

## **PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE FORUMS: Some Insights of Malaysian Distance Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The use of technology is particularly significant in today's distance learning scenario. It has maximized the opportunities for interaction between discussion groups separated by time and space. This article reports the responses to a survey carried out with distance learners at a selected institution of higher learning. The learners responded to a questionnaire on their participation in online forums. It also looks at the postings or entries in the learner management system by these learners for the completion of a course. The findings suggest that both learners and instructors need to play their respective roles effectively in the cyber space to promote online interaction which is crucial to the learning.

**Keywords:** Learner Management System, online forums, distance language learning

### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of technologies in distance programs provides learners many challenges and opportunity to improve their learning. It has opened avenues for teaching and learning at a distance where learners can work at their own pace without the constraint of time and location. It also allows for real-time interactions with the instructor and other learners via teleconferencing, videoconferencing, and computer chat room discussions. Today one of the major technological innovations that have taken place in the teaching and learning in this Information Communication Technology (ICT) era is the emergence of the Learner Management System (LMS). Learner Management System is an automated system for administrating the learning process within an organization. The LMS allows a learner to fully manage and track his or her learning online as it has documented transcripts to serve as a record of learning. Learning through this electronic mode is popular especially in colleges and universities and it has become an integral aspect of many graduate courses for either part or the entire degree programme. Many of these institutions have replaced their conventional on-campus teaching with some element of online learning to mediate better learner interaction.

The term online forums need to be clearly explained as the article mainly focuses on participation of learners in the online forum. The term online forums refer to discussion forums or threaded discussions. This is a commonly used tool in online teaching. Online forums provide the ability for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time designated by the instructors. Online forums are also known as web forums, online discussion and bulletin board. As online learning which comes under the umbrella of distance learning is quite a recent phenomenon in many parts of the world, research in the area of facilitating learner control in an online environment is still limited. Virtual worlds of learning are imaginary environments in which people enter to engage in text-based social interactions for the purpose of learning.

There are some pertinent issues raised as to whether successful learning can happen without face-to-face meetings with learners via online modes. Such autonomous or self-directed approach to learning is not just a function of the institution and the instructional facilitator but the individual learner. Studies show that Malaysian learners are used to the traditional mode of learning and lack participation in the virtual environment. It is also established that learner participation in online learning is limited or rather very discouraging (Pramela, 2006). This article reports the findings of a research on how a group of distance learners reacted towards participation in online forums in the LMS during a language course.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Online forums are one of the commonly used tools in online teaching. It is another example of an Internet-based English language tool is regarded by educationists as being able to make teaching and learning language fun and enriching. It is also an exciting and growing field. Berhannudin and Wan Fara Adlina (2004) found that online forums allow students to have time to think while practising to write in English besides having the opportunity to use the target language outside their classroom. Supyan Hussin (2008) is of the opinion that in online forums the more active the learners are the higher the tendency for them to acquire new information and knowledge. This is also reported by Malachi (2006) that online forum (OLF) has enriched his learners' knowledge about literature reading. Abtar (2004) explains that engaging learners is crucial in online discussions as disengagement can result in learners losing interest in the subject matter. She suggested that instructors should post a relevant discussion question, refer learners to resource materials, and encouraging learners to respond to issues raised. She also addressed the issue on knowledge building. Tutors must employ knowledge building strategies. Only then they can encourage the learners to contribute in the process of learning.

The discussion forums provide the avenue for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time designated by the instructor. The ability to learn asynchronously is one of the important benefits of online learning – anywhere, anyplace and anytime. Unlike regular classrooms, online forum offers the ability for the students to participate in a single discussion to provide equal opportunities for large participation as an informal class. Effective online courses involve feedback, interaction and promote self-learning. Rainley (2006) believes that a successful online instructor must be willing to give up on the traditional teaching concepts and control in the virtual class so as to encourage and empower the learning community. Warschauer et al. (2000) comment that in theory the power of computer and the Internet can allow distance education programmes to be more flexible, interactive and fast-paced, but whether this will prove to be true in practice remains to be seen. This is where learners will have to take more responsibility for their own learning process and development in this virtual mode.

The teacher directs the instruction, leads the lessons, prompts responses and paces the class. The learning is learner-centred and requires a different role for the teacher, that of facilitator rather than instructor. The teacher plans the activities but follows the flow of the conversation, offering guidance as needed rather than strictly adhering to the pre-planned syllabus using the online mode. Many researchers believe that the most efficient way of shifting traditional classrooms into dynamic and open learning environments is through ICT. However, its viability and implications in language learning must be studied further (Pramela and Wong, 2009). She also adds on to say that open and flexible technology-enhanced learner-centred learning environments, do not in themselves, lead to learning efficiency or effectiveness. It depends very much on the effective participation of the learners.

This closely ties to engagement theory (Kearsley and Shneiderman, 1998) which suggests that learners must be actively engaged in meaningful tasks for effective learning to occur. This means that there must be planning, problem solving, evaluating, making decisions or involved in the discussions. The engagement theory is based on many learning theories. It espouses a constructivist philosophy (Piaget 1973) which propagates that students are given a chance to create own learning. This theory embraces the ideas of situated learning which emphasis the importance of a community of practice. It is also consistent with adult learning theories that emphasise the experiential aspects of learning which embraces the ideas of cooperative and team building.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has made it possible for language learners to integrate independent learning experiences with opportunities for interaction and collaboration. Computer conferencing requires considerable self-direction, motivation and initiative on the part of the learners. The instructor is required to be an effective facilitator, placing the learner at the centre of the learning process. The crucial question is how to arouse and maintain in these learners, the desire to interact online. In the absence of body language and other cues of the face-to-face contexts, the instructor has to stimulate and sustain discussion and help the learners to establish a sense of community. To function as a virtual community, interactivity is crucial.

Creating interaction in the classroom is essential to student learning and to the overall success and effectiveness of distance education (Kearsley et al., 1995). The quest for interactivity has become a necessary goal in the 'design and provision' of distance education programmes (Oliver and McLoughlin, 1996). Successful e-learning just like face-to face learning must have interactions between students and instructors.

CMC has made it possible for language learners to integrate independent learning experiences with opportunities for interaction and collaboration (White, 2003). Harasim et al. (1995) believe that quality of the interaction and participation online can be improved through the online mode of learning. Interacting is two-way communication among two or more people within a learning context, with the purpose of either tackling a task or social relation-building. They claim that asynchronous communication provides participants the opportunity to comment immediately or to reflect and compose a response thoughtfully. Hiltz (1994) explains that CMC allows all learners equal opportunities to ask questions and make comments even if they have difficulties in putting their ideas into words quickly.

Pallof and Pratt (1999) argue that the 'key to the learning process is interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from the interactions'. A sense of virtual community and the collaboration among learners in online learning environments promote quality and quantity of education (Lauron, 2009). However, simply grouping individual students in asynchronous discussion groups does not necessarily lead to effective interaction or collaborative learning. These learning environments need a certain amount of structure and monitored closely by trained instructors or even moderators.

Pramela (2006), in a study conducted in a virtual learning environment found that learners did not give much importance to interactions during online tutorials. The learners were more teacher-dependent and lacked self-motivation and communicative competence to participate during online tutorials. Although these learners attended OLT sessions, they strongly felt that OLTs were for communication with friends and their instructor.

They also felt that learning through the face-to-face mode is better. She suggests further research on experiences and difficulties encountered by learners and instructors in similar online setups as this research is an important aspect for the online pedagogy.

Gunawardena (1995) emphasized that CMC contained few social clues. Student perceptions of the social qualities of a medium depended upon the social presence created by the instructors and the online community. Hence CMC through online forums is crucial to the learning process. It promotes the exchange and sharing of ideas, opinions and success stories, expands network of experts and helps in the building of the culture of subscribing to life long learning. In online forums, learners are responsible for their own learning and it is here that the role of the teacher in providing support and guidance is essential. Pramela (2006) explains that the value of interaction by instructors may go unnoticed by learners who are not familiar with the online learning. Computer networking in the form of forums also allows for more opportunities for participation by those who at times are often excluded. This includes shy students and student who are apprehensive about writing. Masputeriah (2006) explains that OLF provides a less stressful environment for learners who have poor language proficiency.

Vygotsky (1978) claims that social discourse between people gives rise to the growth of an inner voice, which provides a person with a sense of control or mastery which is especially important for language learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Contexts of the Study**

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established in 2000. OUM offers a flexible mode of learning via three methods – self-managed learning where learners study independently according to their time availability, online learning with online forum discussions using a learning management system (LMS) and face-to-face interactions with direct contact with tutors during tutorial sessions. At OUM, online forms are a crucial element in achieving institutional aims and the learning philosophy. Online learning supports face-to-face learning so that students remain connected to peers and other learning processes.

### **The sample**

The sample comprised OUM learners from two tutorial groups which added to a total of 62 learners. These learners were a mixed group of working adults ranging from IT technicians to bank clerks and government employees. They were in their second year of study and had followed an English course.

The rationale for selecting these learners were their experience following courses at OUM. The courses would have provided them with much needed practice of how to use the LMS. The survey was conducted during students' face-to-face tutorials at the study centre at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia with the consent obtained from OUM.

### **Course Profile**

English for Workplace Communication (OUMH2203) is one of the courses offered by the Faculty of Education. The course is for all students who are enrolled in programmes in business management and information technology. It is an intermediate level course, designed for students who need practice and exposure to enhance their communicative and grammatical competence to enable them to participate successfully at their workplace.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> OUMH 2203 English for Workplace, Open University Malaysia, Prentice Hall, Malaysia.

### **Data Collection**

For data collection, the author used a mixed mode approach using qualitative and quantitative methods. According to Warschauer (1998), using both approaches is best to reveal language and literacy used especially in technology enhanced environment. It also reveals how computer mediated language and literacy practices are shaped by broader institutional and social factors and what these practices means from the perspectives of the learners.

To answer Research Question one, quantitative approach was used. A survey was carried out using a questionnaire (Refer Appendix A). The questionnaire comprised nine questions with scaled and open-ended questions.

Research question two, demanded an in-depth study of the text interactions by the learners during their online participation. Hence a qualitative method enquiry was used.

In-depth interviews were also conducted with ten learners to elicit additional information to support the findings of this research.

The author also provided her e-mail address to all participants to invite them to pen in their comments and views. This was to enable those not comfortable in answering in the survey form. For the e-mail responses the participants were given about a month after the end of the semester (study term) to respond.

### **Data Analysis**

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to analyse the data. The answers to the first research question were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics where frequency count and percentages were used to quantify the data on perceptions towards online forums. To find out answers to the second question, qualitative methods were used to explore and analyse the entries or interactions by learners in online forums during the course.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

A total of 62 students were given the survey forms. Only 57 of them handed back completed forms.

<b>No. of questionnaires distributed</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>No. of questionnaires returned</b>	<b>57</b>

**Table: 1**  
**Students' reactions in terms of confidence, selection of group and their perception about the LMS**

<b>Questions</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Do you feel confident in the online discussion forum?</b>	<b>94.7% (54)</b>	<b>5.3% (3)</b>
<b>Do you select a particular group to interact in the forum?</b>	<b>36.8% (21)</b>	<b>63.2% (36)</b>
<b>Has participation in the LMS helped you as a distance learner?</b>	<b>94.7% (54)</b>	<b>5.3% (3)</b>

**Table: 1** shows the responses to the questions on students' reactions to participation in online forums, in terms of confidence, selection of group and their perception about the LMS. Majority of the students 94.7% claimed that they felt confident taking part in the online discussions. These students have accepted that the online discussions are part of the OUM courses. Only 5.3% claimed otherwise. More than half the respondents (62.2%) did not join or pick any particular group for online discussions. They were familiar with all their coursemates during the face-to-face meeting and therefore could discuss with each other. This is what two students said when interviewed:

*... We already know each other from our tutorials so easier to interact...we are free to be in any group.  
 ... more heads better because as students we don't have many ideas.*

To the question whether participation LMS has helped you to be a distance learner, a total of 94.7% responded positively. Students also felt that many of their questions can be answered through online forums. Some felt that the tutor is their best source. It is evident that even in participation in the LMS the role played by the instructor is considered necessary by the students. This is because students have more faith in queries answered by their lecturer or tutor. They also feel that LMS is the best way to learn, as they do not meet their tutors regularly. Below is what was shared by a student:

*When my question is answered, I feel more confident in asking the next question*

**Table: 2**  
**Number of entries in the LMS**

Question	0-5	5-10	11-15	More than 15
How many entries did you make throughout your course?	24.6% (14)	43.8% (25)	24.6% (14)	7% (4)

As for the number of entries in the LMS, 24.6% said they sent between 0-5 entries, 43.8% said that they sent between 5-10 entries throughout the course (1 semester). Those who said they sent 11-15 entries totaled 24.6% and only 7% sent more than 15 entries. This data clearly indicates that the majority of the students do not actively participate in the LMS. The LMS entries showed that many students did not interact until the last tutorial (3<sup>rd</sup> tutorial). Students sent more entries during this time to meet with the deadline for the assignment.

**Table: 3**  
**Students' reactions in terms of satisfaction towards peer and tutor support**

Questions	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Not Satisfied
How satisfied are you with the peer support provided during the online participation?	14.0% (8)	77.2 % (44)	8.8% (5)
How satisfied are you with the tutor feedback online participation?	19.3% (11)	57.9% (33)	22.8% (13)

Another reason for more entries during this period was the final examinations. Students had more queries about answering examination questions and channeled more questions to their peers and their instructor.

Table: 3 shows students' reactions in terms of satisfaction towards peer and tutor support. Only 14% were very satisfied. Majority of the students 77.2% were satisfied with the peer support during the online participation whereas 8.8% claimed that they were not satisfied. Some of the positive responses shared during the interviews were as follows:

*My coursemates help to answer question like a tutor  
Give me more points to do my assignments  
Answering questions which I do not know prepares me for the exam  
Because of the LMS I manage my time better  
I can solve my problems immediately*

As for feedback from the tutors, 19.3% indicated very satisfied and 57.9% expressed that they were satisfied. Only 22.8% said they were not satisfied. As mentioned earlier in this study, students who may not have had a full understanding of the concept of online learning may be the ones not satisfied with the tutor support. The following were responses given for tutor support:

*I did not know my mistakes because the tutor did not reply and I did not get any feedback.*

*I like the type of feedback given. She is very encouraging even with simple answers... .*

To the question on *what do you like most about the online participation?* Students gave several reasons and some of the reasons were:

*Fun  
Information such as in the form of attachment given by friends  
Discuss on the subject – anytime, anywhere  
Receive marks for participation  
To keep abreast with my assignment  
Can send e-mail or take part in the forum*

To the question on *how can I improve myself through online participation?*

*reading what my coursemate write and writing to them  
confidence building in taking part  
gives me time to think and then write  
able to improve my IT skills  
language and grammar is improved to a certain extend*

### **Some samples of students' postings in the LMS**

Below are some entries by students in the LMS in terms of peer support and learning. These entries were grouped under themes such as 'asking for help', 'contributing ideas', 'acknowledging peer help' and 'motivating others to take part'.

## I. Asking for help

### **SAMPLE A:**

i have a diffucullities to prepare our assigment. to all frenz, could u give me some tips to start.  
thank u

### **SAMPLE B:**

there's lot of information that forwarded by members. are we need to read 1st all of it before begin to draft our asgment? need a help here...  
thank u

### **SAMPLE C: (Reply to Sample B)**

there's a info that we should no everyone...it is important

### **SAMPLE D:**

Can anyone help  
hmmmm.... I understand that u are working kat Tourism Malaysia & ditempatkan di divison International Promotion and u are very knowledgeable in this topic.. but please give a respect to our friend here and don't be too rude..... we are all students and we are still learning....  
Thanks,

## II. Contributing ideas

### **SAMPLE A:**

hmm.. let me try...  
how about -  
weather?  
variety of food? culture?

### **SAMPLE B:**

4 major factors which help in the industry of Tourism in Malaysia as a major economic market :

1. hospitality
2. transportation
3. attraction
4. facilities

### **SAMPLE C:**

Some info.  
An exclusive interview with Tourism Minister on Visit Malaysia Year 2007.  
<http://www.tourism.gov.my/vmy07/interview.pdf>

## III. Acknowledging Peer help

### **SAMPLE A:**

Thanks for the information... I've also found some information regarding this and posted in the new msg.. hopefully it helps.

### **SAMPLE B:**

Student B has been kind to us. He gave us a lot of useful info.



#### IV. Motivating others to take part

**SAMPLE A:**

why no comments?u can put some comments or info..i don't mind ler..

**SAMPLE B:**

Why not everyone write something so we can finish our assignment.

**NOTE:** The language in the entries above was not edited.

On the whole, the study has shown that the students are quite positive about learning via LMS that is taking part in the online forums. However, their participation in the forums was mainly towards the end of the course and it was more towards completing their assignment and preparing themselves for their examination. These students probably did not see the importance in participating in the online forums in the early part of the course or semester as they did not see the need for it. This could be largely due to the structure of the course where participation in online forums was not compulsory. Other reasons could be because the students had a busy schedule of having to cope with studies, their family and work or they simply felt uncomfortable to take part in the open discussion compared to classroom discussion and interacting via telephone calls or text messages (SMS).

#### **Limitations of the Study**

This study comprised only 57 students from one course. Therefore the results cannot be generalized to all students who participate in online courses. Besides for better and deeper understanding on the students' behaviour in online forums, more data needs to be collected and analysed. Data from other students' in similar setups will probably shed more light. This study also did not look at linguistic features and other textual features which can also help to provide valuable information.

#### **SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Students value every effort made by the instructors to motivate them in the learning in the faceless environment. Below are several suggestions to improve participation in online forums: As for the instructors, getting to know your students well especially during the face-to-face interactions will motivate them to have more confidence in taking part in the online forums. They can promote wider online participation by affirming their students' abilities and ideas. This can be done by giving positive comments on students' work. Integrating stories and personal experiences are important during interaction with students. This helps to create social presence and enhance confidence in the students to perform better in their participation. In addition, allowing students flexibility in terms of time, contents and deadlines will allow them adequate time to answer questions and complete assignments.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This study is timely as currently more distance learning courses are made available to learners. Learners are still getting to grips with the participation through electronic modes of learning. This study hopes to show the way for learners to manage the learning process through an online mode in order to meet their needs.

The findings will be useful for instructors to better understand how computer enhanced language teaching can be used to improve their teaching and learning experience.

Educationists, programme designers and researchers could consider how and to what extent technology can be used to improve teaching and learning of English online especially with the use of online forums particularly how to conduct online forums a comfortable platform for students to interact and in the process promote learning. Online learning in Malaysia needs continuous research and development in infrastructure and pedagogic issues. There must be full commitment in the delivery of knowledge. As online education continues to grow, educators must develop and apply the use of creative and active learning strategies to enhance learning. Continuously assessing variety of learner needs, implementing strategies to harness the power of feedback and assessing learning and teaching outcomes, will ensure continuous lifelong learning and active participation of learners in online forums. Hence, special pedagogic training is vital for instructors in scaffolding new online strategies.

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## APPENDIX A

*Select your choice and write down your comments.*

**1. Do you feel confident in the online discussion forum?**

Yes      No

Comments

**2. Do you select a particular group for your online discussion?**

Yes      No

Comment

**3. Has participation in the LMS helped you as a distance learner?**

Yes      No

Comment

**4. How many entries did you make from the time assignment was given until submission date?**

0-5      5-10      11-15      others (state)\_\_\_\_\_

**5. How satisfied were you with the peer support provided during the online participation?**

Very Satisfied      Satisfied      Not Satisfied

Comment

**6. How satisfied are you with the feedback you received for the assignment from your tutor?**

Very Satisfied      Satisfied      Not Satisfied

Comment

**7. What do you like most about the online participation?**

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**8. How can I improve myself through online participation?**

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**9. How can my coursemates help in the online participation?**