

INSTRUCTORS' FEEDBACK AS TEACHING PRESENCE AT DISTANCE LEARNING

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Abstract

The relationship and interaction between instructor and student are at the heart of the teaching and learning process. In distance learning, that relationship and interaction can exist in the form of online feedback from instructors in students' assignments or discussion forums. The purpose of this study was to analyze the existence of teaching presence through tutors' feedback in discussions and assignments in online tutorial at the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences in Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. The concept of teaching presence in this study was part of the Community of Inquiry framework from Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2000). The interaction in this learning community was combined in three elements, namely social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. The Community of Inquiry was defined as a cohesive and interactive community of learners whose purpose was to critically analyze, construct, and confirm worthwhile knowledge (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Meanwhile, teaching presence in the Community and Inquiry framework was defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of (student) cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. The roles of a tutor in teaching presence in this framework were as: (1) instructional designers and organizers; (2) direct instructor, and (3) facilitators. This study used content analysis to analyze the sample text of feedback that were provided by tutors in discussions and assignments activities of 5 (five) courses during the eight-week period of online tutorials. The analysis of the text used message unit to identify to what extent teaching presence occurred in the interaction between students and tutors. The findings of this study indicated that teaching presence appeared in the 5 (five) courses through tutors' feedback. It showed that the tutors' feedback was functioned as facilitating discourse, where instructors have a primary role in promoting productive discourse by focusing class discussions, raising pertinent questions, finding areas of consensus, and moderating student participation.

Keywords: teaching presence, online feedback, online tutorial, community of inquiry

1 INTRODUCTION

Indonesia Open University or Universitas Terbuka (UT) as a distance teaching university provides learning support services to facilitate its students in the process of self-learning and to improve their learning achievement. The learning support services offered by UT are tutorials, such as online tutorial, that is conducted in an asynchronous method and webinar tutorial that is held in a synchronous method. The function of tutorials is to assist students to have a better understanding of the learning materials or modules. The activities in the tutorial consist of initiation of course materials, discussions, and assignments. To obtain meaningful

learning experiences in the tutorial, students are expected to be active in the tutorial activities, namely reading the initiation materials, participating in the discussions, and completing the assignments. Students are also expected to interact and collaborate in the discussions with other students and tutors.

In online learning, tutors have important roles in assisting students to comprehend the course materials and to motivate them in their learning. However, teaching in an online environment is not easy. The role of the tutors in an online environment is quite complex and challenging (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Tutors not only provide course materials, but also act as a facilitator in the learning process. Teaching online requires a combination of technological skill and pedagogical knowledge, such as teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). One of the forms of teaching presence in online learning is tutors provide feedback in discussions and assignments.

Research has proved that feedback contributes to student satisfaction, motivation, and perceived learning (Wisniewski, et al., 2020). Effectively communicated feedback can improve the learning experience. Previous research about the role of feedback in building teaching presence from Morrison & Jacobsen (2023), indicated that students experienced teaching presence when instructors provided feedback in the timely, strengths-based and personal. Regular feedback helped students know their work was being seen and that they were “on the right track”. Strengths-based and personal feedback aided student motivation and self-regulation, which emerged as important for ongoing engagement and learning online. Other research from Wang, Stein, and Shen (2021) about students’ and teachers’ perspectives on teaching presence in online courses showed that students perceived facilitating discourse to be more important than direct instruction. The results indicated that teachers could pay more attention to making macro-level comments on courses, designing instructional methods, and providing formative feedback for homework and discussions. These research findings indicate that students have a sense of teaching presence in their online learning through feedback and it is important to increase students’ motivation.

From previous studies, and from other literature, there are evident that teaching presence is an important component of providing an exemplary online learning experience. Yet there is little research focused on tutors’ feedback as teaching presence in online tutorial. The objective of this paper is to analyse the existence of teaching presence through tutors’ feedback in

discussions and assignments in 5 (five) courses in online tutorials at the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences in Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia. The online tutorial at UT was a learning support for students. These activities were conducted over eight weeks and consisted of materials, discussions, and three assignments that were individually assigned in weeks three, five, and seven. Tutors were expected to actively participate by giving feedback in the discussions and assignments each week. Through feedback, students can have a sense of teaching presence in tutorial activities.

In this study, teaching presence is part of the framework of the Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The Community of Inquiry framework is used as the concepts and tools to support learning experiences in online learning through computer-mediated communications (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" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 9). The interaction in this learning community is combined in three elements, namely social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. The focus in this paper is teaching presence.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) identified the roles of tutors in the online learning as an instructional designer, facilitator, and provider of direct instruction. These roles are known as teaching presence in the online learning. Teaching presence is defined as "the design, facilitator and direction of cognitive and social process for the purpose of realizing personality meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). In this learning experience, tutors and students have an important responsibility; both parties are part of the learning process (Garrison, 2011). Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) identified the roles of instructors or tutors of an online learning as: (1) designer and organizer; (2) facilitators, and (3) direct instruction.

The facilitator is an important element to "sustain interest, motivation and involvement of students in effective learning" (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 7). As a facilitator in online learning, tutor encourages students' participation with a role model, comment on posts, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, keep the discourse discussion focused, and strive to make students stay active in discussions (Tolu & Evans, 2013). Providing feedback is one of the roles of tutors in teaching presence as facilitators.

Teaching presence is important in terms of assisting students develop understanding within an online course. Teaching presence is vital in student discussion posts as teachers can guide students toward deeper thinking, engagement, and learning (Garrison, 2011). Wang and Liu (2019) have found that “the design and organization, as well as facilitating discourse, can facilitate students’ interaction, reduce the number of peripheral students, and facilitate students’ collaborative knowledge construction, especially in the knowledge sharing, discovery, discussion, and application” (p. 370).

Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) created categories and indicators of teaching presence as follows:

Table 1. Categories and Indicators of Teaching Presence

Categories	Indicators	Examples
Instructional design	Setting curriculum	"This week we will be discussing."
	Designing methods	"I am going to divide you into groups, and you will debate. . ."
	Establishing time parameters	"Please post a message by Friday ."
	Utilizing the medium effectively	"Try to address issues that others have raised when you post"
	Establishing netiquette	"Keep your messages short."
Direct instruction	Presenting content and questions	"Bates says...what do you think"
	Focusing the discussion	"I think that's a dead end. I would ask you to consider..."
	Summarizing the discussion	"The original question was Joe said...Mary said...we concluded that...We still haven't addressed..."
	Confirming understanding	"You're close, but you didn't account for... this is important because..."
	Diagnosing misperceptions	"Remember, Bates is speaking from an administrative perspective, so be careful when you say..."
	Inject knowledge from diverse sources, e.g., textbook, articles, internet, personalexperiences (includes pointers to resources)	"I was at a conference with Bates once, and he said... You can find the proceedings from the conference at http://www ."

	Responding to technical concerns	"If you want to include a hyperlink in your message, you have to ..."
Facilitating discourse	Identifying areas of agreement and disagreement	"Joe, Mary has provided a compelling example to your hypothesis. Would you care to respond?"
	Seeking to reach consensus and understanding	"I think Joe and Mary are saying essentially the same thing"
	Encouraging, acknowledging, and reinforcing students' contributions	"Thank you for your insightful comments"
	Setting the climate for learning	"Don't feel self-conscious about 'thinking out loud' on the forum. This is a place to try out ideas after all."
	Drawing in participants and prompting discussion	"Any thoughts on this issue?" "Anyone care to comment?"

Source: Anderson, Rourke, Garrison dan Archer (2001)

2 METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative methods with content analysis. 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 interpret 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 writers 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. The transcripts of online tutorial activities were analysed by using content analysis with the 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 initiations, discussions, and assignments, to determine the category (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Data sources of this study were the sample text of discussion activities and interactions between students and tutors of 5 (five) courses during 8 (eight) week-period of online tutorial at the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching presence would be impossible without the expertise and responsibilities of tutors who are experienced, can identify the ideas and concepts of the material being studied, organize learning activities, direct the discussion, provide additional resources, diagnose if there are misconceptions, and provide input when required (Garrison, 2011). From the analysis of the activities of 5 (five) courses of the online tutorial at the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences using categories and indicators of teaching presence from Rourke et al (1999), it was found that teaching presence was occurred in all activities of initiations, discussions, and assignments, although not all indicators of teaching presence appeared in such activities.

At the beginning of online tutorial activities, it is seen that most tutors greeted students. Greetings were very important in an online learning environment. By greeting the students, the interaction did occur between students and tutors, also among students. The usefulness of the greeting at the beginning of the online tutorials provided an opportunity for tutors and students to get to know one another, and to build an online community. The realization of the online community might be able to reduce the sense of isolation in the learning process.

Table 2 showed the frequency of categories of teaching presence that were observed in the activities of initiations, discussions, and assignments in 5 (five) courses at the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences.

Table 2. The Frequencies of Teaching Presence in Online Tutorials

Categories	Indicator	Frequency
Instructional Design	Setting curriculum	40
	Designing methods	0
	Establishing time parameters	0
	Utilizing the medium effectively	0
	Establishing netiquette	5
Direct Instruction	Presenting content and questions	46
	Focusing the discussion	1
	Summarizing the discussion	0
	Confirming understanding	3
	Diagnosing misperceptions	14
	Inject knowledge from diverse sources, e.g., textbook, articles, internet, personal experiences (includes pointers to resources)	4
	Responding to technical concerns	1

Facilitating Discourse	Identifying areas of agreement and disagreement	0
	Seeking to reach consensus and understanding	0
	Encouraging, acknowledging and reinforcing students' contributions	19
	Setting the climate for learning	0
	Drawing in participants and prompting discussion	0

As Instructional Designers and Direct Instruction in online learning, tutors must create a customized curriculum, such as the need to enrich or reduce the material content (Garrison, 2011). The tutors also can provide links from websites to enrich the material that is relevant to the subject of the course (Garrison, 2011). In the 5 (five) courses in online tutorial, tutors designed a curriculum based on the material of the course's modules. The content of the initiation of the online tutorial served as enrichments of the modules. In developing the materials, some tutors also posted materials from other sources, such as articles, books, and other sources from the internet. Tutors also provided links from these sources that corresponded to the topics covered in the modules. Most of these sources were in the form of Open Educational Resources (OER). Selection of topics within modules that would be covered in the online tutorial was part of the tutor's role as an Instructional Designer.

Teaching presence is shown in the form of feedback that is provided by tutors. In the category of Instructional Design, the feedback was conveyed to the indicator of establishing netiquette, where tutors warned students not to plagiarize. As one tutor alerted, "... do not copy paste, please correct the discussion answers, make sure you use your own language".

Meanwhile in the category of Direct Instruction, the feedback was related to the indicator of presenting content and questions, confirming understanding, diagnosing misperceptions, and injecting knowledge from diverse sources. On the indicator of presenting content and questions, the tutor confirmed the student's answer, then asked further questions to find out the student's understanding of the course material. As can be seen in the following feedback from a tutor.

...[you] are correct. One of the roles of political parties is to carry out regeneration which ultimately places them (the best cadres) in political seats or positions. My next question is, in your opinion, what are the ways, strategies, or methods to change the party's behavior so that it plays a maximum role?

Another example of feedback on the indicator of presenting content and questions, can be seen as follows.

...the problem is not that Indonesia is too big. Political parties have branches up to the district level. If they can mobilize this power, political parties can play their role. So, my next question is, what method or strategy can [you] offer in this forum so that political parties can play a role according to our expectations -- or at least according to yours?

The Direct Instruction category is also associated with the specific content of the subject matter, such as diagnosed misconceptions in the discussions. Some tutors provided feedback on misconceptions. Diagnosing misconceptions is another critical task of the online tutor. Students often hold misconceptions that impair their capacity to build more correct conception. In this indicator, tutors provide feedback to correct the students. As one tutor suggested in the course of Government Studies,

Please check your answer again. First, put forward the true goals of privatization. Second, what kind of State-Owned Enterprises that meet the criteria for privatization. Third, draw conclusions. Please look for official and correct information, do not rush in answering...

In this feedback, the tutor saw that the students hold misconception about privatization, and suggested the student to look for the official source of information, so the students can write the correct answer.

In the Facilitating Discourse category, the role of tutors is as facilitators. They have responsibilities to motivate and retain the interest of students to participate in online tutorial activities. Therefore, tutors should provide feedback, such as identifying areas of agreement and disagreement in discussions, encouraging student participation, providing recognition, and reinforcing students' contributions.

Many tutors give students recognition for their answer in discussions. The following is the instance of the feedback. "The answers you put forward in the discussion are correct. Great. Improve the habit of reading the modules with high discipline, set your daily schedules for reading them".

From the text analysis of the activities of online tutorials, all tutors of 5 (five) courses of the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences introduced themselves at the beginning of the online tutorial. The result also showed that the pattern of teaching presence was not too different from one course subject to another course subject. All tutors provided feedback to the students in the discussions, although not in all indicators. Anderson et al (2001) argued that the reasons that affected the frequency and content of teaching presence in the online learning could be in the form of teaching style of each tutor, class size, students and tutors' knowledge of learning media being used, workload, and time availability of tutors (Anderson, et al., 2001).

4 CONCLUSION

Teaching presence occurred in 5 (five) courses of the Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences. The categories of the teaching presence were dominated by the element of instructional design and direct instruction, and as a facilitating discourse. The tutors' role as a facilitator is essential in online learning, Teaching presence in online learning can be seen as feedback. Giving feedback is important and very useful for students because it creates an opportunity to extend the dialogue with tutors about academic performance and standards (Poyatos-Matas & Allan, 2005). Feedback also increases student confidence and serves as a catalyst for improvement in learning behaviors

It is challenging for the tutors to fully apply teaching presence. The implementation of teaching presence has implications for tutors. They may need to spend much of their time managing the online tutorial, since they need to provide attention, responses, or feedback to students in the discussions. Thus, tutors may need to be able to manage their time wisely to deal with all their academic and administrative responsibilities.

The findings of this study should be considered in the view of some limitations. First, the number of the analyzed classes may not be representative of all online tutorial classes and tutors at UT. There may be differences among online tutorial classes at UT. Generalizability of the findings to other online tutorial classes is cautioned. Future studies may cover a larger sample of online tutorial classes at UT, which may provide different perspectives of online tutorial classes and tutors on feedback.

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