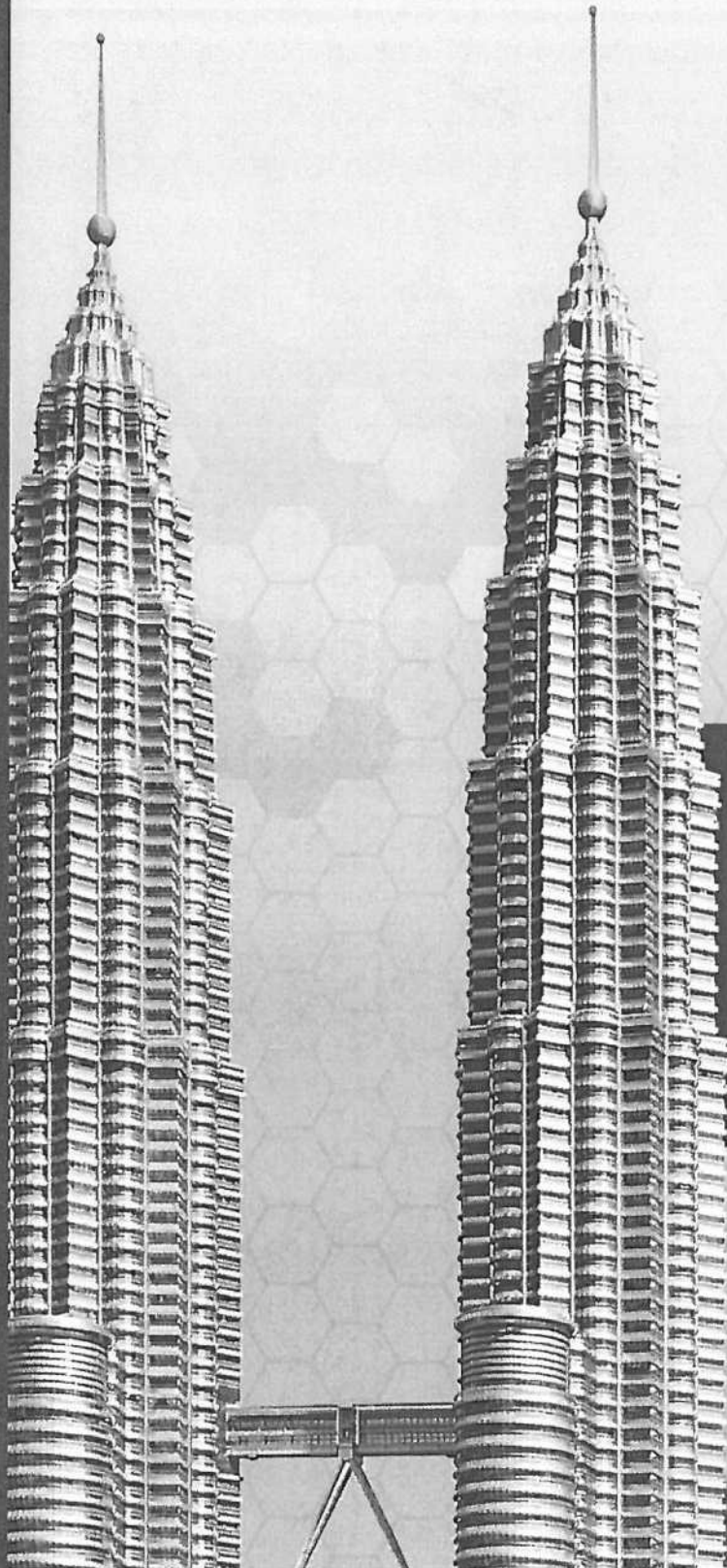




Asian Association
of Open Universities



New Frontiers in ODL

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Conference of
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PROCEEDINGS

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Sub-Theme 3

New Research and
Practices in Open and
Distance Learning
(ODL)

PROCEEDINGS

SOCIAL PRESENCE IN ONLINE GRADUATE PROGRAM TUTORIALS AT DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study examined the existence of social presence in online tutorials at a graduate program in a distance teaching university in Indonesia. The concept of social presence in this study is part of the framework of the Community of Inquiry from Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000). Community of Inquiry framework is used as a concept and tools to support the learning experience in online learning through computer mediated communication (CMC). The model of Community of Inquiry assumes that learning occurs within the community through the interaction of three core elements, include: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. According to Garrison, et al., social presence is defined as the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in trusting environment and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personality. It creates the academic setting for open communication, sense of belonging to the group and its academic goals. It also produces an environment for learners to express themselves freely and openly. The method of this study used content analysis. Data was collected from transcripts of the discussion activities and interactions between students and tutors in online tutorials of three courses in the graduate program. The transcripts of online tutorial activities were analyzed by using content analysis with a message unit. By using the message unit as the unit of analysis, code makers generally see the message that emerges from the interaction between students and tutors in the initiation, discussion and assignments, to determine the category. The result of the study was that the social presence occurred in the online tutorial of the three courses in the graduate program, even though it was not fully optimal.

Keywords: *Scial presence, online tutorial, graduate program, distance education*

Introduction

Online learning has been utilized extensively to enhance classroom learning as well as to increase access to educational experiences at a distance, largely through synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication applications (Garrison & Archer, 2007). Online learning has characteristics of being flexible, where learners are able to study whenever and wherever they want. Through online learning, learners also could learn with their own speed. Another characteristic of online learning is that the role of instructor would change. The role of instructor is a shift from being the source of knowledge to being a facilitator and collaborator with the learners (Rovai, 2004). Their tasks include “providing feedback to learners and a summary of or specific comments on the discussed issues at the end of class discussions and intervening and promoting students’ participation in the discussion when it becomes stagnant” (Ruey, 2010, p. 708).

Online learning also has disadvantages. Sometimes, learners in an online learning program may experience isolation and alienation from the institution because of their physical separation from instructors and other students (Garrison et al., 2001; Morgan & Tam, 1999; Rovai, 2007). Development of feelings of social presence in online learning can assist, reduce or eliminate these outcomes (Rovai, 2007). This experience could be interpreted that the social presence between instructor and students is important in online learning.

Universitas Terbuka (UT) is a distance teaching university in Indonesia, where students learn independently, in undergraduate and graduate programs. In graduate programs, UT offers two learning modes, namely regular program and fully online program. As a distance teaching university, UT uses multimedia learning materials for its students, with printed materials as the major media,

supplemented by non-printed materials. To assist students in their learning, UT provides learning supports, including face to face tutorial and online tutorial.

For graduate students in the regular program, besides learning independently with printed learning materials, they also take face to face tutorial and online tutorial. Online tutorial is a learning support that is held in 13 weeks in one semester, with a tutor as a facilitator. The activities in the online tutorial are initiations, discussions, and assignments. The material of initiation is from printed learning materials and other relevant sources. Students also need to participate actively in discussion forums and do the assignments. Face to face tutorial is the other form of tutorial that is compulsory for graduate students in the regular program. The face to face tutorials are held in the cities of UT's Regional Offices in all over Indonesia for four times in one semester. It is integrated with online tutorial's assignment activities. Students and tutors discuss the online tutorial's assignments during face to face tutorials.

For graduate students in the fully online programs, they also learn independently. However, unlike their fellow students in the regular programs, the students in the fully online programs do not have face to face tutorial. Without face to face tutorial, students are not able to meet their fellow students and instructors in a study forum. There is no verbal communication among students and between students and instructors. Students who do not used to learn in an online learning environment may find that it is challenging to study in the online environment, especially in the graduate level. Students may feel isolated in their learning. They may miss the atmosphere of togetherness in a class room.

The learning atmosphere in a face to face classroom often is connected to social presence. The learning through computer mediated communication considered very low in terms of social presence when compared to the learning through face to face communication (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997). Generally, there are fears that social presence may be loss in the teaching and learning process at UT, especially in the fully online programs. Therefore, this study examined the existence of social presence in the three online tutorials of the fully online of Public Administration graduate program at UT.

Literature Review

Social presence in this study refers to one of the elements of Community of Inquiry framework from Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Community of Inquiry framework is used as a concept and tools to support the learning experience in online learning through computer mediated communication (CMC) (p. 87). Community of inquiry is defined as "a cohesive and interactive community of learners whose purpose is to critically analyze, construct, and confirm worthwhile knowledge" [3], (p. 9). The model of Community of Inquiry assumes that learning occurs within the community through the interaction of three core elements, include: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Social presence is originally defined as "the ability of learners to project themselves (i.e. their personal characteristics) socially and emotionally, thereby representing themselves as 'real people' in a community of inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 94). The definition of social presence then is revised as "the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in trusting environment and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personality" (Garrison, 2011, p. 34). According to Garrison (2011), too much emphasis on developing interpersonal relationship may harm the academic functioning of the group if the individual bonds are stronger than the identity to the group and its goals.

Research evidence suggested that social presence among members of a learning community increased discourse, facilitated the critical thinking carried on by the community of learners, strengthened the sense of community, promoted learner satisfaction, facilitated collaborative learning, and contributed to the success of the learning experience (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).

Garrison (2011) categorized social presence into interpersonal communication, open communication and cohesive responses. Interpersonal communication is responsible for setting the academic climate for open and academically purposeful communication. It also creates a climate and sense of belonging to the group and its educational goals (Garrison, 2011). Indicators of interpersonal relationships include affective expression, self-disclosure and using humor (Garrison, 2011). Open communication is referred as producing an environment for learners to express themselves freely and openly. Indicators of open communication include continuing a discussion thread, quoting from others' messages, referring explicitly to others' messages, asking questions, complimenting, expressing appreciation, and expressing agreement (Garrison, 2011). Interpersonal and open communication contributes directly to group cohesion. In a cohesive community, constructing meaning, confirming understanding and completing collaborative activities can be achieved successfully (Garrison, 2011). Indicators of cohesive responses include addressing participants by name, addressing or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns, and salutations (Garrison, 2011).

Garrison (2011) argued that social presence is an essential for collaboration and create critical discourse. However, it does not mean to support engagement for only social purposes. He asserted that social presence in academic context means "creating a climate that support and encourages probing questions, skepticism and the contribution of explanatory ideas" (p. 32). Sense of belonging is required to sustain critical thinking and discourse, and that is not able to develop instantly; it must develop over time.

The role of the teacher is important to establish social presence in an online learning. Garrison (2011) asserted that the teacher should model of appropriate messages and responses. It is an important factor in making students feel welcome and in giving them a sense of belonging. The teachers have to be sensitive and responsive at the beginning of the online activities. They should also ask students to collaborate to establish group identity.

Rovai (2007) provided suggestions for the strategies for instructors to promote social presence. He asserted that instructors need to access the discussion forums every day in order to keep up with the conversations. The instructors should post at least one message per day in group discussion boards to suggest that the postings are being read. Postings can be expressions of appreciation, agreement, support, and encouragement, but Rovai (2007) suggested to avoid being so critical. Furthermore, Rovai (2007) advised instructors to maintain a focused discussion and summarize periodically what has been or needs to be done. He also advised encouraging students' dialogue by asking questions that stimulate in-depth reflective discussions and hold students responsible for their thinking.

Garrison (2011) suggested that the tutors have to be sensitive and give the appropriate messages that make the students feel welcome in the class community. The tutors also need to address the messages with respect, and may ask the students to be involved as co-moderators in the discussion forums. The tutors also need to encourage students to participate actively in the tutorial activities.

The role of students in establishing a social presence in an online tutorial is also essential. In the first week of the online tutorial activities, students are expected to build a community. Rovai (2002) defined community in online environments as:

.... consisting of two components: feelings of connectedness among community members and commonality of learning expectations and goals. ... Classroom community is strong when learners (a) feel connected to each other and to the instructor, (b) manifest the immediate communication behaviors that reduce social and psychological distance between people, (c) share common interests and values, (d) trust and help each other, (e) actively engage in two-way communications, and (f) pursue common learning objectives. (p. 322)

In the online class community, students could express their unique opinions and discuss with other, different perspectives. Equal discussions would promote mutual understanding and common improvement, and simultaneously would be building up friendships among students. This online community also could help students to construct their individual identities, overcome anxiety and isolation resulting from online learning processes. In addition, interpersonal communication could allow students' learning experience to be accepted, encouraged, and supported by other students in the community. Therefore, the sense of belonging, identification, and community cohesion are reinforced, which, in turn, drives all the students in the community to play active roles in the interactions (Wei, 2013).

A sense of community in an online class can be encouraged through emphasizing common purposes (Rovai, 2002). In regard to developing the community, as a first step, the students need to have interpersonal communication by introducing themselves to each other. The introduction activity can create a sense of belonging in the class community for the students and it can build open communication and group cohesion throughout the online tutorial activities. Building a sense of community and sense of belonging within the group is necessary to create a collaborative learning environment. Collaborative learning is one of the instructional principles to be considered when designing online social constructivist pedagogy (Huang, 2002).

Table 1: Categories and Indicators of Social Presence

Category	Indicators	Definition	Example
Interpersonal communication	Affective expression	Conventional expressions of emotion, or unconventional expressions of emotion, including repetitious punctuation, conspicuous capitalization, emoticons	"I just can't stand it when...!!!" "ANYBODY OUT THERE!"
	Self-disclosure	Presents biographies, details of personal life outside of class, or expresses vulnerability	"Where I work, this is what we do . . ." "I just don't understand this question"
	Use of humor	Teasing, cajoling, irony, understatements, sarcasm	"The banana crop in Calgary is looking good this year ;-)"
Open communication	Continuing a thread	Using software features to quote others' entire messages, or cutting and pasting selections of others' messages	Software dependent, e.g., "Subject: Re" or Branch from"
	Quoting from others' messages	Using software features to quote others' entire messages, or cutting and pasting selection of others' messages	"Martha writes:" or text prefaced by less than symbol <

	Referring explicitly to others' messages	Direct references to contents of others' posts	"In your message, you talked about Moore's distinction between..."
	Asking questions	Students ask questions of other students or the moderator	"Anyone else had experience with WebCT?"
	Complimenting, expressing appreciation	Complementing others or contents of others' messages	"I really like your interpretation of the reading"
	Expressing agreement	Expressing agreement with others or content of others' messages	"I was thinking the same thing. You really hit the nail on the head"
Cohesive communication	Vocatives	Addressing or referring to participants by name	"I think John made a good point." "John, what do you think?"
	Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns	Addresses the group as we, us, our, group	"Our textbook refers to...", "I think we veered off track..."
	Phatics, salutations	Communication that serves a purely social function: greetings, closures	"Hi all," "That's it for now." "We're having the most beautiful weather here"

Source: Adapted from Rourke et al., 1999

Method

This study used content analysis for its method. According to Kanuka and Anderson (1998), content analysis is defined as a research methodology that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from the text. The procedures in the content analysis include identifying and interpreting variables, collect a sample of the text, and establish the rule of reliability and validity in determining the categorization of the segment or section of text. The process of selecting a segment or portion of a transcript requires researchers to define the unit of analysis. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999) identified five units of analysis that has been used in the study of computer conferencing, namely: proportion unit, sentence units, paragraph units, thematic units, and message unit. This research will use message unit.

Data source of this study is the sample text of the discussion activity and interaction between student and tutor in an online tutorial of three courses of the Public Administration graduate program in the first semester of 2015. The transcripts of online tutorial activities will be analyzed by using a message unit. By using the message unit as the unit of analysis, code makers generally see the message that emerges from the interaction between students and tutors in the initiation, discussion and assignments, to determine the category (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

Result and Discussion

From the data analysis using the categories and indicators from Rourke et al (1999), social presence was found in the online tutorial activities of three graduate courses at UT, even though not all categories and indicators were occurred. The researcher has analyzed the activities of the discussions using content analysis with message unit. The result of the analysis disclosed that some of the indicators of social presence occurred many times in the discussion activities in the three courses that were analyzed, while some other indicators did not exist. They could be seen in the Table 2 below.

Table 2: Social Presence Categories Occurred in Online Tutorial of Three Courses of the Fully Online Public Administration Graduate Program at UT

Categories	Indicators	No. of times
Interpersonal communication	Affective expression	0
	Self-disclosure	2
	Use of humor	0
Open communication	Continuing a thread	48
	Quoting from others' messages	0
	Referring explicitly to others' messages	7
	Asking questions	0
	Complimenting, expressing appreciation	23
	Expressing agreement	3
Cohesive communication	Vocatives	9
	Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns	5
	Phatics, salutations	23

From three courses in the Public Administration graduate program that were analyzed, the researcher found that not all tutors introduced themselves or provided their profiles in the online tutorial. The tutors also did not provide an online forum for students to introduce themselves. The introduction is important for students and tutor to know each other, because in the fully online program, students do not have an opportunity to meet face to face with the tutor and their fellow students. Self-introduction or self-disclosure from tutors and students also could support the creation of online community. Within three courses that were analyzed, students and tutors never express their emotions in the discussion, using affective expression, such as repetitious punctuation, conspicuous capitalization, and emoticons. They also never used humor during the discussion or initiation activities. These findings showed that there was a lack of interpersonal communication in some of the courses in the fully online graduate programs.

Meanwhile, open communication did occur in the discussion forums. Students and tutors responded other students' posting with continuing a thread. Within the responses, the students and tutors expressed their appreciation and complimentary to the arguments or opinions made by other students. Students also expressed their agreement with other students' opinions. Sometimes, they express them with referring explicitly to others' messages, although these just occurred seven times during all discussions in the three courses. The activities in the online graduate program tutorial showed that the discussion activities in the online tutorials have created an environment for students to express themselves freely and openly.

Some of the role of tutors to promote social presence also did occur in the online tutorial of three courses. The tutors posted greetings, appreciation, support, and comments to encourage students' participation in the discussions. As one of the postings from a tutor:

Wow, the participants [of the discussion] here are active and increasingly academic in understanding the issues.... Your answers are good. [You have added] the theoretical or conceptual aspects in analyzing problems. Okay, please continue and sharpen your analysis (a tutor of fully online graduate program course)

Garrison (2011) stated that interpersonal and open communication contributes directly to group cohesion. In a cohesive community, constructing meaning, confirming understanding and completing collaborative activities can be achieved successfully. In the graduate online tutorial courses at UT, cohesive communication occurred in some extent. The analysis disclosed that most of students and tutors greeted each other in the beginning of their postings. Sometimes students and tutors addressed or referred other participants by name. In addition, a few students also addressed the group as a group, using pronoun we or us.

Despite of the existence of social presence in the online tutorial, the researcher found a lack of interactivity in students' postings. A lot of students in the online tutorial tended to post their contributions without referring to those of their peers. This finding is similar to two separate studies from Henri (1992, 1995), who observed that over two-thirds of learners in online discussion posted 'serial monologues'; they did not respond based on their peers' contributions. McKenzie and Murphy (2000), as well as Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang (2003) found the similar results in their research.

Conclusion

Social presence creates an academic atmosphere for open communication, a sense of belonging in the group and the academic goals, also produces an environment for learners to express themselves freely and openly. In the three graduate online tutorial courses at UT, social presence only occurred in some extent.

There were open communication and cohesive communication in some of the discussions of the online tutorial. However, interpersonal communication between students and tutors and among students was limited. Tutors did not form a forum for students to introduce themselves, so students did not have an opportunity to know other students better. In conclusion, the social presence occurred in the three online tutorials of the fully online of Public Administration graduate program at UT, even though it was not fully optimal.

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as

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Anuwar Ali', positioned above a dotted line.

Professor Emeritus Anuwar Ali
*President/ Vice-Chancellor
Open University Malaysia*