

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE USE OF DISCUSSION FORUM IN E-LEARNING TOWARDS CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AT ONE UNIVERSITY IN JAMBI

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ABSTRACT

The Discussion Forum is a feature of asynchronous learning in e-learning. It enables discussions between lecturers and students, as well as among students themselves. Unfortunately this feature is rarely used by lecturers while using e-learning. This research investigated students' perspectives on the use of Discussion Forum in e-learning towards critical thinking skills. The aims of this research: (1) To describe students' experiences when using Discussion Forum in e-learning; (2) To describe students' perspectives on the use of Discussion Forum in e-learning, towards critical thinking skills. To collect the data for this research, qualitative methods such as interviews and document analysis were employed. The research was conducted at a university in Jambi, involving eight participants from the 2019 class of the English education study program. The findings of this research indicated that students are familiar with and have utilized Discussion Forum extensively during their e-learning journey. Notably, there are discernible signs of the application of critical thinking skills within this Discussion Forum. Almost all participants expressed their satisfaction with utilizing the Discussion Forum due to the absence of pressure and the opportunity to express their opinions without any sense of urgency. The participants affirmed that the use of Discussion Forum can be considered a valuable alternative for fostering critical thinking skills, particularly in an educational context. However, they also stated the need for significant guidance from lecturers and increased student participation to fully maximize the potential of the Discussion Forum.

Keywords: *Students' perspectives; discussion forum; e-learning; critical thinking skills.*

INTRODUCTION

For over the past three years, the world was struggling to deal with a catastrophic pandemic, Covid-19 pandemic. It affected a lot of fields. One of them is the education field where teaching and learning processes were instructed to be done through online learning. It was applied almost in all education levels including at university level. There are a lot of examples of utilizing several tools and media to develop online learning. One of them is the use of e-learning.

According to Abdul Barir Hakim (2016), e-learning is teaching and learning supported and developed through technology and digital media and is also a form of distance learning. Generally, there are two learning models while using e-learning which are synchronous and asynchronous models (Arfan, 2021). However, the reality is most educators only use a synchronous learning system compared to asynchronous. Even Though, there are many useful features that can be explored more to support the learning process, one of them is the Discussion Forum feature.

A Discussion Forum is an activity in e-learning that facilitates discussions between lecturers and students as well as among students (Fatmawati, 2019). The Discussion Forum in e-learning can help students to apply their knowledge such as supporting theory or student experiences that are by the learning topic (Dengler, 2008). The main purpose of conducting discussion is to open students' minds, therefore this also has to do with improving students' thinking, therefore, they have a description of what they will learn, or even they can associate their experience or knowledge with the material to be learned. In the current era, students are required to think more deeply about something. In addition, students are also expected to be someone who is more solutive when facing a problem. This way of thinking is usually called critical thinking. It contains the reasoning process, but it also includes an element of investigation. This ability is essential when a student is confronted with a larger, sometimes ill-defined challenge.

By these things, it is found out that there is a gap where lecturers rarely use the Discussion Forum feature in e-learning. And also in this era, students are required to have critical thinking skills where it can be fostered by having problem-based learning where it can be done from the Discussion Forum feature. Therefore, the researcher thought that this topic is interesting and important to discuss further in order to see how students view based on their experiences and perspectives while using Discussion Forum in e-learning towards their critical thinking skills

METHOD(S)

In conducting and collecting data in this research, the researcher used qualitative research method. Qualitative research is a tool to describe and understand the meaning that comes from individuals and groups regarding social problems and individual problems (Creswell, 2009). Therefore this method is deemed appropriate to be used in this study because the researcher was going to look at the point of view of students in the use of e-learning, specifically the use of Discussion Forum on critical thinking skills. The researcher employed the qualitative descriptive research design because the researcher was going to describe the situation under investigation in the field more specifically, transparently, and in-depth without any special behavior toward what would be studied. By using this approach, the researcher described and analyzed the data obtained until a conclusion emerged at the end of the research.

This research was carried out at one of Jambi's universities by concentrating on pupils who enrolled in an English study program. This research consisted of a series of interviews with a variety of questions connected to the research title. In practice, the process of collecting data from participants was carried out by an online platform which was the Zoom application.

In determining the participants who can participate in this research, the researcher used purposive sampling. In order to find the appropriate participants, the researcher already made a preliminary survey where it was made in Google Form that consisted of several statements such as the participants are the 7th-semester students, the participants should have used an e-learning and Discussion Forum. Then, this preliminary survey was distributed to 5 classes.

In this research, there were 8 participants where all of them are students from an English education study program. Considering the research ethics, they were given pseudonyms as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7 and P8. All of them were students in the 7th-semester while researchers collected the data. All of them already fulfilled the preliminary survey and they were willing to participate in this research. All of them are from 4 different classes.

In collecting the data, the researcher used interviews as data to be processed. This interview was carried out by involving participants who met the criteria that the researcher mentioned earlier. Next, the researcher interviewed participants online via the Zoom application. In collecting data, the researcher needed several instruments such as the researcher, preliminary survey, interview protocol and document, therefore the researcher got accurate and more structured data and therefore could be used as guidelines tools for collecting research data.

Therefore, after the researcher finally got the data from the interview in recording form, then the researcher transcribed the recording manually and analyzed it. In the process of data analysis, the researcher used a thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke. There are 6 stages such as familiarizing with the data, generating initial code, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

In this research, the researcher used one strategy to see trustworthiness by doing member checking. This member checking was done by bringing back the results of the final report or specific descriptions or themes in front of the participants to check whether they feel that the report/description/theme is accurate.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

1. Students' Experiences When Using Discussion Forum in E-learning

The participants' opinions suggest that the Discussion Forum in e-learning refers to an online feature that facilitates asynchronous communication among students and/or with lecturers. It allows students to exchange ideas, opinions, and comments in written form. This forum can be accessed from anywhere and anytime, allowing for greater flexibility in learning.

Based on the interview transcripts, all participants stated that they had no prior knowledge or experience of using Discussion Forum before they study at university. The method of using Discussion Forum in several courses was generally similar. Typically, the lecturer would initiate the discussion by posing questions or instructions related to the material being studied. The students would then respond by sharing their opinions or answers to the questions or the statements. Following that, they would engage in back-and-forth exchanges, responding to each other's comments or answers. However, there were lecturers who also used the Discussion Forum as students' weekly activities report in group projects and also as a place to submit students' assignments where it will be discussed further among

the students.

2. Students' Perspectives on The Use of Discussion Forum in E-Learning towards Critical Thinking Skills

The Differences Between Online and Offline Discussions

Almost all participants found that using online discussion forum provided a convenient platform to express their opinions and engage in discussions at any time and from any location. But, Discussion Forum also has a lack where online discussions was limited due to signal dependency,

2.1 The Definition of Critical Thinking Skills

The participants demonstrated some familiarity with the concept of critical thinking, although their definitions varied. In general, many participants emphasized that critical thinking involves the ability to gather and evaluate information in order to solve problems and reach conclusions.

Raising Problems and Difficulties

Almost all participants said that they had never asked before the lecturer asked questions or opened a discussion in the Discussion Forum even though the features and lecturers also allowed students to ask questions first but in the middle of the discussion many questions arose from students. But, there is a participant that already used the Discussion Forum to ask several questions regarding her difficulties while trying to learn a material. Usually the types of questions that are often asked by participants are when they do not understand something or have any difficulties related to the material or ongoing learning.

Gathering, Evaluating and Interpreting Important Information

Almost all participants in the research indicated that when they are required to answer questions from their lecturers or their friends, they first analyze the questions given. Some participants mentioned that they would answer directly if they only need background knowledge without additional information, while others stated that they prefer to search for additional information to provide comprehensive and complete answers. They expressed a desire to avoid giving random answers and often compared their answers with those of their peers. Importantly, participants emphasized that they used their own language in constructing their answers, rather than simply copying from sources. Furthermore, participants noted that the process of seeking information to construct their answers has led them to read and learn more about the issues or questions posed by their lecturers, resulting in a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Lecturers' Questions in Discussion Forum

The questions given by the lecturer often invite open-ended responses and opinions, rather than definitive answers. Participants reported that this approach fostered critical thinking, as they were encouraged to consider multiple perspectives and weigh in with their own insights.

Responding to Other Opinions

The participants displayed a cooperative attitude towards their fellow students in the Discussion Forum, actively engaging in responses regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the comments. Moreover, there was a notable awareness among the participants that discussions at their academic level require more than mere agreement or disagreement; they emphasized the importance of providing substantiated and logical reasons for their viewpoints. Although some participants tended to remain silent and observe others' comments.

The Correlation of Discussion Forum and Critical Thinking Skills

All participants reported experiencing a positive impact from using Discussion Forum, particularly in relation to the development of critical thinking skills. They expressed a feeling of being more open-minded and challenged to collect and apply information in their daily lives, which has been translated into greater thoughtfulness when communicating online, including on social media platforms.

Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills through Discussion Forum

Participants suggested that students should be more active in participating and utilize the Discussion Forum as a platform for online discussions. The participants suggested that lecturers should actively participate and manage the flow of discussions in the forum to encourage students to engage in more meaningful and fruitful discussions. The participants emphasized that the issues posed should be numerous to provide a wider perspective and encourage diverse opinions to emerge.

DISCUSSION

After the data has been processed in the form of a description, this section presents a discussion of the findings from the interviews with the theories about Discussion Forum and critical thinking skills.

1. Students' Experiences When Using Discussion Forum in E-learning

Based on the obtained results, it is evident that participants are familiar with the discussion forum in e-learning. They recognize it as an online platform that facilitates interactive discussions, enabling participants to exchange comments, share perspectives, and provide answers to questions or solutions to problems. This aligns closely with the definition and description of a Discussion Forum by Fatmawati (2019). Based on the interview, all participants shared a similar sentiment, indicating that engaging in online discussions through e-learning platforms was a novel experience for them. Through interviews and document analysis, the researcher discovered that a limited number of lecturers actively utilized Discussion Forum as part of their teaching approach. The use of Discussion Forum that participants experience is a type of class discussion as stated by Abdul Majid (2013). He classifies various types of discussions that are often used in the learning process including class discussions, where it is also referred to as group discussions, is a collaborative process wherein all members of the

class actively engage in problem-solving through discussions. It serves as a platform for all participants to contribute their ideas and perspectives.

2. Students' Perspectives on The Use of Discussion Forum in E-Learning towards Critical Thinking Skills

Through an analysis of the obtained results, it becomes apparent that each participant possesses a foundational understanding of critical thinking. According to them critical thinking entails the skillset to recognize problems, engage in logical reasoning, and actively seek solutions for these issues. This perception aligns with Germaine's (2016) assertion that critical thinking encompasses the ability to reason effectively and establish connections between systems, concepts, and disciplines in order to address challenges and reach informed decisions.

Moreover, in formulating inquiries to address this second question, the researcher drew upon the framework of critical thinking put forth by Paul and Elder in 2006, which describes five key characteristics of critical thinkers. Based on the interview findings, the researcher discovered a strong association between the use of Discussion Forum and the participants' thinking abilities, particularly in terms of critical thinking. Many participants expressed feelings more at ease expressing their opinions through writing, which enabled them to overcome their hesitations and fear of judgment from others. Moreover, the participants highlighted the convenience of accessing the Discussion Forum at any time and from any location, which allowed them ample opportunity to gather additional information and enhance the quality of their responses.

To see the implementation of critical thinking, researcher uses 5 traits of critical thinker by Paul and Elder in 2006:

1. Raises critical issues and difficulties, and formulates them clearly and accurately.

Most of the participants did not raise critical issues or difficulties before the lecturer gave the instructions but they did ask in the middle of discussion. Mostly they will ask questions regarding their difficulties or if they did not understand about the material given. But, there is a participant who had used it to ask problem and ask solution from other students

2. Gathers and evaluates important information, and successfully interprets it using abstract notions.

Participants will evaluate the information that they got when they want to answer a question but they will paraphrase it into their own language.

3. Reaches well-reasoned findings and solutions, which are then tested against applicable criteria and standards.

Participants were open to give solutions to other students' questions and problems. It shows also as an ideal discussion where participants can discuss a problem and come up

with a solution and it is aligned with Morgan Supriyanto (2013)

4. Thinks openly within various systems of thinking, recognizing and evaluating their assumptions, implications, and practical repercussions as needed.

Participants did some variety of thinking like being more open-minded and always evaluating and recognizing information, and applying what they got in discussion forum into daily live activities such as becoming more aware to comment on something.

5. Works successfully with others to solve complicated challenges by communicating effectively.

Participants were willing to help other students while other students asked questions and participants were open to various responses of other students' opinions.

CONCLUSION

After gathered and transformed the data into several findings, the conclusion are: All participants understand what the Discussion Forum feature is and how to use it, Participants just found out the use of a Discussion Forum feature in e-learning when at university, Not all courses used the Discussion Forum feature in e-learning, Usually the lecturer will start the discussion in the Discussion Forum feature in e-learning, but it is possible that students can also start the discussion first, Almost all participants said that using the Discussion Forum feature in e-learning was very helpful and more efficient to use, There are indications of the application of critical thinking skills when using the feature Discussion Forum in accordance with the theory used, Participants said there was a correlation between the use of Discussion Forum and applying critical thinking skills.

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