M-2009

TOILING IN THE INTERNET FOR A GRADUATE DEGREE.
STUDENT PREFERENCE AND EXPERIENCE IN ONLINE THESIS ADVISING

Suciati Ph.D, Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

Summary

Theses advising in a graduate distance education program is perceived as needing an intensive communication to resolve student difficulty in the research and writing process. Using internet for sending drafts of theses, offering advice, giving correction and recommendation is advisable since it guarantee speed, cost and ease. However, regardless of the availlable access to internet, not all students and advisor actually use internet, or may use very infrequently during thesis advising. One possible reason is lack of information 'tool literacy' in which both students and advisors unaware or do not know how to use it.

This study describes student perceptions of the advising process and the use of online communication through the internet for thesis submission, correction and feedback. Some students prefer to submit their theses draft electronically and have the advisors use in-text editing and comments on their draft, to be sent back to them for revision. Students tendency to communicate online with their advisors seems influenced by the 'cues' sent by the advisors, whether they prefer online or not. The study also tries to explain various factors influencing student perceptions and behavior in completing their theses.

Introduction

Graduate education becomes an aspiration for many people who perceive it as instrumental for obtaining a better social status and income. With a flexible learning system, distance education has become a prefered choice for education. Many distance education institutions worldwide offer graduate study levels with an increasing number of participants.

The blended form of education implemented by distance graduate education program usually includes independent learning and face-to-face sessions, integrated with online communication for tutorial, academic and theses advising. Some programs include video-conference for seminars.

Theses advising is perceived as needing an intensive communication, face-to-face and online, to resolve student difficulty in the reserach and writing process. This study shows that not all students favour online theses advising, and they prefer face-to-face discussion with their advisors. On the other hand, advisor tends to underplay online communication with their advisee. Their behavior send a message that online communication is not preferable.

Using internet for offering advice, giving correction and recommendation is more advisable than on printed draft of student theses. This mode of communication ensures speed, ease of correction, and minimize reliance on bulky papers sent by post. In the long run it saves a lot of the student as well as the teacher's resources. It may even lead to paperless thesis advising, or wouldn't it?

In the era of information technology, one should have what is called as 'tool literacy' (Rudestam, 2002) in which one understands and use practical and conceptual tools of current information technology. In distance education system internet technology can be a medium which shorten the distance and allow for faster communication. Thesis advising in a distance education schmene can take advantage from online comunication in sending draft of thesis to and from students to advisors, and for advisisors to give comments and correction. Instant delivery by the internet is obviously superior from delivery by post.

However, regardless of the availlable access to internet, not all students and advisor actually use internet, or may use very infrequently during thesis advising. One possible reason is lack of information 'tool literacy' in which both students and advisors unaware or do not know how to use it. Aware of this condition, UT integrates internet use in the learning process, by requiring students to participate in online tutorials and using web-based supplementary material. Since it is mandatory, each student will be exposed to online communication by internet and used to using it.

Another possible reason why students and advisors do not use internet is the absence of what Rudestam (2002) named 'online communicative competence'. It is one dimension of information literacy which relates to communication, interaction, and interpersonal behavior in the world of cyberspace., and interpersonal behavior is definitely influenced by common internal factors, such as individual beliefs, preferences and perception ((Grasha & Yangarber-Hicks, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

This article aims to explain student perceptions of the theses advising process and the use of online communication through the internet for thesis submission, correction and feedback. The study also tries to explain various factors influencing student perceptions and tendencies in completing their theses.

Methods

The case study was conducted in early 2008, involving program graduates from different year and locations. A questionnaire was developed to inquiry about students experience in the thesis advising process and their perception of the use of online communication during the advising process. Twenty - nine (29) alumnae completed and returned the questionnaires out of 50 sent to them by post; which contitutes a return rate of 58 %.

Country background

Indonesia is an archipelago with more than 13000 islands, stretching out through a 20000 miles square area, with a population of close to 237,000,000 people.

Universitas Terbuka (UT) of Indonesia was established in 1984 by a presidential decree to meet the needs of higher education for fresh high-school graduates. However in later years, the percentage of younger students becomes very small, less than 5 percents. The total number of students in early 2009 is 537 thousands, 70% of which are student teachers working. Since 2004 UT offers three magister programs; namely magister of public

administration, magister of management and magister of fishery management. The magister program is initially intended to be a carrier flag for the institution, aiming at providing excelent service to a small number of students. Yet in four years the number of students has multiplies fourfold. Magister for Public Administration has the most number of students .

Learning system at the graduate program

The program policy is administered by the School of Graduate Studies at Universitas Terbuka Jakarta, as the central office. The Regional Offices hold tutorials, examinations and other learning activities. At the first semester of 2009, the number of registered students is 622, supervised by 12 Regional Office.

Tabel 1

Graduate Students distribution in 2007.1 to 2008.2

Year	Public Administration	Magiater Management	Magister for Fishery Management	Total
2007.1	248	81	13	342
2007.2	412	117	29	558
2008.1	332	125	40	497
2008.2	448	181	38	667

For the last two years the number of students registered each semester is stable. This is an indication that students are getting used to the learning system and move smoothly within the program.
Students began graduating at 2006, and since then 113 students were graduated.

Table 1. Number of graduates (2004-2008)
and the predicate of program completion

GPA	f	%	Predicate
3.76 - 4.00	6	5.3	Cumlaude
3.51 - 3.75	33	29.2	Greatly Satisfactory
3.26 - 3.50	46	40.7	Satisfactory
3.00 - 3.25	28	24.7	Good
Total	113	100	

In general a student will need four to five semesters to complete the program, eventhough the program is structured for four semesters. Students will compelete courses in three

semesters and work on theses in the fourth and fifth semester. The general learning process can be described a s follows.

1. Students study individually using a package of he learning material, consisting of printed and multimedia material. Some courses supplemented with web – based material.

2. Students are required to attend four times face-to-face tutorial sessions per course, and a minimum of eight times online tutorial access per course per semester.

3. Online tutorial access will enable students to access three class assignments to complete and submit to face-to-face tutors for marking.

4. A course final grade will be determined based on tutorial performance (60%) and final assessment (40%).

5. At the final stage of the program students are required to write a theses (Program Final Assignment) and sits for a theses defence.

6. To complete the program students have to have a GPA of 3.00 and above and pass the theses defence.

As seen from Figure 1, students from early stage of the program have been conditioned to use internet for compulsory tutorial. The learning process represents a blended learning scheme which combines independent learning, face-to-face tutorials and online tutorials.
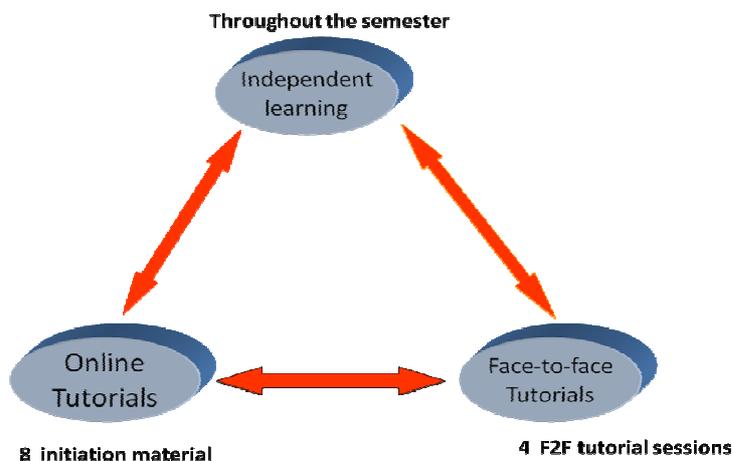

Figure 1. Students learning components

Thesis advising mechanism

One of the output of the third semester is a reserach pre-proposal to be developed and carried out at the fourth semester. Two advisors are assigned to individual student during research period.   Theses advising is conducted as individual face-to-face interactions, online communication by email, and residential intensive face-to-face advising sessions at the Regional Office. Students has to use a manual specifying the format according to UT standard. After obtaining approval from both advisors she will be scheduled for theses defence.

By design, a students will have two advisors, the main advisor will concern with the research substance appropriateness, and the second advisor will concentrate more on the research methods and technical aspects of thesis writing. For the main thesis advisors UT employs university lecturers with doctorate degrees of relevant field of study from a neighbouring

public university of the Regional Offices, and the second advisors will be lecturers from UT in Jakarta. The students are expected to contact advisors for face-to-face meeting with their advisors, and they will at least meet their main advisors twice during the residential thesis advising. The rest of the advising will have to done in a distance, using telephone, sms, or online. Student submission of drafts of thesis to and fro to the advisors is recommended by internet, due to a far distance between the students and the advisors.

Thesis research and writing on regular semester is planned for 14-16 weeks, however most students will require two semesters.

Thesis advising scheme within a semester

Activity	Weeks													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Academic service	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Distance and/or online thesis advising	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Residential thesis advising			X										X	
Thesis writing	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Thesis Defence														X

Findings and discussion

Backgrounds of respondents

The students ranges from 27 to 52 years old, with an average of 41. Seventy two percents are from 27 to 45 years old. Four (13.7%) out of 29 are females.

The following description will explain students' perception regarding their experience in theses advising.

Preparation for Theses writing

a. Use of manual for thesis writing
   UT designed a special manual for thesis writing to be distributed to students when they complete the third semester. It is designed as a simple booklet which explains the technical aspects of theses writing in accordance to UT specifications. When asked if they have and understand the content of the manual, almost 100% state that they own one and understand the content. However during the process of advising, some advisors find out that students do not use the manual, consequently the theses must undergo heavy re- editing, which is time costly.

b. Pre proposal
   Twenty three respondents (79,3%) claims to have pre-proposals ready before entering the fourth semester. The pre-proposal is the product of independent study at semester three. Having the pre-proposal handy will help the students move on efficiently in their respective research. However many will change their topics after the residential theses advising after rigorius discussion with their advisors. In some cases it cause more time of study which has financial implication on students. Many reasons quoted by students for

changing research topics are such as 'find a more interesting topic during the seminar session', 'my topic lack of focus', 'the advisor directed me for quantitative methods, eventhough I prefer qualitative', etc.

Use of online communication in theses advising

a. Means of sending draft of theses to advisors.

Student preference in the way of sending theses drafts to their advisors varies. Fourteen (48.3 percent) prefers to send it as email attachment, and the rest prefer send the printed form by post. Some students mentions about repeated failures of uploading parts of their work to be sent online to the advisor, and this condition make them resort to using the post service.

Internet access in Indonesia is getting better. In 2007 the number of internet subscribers has trippeled to 25 millions (APJII, 2007), this figure obviously will increase in 2009.

If a student has a computer and telephone line, he can easily access internet through the service provided by the national Telkom. Most of the graduate students have access to a computer with internet line, either at home or at the office. Sending a package by post from the outer islands to Jakarta may take two weeks by regular mail and three days by special delivery. Whereas emailing a draft of thesis, of about 100 pages as email attachment will cost less, except for students who have to travel a long way to find internet kiosk. It is interesting to note however, that some graduates explain the reasons for not using email is because the advisors seem do not require it. The advisors prefer print-out documents to be sent to them for comments and corrections.

b. Use of internet for advising

Out of 29 students, 19 (65%) use internet to contact and interact with their advisors. The reported frequency is between one to 15 times. The majority (81%) ranges from 2 to 6 times. Student who use internet for communication with advisors reporting it as 'cheaper' and 'faster'.

c. Online /in-text correction by advisors

Eight students (42,9%) of students who sent draft of theses to advisors do not prefer in-text or online editing by the advisors, in other words they want the advisors to print the theses and make correction on the printed form. Students used Microsoft Word to type their theses, but they do not know very well and accustomed to in-text editing using Microsoft Word. It so happened that when an advisor conduct in-text edit and comment on a student theses, when the hoped-for revised version is resubmitted to the advisor, the changes is not integrated. Eventhough change integration can be done by a simple "accept' or 'reject' changes. The program overestimate the word processing capability of the students and do not formally provide training on this matter.

d. Advisors preference of doing online correction

Out of eight students who emailed their theses to advisors, five of them (62.5%) reported that their advisors conduct in-text comment and editing, which also accounts for only 17,2 % of all students reporting the case.

Residential theses advising

An intensive face-to-face advising sessions are provided twice during the theses writing process. First is conducted at the beginning of the semester as seminar of research proposals. Each student will present the substance of their proposal in 20 minutes followed by questions advisors and fellow students. The second session is conducted after most

students collect data and analyse their findings. This session is for students to report their findings and to have inputs from advisors and expert feedback.

When asked if they are able to present findings during the second residential advising, 5 students (17.2%) stated not able to do it for various reasons, such as 'data collection is not completed', 'operationalization of variables are not yet approved by the advisor', 'I'm not ready','the output of the previous session is unclear to me', etc. These responds indicates that students may not contact their advisors due to various reasons, therefore they cannot resolve their problems. A students especially report that the seminar has turned into a 'killing field' for him, and this perception hindered him from further contacting his advisor.

In addition these people are working fultime and conducting research at the same time. There is always time constraints because of other competing responsibilities. This condition seems to be the main cause for students to lengthen their study period.

Support and helpfulness of advisors

Theses writing can be a hard, winding and lonely road for students, especially for distance learners with less frequent face-to-face interactions with the advisors, compared to students in the conventional university. Therefore they have to have a source of moral support and encouragement from friends, family and advisors.

Almost all students (27; 93.1%)reported that the advisors are actively made efforts to motivate students during the writing process, in the forms of 'encouragement to complete the theses', 'invitation to contact anytime finding difficulties', 'psychological support that student will be able to complete the theses', 'digging for deeper data', 'let students borrow the advisors' books', etc.

Some candidates, however, 'drop-off' quetly from the process, and pick it up later when they are ready.

The necessity for local content development as research source of reference

External examiners frequently mentioned that many of the theses lack of strong conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Most students who are practitioners in the field, for example the majority of the magister of public administration students are local government officials and members of the house of the representatives, who are not accustomed to theoretical thinking. In addition, scientific journal in their respective field is not availlable in local university library. Since most of them do not have a good mastery of English, subscription for reference clearinghouse service such as Proquest, is not much helpful. We need to develop and upload local content in the Indonesian language to be accessed by UT students. Print subscription is limited in number and access to be distributed to all students.

Conclusion

Use of internet for theses advising theoretically is promising and beneficial to students and advisors. Seeing the benefits, however does not always mean using it. This study nevertheles shows some empirical evidence, that student interest to use online communication through the internet for theses advising is substantial, and growing. By using the internet student can expect a faster theses delivery an faster response from the advisors. However sttudents also take cues from the advisors whether to use online communication or not, since advisors may not accustomed to using internet dan have different preference from

the students. In the long run both students and advisors will need to learn a new habit of 'collaboration', optimizing the use of word proccessing tools for a faster correction.

In the long-long run we may be able to realize a paperless theses advising, or at least cutting down the number of papers shuffled to and fro; and the best of all is reducing the number of trees cut down to produce paper, that we may live in a greener world.

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