective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting on what I've done. • Quite happy because it can be a self-evaluation. • Being more open to group mates' input. • Helped me understand what was lacking in me.
Feeling motivated to improve oneself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a better understanding of what is lacking and what needs to be developed. • Feel happy because I feel motivated by my friends' evaluation. • I feel like continuously fixing my mistakes. • Encourage me to be better in my next assignment.

The themes found in the open-ended part of the questionnaires reinforce students' positive attitudes and perceptions on implementing peer evaluation. Overall, students felt that peer evaluation provided room for reflecting on their own performance and a sense of involvement in their

friends' development. However, some drawbacks were also identified, particularly related to the feeling of reluctance that the students felt, as seen in the excerpts: "Have a sense of reluctance or uneasiness" and "Feeling reluctant because I myself am not good enough, either". This hesitation may stem from self-doubt or discomfort in providing critical feedback, suggesting a need for further support or training in giving constructive evaluations.

To better delve into students' perceptions and strengthen the survey findings, interviews were conducted with five participants: Arina, Bella, Choki, Dandi, and Erlan (all pseudonyms). The following sections elaborate on the themes found in the interviews, followed by the evidence.

3.1. Benefits of peer evaluation

3.1.1. Changed perspectives and attitudes

The participants acknowledged that peer evaluation has provided some benefits. One significant benefit is a shift in students' perspectives and attitudes towards group work. Initially, some students were skeptical about the effectiveness and value of group work. However, through peer evaluation, they began to appreciate its advantages. For example, Arina mentioned that her view changed from skepticism to appreciation.

Honestly, I personally don't really like groups. But I started to get out of my comfort zone. I started to try several times when there was group work in the courses, like it or not I had to go in groups. That trained me to be more open to groups [...] I used to be very individual. (Student A, interview)

The above excerpt shows Student A's effort to step out of her comfort zone and start participating in group work. Through repeated experiences in group settings, including peer evaluation, Student A learned to be more open and collaborative. Previously very individualistic, Student A appeared to develop a greater appreciation for teamwork.

3.1.2. Developing closer relationships with teammates

Another key benefit of peer evaluation was the development of closer relationships among team members. In the following interview excerpts, Student B and Student E noted that the process fostered a sense of connection within the group.

I feel close [to my teammates]. In the English for Managers course, we worked together. (Student B, interview)

I think the group members are getting closer. (Student E, interview)

The previous excerpts show that Student B felt a strong closeness with her teammates, particularly while working together in the English for Managers course. This collaborative experience fostered a supportive and cohesive group dynamic. Student E echoed this sentiment, noting that the group members became increasingly close through their shared efforts and teamwork.

3.1.3. *Fostering self-evaluation*

The third benefit the participants gained from peer evaluation was that they were given room for self-reflection. Self-reflection occurred when they gave assessments to their friends and read the evaluations their friends gave. From the activity, they could identify what was lacking and what needed improvement in their performance. Also, it might result in a change in the behavior of any free riders or students who did not contribute equally. Student E and Student D shared their perspectives below.

As I remember, there was one comment from a group member [...] my speaking skill is a bit lacking, so it needs to be improved by practicing continuously to be fluent. (Student E, interview)

Peer evaluation could make a friend who doesn't want to work change. (Student D, interview)

The above provides evidence of how the participants could use peer evaluation results to foster personal and academic growth, as articulated by Student E. Similarly, Student D added that peer evaluation can potentially motivate disengaged group members to become more active and committed to their work.

3.2. *Challenges of doing peer evaluation*

Despite the benefits of peer evaluation, students faced several challenges when engaging in this process. Reiterating what was found in the open-ended responses, the participants highlighted the dilemma they faced when having to assess their teammates' performance and contribution. The excerpts from Student A and Student C below stand as evidence.

When giving an evaluation, I was confused whether I had to be honest or not. It's a dilemma. [...] I couldn't be 100% honest. (Student A, interview)

In my opinion, it was less objective because there must be misconduct from a group. But I did not want my friend to get a bad grade because of my evaluation. I also didn't want my score to be bad because of an evaluation. Maybe all group [members] would rate good, good, good as long as it was reasonable. [...] There was a thought: "Well, later if I assess as it is, will my friend pass or not?" There were such thoughts. (Student C, interview)

The insights from Student A and Student C imply that students might worry that providing critical and honest feedback would get their friends in trouble. Also, they feared that it would trigger conflicts and damage their interpersonal relationships. As a result, students might opt to provide good feedback to their peers. Student C also heightened the fear. In his interview, he addressed that students might worry that giving honest but critical feedback might result in receiving poor evaluations in return. It then created a cycle of overly positive grades as they attempted to protect both their own and their friends' grades.

3.3. *Suggestions for future implementation*

To improve the effectiveness and reliability of peer evaluation, the participants suggested some strategies, such as conducting peer evaluation in class, justifying the reason for giving particular scores,

and inserting screenshots of the completed task as evidence. Below are the interview excerpts from Student A, Student C, and Student D.

I think it should be in the classroom. Right away after each class. So that we can see whether they [students] fill it in or not. (Student A, interview)

Perhaps there should be a space where we can provide the reasons. So, when we rate our group member's performance as good, there is a reason why. So, we don't just rate. (Student C, interview)

Give the proof that they really did it (Student D, interview)

The three students addressed different recommendations for implementing peer evaluation in the future. Yet, all the suggestions could enhance the peer evaluation process's accountability, transparency, and effectiveness.

3.4. Discussion

Analyzing the intersection of social presence and peer evaluation in the Indonesian context from a sociocultural perspective can help make sense of the findings. Although the survey's open-ended items revealed that the students claimed to be objective in giving feedback, the interviews revealed a contradictory finding. Although anonymous peer evaluation applied in the study seemed to accommodate objective assessment, some participants expressed their uneasiness about making objective assessments. They feared their peers would be disadvantaged or fail because of their evaluations. This finding aligns with the concept of face-saving, in which students feel reluctant and restrained in giving negative feedback (Wei Diong et al., 2018).

In addition, the results of the study show that while students valued social presence in peer evaluation, some obstacles prevented them from providing constructive feedback to their peers. While in the survey, students acknowledged that they took time to give feedback, it did not automatically result in critical feedback. The findings corroborate with the study by Wang et al. (2023), who found that providing critical feedback was a challenge in peer evaluation, and students tended to give positive comments to their peers. In addition to cultural influences, the issue could stem from the absence of clear guidance the students received in giving constructive feedback. Also, the students may not be familiar with peer evaluation and its expectations. The findings echo what Sun (2020) found in their research, which emphasizes the role of teachers in the process.

Social harmony was another prominent aspect of the findings. Reiterating Abele et al. (2020) and Ofte and Duggan (2020), who found cultural variations in giving feedback, this study suggests that the emphasis on maintaining harmony may affect how feedback is given and how social presence is realized. Similarly, Wei Diong et al. (2018) also found that students in collectivist cultures tend to prioritize the group as a whole rather than focusing on individual abilities. As a result, students may be more likely to express their support and positive feelings to maintain harmony, even at the expense of honest feedback.

Aligning with the concept of social harmony as well as group cohesion in the CoI framework, another characteristic of the collectivist culture that may impact social presence is interdependence. In

this study, students seemed to enhance their sense of belonging to the team through the completion of the project and peer evaluation. In a collectivist setting, students will likely engage in behaviors that strengthen group bonds and mutual support, resulting in enhanced social presence. Yet, since students prioritized the group's success, objectively evaluating individual contributions might be challenging. Thus, social dynamics appeared to take precedence over objectivity.

This study has also demonstrated that social presence and peer evaluation worked bi-directionally, reinforcing each other in the learning process. Previous research has shown that social presence could improve group cohesion, affecting the quality and effectiveness of peer evaluation (Chatterjee & Correia, 2020; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). This study extends those findings by providing evidence that peer evaluation could also improve social presence among the participants. The enhanced social presence was manifested in several ways. First, they felt more connected and community-oriented as peer evaluation allowed them to interact with each other more frequently and meaningfully. Secondly, peer evaluation promoted a collaborative learning environment by making students more aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses. Collaborative learning plays a vital role in fostering students' interpersonal skills within the realm of education (Yustisia et al., 2023). By working together in group settings, students engage in meaningful interactions that encourage effective communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This approach allows them to listen to diverse perspectives, express their ideas clearly, and develop empathy toward others' viewpoints. Furthermore, collaborative learning cultivates skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, and mutual support, which are essential for success both inside and outside the classroom. Ultimately, it prepares students not only to excel academically but also to navigate the complexities of professional and social environments in the future.

4. Conclusion

This study has attempted to examine the intersection between social presence and peer evaluation among Indonesian university students. Through questionnaires and interviews, social presence in peer evaluation was perceived positively by the students. The main benefits of peer evaluation include changing perspectives, feeling involved, and fostering self-evaluation. However, there were some challenges that the students faced, including being objective and providing critical feedback. The participants also suggested in-class peer evaluation rather than outside-class and attaching proof of contribution to the group work in the peer evaluation form.

Considering that learning is culturally situated, social presence could be viewed using a cultural lens to provide nuanced insights into how cultural backgrounds and social norms shape students' interactions and evaluations. In this study, cultural norms in a collectivist society like Indonesia may have impacted objectivity and provision of critical feedback since the students focused more on the group's success. Hence, the findings underscore the importance of considering cultural context in peer evaluation practices and highlight the potential of peer evaluation to enhance both social presence and educational outcomes when appropriately guided and supported.

The results of this study might not be applicable in other situations because of its restricted scope and qualitative design. Thus, further studies involving different methods in different cultural

settings may be done to enrich the discussion on a similar topic. Another implication of the findings relates to the effect of peer evaluation on another aspect of the CoI framework: cognitive presence. The findings show that the participants could improve their cognitive presence through peer evaluation as they used their peers' comments for self-evaluation. This can be a potential topic to explore in further studies.

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