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INVESTIGATING TEACHING PRESENCE IN
ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

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ABSTRACT

The discussion forum is a vital component of online courses. Studies by Berge (1997), Gunawardena et al. (1997) and Garrison et al. (2000, 2001) showed that these asynchronous forums have the potential to promote critical thinking, meaningful problem solving, and knowledge construction. This case study investigated how four E-PJJ instructors at UiTM Terengganu Kampus Dungun used their online discussion forums to facilitate online students in their studies. In this study, the researcher looked into the aspects of teaching presence based on the instructors posted messages and compared them with Garrison & Anderson’s (2003) teaching presence indicators. The study discovered the discussion forums were under utilized and they were used mainly for class management and assessments handling instead of academic discussions on course contents. This was mainly because online discussions were not part of the students’ assessments. It was also found that non-language forums were more active compared to language forums.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background.

Various researchers have described the growth of e-learning as explosive, unparalleled, astounding and even disruptive. It is said to be explosive in the sense that e-learning has developed so rapidly, together with the exponential revolution of information technology and the Internet, as described by Ikenberry in Garrison & Anderson (2003). Due to this, a large number of people in education itself, are still lost in this new trend. Mcrea, Gay & Bacon (2000) in Wentling, Waight, Gallangher, La Fluer, Wang & Kanfer (2000) listed that the major driving factors for e-learning are the rapid technological changes and the shift from the industrial to the knowledge era, thus increasing the need for knowledge workers. Lewis (2002) highlighted the unparalleled increase in demand for mass education of e-learning, in both developed and developing countries, widening participation and an increased interest in lifelong learning following changes in the external job market.

Even though e-learning promises a lot of hope, together with new approaches, tools and media to improve learning, lack of ability to design a stimulating learning environment could be disruptive to the learners Lewis (2002). Teachers and course designers must understand the capabilities, the advantages and disadvantages of each of the tools and technologies they use (Laurillard, 1997). In addition, the design of the course contents and appropriate delivery method must also be well planned (Lynch, 2002).
Considering the issues, there is the need for pedagogical research in e-learning, for issues such as poor motivation, lack of communication, isolation and inability to assess progress (Lewis, 2002). The educational community has scarcely begun to recognize the value of collaborative capabilities of e-learning and as a consequence these capabilities are greatly under-utilized (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The challenge now is to understand the emerging educational context and how we create learning environment that will facilitate development of higher-order cognitive abilities and encourage these to thrive in what has been described as the knowledge era. Educators and researchers are challenged when new technologies such as e-learning are inserted into equation, as quoted by Privateer (1999:70):

... digital technologies require radically new and different notions of pedagogy.

This opinion is also shared by University of Illiois (1999:18):

"The implementation of online education shows both promise and peril. Computer mediated instruction may indeed introduce new and highly effective teaching paradigms, but high-quality teaching is not always assured. Administrative decisions made without due consideration to pedagogy, or worse, with policies or technology that hampers quality, may cause much wasted time, money and effort of both faculty and students."

Carr (1999:18) states on the need for pedagogical shift in this knowledge era:

A global knowledge economy raises new learning challenges in dealing with vastly increased flows of information, with its infrastructure of digitised electronic text combining print, image, graphics and voice via many-to-many interactive channels. This is supporting a significant shift in pedagogy from teacher-directed learning to discovery-based, student-centred learning.

Without appropriate pedagogy, use of high capacity communication services cannot provide significant improvements in learning outcomes. In general, it is the pedagogy that provides for learning, not the technology or the software alone. The services provided by high capacity electronic linking, including provision of software types such as interactive multimedia and the Internet, can assist and expand opportunities for teaching and learning, but without appropriate learning concepts and teaching practices, their potential will not be realised.