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ENHANCING STUDENT MESSAGE CONSTRUCTION QUALITY WITH AI SUPPORT IN ONLINE DISCUSSION IN UNIVERSITAS TERBUKA

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the quality of students' message construction in discussion forums within online tutorial classes organized by Universitas Terbuka, with a specific focus on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by students as a thinking partner. The research employs a qualitative approach through content analysis. The data consist of messages or opinions expressed by students in the discussion forum of the *Sociology of Communication* course. The findings reveal that students with a deeper understanding of the discussion material tend to be more capable of formulating contextually appropriate and directed prompts to AI, thereby generating responses that are relevant and able to mprove academic discussion. Conversely, generic use of AI without critical engagement often results in messages that are overly general, superficial, and lack meaningful contribution. These findings indicate that AI can function as a tool that helps students practice critical thinking and enhances academic communication, if students use it actively and carefully. While the context of this study is limited to a single course at Universitas Terbuka, the results provide insights that may inform broader discussions on how AI can be integrated as a dialogic and reflective learning facilitator in online education. This study shows the importance of designing digital learning environments that integrate AI as a dialogic and reflective learning facilitator, rather than as a substitute for human cognition. Practical recommendations are offered for designing more effective and inclusive strategies for delivering messages in online discussion forums, with implications for contributing to the theoretical development of AI integration in distance education.

Keywords: message construction, online discussion forums, artificial intelligence, distance education, critical thinking

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1 INTRODUCTION

The growth of online learning in higher education has changed the way academic communication takes place. This applies both to interactions among students and to communication between students and lecturers or tutors. At Universitas Terbuka, as an open and distance learning institution, this shift is seen through the intensive use of information and communication technology. Within this setting, online tutorial forums have become an important medium for sharing ideas, building common understanding, and developing critical thinking. These forums are no longer just spaces for asking and answering questions. They also serve as platforms for reflective communication, where students are expected to compose academic messages that are coherent and meaningful. The quality of participation depends largely on students' ability to create messages that are logically structured, contextually relevant, and supported by sound arguments.

In reality, not all students are able to express their ideas effectively. This challenge has become more visible with the growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to support academic work. It raises a key question: Is AI merely a machine that provides quick answers, or can it truly serve as a partner that helps students construct meaningful academic messages? The Guidelines for the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in Higher Education Learning (Directorate of Learning and Student Affairs, Directorate General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology of Indonesia, 2024) outline several potentials of GenAI. These include personalizing learning, expanding access, supporting adaptive assessments, improving student engagement, strengthening collaboration, and assisting lecturers with administrative tasks. Such possibilities provide a strong basis for analyzing the role of AI in online forums.

At the same time, scholars have cautioned against the risks of excessive dependence on AI. Gerlich (2025) describes the phenomenon of cognitive offloading—the tendency to delegate cognitive processes to AI—which can reduce memory retention, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving abilities over time. Evidence from higher education contexts also reinforces this cautionary view. Klopfer's experiment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (reported in Shein, 2024) showed that students who relied on ChatGPT completed programming tasks more quickly but retained far less knowledge when tested later compared to peers who used more effortful, problem-solving strategies.

These findings highlight the importance of treating AI as a reflective partner rather than as a shortcut for instant answers.

Earlier studies have highlighted the value of online discussion forums in fostering students' cognitive engagement. For example, Wei et al. (2023) showed that well-structured threads in MOOCs can promote self-reflection and deepen conceptual understanding. Similarly, Guo et al. (2023) found a positive link between the quality of students' contributions and their academic achievement. Research on AI in education has also shown its benefits. It can provide automatic feedback, identify gaps in understanding, and support independent learning (Ateeq & Alzoraiki, 2024). Yet most of this research focuses on technical efficiency, system performance, or final outputs. Few have examined the internal process students experience—how they design prompts, review and revise AI outputs, and construct reflective academic messages. Likewise, there has been little attention to viewing forums as spaces for dialogue between humans and technology, spaces that require critical engagement and meaningful communication.

This study examines how students construct messages in online discussion forums, with a focus on the Sociology of Communication course at Universitas Terbuka. The analysis does not stop at the final responses students post. It also looks at how they create prompts for AI, evaluate the outputs, and revise them before sharing in the forum. The study considers three aspects in particular: the language used, the depth of content, and the level of reflection. In addition, it explores how AI can enrich the forum as a collaborative learning space, where academic communication skills matter as much as technical skills.

The research is based on the idea that students with strong subject knowledge can design better prompts. These prompts lead to AI-generated responses that add more depth to the discussion. In contrast, using AI in a routine way, without reflection, often results in shallow and disengaged messages. The study argues that when AI is used as a thinking partner, it can strengthen students' critical thinking, argumentation, and academic writing. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical insights into online academic communication and practical guidance for distance education institutions. In particular, they may help institutions design ethical, reflective, and student-centered strategies for integrating AI.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study looks at student contributions in the online discussion forum of the Sociology of Communication course at Universitas Terbuka. The main concern is how students build academic messages by using artificial intelligence (AI). Here, AI is not seen only as a technical assistant, but also as a partner in thinking. The study does not limit itself to the final responses students posted. It also traces the interaction process between students and AI during message construction.

The research uses a qualitative approach, with content analysis as the main method. This method is considered suitable because it can uncover the meanings in students' texts and show how their ways of thinking appear in writing. As Moleong (2018) explains, qualitative research aims to understand experiences in natural settings and present the findings in descriptive form. With this approach, the study offers a contextual and deeper understanding of the phenomenon being investigated.

The main data come from students' written contributions in the forum and from AI-generated responses that were used in the message construction process. We also recorded how students created prompts for AI, and how they revised and adapted the AI outputs before posting. Supporting literature and relevant theories were used to enrich the analysis and help interpret the findings.

The data were collected from archived forum discussions in the selected online tutorial sessions. Content analysis followed Krippendorff's (2004) view of it as a way to draw valid inferences from texts within their context. The focus was not only on the texts that were finally published, but also on the processes that shaped them. In particular, the study looked at signs of students' reflective thinking as they engaged with AI tools.

Data analysis was carried out in several stages. It began with reducing the data, continued with displaying the data in simpler forms, and ended with drawing inferences. These steps were done gradually during the research. The data were categorized according to the research focus and presented in narrative form to make interpretation easier. All conclusions were checked repeatedly to ensure that they stayed aligned with the meanings drawn from the data.

3 FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Content Understanding, Prompt Quality, and AI Responses

Online discussion forums in distance learning have become essential platforms for students to demonstrate their understanding and communication skills. At Universitas Terbuka, these forums are not only academic spaces but also arenas for practicing critical thinking, articulating ideas, and constructing structured arguments. In the *Sociology of Communication* course, the forum serves as a reflection of how students build and convey messages to peers, to tutors, and through interaction with technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI).

A key element observed in the forum discussions is how students construct prompts or instructions for the AI system, and how the system responds in return, based on the linguistic structure and content depth. Students who understand the course material well are more capable of generating prompts that are contextually relevant and analytically rich. In contrast, shallow prompts tend to produce low-quality responses. This reinforces the notion that the mere use of AI does not guarantee meaningful academic messages. Without sufficient content mastery and reflective engagement, AI becomes a generic text provider that contributes little value. In other words, the quality of the AI's output heavily depends on the quality of the students' input and their interpretation of the result.

Analysis of student contributions in the discussion forum revealed a pattern of systematic, referential, and generative sentence structures, often including complex syntax and consistent use of academic terminology. This style suggests that some students may have used AI tools in crafting their responses. A number of these contributions follow a predictable structure, beginning with a definition, continuing with theoretical elaboration, and ending with a concise conclusion, presented in a logical and polished manner, free of the common errors found in spontaneous writing. These findings indicate that message quality is not only determined by the final output, but also by the thinking process and strategic construction behind it, suggesting deliberate integration of AI tools.

The AI-generated responses themselves reflect how clearly the student initiates communication. Students are expected not to accept AI responses at face value, but to critically analyze, evaluate, and adapt them within the academic dialogue. This highlights the dialogic nature of communication in the forum, it is not a one-way transmission, but rather a space where students actively manage the flow of information and co-construct

meaning in every interaction. This observation resonates with Tannen's (1986) perspective that meaning in communication is constructed throght interaction, rather than merely transmitted

Students' abilities to pose questions and construct responses reveal higher-order communication skills. They are expected not only to comprehend the content, but to tailor their expression, select appropriate vocabulary, and direct the message toward a defined goal. In digital environments, this requires awareness of communicative context, structural clarity, and sensitivity to the understanding of the audience, be it human or machine. Such dialogic and reflective engagement also aligns with Freire's notion of critical pedagogy, in which learners are encouraged to exercise critical consciousness in dialogue (Freire, 1970/2005)

To illustrate variations in the quality of student contributions, several excerpts are presented below, each analyzed for structure, depth of reflection, and signs of AI assistance. The content analysis identified three major patterns: (1) contributions written in a polished academic style, likely generated or assisted by AI; (2) reflective messages showing personal understanding and intersubjective interpretation; and (3) critical or skeptical responses toward passive use of AI.

Some students constructed arguments in highly structured language, citing online sources but with little personal elaboration. For instance:

"Jenis dan frekuensi kontak sosial mempengaruhi kedalaman dan efektivitas komunikasi dengan cara yang signifikan, terutama dalam konteks interaksi sosial yang kompleks. [...] Formal: Kontak sosial formal seperti pertemuan bisnis atau rapat kerja sering kali memiliki struktur yang jelas dan tujuan spesifik."

("The type and frequency of social contact significantly affect the depth and effectiveness of communication, especially in the context of complex social interactions. [...] Formal social contact, such as business meetings or work-related gatherings, often follows a clear structure and specific objectives.")

This excerpt demonstrates a highly structured style, complete with subheadings and sequential elaboration. While informative, such contributions may lack internalization of concepts or reflective engagement from the student.

In other cases, students raised local or cultural themes, but without critical analysis or direct relevance to the discussion question. For example:

"Tradisi kearifan lokal berwujud nyata lainnya adalah cagar budaya seperti patung, alat seni tradisional, senjata tradisional yang diwariskan turun-temurun dari generasi ke generasi lainnya."

("Other forms of local wisdom traditions are tangible heritage sites such as statues, traditional art instruments, and ancestral weapons passed down from generation to generation.")

Although this statement demonstrates declarative knowledge, it does not adequately address the main point of the discussion. It may also reflect a use of AI without proper contextual understanding, resulting in superficial responses.

These findings affirm that the construction of meaningful messages in online tutorial forums requires integration between academic content mastery and communication competence. Students must not only grasp the theoretical concepts but also apply them in real-time interactions, including those involving AI tools. This suggests that distance learning at Universitas Terbuka provides a space for students to develop as reflective, critical communicators who are adaptive to the evolving role of technology in education.

3.2 AI as a Tool for Reflection, Not Mere Automation

In online learning, discussion forums are not only platforms for exchanging opinions, they also serve as spaces for students to practice structured thinking and message formulation. At Universitas Terbuka, these forums offer students opportunities to improve their communication skills while internalizing course content. In this context, AI is increasingly being seen not merely as a technical assistant, but as a partner in building deeper understanding through reflective engagement.

Students' experiences using AI in discussions show that the technology can play a role beyond generating automated answers. When students use AI to reevaluate their ideas or to verify their grasp of certain concepts, the tool becomes a medium for reflection that strengthens conceptual mastery. This reflective use of AI rasionates with Freire’s (1970/2005) notion of critical pedagogy, whre learners are encouraged to engage in dialogue and critically examines knowledge rather than passively consume it. This is evident in several student responses that show a reworking of AI-generated content. For instance, one student began their post by writing:

"Berdasarkan hasil bantuan AI yang saya peroleh..."
("Based on the AI-generated assistance I received...")
The student then continued by aligning the response with theories discussed in the course module. Another student revised the AI's output by incorporating local references or examples relevant to the Indonesian context. These practices reflect a process of critical reflection rather than a simple copy-paste approach. Such patterns indicate that students did not merely accept the AI's responses at face value, but used them as a starting point to build their own arguments or confirm their understanding. This kind of interaction transforms the forum into a dialogic communication space, where students design questions, evaluate answers, and reorient the direction of discussion based on their findings. As Holmes et al (2019) highlight, AI in higher education should be understood not only in terms of its efficiency, but also in how it fosters new opportunities for reflection and learning.

Through this process, students' ability to formulate messages and refine responses evolves toward greater complexity. They are not only constructing sentences, but also considering depth of meaning, message accuracy, and clarity of communicative intent. By treating AI as a tool for reflection, students are encouraged to be more deliberate in word choice, message clarity, and argument development. As a result, the overall quality of communication in the discussion forum becomes sharper and more focused This aligns with the national guidelines, which emphasize that GenAI can support the personalization of learning according to students' needs, expand access to learning resources, enhance engagement and collaboration, and assist lecturers in developing instructional activities (Directorate of Learning and Student Affairs, Directorate General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology, 2024).

Additionally, several student contributions illustrate how theoretical reflection can be combined with real-life experiences. In some cases, students not only explained a concept, but also connected it to real-world scenarios they had encountered or observed. For example:

"Misalnya, dalam tim kerja yang sering mengadakan rapat dan diskusi, anggota tim akan lebih memahami perspektif satu sama lain. Ini membuat mereka lebih efektif dalam berkolaborasi dan menyelesaikan masalah."

("For instance, in a work team that frequently holds meetings and discussions, team members become more familiar with each other's perspectives. This enables them to collaborate more effectively and solve problems together.")

Another example:

"Seorang karyawan baru yang awalnya merasa canggung berkomunikasi dengan atasannya, seiring waktu dan interaksi yang terus-menerus dapat menciptakan pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang gaya komunikasi atasannya."

("A new employee who initially feels awkward communicating with their supervisor may, over time and through continuous interaction, develop a better understanding of their supervisor's communication style.")

These examples show that students are not merely repeating theoretical concepts, but are narrating meaning drawn from their social experiences in a reflective and contextual manner. Through such approaches, the online discussion forum becomes more than just a space for information exchange, it transforms into a setting for developing critical thinking, reflective communication, and cognitive growth. This observation is also consistent with Zawacki-Richter et al (2019), who emphasize that the integration of AI in education must go hand in hand with pedagogical reflection to ensure meaningful learning outcomes.

In this context, AI is no longer seen as a simple technical aid, but rather as a window through which students can revisit and deepen their understanding of the subject matter. At Universitas Terbuka, the integration of critical thinking skills, effective communication, and technological tools represents a key strength in shaping a meaningful and transformative learning experience.

3.3 The Quality of Student Messages Correlates with Meaningful Academic Interaction

In online learning, communication is at the heart of effective education, especially within discussion forums that serve as a space for exchanging ideas between students and tutors. As a distance learning institution, Universitas Terbuka relies on digital platforms to bridge this interaction. Within this space, the students' ability to construct well-structured messages reflects not only their mastery of the subject matter but also their level of engagement in deep academic discourse.

Observations of student contributions in the discussion forums show that the quality of messages often aligns with the intensity and depth of their participation. Active students,

those who respond to peers, ask follow-up questions, or elaborate from their own perspectives, tend to construct more reflective and contextual messages. In contrast, students who submit superficial answers without acknowledging the discussion context generally produce messages that are less meaningful. This reinforces the view that online discussion forums are not just places to submit answers, but are practice arenas for critical thinking, negotiating meaning, and developing academic perspectives.

In an ideal online discussion space, communication between students and tutors grows into constructive dialogue. Such interactions not only enhance comprehension of the subject matter but also strengthen students' analytical thinking and their ability to present ideas in a structured way. Students who are regularly involved in active discussions tend to produce higher-quality messages because they are trained to formulate arguments, relate them to real-life experiences, and consider multiple perspectives. This can be seen in student contributions such as:

"Misalnya, dalam tim kerja yang sering mengadakan rapat dan diskusi, anggota tim akan lebih memahami perspektif satu sama lain. Ini membuat mereka lebih efektif dalam berkolaborasi dan menyelesaikan masalah."

("For example, in a work team that frequently holds meetings and discussions, team members are more likely to understand each other's perspectives. This helps them collaborate more effectively and solve problems.")

Another example demonstrates how academic interaction is established from the very beginning of a student's response:

"Kepada yth tutor dan teman-teman tuton, saya bisa dipanggil Pristi, izin menanggapi diskusi ini dengan persepsi saya, terima kasih."

("Dear tutor and fellow participants of this online tutorial, you may call me Pristi. I'd like to respond to this discussion by sharing my personal perspective. Thank you.")

"Selamat malam, sebelumnya saya ingin menyampaikan terima kasih kepada tutor yang telah menyampaikan penjelasan dan materi yang lengkap dan dapat dimengerti. Mohon izin saya untuk menyampaikan jawaban diskusi dalam mata kuliah Sosiologi Komunikasi ini.")

("Good evening. First, I would like to thank the tutor for the clear and comprehensive explanation of the material. With your permission, I would now like to submit my response to this discussion for the Sociology of Communication course.")

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"Izin menanggapi diskusi… komunikasi yang baik adalah komunikasi yang efektif. Ketika seorang karyawan mengomunikasikan keluhan kepada supervisor, itu sesuai dengan kebijakan dan membantu perbaikan. Dalam organisasi, komunikasi yang efektif berperan besar."

("Allow me to respond to the discussion… good communication is effective communication. When an employee communicates a complaint to a supervisor, it aligns with organizational policy and facilitates improvement. In any organization, effective communication plays a major role.")

These excerpts show that when students feel heard, respected, and intellectually challenged, they are more likely to produce sharper, more reasoned, and applicable messages. As Moore (1993) noted, the structure of the forum and the intensity of dialogue are critical elements in distance education. The more meaningful the interaction, the smaller the psychological distance between students and the learning process, thereby encouraging them to craft more thoughtful and engaged messages. This perspective aligns with Tannen (1986), who argued that meaning in communication is not simply transmitted, but built through interaction. Thus, discussion forums are not merely platforms for expressing opinions, they are spaces for constructing shared understanding.

As Gunther Kress (2010) aptly stated: **Communication is not only the transfer of information, but the means through which people interpret and negotiate meaning in social contexts."** This view affirms that academic communication within discussion forums is a process of meaning negotiation between students and their learning environment, not just the delivery of information.

This study reveals that the online discussion forum in the *Sociology of Communication* course at Universitas Terbuka functions not only as a medium for academic communication but also as a reflection of students' comprehension of the subject matter and their ability to integrate technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), into their learning processes. The findings indicate that students with a solid grasp of the material and the ability to formulate effective prompts for AI tend to contribute more analytical, relevant, and reflective posts. Conversely, those with limited understanding often produce vague or superficial messages, even when assisted by AI.

Moreover, the findings affirm that the discussion forum is more than just a space for information exchange, it plays a vital role in shaping students' academic identity and in nurturing their interpersonal communication and critical thinking skills. When connected with communication theories such as Barnlund's transactional model, Delia's concept of person-centered communication, Carey's ritual model, and Freire's dialogical pedagogy, the forum emerges as a dialogic, reflective, and collaborative learning environment in the context of distance education.

The link between students' message construction and their conceptual understanding clearly illustrates that the ability to communicate meaningfully is closely tied to the depth of content mastery. These results support the notion that effective communication stems from internalized knowledge and the capacity to reinterpret that knowledge critically. Students who exhibit strong conceptual understanding tend to move beyond mere description toward interpretation and critical analysis. In such cases, AI functions as a facilitator that extends students' cognitive reach. However, for students who lack sufficient understanding, AI remains a passive tool that fails to enrich the discussion.

This phenomenon aligns with Freire's educational philosophy, which posits that true dialogue can only take place when learners possess a degree of critical consciousness. Technology alone cannot substitute the learning process. Thus, the interplay between subject mastery, AI use, and message quality suggests that meaningful academic communication in online learning cannot be separated from students' reflective and conceptual engagement.

In addition, this study highlights a shift in the focus of research on AI use in online learning, especially within the context of discussion forums. While previous studies have largely emphasized the efficiency of AI in automating technical tasks, such as generating summaries or producing instant answers (Holmes, Bialik, & Fadel, 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019), this study draws attention to the reflective process students undergo when using AI as a thinking partner. Holmes et al. (2019), for instance, point out the potential of AI to serve as a thinking companion when used reflectively. Meanwhile, Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) note that most research on AI in higher education remains focused on technical functionality and has yet to address the educator's role in fostering deep cognitive engagement.

This research fills that gap by demonstrating that online forums can serve as spaces to strengthen critical thinking and meaning negotiation, particularly when students use AI not merely to generate text, but to build arguments, test their understanding, and contextualize their responses in a more reflective manner. This approach differs from the findings of Zheng, Du, and Guo (2023), who examined students' cognitive engagement in online forums through epistemic network analysis but did not explicitly connect their findings to reflective human–AI interaction. Similarly, although Ateeq et al. (2024) explore the role of AI in advancing more holistic assessment approaches, they do not delve deeply into the thinking processes that students experience when engaging with AI in forum discussions.

By integrating AI use, conceptual understanding, and message construction, three dimensions rarely explored in tandem, this study provides new insights into how technology can not only accelerate learning but also shape the way students construct and express their thinking in digital spaces.

The implications of these findings can be interpreted across three dimensions: social, historical, and ideological.

- **Socially**, this research shows that the integration of AI in discussion forums enhances not only communication among students but also promotes more reflective and collaborative academic interaction. This implies that AI is not merely a technical aid but also a social actor that contributes to the shaping of the digital learning ecosystem.
- **Historically**, the results illustrate a paradigm shift in Indonesian distance education. Whereas it was once rooted in one-way content delivery models, it has evolved into an interactive environment that enables students to become active participants in constructing knowledge.
- **Ideologically**, the study affirms that AI can function as a learning partner that supports critical thinking without undermining the role of educators or diminishing the value of education. This reflects a transformation in how technology is perceived, from a tool of convenience to a co-creator in a reflective and dialogical learning culture.

The use of AI in online discussion forums offers both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, AI enhances the dynamics of interaction by offering instant feedback, providing supplementary references, and suggesting guiding questions that prompt deeper reflection. It encourages students to develop more critical and comprehensive responses and fosters active engagement in forums that might otherwise remain passive. For instructors, AI also

serves as a valuable tool for monitoring and assessing student participation more effectively.

The use of AI as a reflective partner encourages students to be more deliberate in word choice, clarify their intended meaning, and strengthen their arguments. Consequently, the quality of communication in discussion forums becomes sharper and more focused. This aligns with the national guidelines, which emphasize that GenAI can support the personalization of learning according to students' needs, expand access to learning resources, enhance engagement and collaboration, and assist lecturers in developing instructional activities (Directorate of Learning and Student Affairs, Directorate General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology, 2024).

On the other hand, excessive dependence on AI may diminish student initiative and blur the educator's role as the primary learning facilitator. Therefore, institutions must design integration strategies that preserve the centrality of human interaction in the learning process. AI should be seen as a partner that supports dialogue, not a substitute for it.

Theoretically, this study contributes by framing AI as a reflective entity in academic communication. Practically, it offers valuable insights into designing online discussion forums that are not only informative but also transformative. By combining linguistic content analysis with an exploration of human, AI interaction, this study deepens our understanding of how technology can be meaningfully applied in distance learning.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that distance learning institutions like Universitas Terbuka develop strategic policies for AI integration that specifically aim to enhance social presence in online forums. One such strategy could involve the design of AI systems that support social interaction and community-based learning, rather than functioning solely as informational agents.

These policies should be accompanied by capacity-building efforts for both instructors and students to ensure effective and ethical engagement with AI tools. To prevent undesirable outcomes such as overdependence or the erosion of educator authority, it is essential to establish clear ethical and pedagogical guidelines. These should reinforce the role of AI as a supportive tool, not a replacement. The development of institutional guidelines for AI integration will be crucial for promoting equitable, inclusive, and high-quality learning experiences. When applied thoughtfully, such policies can transform online discussion

forums into dynamic, reflective, and meaningful spaces for all participants in distance education.

4 CONCLUSION

This study shows that the quality of student message construction in online discussion forums at Universitas Terbuka depends strongly on two factors: their understanding of the course material and the way they use artificial intelligence (AI) as a thinking partner. Students who create prompts that are context-aware and purposeful tend to produce responses that are relevant and reflective. In contrast, students who use AI in a generic or mechanical way often produce messages that are superficial and less meaningful. These findings suggest that AI works best when students use it consciously and actively as part of their learning process.

The results also highlight the philosophical values within online learning. Academic communication is not only about delivering information; it is also about negotiating meaning. In this sense, AI is not merely a technical tool. It also acts as a facilitator of reflection, helping students revisit their understanding and improve their academic expression. To develop high-quality communication in online forums, students need a mix of conceptual knowledge, reflective awareness, and digital literacy.

From a theoretical point of view, this research adds to the discussion of technology-enhanced academic communication. It positions AI as a reflective partner in the context of distance education. This perspective suggests that human–machine interaction can grow into a dialogic process for creating meaningful academic messages. It also enriches the analysis of online discussions by adding philosophical dimensions of education such as critical awareness, interpretive learning, and communicative agency.

The study recognizes its own limitations. It focuses only on students in the Sociology of Communication course at Universitas Terbuka. As a result, the findings should be seen as context-specific rather than representative of the whole institution. Future research could use a mixed-method approach with broader samples from different courses and learning communities. Quantitative surveys could help map patterns of AI use among students, while in-depth interviews with instructors and tutors could give a fuller picture of the teaching context. Future studies may also evaluate how AI literacy training can support students in developing meaningful academic communication..

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