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STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE LEARNING IN BUSINESS COURSES AT UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA, INDONESIA

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Summary

This paper presents findings of a research on participation in four online learning courses offered by UT Faculty of Economics. The purpose of the study is to have an understanding of how distance students participate and which factors influence participation in online tutorials. Online tutorial has been used by Universitas Terbuka (UT) to provide two-way communication channel for distance students, facilitate learning process, and assist them in preparing for examination. The findings of the research indicate that there is low participation of students in online tutorials, in terms of students' contribution to online discussion forum and to work on assignments. Findings of the questionnaire survey indicate that most respondents perceive that tutors have addressed students' questions on topics appropriately and given motivation to students to learn. One constraint in online tutorials relates to slow feedback from tutors to students, while access, costs, and computer skills do not hamper students' participation in online tutorials. Some recommendations are presented. First, tutors are advised to give feedback immediately to respond to students' queries on email. Second, topics on current issues should be presented in the form of case studies

Introduction

Bates (in Siahaan, 2005) and Simamora (2003) identified several benefits of internet usage as a learning medium. One of them is its ability to create both *real time* (chatting, *audio/videomulticasting*) and *non real time* (e-mail, bulleting board, mailinglist) interaction. Belawati (2003) stated that internet technology is imperative for distance learning institution to overcome separation of time dan place which is one of distance learning characteristics. Students can access learning material as well as communicate with tutors any time and any place using computer and internet media.

There are some factors influencing student participation in tutorial *online,* such as technology and characteristic of *interface*, content-*area experience*, students' role and task, and *information overload*. There are three categories of *online* tutorial participation, namely those who have *active participation*, those who read messages but never post the message (*lurkers*), and those who do not take part at all. This has also been suggested by Taylor (2002) who categorized online participation into three groups which were *workers*, group which were participating actively in online tutorial and regularly visiting 'class'; lurkers, the

group who sometimes participated but usually only read; and shirkers, the group who did the least posting and visiting 'class'.

Research on online tutorial conducted in Universitas Terbuka (UT) showed that most of students participating in online discussion were passive (58%) or only reading learning materials given by tutors and comments of other participants (Belawati, 2003). Mulyatno (in Universitas Terbuka Report, 2007) also stated that only 37.8% students of UT Mathematics and Science Faculty had accessed internet, and 26.7% had not accessed internet. However, Zaidin et.al. (in Andriani, 2005) said that interest level of UT students in online learning was relatively high (73.07%).

Online tutorial has been used by UT to provide two-way communication channel for distance students, facilitate learning process, and assist them in preparing for examination. UT provides Guidelines for Online Tutorial for tutor, describing the technical aspects of conducting online tutorial activities. It is stated in the Guideline that online tutorials are to be conducted for 8 weeks, beginning after course registration. Online tutorial activities consist of initiation materials from tutors to students, assignments, and online discussions facilitated by tutors.

This paper presents findings of a research on participation in four online learning courses offered by UT Faculty of Economics. It aims to observe how students participate in online tutorials, and factors that influence student participation on *online* tutorials and their participation in online discussion.

Research Method

This research is descriptive using a case study design. There are four cases of online courses investigated in this research, namely Introductory Accounting, Budgeting, Corporate Organization, and Introduction to Business. All of them are courses offered in the second semester on 2007 at UT Faculty of Management.

Data collection was carried out by observing online tutorials of these four courses. In addition, questionnaires were also sent via email to 910 students who registered to online tutorials for these four courses. Only 30 questionnaires were filled out and sent back for analysis, meaning that there was only a 3.3% of response rate.

Results of the Study

Student Participation in Online Tutorial

Data on student participation in four online courses is summarized in Table 1. The table compares percentage of student participation in each course and the average of student participation of each course.

Table 1
Student participation in online tutorial of the four courses

No	Course	Student's Activities in Online Tutorial											
		Regis-ter	Login	%	Passive	%	Active	%	No Login	%	Work on Assignment	%
1.	Accounting Introduction	265	75	28,3	49	18,5	26	9,8	190	71,1	34	12,8

No.	Course										
2.	Budgeting	202	60	29,7	49	24,2	11	5,4	144	72,8	7	3,47
3.	Organization	182	59	32,4	46	25,3	13	7,1	123	67,6	7	3,8
4.	Business	261	115	44	106	40,6	9	3,5	146	55,9	51	19,5
	The average	**227,5**	**77,25**	**33,6**	**62,5**	**27,15**	**14,75**	**6,45**	**150,75**	**67**	**24,75**	**9,89**

Table 1 shows that the average of students registered in one course is around 227 students. Around 33,6% of those who registered logged in to the online tutorial of each course. Only 6,45% of all registered students in the online courses participated actively, and only 9,89% worked on their online tutorial assignments. Meanwhile, there is sizeable percentage of student participating passively (27,15%). Comparison between active students and passive students raises a question whether online tutorial has been utilized by students effectively.

To answer the question on how students participate in online tutorial, the researchers observe online tutorials of these four courses focusing on interaction pattern occurred in discussion forum and tutor performance in conducting online tutorials.

Further investigation was conducted to observe the interaction pattern of students actively participating online discussions. The result of the observation on the interaction pattern of discussion forum demonstrates that there are differences in presentation and management of discussion forum conducted by tutors. As UT has online tutorial guidelines, it shows those tutors do not utilize it. Data regarding the number of tutors' posting shows that tutors do not actively respond to students. Further analysis of students' activities on discussion forum shows that there is variation of students' questions concerning online learning materials and the content of printed learning printed, completion of assignments, and other technical aspects related to participation in online tutorials.

Questions regarding technical problem were found in online tutorial of Introductory of Accounting and Introduction to Business which showed that students did not understand how to post assignment reports correctly. There were a number of students who posted assignment reports in discussion forum that could be accessed by other students. Assignment is usually individual task, which should be sent through "task window" or directly to tutor via email. Observation of student participation on discussion forum showed that there was quite low student posting in online tutorial of Budgeting and Corporate Organization courses. In addition, student activities on these courses tended to be decreasing every week in terms of frequencies and intensities.

In order to observe tutor preparation, the researchers utilize instructional design criteria for online tutorial consisting of the following elements: provision of learning material, timetable, learning guideline, feedback, assignment, learning material enrichment, and motivation from tutor (Belawati, 2003). Observation results could be described as the following. First, all courses provide eight learning material, which are requirements for online tutorial guidelines in UT. Second, all of courses provide a schedule that contains outline of material and assignments. Third, only two courses provide technical instruction on how to participate in online tutorial process, namely Corporate Organization and Introductory Accounting. Fourth, all courses provide *feedback* for student to answer their questions and to motivate students participating in online tutorial. Feedback given on time is proven to start up discussion. Fifth, two courses give three assignments as required in UT online tutorial guidelines. Sixth, all courses provide learning materials enrichment, yet they are not diverse and deep enough to address the discussed topics. Learning material enrichment is pivotal in online tutorial, because through this medium distance education course manager can provide additional learning material with less cost. Seventh, all courses have given motivation to students in order to participate actively in online tutorial. However, there are differences in degree of tutor effort to motivate students. Motivation is important to overcome low involvement in online tutorial participation. There are some methods utilized to motivate students, the simplest one is greeting, asking whether or not they can follow discussion well,

whether they understand material presented by tutor, or whether they have difficulties in completing assignments.

Besides observation, there were a number of other findings revealed from questionnaires sent to online tutorial participants. First, a large proportion of respondents (40%) had strong interests in online tutorial as indicated by frequent access to online tutorials on every day basis, while 33% accessed online tutorials on a three-day basis. Second, respondents stated the importance of online tutorial schedule as a guideline for participating in online tutorial activities. Third, 40% of respondents stated that online tutorials gave benefits to enriching their learning process.

Factors Influencing Student Participation in *Online* Tutorial

Factors influencing student participation in online tutorials are divided into two categories, namely technical and non-technical aspects. Technical aspect is concerned with UT internet network and students' computer skills. Meanwhile, non-technical aspect is concerned with expenses and tutor promptness in giving feedback and motivation to students. A summary of factors influencing students' participation in online tutorial is shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Factor Influencing Student Participation in *Online* Tutorial and Discussion Forum on Four Courses at Registration Term 07.2

No.	Factors	Influence
1	Expenses	Insufficiently influential (70%)
2	Students computer skill	Insufficiently influential (83%)
3	Internet access point	Insufficiently influential (office: 77%)
4	UT's internet network accessibility	Insufficiently influential (87%)
5	Prompt *feedback*	Sometimes fast subtracted (73%)
6	Accuracy *feedback* given to students	Duly (63%)
7	Motivation by tutor	Adequately active (70%)

Factors that were insufficiently influential to participation in online tutorial include cost, students' computer skills, access points, and ease of access to UT website. Cost factors are not constraints because of most of the students access the internet from the workplace (77%). Computer skill factor is not a significant constraint because most of students have the skills in using the computer (83%). Meanwhile access to UT website is perceived by easy enough by a considerable number of students (87%), indicating UT technical readiness to provide online tutorial services.

Meanwhile, one factor significantly influential to students' active participation in online discussion forum is tutors' promptness in giving feedback. A large proportion of students (73%) declare that tutors sometimes do not give prompt response to students' queries. However, many students think that tutors give accurate feedback to students despite the fact that the feedback has been somewhat delayed (63%), and the feedback is also considered to be motivating by students (70%).

This research has also found out factors that are influential in improving student participation in online discussion through providing discussion material presented in short and topical cases. That data points out that 57% of students want discussion material in short cases, and 53% of students want discussion topics on current issues.

Conclusions

The findings of the research on participation in four online learning courses offered by UT Faculty of Economics indicate that there is low participation of students in online tutorials. Only 6,45% participated actively and 9,89% who did their online tutorial assignments. Meanwhile, there is sizeable percentage of student participating passively (27,15%). Observation result on interaction pattern of discussion forum demonstrates that there are differences on presentation and management of discussion forum conducted by tutors. As UT has online tutorial guidelines for tutors, the finding of the research also shows that not all tutors do utilize it.

In order to observe tutor preparation, the researchers utilize instructional design criteria for online tutorial which includes provision of learning material, timetable, learning guideline, feedback, assignment, learning material enrichment, and motivation from tutor (Belawati, 2003). Observation result shows that not every tutor provides tutorial instructional design criteria.

Data regarding the number of tutor posting shows that tutor does not actively respond to students. Meanwhile, findings of the questionnaire survey indicate that most respondents perceive that tutors have addressed students' questions on topics appropriately and given motivation to students to learn. However, tutors still need to focus attention on discussion format using short cases and on topics of current issues.

Findings of the research also indicate the principal factor influencing student participation in tutorial *online* is the slow feedback from tutors to students, meanwhile technology and characteristics of *interface* such as access, costs, and computer skills do not hamper students' participation in online tutorials. Limitation of the research is that it has low response rate to the questionnaire. Some recommendations are presented. First, tutors need to be trained in designing instructional system for online tutorials. Second, tutors are advised to give feedback immediately to respond to students' queries on email. Finally, based on findings the research, topics on current issues should be presented in the form of case studies.

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