

Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum at OUM

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1.0 Introduction

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a concept that has received high praise, both within and outside academia. It has been praised for the flexibility it can offer learners in enabling them to fit their academic pursuits around their work and family obligations. ODL offers students considerable benefits, including increased access to learning, lifelong learning opportunities and convenience of time and place (St. Pierre, 1998). The contract between tutor and learner, whether in an actual classroom or virtual, requires that the learner be taught, assessed, given guidance and prepared for examinations. This must be accomplished by two-way communication. Learning may be undertaken either individually or in groups; in either case, it is accomplished in the physical absence of the teacher during an online forum in ODL. Open and Distance teaching materials are provided to learners in the form of modules and e-material where they are structured in ways that facilitate learning at a distance.

Open University Malaysia (OUM) adopts a blended approach to support the learning achievement of its almost 22,000 students. This approach is made up of the following: self-managed learning; face-to-face interactions in classroom settings and online forum discussions using the LMS. To support self-managed learning, specially constructed print modules, CDROM courseware and web courseware are designed and provided to learners. For the face-to-face interactions, learners meet formally once a fortnight at OUM learning centres whereby further learning support is provided by a tutor. In the online forum discussions, learners 'meet' their tutors and peers virtually using OUM's myLMS. The online discussions in myLMS are crucial for building up a connected learning community as OUM learners being in the ODL mode are separated by time, distance and personal experiences. Consisting mainly of working adults, they carry a rich conglomerate of experiences which need to be shared whenever the occasion arises and the online forum provides them the required space to do so. To conduct online discussions, tutors and learners meet in the subject related online discussion forum.

Before they meet online, both tutors and learners are trained on how to maximise the online discussions. A 5% assessment mark is given to learners for online participation.

2.0 Issue

One of the issues in the blended approach that is of utmost concern at OUM is "how effectively moderated are the online discussion forums?" This is an important issue because firstly students and tutors being distributed, are using this forum to be connected. Secondly, we are aware that while OUM tutors and students are trained at various levels to use the myLMS, the training factor per se cannot be taken as vouching for implementation effectiveness.

As such, to find out the actual effectiveness of the online discussion forums, this study was carried out for the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences (FEASS). The FEASS offered 7 subjects for the January 2004 Semester and detail information on the number of tutors teaching each subject is reflected in Table 1. A total of 152 tutors were involved in the tutoring process for FEASS throughout the country.

Table 1: Subjects and Number of Tutors for Each Subject for FEASS

Subjects offered in Jan 2004	No of tutors teaching
Writing in an ESL Context (HBET2303)	28
Teaching of writing in an ESL Context (HBET2403)	19
Teaching of literature in an ESL Context (HBET3703)	13
<i>Bimbingan dan Kaunseling</i> (HBEF2203)	22
Foundations for TESL Methodology (HBET1503)	29
<i>Prinsip Teknologi Pengajaran</i> (HBEF3103)	22
<i>Psikologi Pendidikan</i> (HBEF2103)	19
Total	152

3.0 Objectives of Research

The objectives of this research are:

- i. To determine the pattern of online interaction among FEASS community.
- ii. To ascertain the quality of online discussion forum provided by OUM tutors under FEASS.
- iii. To determine the perceived effectiveness of online discussions among OUM learners.
- iv. To determine the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM tutors.

4.0 Research Questions

The following are research questions formulated to answer the bigger issue of how effective online discussion forums are at OUM:

- i. What was the pattern of online interaction for the FEASS tutor-learner community?
- ii. What was the quality of online moderation provided by OUM tutors?
- iii. What was the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM learners?
- iv. What was the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM tutors?

5.0 Literature Review

In this section, a review of literature on the effectiveness of online discussion is carried vis-à-vis the following: overview of online discussions, pattern of online discussion, quality of online discussion, perceived effectiveness and use of rubrics in online discussion.

5.1 Overview of Online Discussions

The discussion forum is an important component of online and distance learning. Tutors and learners rely on these forums to engage and interact with one another in ways that potentially promote content understanding, higher order thinking skills, cooperative and collaborative learning.

Horton (2000) stated that online discussion allows students to interact with classmates outside class. An online discussion is not fixed in time or space: students can log on at any time from any Internet-enabled computer to seek clarification for issues they encounter in their coursework, to discuss topics rose in class, or to initiate new discussions on related topics. A successful online discussion has the same synergistic effect of group or face-to-face discussion, in which students build on one another's perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the materials.

McDonald (2002) shares similar view with Horton as she claims that online education is emerging as a new educational paradigm due to the change in student interaction and independence that telecommunications and computer media can potentially introduce. This new paradigm promotes anyplace, anytime education allowing global communities of learners based on shared interests, changing how we teach and learn, thereby creating a true learning society.

Morgan (1999) indicated that learners need to learn how to engage in critical discussion (online) and doing so may mean unlearning some of what they were taught in previous school level. Morgan had outlined a few criteria for online discussion, such as:

- i. The teacher cannot effectively direct the discussion session itself.
- ii. Instead, prompt the discussion session with issues rather than topics. Specifics and cases help learners ground their discussion in shared data.
- iii. Sequence prompts from discussion session to session, building on what was played out in the prior session.
- iv. Encourage a dialogical orientation towards issue and other participants.

- v. Isolate exemplary exchanges and show why they are exemplary.
- vi. Have learners slowly take over reviewing discussion sessions and posting summaries.

According to Harnish (2001), in an online discussion, teachers (tutors) should support the development of learner's skills such as critical thinking, negotiation, diversity in thought and communication. Harnish indicated that online discussion could provide opportunities to learners to collaborate, especially when students are working in groups (such as in Problem Based Learning - PBL), groups can benefit from the discussions of other small groups.

Alley & Jansar (2001) in Deubel (2003) stated that experiential approach, higher order learning and knowledge construction, are key elements for quality assurance in online learning. The success of an online course is also affected by its pedagogical richness, such as learning styles, use of media and interactivity with content, testing and feedback and collaboration among the participants. Other success factors include content quality, delivery support functions for instructors, administrators and students, pedagogically driven instructional design with well-defined objectives, web site usability factors and technological factors.

According to Bonk et al. (2000), self-paced Web-based courses need not be isolating experiences. Online interaction between students in a self-paced course can have many benefits, including improved quality of student work, improved course completion rate and development of a community of learners. Careful development of discussion questions and guidelines, opportunities for sharing assignments and adequate time to learn the technology are important factors to successful online interaction. Online discussion is a vital part of e-learning courses where instructors or tutors can assume many roles. Typically a conversational or informal role allows for more students' participation and dialogue. When online instructors were more informal and spontaneous in their commenting, students were more interactive with each other, compared to

conditions wherein the instructor simply posed formal topic-centered questions or postings.

5.2 Pattern of Online Discussions

In this section the following areas will be discussed: The frequency of tutor and learner presence in online discussions, the frequency at which tutors and learners get online after the first message is posted and the pattern of online discussion from the beginning till the end of the discussion activity.

According to Moore and Kearsley (1996), the single most important skill that all distance educators must develop is to make their students active participants in their educational programme. It is not difficult to present information over a distance, but getting people to participate and making learning active at a distance is much harder.

Most of the researches so far have generated positive findings towards tutors' and learners' participation in an online distance learning forum. In a research done by Hughes (2003) at the University of Canberra, it was noted that after the first message was posted online by a class member, approximately ten students contributed to the discussion. There was active participation among learners there on.

To evaluate the identified challenges in online discussions, Murphy and Coleman (2004) did a survey on 20 participants who were all working towards a Master of Education in Information Technology through WebCT™ (web-based mode). A two-week long online asynchronous discussion was used in the first phase with the researcher as moderator. The first question posed by the researcher was aimed to initiate dialogue among participants and to relate their experiences as a learner in web-based courses. The response received in this study was similar to the research done by Hughes whereby the participants replied to the first question and in doing so, highlighted their own experience in relation to both the original question and the comments of other participants in the discussion forum. This shows that the first question posted by the researcher not only

encouraged replies from participants but also triggered them to share and contribute their views.

During the second week, the researcher posted a summary of challenges identified by participants up to that point. Participants were invited to add to or comment on any of the items listed in the summary. As expected, the participants did reply and had posted their comments related to the summaries and based on these feedbacks an interim analysis was conducted of the discussion content.

Bonk et al. (2000) commented that managerial actions also are vital in online discussions such as pointing students to other messages, commenting about posting format, defining the audience, noting on and off task participation and directing students to different topics and folders for posting. Sometimes, the instructor must remind someone that he or she is supposed to start the discussion. Other times, he may throw out questions at this time as well as push students to explore further. He may explain or clarify key points when required or encourage students to elaborate on their thinking.

At the same time, if students post their chapter work on time, fellow students can provide immediate feedback. If a student is late in posting, the instructor should typically refuse to respond to the post. Not only does this policy help nurture student's timely participation, it also provides some useful boundaries for instructor participation. Without such practice, instructor obligations and feelings of guilt about missing feedback may never end.

Levin and Ben-Jacob's (2003) research were based on a discrete mathematics course taught using the Mercy College Long-distance Instructional Network (MerLIN). In this research they explored the general considerations for providing meaningful experiences in distance learning, instructor's role as a model and a facilitator, clarification of objectives and importance of collaborative learning. In their research, Levin and Ben-Jacob found that the students were encouraged and motivated to post their answers for the opening questions posted by the instructor on the first week. After two weeks the

instructor did not participate directly in the forum but instead gave suggestions, feedback and encouragement. This had allowed the students to take full ownership of the online discussion.

Levin and Ben-Jacob indicated that in order to provide meaningful experiences in distance learning, instructors should function as models and facilitators. However, there should be a period where the instructor should “step aside” and let the students to take control of the discussion. As the course progress, the instructor should serve in a consultative or facilitator capacity to stimulate dialogue and to pose questions.

Chow and Siaw (2003) did an analysis on online participation between two groups in using the discussion board in Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK). The two groups were from undergraduate foundation-level business course and pre-MBA course. The study revealed that the undergraduate students were less active than the postgraduate students.

Most of the postgraduate student’s contributions draw heavily on their working and rich personal experiences and they can easily apply the book theories in practice. The tutors also play a very important role in stimulating and maintaining student’s participation as well as facilitating successful discussions, encouraging message contributions, share resources, motivating students and demonstrating important issues that emerge fro the discussion. At the end of each discussion thread, the tutor combined the participants’ contribution and summarized each participant’s important point as well as the lessons being learned and this has helped to maintain the momentum of the students’ continuous effort in participating. Some students found that reading the summaries to be a quick and useful way, especially when they do not have time to read through every message.

5.3 Quality of Online Discussions

In this section, the quality of online discussions will include the following: Does online discussion lead to a significant increase in the total learning experience of the learner?

Does it increase competency in use of technology? Does it improve confidence and motivation to participate online?

In an online environment, teaching effectiveness 'is highly dependent' on the teacher's knowledge, skills and abilities about how to use the technology to produce appropriate learning outcomes. Therefore, the onus is upon the tutor to ensure that the quality of online moderation is maintained at a very high level in order to produce more informed and confident students.

Tutor's support in building knowledge among learners is vital as this ensures new knowledge being imparted to learners. Knowledge building is a lifelong process and characteristics associated with lifelong learning include for example, to actively construct learners own knowledge, manage their own learning, develop an understanding of how to learn and develop the skills of analysis, problem solving, adaptation, synthesis and evaluation.

A research done in the University of Southampton by Morgan (2002) showed that learners identified the importance of the teacher's role as one of validating worthiness and teachers encouraged learners to validate their knowledge for themselves in order to become less reliant on external validating processes. It was noted that at all times, the tutor participated as motivator to encourage students to take active part in the forum. As much as learner-tutor participation is crucial, it must also be noted that tutors and learners must stay focused on subject matters and engage themselves in high level reasoning which requires critical thinking.

According to Mac Knight (2002) in her article 'Teaching Critical Thinking through Online Discussion', "To build on what we already know, requires critical thinking. Otherwise, we may fall prey to modern communication media, which presents a world where the pre-packaging of intellectual positions and views is so ingenious that thinking seems unnecessary".

O'Conner (2003) commented that good communication inside and outside the classroom can often be enhanced with the tools of technology. By using electronic communication tools, students are often better able to communicate with each other. Good communication leads to good collaborative thinking and sharing among students. Such collaboration leads to the formation of learning communities, instead of isolated instances of learning. Researchers have found that adding elements such as discussion boards, chats, and e-mails to a course increases student motivation and participation in class discussions and projects (Penn State, 2004).

Hew & Cheung (2002) conducted a survey regarding online discussions involving pre-service teachers enrolled in a diploma in education program. They found that most of the students felt that their classmates were more outspoken and increased reflection during the online discussion than in normal classroom situations. Asynchronous activities (no pressure for immediate response) provide learners with time to reflect, formulate ideas and have more thoughtful responses (Penn State, 2004).

Christopher, Thomas and Tallent-Runnels (2004) found that the participants in the online discussion forum in their study were able to analyse and apply knowledge in their responses. On a regular basis, the learners could use what they learned in a new way by making connections to the classrooms, schools and districts in which they teach. Actual learning process takes place when individuals can see connections and make changes in their own environment. Analytical thinking requires the learner to break apart new material to make it more understandable. Therefore, these students were learning above the lowest levels of remember and understand.

Their study indicated that some of the participants responded to the new material learned in this course (through online discussion forums) at high levels. The learners could connect the elements of what they were learning with their prior knowledge to create new ideas and perceptions. At times, they were also able to evaluate practices and experiences in the educational setting in relation to the information they learned.

5.4 Perceived Effectiveness

In this section, the following will be discussed with reference to perceived effectiveness: Does online learning increase student's active learning process? Flexibility of online learning, the need to focus on content delivery in online discussion and the importance of tutor's feedback to students.

Some studies report that when participants have more active control over the learning process, learning increases (Jensen, 1996 in Zhang & Peck, 2003). Therefore less instructor participation may foster more active learning. Another study (Aviv & Golan, 1998), however, indicates that students' participation in electronic discussion is often minimal without an instructor's participation. In this report it was noted, that in electronic discussions, most students participate passively and only respond to a few messages and very few students ask questions. They also propose that electronic discussions can result in successful learning experience when they are planned, focused and guided throughout the process.

In Penn State, instructors felt that when they post discussion questions or short essay assignments in the online portion of a course, students must attend to and reflect on the subject matter before responding. This results in reflection and articulation of content, as the very process of reporting and writing about what they have learned engages students in an activity learning experience. A tutor's encouragement is an important aspect in promoting active learning and participation of students in online discussions. Students are more likely to be engaged when the online activities serve a clear meaningful pedagogical purpose and when their efforts, time and commitment are recognised and adequately rewarded (Adrien, 2003).

A study carried at the New Jersey Institute of Technology among 116 participants by Wu and Hiltz (2003) to determine if online distance learning has the requirements to improve students' perceived learning showed that over 50% of learners felt that they learned a great deal from their peers through online discussion. 57% of the learners thought online

discussion increased their learning quality, while over 78% of them said online discussions were a great way to share opinions among peers and instructor. The overall results showed that online discussions has benefited their learning skills and improved their learning quality.

Wu and Hiltz also indicated that the students enjoyed the flexibility of online discussions. Reasons for students' satisfaction in online learning ranged from accessibility and convenience to flexibility and student-teacher interaction (Peters, 2001). With students control when, where, and what they learn, as well as how often and how quickly, it creates a satisfying and less stressed environment.

Conaway (2002) stated that most of the students in National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), US, find that online learning is initially attractive because it makes balancing school, work, and home duties much easier. They come back for more because they are also satisfied with online course content and quality. O'Sullivan and Miron (2000) claimed that as thousands of universities world wide decide to go virtual, the focus needs to shift from content delivery to the process of learning the content. The main reason is to promote discussion amongst the students in order to promote thinking critically about content rather than them just digesting content.

Feedback is important in online postings. Feedback from tutors provides a guideline and a direction for the students to follow and continue their online postings. Tutors should avoid sending any discouraging comments, instead suggestive and constructive feedback will motivate the learners to reconsider and correct their mistakes. For the tutors, good feedback starts with positive and encouraging comments, pointing out errors but not correcting them, using leading questions to help students to reflect on their work and make improvements (Kannan & Macnish, 2000).

Tutor's feedback provides an automatic confirmation that they are paying attention and instill confidence among students that their work is progressing as it should. Providing timely feedback is important, if student's questions go unanswered for too long, they will

tire of posting them (Benfield, 2002). Tutors should be prepared for the replies they might get from students. Brown (1998) stated that students demand more feedback; and the more feedback they receive, the more interaction they want, which maybe to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction between the tutor and among the students.

5.5 Use of Rubrics in Online Discussions

Rubrics are normally used as scoring guides that provide criteria to describe various levels of student performance. Andrade (1996) defined that a rubric is a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work, or “what counts”; it also articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor.

Rubrics are suitable to be used for performance-based assessments that evaluate student performance on any given task or set of tasks that ultimately leads to a final product, or learning outcome (Teach-Nology, 2004). Rubrics use specific criteria as a basis for evaluating or assessing student performances as indicated in narrative descriptions that are separated into levels of possible performance related to a given task. Starting with the highest level and progressing to the lowest, these levels of performance are used to assess the defined set of tasks as they relate to a final product or behavior. The rating scales can be numerical, qualitative or a combination of numerical and qualitative.

Dabbagh (2001) stated that online discussions function as asynchronous communicative tool, articulation tool, reflection tool, evaluation tool, analysis tool and a platform for the participants to provide their contribution. To evaluate the effectiveness of online discussions among students and facilitators, Dabbagh had outlined 8 protocols as a guide and designed an evaluation rubric. The 8 protocols are:

- i. Postings should be evenly distributed during the discussion period (not concentrated all on one day or at the beginning and/or end of the period).
- ii. Postings should be a minimum of one short paragraph and a maximum of two paragraphs.

- iii. Avoid postings that are limited to 'I agree' or 'great idea', etc. If participants agree (or disagree) with a posting then state why agree by supporting their statement with concepts from the readings or by bringing in a related example or experience.
- iv. Address the questions as much as possible (don't let the discussion stray).
- v. Participants should try to use quotes from the articles as a support in their postings (include page numbers).
- vi. Build on others responses to create threads.
- vii. Bring in related prior knowledge (work experience, prior coursework, readings, etc.).
- viii. Use proper etiquette (proper language, typing, etc.).

The rubrics suggested by Dabbagh are rated as excellent, good, average and poor based on these criteria:

- i. timely discussion contributions
- ii. responsiveness to discussion and demonstration of knowledge and understanding gained from assigned reading
- iii. adherence to online protocols

Four Corners Virtual Resource Center (2002), a service provider that supports teachers of adults and nurtures communities of learners in Colorado, USA also designed a similar rubric structure to evaluate their online segment effectiveness among adult educators. The rubrics are categorized as *Good or Excellent*, *Satisfactory* and *Requires further effort*.

The components that were evaluated are stated below:

- i. Discussion Forum and Participation
- ii. Resources for Teachers and Students
- iii. Virtual Classroom
- iv. Online Teaching and Assessment

In this research, both rubrics structure had been used as a guide to build a new rubrics system that is suitable for OUM. The evaluation criteria or components are modified to

fulfil our requirements of overall increase in the quality of learning vis-à-vis the following: motivation, communication, engaging the learner, improve higher order thinking, collaborative learning, and technology knowledge and result ratings are divided into four categories such as *Excellent, Good, Satisfactory* and *Require more effort*.

6.0 Methodology

In this section the following are discussed: data collection techniques, sample and data analysis methods.

6.1 Data Collection Techniques

This research used 4 different instruments to collect data that allowed the researcher to meet the research objectives. The study employed several quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The various techniques listed below were used to obtain data about the effectiveness of online discussion forum at OUM.

i. Checklist of Pattern of Online Discussion Forum

A total of 4 question items were used to collect data regarding the pattern of the online discussion forum for each tutor under FEASS. The purpose of these questions was to enable the researcher to get a general overview of the frequency of postings according to tutor and learner postings, tutor and learner postings that showed focused discussion, learner postings that showed high level questions and also frequency of tutor postings which showed relationship between learning in actual classroom and virtual classroom.

ii. Online Discussion Rubrics

A set of criteria consisting of the following 7 items was drafted to determine the quality of online tutoring provided by OUM tutors:

- a) Motivation

- b) Communication
- c) Engaging the Learner
- d) Knowledge Building
- e) Encouraging Higher Order Thinking
- f) Collaboration
- g) Technology Support

iii. Students' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum

An online questionnaire was posted in the OUM Website in order to find out the perceived effectiveness of online discussion forum among OUM learners. The questions consisted of background information and students' perception on (i) content of the online discussion forum, (ii) interaction in the online discussion forum, (iii) feedback received from tutor, (iv) motivational strategies used by tutor, (v) general features of myLMS and (vi) level of participation in online discussion forum.

iv. Tutors' Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum

Online questions were posted to determine the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM tutors. This questionnaire is almost similar to the questionnaire in item (c), but the focus was on the tutors, asking for tutors' general information and tutors perception on (i) content of the online discussion forum, (ii) interaction in the online discussion forum, (iii) feedback received from tutor, (iv) motivational strategies used by tutor, (v) general features of myLMS and (vi) level of participation in online discussion forum.

6.2 Sample

A total of 37 tutors' postings were analysed to determine the effectiveness of online discussion forum. This represented 33% of the population and tutor posting were selected. However out of the 37 tutors only posting for 35 tutors were analysed as posting for 2 tutors were not properly laid out. The selection was done by using a systematic

sampling procedure. The systematic design involved drawing every 4th tutor in each subject group as represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Sampling Method to Determine Tutors Selected

Subjects offered in Jan 2004	No of tutors teaching	Sampled Tutors
Writing in an ESL Context (HBET2303)	28	7
Teaching of writing in an ESL Context (HBET2403)	19	5
Teaching of literature in an ESL Context (HBET3703)	13	3
<i>Bimbingan dan Kauseling</i> (HBEF2203)	22	5
Foundations for TESL Methodology (HBET1503)	29	7
<i>Prinsip Teknologi Pengajaran</i> (HBEF3103)	22	5
<i>Psikologi Pendidikan</i> (HBEF2103)	19	5
Total	152	37

As a result of this sampling method, the sample size of each subject group was proportionate to the number of tutors in that group. This method of sampling was used because it allowed the researcher to get more representatives from each segment of the population and obtain more valuable and differentiated information with respect to each group.

All the 255 students' postings were selected and analysed to determine the effectiveness of online discussion forum.

6.3 Data Analysis Methods

Two data analysis methods were employed: qualitative data analysis and quantitative data analysis. A description of how data was analysed is provided.

6.3(a) Qualitative Data Analysis

The researcher was given access to the online discussion forum of FEASS. All postings of each sampled tutor were printed and filed according to the subject group. Each message posted by the tutors and learners was read by the researcher and analysed according to each question in the Checklist for Online Discussion Forum instrument (Appendix 1).

After reading each posting, the researcher counted the number of postings sent by the tutors as well as the learners. Messages were then read again thoroughly to analyse if the messages were focused to the subject content.

Messages were further scrutinised to determine if the questions posed by learners were of high quality and if the learners and tutors were able to collaborate amongst themselves to bring about high level discussions pertaining to the content of the subject in the forum and also in the actual classroom. Discussions which showed symbiosis relationship between the learning in actual classroom and virtual classroom was also recorded. Tutors' messages were then read again and analysed according to the criteria set in Appendix 2. These criteria/rubrics are described in Table 3. Each posting was either given an excellent, good, satisfactory or 'require more effort' rating depending on how the tutor posted her/his messages.

Table 3: Rubrics Used for Analysing Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum

Rubric	What to look for?
Motivation	Did the tutor motivate learners in a variety of ways? (E.g encourage inactive learners to participate, provide positive feedback and provide motivational quotation)
Quality of Communication	Did the tutor use proper online etiquette such as proper language, accurate typing and convey the right message?
Engaging the learner	Did the tutor engage the learner in a variety of ways? (E.g. posing engaging questions, referred to other resources or engaging the learners in an activity/ task)
Knowledge Building	Did the tutor support knowledge building among learners? (E.g. do you think this answer is well explained?, .. are there any websites that we can refer to justify or explain this idea ..., I'm going to provide with a website, please read and provide your feedback...)
Higher Order Thinking	Did the tutor encourage critical thinking/ analysis/ synthesis? (E.g was there compare and contrast of information, were the students ask to draw conclusions, were the students ask to judge the credibility of information. ..)
Collaborative Learning	Did the tutor promote interactive learning?
Technology Expert	Did the tutor provide support in hardware, general software and specific software applications?

After analysing each posting, the data was recorded in a form known as Qualitative Research Data Collection Form (Appendix 3).

6.3(b) Quantitative Data Analysis

2 sets of questionnaires were developed that required quantitative analysis of the data. One set analysed learner data and another tutor data. The data was analysed using SPSS. Samples of questionnaires are in Appendix 4 and Appendix 5.

7.0 Findings

In this section the findings are presented according to the research questions. The following were the 4 research questions:

- i. What was the pattern of online interaction for the FEASS tutor-learner community?
- ii. What was the quality of online moderation provided by OUM tutors?
- iii. What was the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM learners?
- iv. What was the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM tutors?

7.1 What Was the Pattern of Online Interaction for FEASS Tutor-Learner Community?

Table 4: Total Number of Postings for Each Question in Checklist on Online Discussion Forum

Pattern of online interaction for FEASS tutor and learner	Tutor	Learner
Total number of messages posted.	922	1929
Postings were focused on the issues discussed.	600 (65%)	1410 (73%)
Postings demonstrated high level reasoning.	NA	484 (25%)
Number of postings that showed symbiotic relationship between the learning in actual classroom and virtual classroom?	88 (9.5%)	NA

With reference to Table 4, the total numbers of postings posted online by tutors were 922 compared to 1929 postings posted by learners. The total number of tutors involved were 35 as compared to 255 students. The ratio of tutor posting was 1:26 as compared to 1:7

students. Out of the 922 postings by tutors, 600 (65%) were focused discussion while out of 1929 postings posted by learners and 1410 (73%) were focused discussion.

There were a total of 484 (25%) of learners' postings which demonstrated high level reasoning. Out of the 922 postings, 88 or 9.5% of tutor postings showed symbiotic relationship between the learning in actual classroom and virtual classroom.

7.1.1 Relationship between Subjects and Number of Postings

Table 5: Cross Tabulations between Number of Tutors and Frequency of Postings against Subjects

Frequency Subject	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120
HBET 2303 Writing in an ESL Context	6	2				1
HBET 2403 Teaching of writing in an ESL	2	1	2			
HBET 3703 Teaching of literature in an ESL Context	2		1			
HBEF 2203 <i>Bimbingan dan Kauseling</i>	3		1			1
HBET 1503 Foundations for TESL Methodology	6	1				
HBEF 3103 <i>Prinsip Teknologi Pengajaran</i>	2	1		1		
HBEF 2103 <i>Psikologi Pendidikan</i>	1	1				
Total Number of Tutors	22	6	4	1	0	2
Percentage	63%	17%	11%	3%	0	6%

Table 5 shows that majority of tutors posted their responses between the ranges of 0 to 60 postings. There were only 2 tutors who posted their responses between the ranges of 81 to 120.

7.1.2 Relationship between Subjects and Learner's Postings

Table 6: Relationship between Subjects and Learner's Postings

Subject	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120	121-140	141-160	161-180	181-200
HBET 2303 Writing in an ESL Context	4	2	1	1					1	
HBET 2403 Teaching of writing in an ESL		1	1	1	1	1	1			
HBET 3703 Teaching of literature in an ESL Context			1	1	1					
HBEF 2203 <i>Bimbingan dan Kauseling</i>	1		1	2						
HBET 1503 Foundations for TESL Methodology	2	4	1							
HBEF 3103 <i>Prinsip Teknologi Pengajaran</i>	1			1						1
HBEF 2103 <i>Psikologi Pendidikan</i>	1		1							
Total	9	7	6	6	2	1	1	0	1	1
Percentage	26%	20%	18%	18%	6%	3%	3%	0	3%	3%

Table 6 shows that majority of the subjects had between 0-20 postings (26%) followed of 21-40 postings (20%). On the other hand, higher posting of more than 100 secured a low percentage of 3%.

7.2 What is the Quality of Online Moderation Provided by OUM Tutors when Checked Against a Set of Quality Rubrics?

7.2.1 Motivation

High motivation is required in an online forum as day-to-day contact between tutors and learners is typically lacking. Tutors must therefore provide consistent and timely feedback, encourage discussion among learners and explore learners' strengths or limitations and their learning objectives by assuming facilitative role in the learning process. The criteria used for motivating learners should include any of the following:

- i. Encourage inactive learners to participate
- ii. Provide encouragement by giving positive feedback on learners' messages.
- iii. Provide motivational quotations.

Tutors were evaluated according to whether they used the above in the forum to motivate learners. Key points that were looked for in each posting included:

(a) At the beginning:

E.g How are you, welcome back to the forum, you were missing for 2 weeks, this is what you have missed ..., thank you for your ideas... etc.

(b) At the end:

E.g., Thank you, hope to get more ideas, never give up, all the best, regards and etc.

Table 7: Number of Tutors Showed Motivating Messages in the Postings

Number of Tutors	Beginning of the message	End of the message	Beginning and at the end of the message	Not demonstrated
35	1 (3%)	11 (31%)	12 (35%)	11 (31%)

From Table 7, the following is observed. A total of 69% of tutors provided some form of motivating messages as compared to 31% that did not demonstrate. The most motivating messages were those that started and ended the forum (35% did this).

7.2.2 Communication

Communication and the right use of language is crucial in an environment that is dependent on written form. In this discussion, this included the use of proper online etiquette such as proper language, accurate typing and convey the right message. The criteria used to evaluate the quality of communication was based on the following combinations:

Excellent - Proper language, accurate typing and convey the right message

Good - Any of the two

Satisfactory - Any of the one

Table 8: Quality of Communication

Tutors' postings	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Require more effort
922	826 (89%)	90 (10%)	6 (1%)	-

From the data given in Table 8, a total of 826 tutors' postings (89 %) had excellent language while 90 (10%) were categorized as good and 6 (1%) tutors' postings fall under the satisfactory category.

Examples of tutor postings which demonstrated excellent, good and satisfactory in communication.

Excellent

Example

Well, my readings revealed that students write only after they have heard the passage read 3 times or maybe more. They can jot down words (if the teacher allows it) as they listen.

Posted by: J.L

Good

Example

Introducing literature for year 4 is not a bad idea. However we must be careful with the choice of material we use and also keep in mind the proficiency level of our students. We can start off with the short poems that have only one or two stanza. Even children in nursery learn a form of lit. (Nursery rhymes) so why can't stds. of year 4?

Posted by: K.K

Satisfactory

Example

They are unable to correct their error because: 1. they don't know that they've made mistakes; 2. they can't identify the mistakes because they don't know the grammatical

structures in English well. Hence, as I've mentioned during the tutorial, you have to guide the students in the process. Tell them what it is that they have to look out for. You need to give them detailed questions, don't leave them on their own & expect them to find their own errors and correct them. If most university students can't do it, how can you expect primary school students to do it? E.G: If you want them to focus on the use of linking words that you've taught them, then you have to guide them specifically as to what to do & how to identify those errors.

Posted by: N.F

7.2.3 Engaging the Learner

Engaging learners to pose questions and eliciting responses from them is important in an online discussion. The criteria used for engaging the learners included:

- Excellent - Demonstrated **all** the following:-
- i) Question was posted to engage learner
 - ii) Learners were referred to other resources/material (website/books)
 - iii) Learners were asked to do activity or exercise which required mental effort.
- Good - Demonstrated any 2 of the above.
- Satisfactory - Demonstrated any 1 of the above.
- Require more effort - Did not engage learner in any way. Only replying non subject content matters/issues.

Table 9: Engaging the learner

Tutors' postings	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Require more effort	Not Applicable
922	2 (0.3%)	15 (1.7%)	27 (3%)	169 (18%)	709 (77%)

On the whole, tutors did not get learners engaged in a constructive way. As can be seen in Table 9, only 5% of the tutors' postings engaged learners in an active manner. On the other hand, a total of 77 % of the tutors' postings did not have contents that engaged learners in any way and 18% needed more effort.

Examples of tutor postings which demonstrated excellent, good and satisfactory in engaging the learner.

Excellent

Learner's Question

I'm having quite a problem trying to decide whether to do the Assignment Part B in table format or not. I tried doing it in essay form but I found difficulty in writing out the rationale for each step/ procedure. Therefore, I am really in need of an answer from you concerning this matter. I hope that you will say it's okay because otherwise it's back to the drawing board for me again. Thank You.

Tutor's Response

The problem with writing it in table form is that the rationale has to correspond exactly to every procedure. You actually shouldn't be answering the assignment question in this way. You should view the lesson as a whole and the procedures in carrying out the lesson. Then argue and rationalise why you've decided to focus on the skills that you've chosen, why so and so activities have been used to teach the skill/s. Look at your lesson objectives too. Do you think the lesson objectives would be achieved with such lesson? When you argue, you don't write in table form. Read up on the Theories on Language learning and Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching and any other relevant books. Then support your argument for devising such lesson and for having such

objectives with the theories that you've read. Do read on the related theories and the books suggested in the module because when you read, then you know how to write an argumentative piece of work. Good luck.

Posted by: N.F

Good

Learner's question

Learning a foreign language is of course, different from learning one's mother tongue. The learner is more matured, has already acquired a language and has probably developed strategies for learning in general. Present research on adults learning a second language as immigrants seems to indicate they employ a combination of instinctive language learning capacity similar to that possessed by the child learning its mother tongue, and learning strategies more similar to those used for solving problems. What do you think?

Tutor's response

You can also ask yourself and you will get an answer. The immigrants learnt the language for survival purposes. Why do we learn the language? Often purpose of learning could trigger the interest in learning.

Posted by: Y

Satisfactory

Learner's Question

I'm supposed to mark the samples of students writing using appropriate symbols. Do I have to prepare a standard code too? Next, regarding section B, it's said that 'include writing guidelines or checklist and the duration taken to do this'. I'm still blank in this part, please explain. Are any samples given?

Tutor's response

Yes, prepare the standard code. You can also use the one that you are familiar with or use the one that I proposed in class. Sec B. You are given options here, do you want to use

guideline or do you prefer a checklist? Whatever you decide it must be geared towards remedying your students weakness that you have identified in sec A.

Posted by: Y

Require more effort.

Learner's Question

Who wants to be my friend? Send me a card....a lovely one.

Tutor's response

Did you get a card Rosafiz?

Posted by: J.L

7.2.4 Knowledge building

Tutor's support in building knowledge among learners is vital as this ensures new knowledge being imparted to learners. In this discussion, this included tutors providing websites as reference purpose and giving out information related to the topics in the module. The criteria used for knowledge building included:

- Excellent - Demonstrated **all** the following:
- i) New knowledge was created-learners were able to come up with answers to their questions.
 - ii) Gathering information-learning were connected from one topic to an other
- Good - Demonstrated any 1 of the above.
- Satisfactory - Guided discovery-providing means in how to answer learner's question but answer was not given directly.
- Require more effort - Answered questions posted by learner.

Table 10: Knowledge Building

Tutors' postings	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Require more effort	Not Applicable
922	1 (0.1%)	13 (1.5%)	131 (14.4%)	550 (59%)	227 (25%)

On the whole, tutors did not support knowledge building in a constructive way. As can be seen in Table 10, 16% of the tutors' postings had contents that supported knowledge building. On the other hand, a total of 59% of the tutors' postings were seen as requiring more effort and 25% as not containing answers which were not applicable in this area.

Examples of tutor postings which demonstrated excellent, good and satisfactory in knowledge building.

Excellent

Learner's question

I am uncertain about:

- i) Specific objectives for content;
- ii) Specific objectives for thinking skills as given in the answer guide of the assignment.

Can you please clarify/provide an example for each? Thank You

Tutor's response

Specific objective:

By the end of the lesson, students are able to write a composition entitled 'A Happy Family'

Thinking skills:

Sequencing and ordering information

Providing proof to support statements

Please refer to text: pgs 94,107,115 and 123

You also need to refer to the Syllabus and the Curriculum Specifications (*Huraian Sukatan pelajaran*) for guidance with regards to skills/topics/vocab/grammar item and sound system.

Some other examples of thinking skills: classifying, analyzing, making predictions, drawing conclusions, distinguishing fact from opinion etc.

Posted by: N.A

Good

Learner's question

I would like to know how to relate a drilling activity with CALT? Lets say, teacher puts up sentence patterns and reads aloud, then carries out drilling in groups, whole class and individually, how can we relate it to CALT? Thank You.

Tutor's response

Regardless of whether the reading is silent or aloud, reading is being done. Ask yourself, what is the reason that reading is being done. What is the reason for that piece of text? Is it to expose the students to a particular language item you wish to teach? To familiarize them with certain language forms and functions? If that is the case, then you may relate it to one of the four competences mentioned by Canale (grammatical competence); which is actually part of the first guiding principles of CALT (communicative needs and areas of competence).

Posted by: T.W.L

Satisfactory

Learner's question

Hi, I would be glad to know about controlled and free interaction in CALT. Can the actual free interaction practice take place in the classroom activity? I think in no matter what situation, we cannot create a totally free interaction. There must be some form of cues. Do you agree? Thank You.

Tutor's Response

To a certain extent, you are right. There can be really no free or no control. The questions or the materials you can supply actually limits what the students have to say or what they can say. Isn't that then some form of control even at the production stage? Think about it. In fact to note this point of argument requires some critical thinking as well.

Posted by: L.S.E

Require more effort

Learner's question

How do you define:

- i) elaborate ii) explain iii) describe

Tutor's Response

'Elaborate' and 'explain' seem to be similar. Well, we could say that they are. However, for 'elaborate' you need to add a little bit more.

E.g.: If I were asked to explain on 'photosynthesis', I might just say it is a process where plants make their own food. Then, perhaps I might go on talking about things needed to carry out the process. However, for your elaboration, you might need to go into the process itself-what are the things needed, the stages and the things being produced out of it. As for 'describe', if I were asked to describe you, I will then not only touch on your height but also skin colour, shape etc.

Posted by: FD

7.2.5 Encourage Higher Order Thinking

In order to produce matured students, it is essential that a tutor encourage learners to demonstrate critical thinking. This included asking learners to judge the credibility of the information given and getting learners to draw conclusion. The criteria used for higher order thinking included:

Excellent - Demonstrated **all** the following:

- i) Required learners to analyse information.
- ii) Required learner to synthesize information
- iii) Required learners to evaluate (judge) information.

Good - Demonstrated any 2 of the above.

Satisfactory - Demonstrated any 1 of the above.

Require more effort - Asked low level thinking questions (close questions have predictable responses and usually require factual recall rather than high level thinking.

Table 11: Encourage Higher Order Thinking

Tutors' postings	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Require more effort	Not Applicable
922	1 (0.1%)	27 (2.9%)	76 (8.2%)	4 (0.4%)	814 (88.4%)

As can be seen in Table 11, only 11.2% of the tutors' postings had contents which encouraged higher order thinking. On the other hand, a total of 88.4 % of the tutors' response was not applicable to thinking process.

Examples of tutor postings which demonstrated excellent, good and satisfactory in Higher Order Thinking.

Excellent

Learner's question

Can you elaborate briefly what is epistemic approach? Students often hold conventional doctrines about the English culture. Is it true of the students we teach? What are some of these beliefs and where do they originate from?

Tutor's Response

The Epistemic approach by Kenneth Dowst emphasizes 'writing, knowing and learning'. Also consider 'writing a way of knowing', that language itself mediates between the writer and the world of his experience according to Constance J. Gefvert. My opinion is, having some knowledge of the English culture would of course enhance learning, but if they have a negative perception of the culture, then the students may have a negative attitude towards the subject. What do you think?

Posted by: N.A

Good

Learner's question

Implementing CALT in class has been emphasized in English language teaching nowadays. However, implementing it is not an easy task. Most teachers will be frustrated when we find that only a few students are willing to take part in the learning process seriously while the rest are not bothered about it. As a result of it, we will find that our objectives to help those students are still far ahead. How do we solve this problem?

Tutor's response

I agree it is not easy to get and keep students' interest in an ESL classroom in Malaysia, especially in the rural areas. But do you think the students' disinterest is due to CALT or to their attitude towards the language? Or were the language activities in class too much above or below their current level of language proficiency? Were the activities relevant to their interests? Yes, no matter how good our activities are in a lesson, there will always be those who can't be bothered and those who can't see the relevance of English in their lives. But we have to soldier on, and help those whom we can. Do not focus too much on the achievement of your lesson's objectives but focus on the objectives and progress of the students. Anyone has any experience to share? Please do.

Posted by: T.W.L

Satisfactory

Learner's question

For Part 2, do we have to reason all steps taken in the lesson plan based on communicative approach?

Tutor's response

Yes, you'll need to rationalize the steps that you propose in your lesson plan based on CALT. Please refer to the three chapters on CALT in your module.

Posted by: A

Require More Effort

Learner's question

Self- Access learning is a very pupil centred activity. It is usually done after the explanation and practice. Can it be considered as one of the technique of the communicative approach? Thank You.

Tutor's response

Self-Access is a mode of learning, which is student, centred. It definitely is not communicative technique learning.

Posted by: L.Z

7.2.6 Collaborative Learning

Tutors' support in generating a collaborative learning environment is crucial whereby learners are encouraged or required to work together on academic tasks. This enables significant role shifts for the learner, from listener, observer to problem solver, contributor and discussant. This approach enables learners to understand the subject better as the skills they acquire through collaboration permits them to relate to real life problem strategies. This would mean grouping of learners for the intention of achieving a common goal, where they are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own by sharing knowledge and ideas. Criteria used for collaborative learning included:

- Excellent - Demonstrated **all** the following:
- i) Tutor promoted interactive learning.
 - ii) Tutor supported learners by using various techniques such as probing, asking groups to reflect and challenge each other's ideas.
 - iii) Groups are self-supervised and group activities are self organized.
- Good - Demonstrated any 2 of the above.
- Satisfactory - Demonstrated any 1 of the above.
- Require more effort - Did not encourage any of the above.

Table 12: Collaborative Learning

Tutors' postings	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Require more effort
922	-	-	22 (2.4%)	900 (97.6%)

As can be seen in Table 12, only 2.4 % of the tutors' postings had contents which encouraged collaborative learning. On the other hand, a total of 97.6 % of the tutors' response required more effort.

Satisfactory

Learner's question

Please suggest some activities for literature lesson that could be carried out for weaker students so that they could enjoy literature lesson as much as the good students.

Tutor's response

It all depends on the ability of your students. I feel that in the beginning you should try to get them to like literature. Therefore the key is that it should be fun. Some suggestions

are like reading to them (in as interesting as possible way). Asking the students to write their own conclusions to stories. One rather successful method which I did back in 1989-1991 was to have a puppet show competition between groups, based on short stories we were doing in class.

This is a forum for sharing. Maybe some of you have ideas or experiences which you would like to share with others.

Posted by: T.S

Require More Effort

Learner's question

Please let me know whether sequencing sentences to form a composition is considered a guided writing exercise.

Tutor's response

It is a controlled writing task in which the students focus their attention on certain grammatical and syntactic features or just sequencing. It is not a total writing programme.

Posted by: N.A

7.2.7 Technology Support

Tutors should be able to use and impart knowledge in technology effectively in order to plan and design learning environments and experiences to support teaching, learning and provide insight into the sorts of knowledge and skills important to develop in learners. The criteria used for technology expert included:

- Excellent - Demonstrated **all** the following:
- i) Tutor provided support in hardware applications, which included familiarizing learners with computers and managing limited hardware resources.

- ii) Tutor provided support in general software applications which included explaining the meanings of certain terms; teaching students certain skills such as using a search engine and copying and pasting; and how to manage MS Windows.
- iii) Tutor provided support in specific software applications which included teaching students how to access the myLMS, button functions and navigation as well as how to input information and save it

Good - Demonstrated any 2 of the above.

Satisfactory - Demonstrated any 1of the above.

Require more effort - Did not encourage any of the above.

Table 13: Technology Support

Tutors' postings	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Require more effort
922	-	1 (0.1%)	-	921 (99.9%)

As can be seen in Table 13, only 0.1 % of the tutors' postings had contents that encouraged technology transfer. On the other hand, a total of 99.89 % of the tutors' response required more effort.

Good

Learner's question

Bagaimana caranya saya nak simpan assignment power point saya ke dalam disket kerana saya ada membuat hyperlink ke fail yang lain?

Tutor's response

Sekiranya ada hyperlink, copy fail tersebut ke dalam satu folder yang sama dengan fail power point dan buat hyperlink sekali lagi. Pindahkan folder tersebut ke dalam disket/cd...insyallah boleh link apabila dibuka dari computer lain.

Posted by: M

8.0 What is the Perceived Effectiveness of Online Discussion Among OUM Learners?

A total of 255 students from the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences responded to the online questionnaire "Students' Perspectives on Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum" (Appendix 4). The following data analysis was done using SPSS.

8.1 General Background of Learners

About 28% of the learners took Foundation for TESL Methodology (HBET1503), followed by 18% Writing in an ESL Context (HBET2303) and 17% Teaching of Writing in an ESL Context (HBET2403) as shown in Table 14.

Table 14: Learners Subjects

Subjects	Frequency	Percentage
Bimbingan Dan Kaunseling (HBEF2203)	3	1%
English for Written Communication (OUMH1203)	18	7%
Foundation for TESL Methodology (HBET1503)	72	28%
Grammar for ESL Teachers (ENGT3015)	5	2%
Introduction to General Linguistics (HBET1103)	3	1%
Learning Skills For OD Learners (OUMH1103)	40	16%
Prinsip Teknologi Pengajaran (HBEF3103)	7	3%
Profesional Ethics (OUMH3203)	2	0.8%
Psikologi Pendidikan & Kaunseling (EDUH2025)	2	0.8%
Psikologi Pendidikan (HBEF2103)	2	0.8%
Teaching of Literature in an ESL Context (HBET3703)	11	4.6%
Teaching of Writing in an ESL Context (HBET2403)	44	17%
Writing in an ESL Context (HBET2303)	46	18%
Total	255	100%

8.2 Demographic Factors

It was found that most of the students were from *Bahagian Pendidikan Guru* (BPG) (98.4%), the balance students were from Open Market. Most of the learners were from the age group of 36 – 40 (40.8%), followed by 31 – 35 (31%) and 41 – 45 (23%) as shown on Table 15.

Table 15: Learner's Age Group

Age	Frequency	Percentage
Below 25	1	0.4%
25 – 30	9	4%
31 – 35	79	31%
36 – 40	104	40.8%
41 – 45	60	23%
46 – 50	2	0.8%
Total	255	100%

About 62% of the learners had completed their 4th semester. About 98.8% of the learners have indicated that they have a computer at home, with 94.1% of them having Internet connection. Most of the learners (78%) have Internet account with TMNet and about 12% of the learners have an account with Jaring. About 92% of learners stated that they access Internet from home while 5.5% from cyber cafes. Most of the learners (55%) indicated they only have intermediate Internet skills and 32% of them were at beginner level.

8.3 Content of the Online Discussion forum

Table 16: Content of the Online Discussion Forum

Question		Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1.	The online discussion content was relevant to the course.	5% (14)	8% (19)	74% (189)	13% (33)
2.	The online discussion content challenged my thinking.	4% (10)	15% (39)	63% (159)	18% (47)
3.	The online discussion helped me understand difficult content better.	4% (9)	16% (42)	60% (152)	20% (52)
4.	The online discussion content was a continuous discussion from the face-to-face tutorial classroom.	4% (10)	10% (26)	67% (170)	19% (49)
5.	The reference materials (e.g. web link, notes) provided were relevant to the course.	9% (22)	13% (34)	64% (162)	14% (37)

Note: N= 255

Table 16, lists students' perspectives on the content of the online discussion forum. It was found that a majority of the students respondents agree that the online discussion content was relevant to the course (74%), challenged their thinking (63%), helped them understand difficult content (60%), was a continuous discussion from the face-to-face tutorial classroom (67%) and the reference material provided were relevant to the course (64%).

8.4 Interaction in the Online Discussion Forum

Table 17: Interaction in the Online Discussion Forum

Question		Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1.	Interaction between the tutor and students was well distributed throughout the semester.	4% (11)	9% (24)	65% (165)	22% (55)
2.	Interaction between classmates helped me improved in my understanding of certain content.	1% (4)	13% (33)	74% (188)	12% (30)
3.	Only a few classmates interacted in the online discussion forum.	2% (5)	8% (19)	70% (179)	20% (52)
4.	My tutor encouraged all classmates to interact with each other.	4% (9)	6% (15)	80% (204)	10% (27)
5.	Interaction between the tutor and students helped me in my learning of the course.	3% (8)	12% (30)	69% (176)	16% (41)

Note: N=255

As shown in Table 17, a majority of the students agreed that interaction in the online discussion forum between the tutor and them was well distributed throughout the semester (65%), interaction between peers helped improved their understanding of certain content (74%) and also helped them in their learning of the course (70%). Further about 69% of the students reported that only a few of their classmates interacted in the online discussion forum. 80% of the respondents indicated that their tutor had encouraged them to interact with their peers.

8.5 Feedback Received from Tutor

Table 18: Feedback Received from Tutor

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. The tutor provided timely feedback to my questions.	5% (12)	12% (31)	61% (155)	22% (57)
2. The tutor provided correct feedback to my questions.	4% (10)	13% (33)	67% (172)	16% (40)
3. The tutor gave me more related information.	5% (12)	16% (40)	60% (153)	19% (50)
4. I understood the tutor's feedback	5% (13)	10% (26)	67% (172)	18% (44)

Note: N=255

Table 18 shows that more than 60% of the respondents agreed that their tutor provided timely feedback to their questions and also correct feedback to their questions (67%). 60% reported that their tutors gave them more related information and 67% stated that they understood their tutor's feedback.

8.6 Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

Table 19: Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. The tutor encouraged me to participate in the online discussion forum.	3% (8)	7% (17)	81% (206)	9% (24)
2. The tutor motivated me to participated by acknowledging my participation.	6% (14)	11% (28)	67% (172)	16% (41)
3. The tutor motivated me by using my responses for further discussions.	6% (15)	16% (42)	60% (154)	18% (44)
4. The tutor motivated learners by constantly thanking them for responding to online discussions.	6% (16)	14% (36)	61% (156)	19% (47)

Note: N=255

Table 19 illustrates that a majority of the respondents agreed that their tutor encouraged them to participate in the online discussion forum (81%), their tutor motivated them by acknowledging their participation (67%), motivated them by using their responses for further discussions (60%) and motivated them by constantly thanking them for responding to online discussions (61%).

8.7 General Features of myLMS

Table 20: General Features of myLMS

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. I do not know how to access myLMS.	1% (3)	3% (8)	8% (20)	88% (224)
2. I am able to access myLMS easily.	0.4% (1)	3% (8)	85.6% (218)	11% (28)
3. When I post my responses, the time taken for the server to process was fast.	2% (6)	14% (36)	63% (160)	21% (53)
4. When I post my responses, I have a time-out problem and as such I loose my messages.	4% (10)	17% (43)	28% (72)	51% (130)
5. I am happy with the way the discussion forum is displayed on the screen.	1% (3)	12% (31)	72% (183)	15% (38)
6. I think the 5% marks for myLMS participation should be increased.	-	12% (30)	62% (159)	26% (66)

Note: N=255

Table 20 shows a general perspective of the respondents towards the features of myLMS. It was reported that 88% of the respondents know how to access myLMS, while only 8% indicated they do not know how to access the system.

A majority of the respondents reported that they can easily access myLMS (85.6%) and this is further supported with 63% respondents that indicated the time taken for the server to process was fast. However, on the contrary about 21% disagree that the time taken for the server to process was fast. Despite that, 72% reported that they are happy with the

way the discussion forum is displayed on the screen. Further, 62% indicated that the 5% marks for myLMS participation should be increased, however, 26% disagree to this fact.

8.8 Online Discussion Participation Level

Table 21: Online Discussion Participation Level

Question	More than 3 times a week	At least 3 times a week	At least 1-2 times a week	Less than 1 time a week	Never came online
1. The tutor was online in the discussion forum on at average of (choose which ever is closest).	16% (41)	14% (34)	35% (90)	21% (54)	14% (36)
2. I was online in the discussion forum on at average of (choose whichever is closest).	14% (35)	19% (49)	43% (110)	20% (52)	4% (9)

Note: N=255

From Table 21 it can be concluded that most tutors (35%) were online at least 1-2 times a week. A higher figure of participation is from the learners (43%). On the whole student participation is more active than tutor participation, whereby 19% of students responded to online discussion at least 3 times week as compared top 14% of tutors. This is further supported by the fact that 14% of tutor did not appear online as compared to 4% of students.

9.0 What is the Perceived Effectiveness of Online Discussion among OUM Tutors?

A total of 17 tutors from the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences responded to the online questionnaire "Tutors' Perspectives on Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum" (Appendix 5). The following data analysis was done using SPSS.

9.1 General Background of Tutors

All the 17 tutors were teaching the Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL) programme. A majority of the respondents were tutors for OUMH1103 (29.4%), followed by tutors teaching OUMH1203 (23.5%) and tutors teaching HBRT1503 (11.8%) as shown in Table 22.

Table 22: Courses Taught by Tutors

	Course	Course Code	Frequency	Percentage
1.	<i>Bimbingan dan Kaunseling</i>	HBEF2203	1	5.9%
2.	English for Written Communication	OUMH1203	4	23.5%
3.	Foundations for TESL Methodology	HBET1503	2	11.8%
4.	Introduction to General Linguistics	HBET1103	1	5.9%
5.	Learning Skills for ODL Learners	OUMH1103	5	29.4%
6.	<i>Prinsip Teknologi Pengajaran Pendidikan</i>	HBEF3103	1	5.9%
7.	<i>Psikologi Pendidikan</i>	HBEF2103	1	5.9%
8.	Teaching of Writing in an ESL Context	HBET2403	1	5.9%
9.	Writing in an ESL Context	HBET2303	1	5.9%

9.2 Demographic Factors

It was found that about 71% of the tutors were male from two major age groups that is from age 31 to 35 years and 46 to 50 years as shown in Table 23. Table 24 shows that a majority of the tutors have taught for between 1-2 semesters (53%).

All respondents have indicated that they have a computer at home with Internet connection. 16 tutors (94.1%) have Internet account with TMNet and one have an account with Jaring. 76.5% of tutors reported that they access Internet from home whereas 23.5% from office. 70.6% of tutors indicated that they have an advance Internet skills and 29.5% have intermediate level.

Table 23: Respondents' Age Group

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
25 – 30	3	17.6
31 – 35	4	23.5
36 – 40	3	17.6
41 – 45	3	17.6
46 – 50	4	23.5

Table 24: Number of Semesters Taught by Respondents

Semester	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	5	29.4
2	4	23.5
3	2	11.8
4	2	11.8
5	1	5.9
6	2	11.8
7	1	5.9

9.3 Content of the Online Discussion Forum

Table 25: Content of the Online Discussion Forum

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. The online discussion content was relevant to the course.	-	-	82% (14)	28% (3)
2. The online discussion content challenged my thinking.	-	-	82% (14)	18% (3)
3. The online discussion helped me understand difficult content better.	6% (1)	6% (1)	65% (11)	23% (4)
4. The online discussion content was a continuous discussion from the face-to-face tutorial classroom.	6% (1)	-	88% (15)	6% (1)
5. The reference material s(e.g. web link, notes) provided were relevant to the course.	18% (3)	-	70% (12)	12% (2)

Note: N=17

Table 25, lists tutors' perspectives on the content of the online discussion forum. It was found that a majority of the tutor respondents agree that the online discussion content was relevant to the course (82%), challenged their thinking (82%), helped learner understand difficult content (65%), was a continuous discussion from the face-to-face tutorial classroom (88%) and the reference material provided were relevant to the course (70%).

9.4 Interaction in the Online Discussion Forum

Table 26: Interaction in the Online Discussion Forum

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. Interaction between the learners and me was well distributed throughout the semester.	6% (1)	6% (1)	59% (10)	29% (5)
2. Interactions between learners helped them improved in their understanding of certain content.	29% (5)	-	59% (10)	12% (2)
3. Only a few learners interacted in the online discussion forum.	29% (5)	-	35.5% (6)	35.5% (6)
4. I encouraged all learners to interact with each other.	12% (2)	-	82% (14)	6% (1)
5. Interaction between the learners and me helped the learners in their learning of the course.	6% (1)	6% (1)	76% (13)	12% (2)

Note: N=17

As shown in Table 26, about 59% of the tutors agreed that interaction in the online discussion forum between the tutor and students were well distributed throughout the semester and also interaction between learners helped improved learner understanding of certain content. About 77% agreed that interaction between tutors and learners helped them in their learning of the course. However, 35.5% of the tutors reported that only a few learners interacted in the online discussion forum. 82% of the tutors indicated that they have encouraged their students to interact with their peers.

9.5 Feedback Received from Tutor

Table 27: Feedback Received from Tutor

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. I provided timely feedback to learners' questions.	-	-	94% (16)	6% (1)
2. I provided correct feedback to learners' questions.	6% (1)	-	88% (15)	6% (1)
3. I gave learners more related information.	6% (1)	-	88% (15)	6% (1)
4. Learners understood the my feedback	6% (1)	12% (2)	76% (13)	56% (1)

Note: N=17

Table 27 shows that a majority of the tutors (94%) said that they provided timely feedback to learners' questions and provided correct feedback to learner's questions (88%). About 88% reported that they gave their learners related information and 76% stated that their learners understood the feedback given to them.

9.6 Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

Table 28: Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. I encouraged learners to participate in the online discussion forum.	-	-	94% (16)	6% (1)
2. I motivated learners to participate by acknowledging their participation.	-	6% (1)	88% (15)	6% (1)
3. I motivated learners by using their responses for further discussions.	-	12% (2)	82% (14)	6% (1)
4. I motivated learners by constantly thanking them for responding to online discussions.	-	6% (1)	82% (14)	12% (2)

Note: N=17

Table 28 illustrates that a majority of the tutors respondents agreed that they encouraged learners to participate in the online discussion forum (94%), they motivated learners by acknowledging their participation (88%), motivated learners by using their responses for further discussions (82%) and motivated learners by constantly thanking them for responding to online discussions (82%).

9.7 General Features of myLMS

Table 29: General Features of myLMS

Question	Not available	Undecided	Agree	Disagree
1. I do not know how to access myLMS.	-	-	-	100% (17)
2. I am able to access myLMS easily.	-	6% (1)	76% (13)	18% (3)
3. When I post my responses, the time taken for the server to process was fast.	-	12% (2)	76% (13)	12% (2)
4. When I post my responses, I have a time-out problem and as such I loose my messages.	-	18% (3)	23% (4)	59% (10)
5. I am happy with the way the discussion forum is displayed on the screen.	-	18% (3)	70% (12)	12% (2)
6. I think the 5% marks for myLMS participation should be increased.	-	12% (2)	35.5% (6)	52.5% (9)

Note: N=17

Table 29 shows a general perspective of the respondents towards the features of myLMS. It was reported that 100% of the tutors know how to access myLMS. A majority of the tutors reported that they can easily access myLMS (76%) and this is further supported by 76% of tutors who indicated the time taken for the server to process was fast. About 59% of the tutors indicated that they face no time-out problem when posting they message, but 23% disagree to this. About 60% reported that they were happy with the way the discussion forum was displayed on the screen. 35.5% indicated that the 5% marks for myLMS participation should be increased, however 52.5% oppose this idea.

9.8 Online Discussion Participation Level

Table 30: Online Discussion Participation Level

Question	More than 3 times a week	At least 3 times a week	At least 1-2 times a week	Less than 1 time a week	Never came online
1. I was online in the discussion forum on at average of (choose which ever is closest).	47% (8)	18% (3)	23% (4)	6% (1)	6% (1)
2. The learners were online in the discussion forum on at average of (choose whichever is closest).	12% (2)	12% (2)	52% (9)	18% (3)	6% (1)

Note: N=17

From Table 30, it can be concluded that in terms of intensity of participation per week, the tutors did better, with 47% of tutors participating, more than 3 times a week as compared to 12% of students.

10.0 Summary of Findings

The present study was concerned with the **Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum at Open University Malaysia**. More specifically, the study examined the quality of online moderation provided by OUM tutors when checked against a list of quality rubrics. The study also sought to examine the nature of collaborative processes in the online discussion forum. The study involved a total of 35 tutors and 255 students from the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences (FEASS), Open University, Kuala Lumpur. This research used 4 different instruments to collect data. The first instrument used was the Checklist for Online Discussion Forum which consisted 4 question items which were used to collect data regarding the general pattern of online discussion forum.

The second instrument used was the Online Discussion Rubrics which consisted 7 items which were drafted to determine the quality of online tutoring. The third question is on students' perspectives on the Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum which was an online questionnaire posted in the OUM website in order to find out the perceived effectiveness of online discussion forum among OUM learners. The fourth instrument used was on tutors' perspectives on the Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum which consisted online questions which were posted to determine the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM tutors. The purpose of this section is to present a summary of the findings, discuss the main findings.

10.1 What was the general pattern of online interaction for FEASS tutor-learner community?

1. On the whole, the tutors and students were quite focused on the issues discussed with 65% of tutors and 73% of students discussing issues related to content.
2. In terms of level of, questions or issues posted by learners, it was found that most issues or questions were at very low level of reasoning (75% of questions or issues were low level).
3. There was a very weak link between what was happening in the actual classroom discussions. Only about 10% of tutors connected the two classrooms.
4. When ranked in terms of most active participation according to subjects, the following was the ranking: HBET2303- Writing in an ESL Context ranked number 1, followed by HBET1503- Foundations for TESL Methodology, while HBET2403- Teaching of Writing in an ESL Context and HBEF2203- Guidance and Counselling were in third place.
5. HBET2303 had the most posting in the 0-20 range, HBET1503 has most posting in the 21-40 range and HBEF203 had most posting in the 61-80 range.

10.2 What is the quality of online moderation provided by OUM tutors when checked against a set of quality rubrics?

1. A total of 69% tutors' postings provided some kind of motivation to learners using the following criteria: encourage inactive learners to participate, provided encouragement by giving positive feedback on learner's messages and gave motivational quotes.
2. In terms of communication, using the following criteria: proper language, accurate typing and communicating the right message, it was found that 89% of tutors' postings had criteria which were communicated excellently, as compared to 10% which were good and 1% satisfactory.
3. OUM tutors failed to **engage learners** on the following criteria: they did not post engaging questions to learners, nor were learners referred to other resources or asked to do any exercise or discuss issues that required mental effort. The quality was low, only 0.3% were rated as excellent and 1.7% as good. Close to 98% of tutors' postings needed more effort in this area.
4. The quality of online discussions for OUM tutors in for of **knowledge building** based on the following criteria: creation of new knowledge and linking of information between topics were satisfactory. Out of the 922 postings only (1) posting (0.1%) was rated excellent and 14 postings (1.4%) rated good. Close to 98% needed more effort.
5. The quality of OUM tutors in encouraging higher-order-thinking is low. Close to 92% of OUM tutors' postings need further support in encouraging higher-order-thinking via online discussion forum.
6. The quality of responses by OUM tutors in encouraging collaborative learning based on the following criteria: promoted interactive learning, asking learners to challenge each others responses and allowing group of learners to self-manage is low. Close to 98% of tutors' postings needed more effort. None were rated as excellent and good. 2% were rated satisfactory.

7. One (1) tutors' posting was rated as good in terms of providing technology support. Zero (0) posting rated as excellent and close to 100% rated as requiring more effort. This quality of tutor support for technology was low.

10.3 What is the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM learners?

1. Content of Online Discussion Forum

Close to 64% of students agree that the context for online discussion was relevant to their course, challenged their thinking, helped them understand difficult context better and was a continuation of their face-to-face classroom. Further they also noted that the reference materials provided were relevant to the course.

2. Interaction in Online Discussion Forum

Almost 72% of students felt that interaction between tutor and students was well distributed throughout the semester, interaction between peers helped them improve understanding of certain context, tutor encouraged all learners to interact with each other and interaction between tutor and peers helped them in learning the course.

3. Feedback Received from Tutor

On the whole 64% of students agree that the tutor provided timely and correct feedback to their questions and also gave related information.

4. Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

Close to 67% of learners said that the tutor encouraged and motivated them to participate in the forum, used their responses for further discussions and constantly thank them for responding online.

5. General Features of myLMS

Almost 77% of students like the features of myLMS, vis-à-vis they knew how to access myLMS and would do so easily; they had no problems with server being slow or time-out on them and they like the discussion forum display.

6. Perception on 5% marks for Discussion forum.

About 62% of students feel that the 5% mark for myLMS should be increased.

7. Online Discussion Participation Level

Students participated more actively than tutors, that is on an average of 3 times a week.

10.4 What is the perceived effectiveness of online discussion among OUM tutors?

1. Content of Online Discussion Forum

Close to 78% of tutors said that the context was relevant to the course, the discussion challenged their thinking, they ensured that there was a continuous discussion from the actual to virtual classroom and that reference materials were relevant to the course.

2. Interaction in Online Discussion Forum

Close to 70% of the tutors said that interaction between them and learners was well distributed throughout the semester, learner-learner interaction improved learner understanding of certain context and they encouraged all learners to interact with each other.

3. Feedback Given by Tutor

About 87% of the tutors gave timely and correct feedback. Tutors also gave related information.

4. Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

87% tutors said that they motivated learners by encouraging them to participate in online discussion forums, acknowledging learner participation, by using their responses to further elaborate other points and thanking them constantly,

5. General Features of myLMS

Most tutors 72% found the myLMS easy to access and faced no server or time-out problems. They are also happy with the myLMS display.

6. Perception of 5% marks for myLMS forum.

Only 35% agree that the 5% mark for myLMS should be increased.

7. Online Discussion Participation Level

Tutors perceived themselves to have participated more actively than students at an average of 3 times a week.

11.0 Discussion and Recommendation

This study is about effectiveness of the online discussion forum in the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences (FEASS). These findings are helpful in order to improve the quality of the online forum at the Open University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

The results of the present study showed that tutors responded to learners' questions on time-table, clarification of format for examinations. It can be concluded here that tutors failed to take charge of the discussion. This finding is similar to that which was conducted in The Institute for Higher Education Policy; Washington where only an average of 5.9% tutors provided feedback to students in a manner that is constructive. It is recommended that for such questions posed by students, tutors should point the learners to relevant sources found on the OUM website or to FAQ Sections.

Most of student postings were on issues such as asking for definitions, basic concepts and facts. It can be concluded that students are still not properly guided on how the discussion forum should evolved. Other studies that have similar findings include that which has been done by Paul, Elder and Bartell covering 38 public universities and 28 private universities in the State of California. Data shows that only 9% of tutors were teaching for critical thinking. According to Jonassen, "Knowledge becomes a function of how the individual creates meaning from his or her experiences; it is not a function of what someone else says is true." Changing mental models and constructing new knowledge empowers learners and encourages critical thinking. It is recommended that tutors be taught on how to emphasize higher-order questioning and encourage critical thinking in learners.

In this study, it can also be seen that tutors answered questions posted by learners without supporting knowledge building among learners. This study confirms the research done in the Southwest University, Missouri where 50% of tutors gave answers and directions and failed to assume a supportive but more passive role. Those students who were referred to the internet commented that the use of internet to explore and find information and the interaction of the groups to arrive with answers is what they liked best about the course.

In relation to this, tutors must point learners to relevant sources found on the internet and pose learners' questions back to the forum.

It can be seen that tutors failed to promote interactive learning where learners were not encouraged to work together on academic purposes. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

It is also useful to highlight the current strengths and weaknesses of tutors in distance learning in Open University Kuala Lumpur. We will discuss this study by stages. The first stage will be the gaining of access into the online forum.

At this stage, the tutor and learner need to be able to set up the system and gain access. Tutors should give support to learners and acknowledge their high level of anxiety and lack of confidence in matters related to Microsoft Office applications and searching for information using the Internet.

We believe that the tutors need to be exposed to an online environment, both to the software and to the ways learning can be developed effectively online during training sessions before tutors themselves assumed the role of a moderator. It is vital to highlight this matter here because as we was going through the postings, we still observed some tutors who did not now how to log on or who took a long time to start a forum. Given here are some examples:

- i) *Dear students, Apologies for not being able to start the forum. In fact I've just managed to log on.*
- ii) *At long last, I've managed to get my forum set up. What a relief!*
- iii) *First, of all let me say that I am glad to be able to get into the forum at last.*

There was also an occasion where the tutor's name was not in online discussion forum in which he or she was supposed to be in, thus creating some sort of confusion among learners. For example:

Learner's posting: *"Sir, since your name does not appear in the forum of HBET 2303, can we ask questions about HBET 2303 here?"*

Tutor's posting: *"Yes, you may pose questions here. Wonder why I'm left out. I am not listed in every subject forum I'm currently teaching but do post your messages."*

There are also some learners who get into other forums due to their ignorance of how to log on for their courses or due to the communication breakdown at the administrative level. For example:

- i) *I've just realized that I am in the wrong forum.*
- ii) *Went to the other forum but your name is not listed there.*

We consider that these fundamental matters could be solved if tutors take their job seriously and attend the tutor training course which is provided by the university. Tutor trainers should highlight these crucial matters in their training. The relevant authorities should also ensure that names of tutors are posted on the right courses as to avoid confusion among learners. Learners should be introduced to myLMS almost immediately as this will ensure a smoother forum interaction between learners and tutors.

The role of a tutor is also to ensure that learners are welcomed to the forum and motivated throughout their postings. If the discussion becomes personal, the tutor could respond to these questions by requesting learners to direct them to his or her e-mail rather than the conferencing environment. It must also be noted that learners should not post online questions pertaining administration of examination matters but they should be directed by tutors to go to the OUM website under the FAQ to get their questions

answered. We feel strongly about this issue given that many learners use the online forum to ask tutors for tips and the format of examination questions. For example:

Kuiz kedua melibatkan sampai berapa bab? Berapa soalan?

- i) *Adakah betul soalan pendek tiada kali ini?*
- ii) *Do you have any information about the exam?*
- iii) *Boleh tak bagi apa-apa hint untuk final ini.*

Tutors should use tutorial classes to inform the learners about the format of the examinations and use the online forum mainly for knowledge building. Learners should not be encouraged to ask for tips as education ought to be seen as a learning process which needs self-discipline and self-control. Good learners ought to follow directions and carry out assignments and channel their mental faculties to critical thinking as the true aim of education should be to produce people with cultivated minds and not merely receiving degrees.

It is important that tutors and learners start to appreciate the social environment of the online forum. At this stage, the tutor needs to be the bridge builder to ensure that the learner takes an active part in this online forum. Tutors should also provide links to their e-mail and websites relevant to their subject matter and start to help learners to know what tutors expect for the discussion and to be selective in terms of which message they should engage in. Tutors could start the forum by posing questions to get learners thinking. For example:

- i) *Selamat bertemu dalam forum LMS. Oleh kerana tiada respons dari anda , maka saya ingin bertanyakan satu soalan sebagai mukadimah membuka tirai perbincangan kita dalam Psikologi Pendidikan.Nyatakan perbezaan di antara peneguhan positif dengan peneguhan negative. Mengapakah peneguhan positif dianggap lebih sesuai digunakan untuk mengekalkan sesuatu tingkahlaku yang diingini? Selamat berforum.*

- ii) *Okay, there is something for you to ponder here: How could you tell the difference between the exposition paragraph and a description paragraph?*

It is only through this active participation that learners start to appreciate the huge range of information available online and his or her ability to contribute in the online forum. Here the tutor acts as a research leader and support in assisting the learner in identifying and finding the information the learner really wants.

Knowledge building is also seen as a vital element in an online learning. Tutors should encourage learners to interact among themselves in order to share their knowledge on subject matters. This approach enables learners to understand the subject better as the skills they acquire through collaboration permits them to relate to real life problem strategies. It is unfortunate that many tutors did not make use of the online forum to create awareness among learners that collaboration learning is the crux of online distance learning. This is seen when tutors answers questions posted by learners without redirecting them to the forum. For example:

Learner's question: *Please explain why Communicative Approach plays an important role in teaching.*

Tutor's response : *Thank you for the question. Basically 4 elements are involved which include grammar, discourse, sociolinguistics and I have forgotten the other one. Read this up because it is an important topic.*

Posted by: LZ (January 2004)

Here, it is obvious that the tutor did not engage the learner into collaborative learning as the tutor was just answering the question posted by the learner. The tutor could have posted the question back to the forum in order to get feedback from other learners. For example:

Example 1

Learner's question: *Please suggest some activities for literature lesson that could be carried out for weaker students so that they could enjoy literature lesson as much as the good students.*

Tutor's response: *It all depends on the ability of your students. I feel that in the beginning you should try to get them to like literature. Therefore, the key is that it should be fun. Some suggestions are like reading to them (in as interesting as possible way), asking the students to write their own conclusions to stories. One rather successful method which I did back in 1989-1991 was to have puppet show competition between groups, based on short stories we were doing in class. This is a forum for sharing. Maybe some of you have ideas or experiences which you would like to share with the rest.*

Example 2

Learner's question: *I have two questions to ask.*

- i) *In the assignment question, we were asked to introduce main characters, characters and others. Can I just introduce only three main characters for this lesson?*
- ii) *For this assignment, I only focus on chapter one. I don't have many activities to do. Can I assume that the students had read the whole novel? Please clarify for me sir.*

Tutor's response: *Can any of the other course mate's help out there? What do the rest of you think?*

It is then that we see the learner moving towards being independent online learners. Learners should be encouraged to form their own interaction and tutors ought to support such collaboration.

12.0 Conclusion

As technology has advanced, distance learning has become more and more popular. This is mostly due to the fact that distance learning appeals to people of all ages, races and abilities. Distance Learning is challenging for both the learners and the tutor.

Distance learning requires organization and motivation. Therefore it is up to the learner and tutor to make the online forum more interesting and constructive by actively interacting in the online forum, maintaining self-esteem and evaluating what is being learned in order to enhance the learning process. The current study done at the Faculty of Education, Arts and Social Sciences shows that so much more can be done to realize the aims and goals of a tutor and the learner in the online forum. With proper management of the online discussion, learners will be able to gain as much knowledge as they can which is a critical component of distance learning and will serve as a cornerstone for higher education transformation in years to come.

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APPENDIX 1

Checklist for Online Discussion Forum

Tutor Name :

Subject :

Subject Code:

	Pattern of online interaction for FE/ASS tutor and learner	Tutor	Learner
1.	Total number of messages posted.		
2.	Postings were focused on the issues discussed.		
3.	Postings encouraged thinking.		
4.	Number of postings that complemented learning in the actual classroom and self-manage learning.		NA

APPENDIX 2

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Item/Criteria	At the beginning	At the end	Beginning and the ending	Not Demonstrated
(1) Motivation Did the tutor motivate learners in a variety of ways? (E.g. encourage inactive learners to participate, provide positive feedback, provide motivational quotation)				
(2) Communication Did the tutor use proper online etiquette such as proper language and accurate typing?	Excellent (netiquette is a must) Demonstrated all the following: Proper language Accurate typing Convey the right message	Good (netiquette is a must) Demonstrated any of the 2: Proper language Accurate typing Convey the right message	Satisfactory (netiquette is a must) Demonstrated only 1 of the following: Proper language Accurate typing Convey the right message	Requires more effort Did not demonstrate any of the mentioned criteria.

(3)Engaging the Learner	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Requires more efforts
Did the tutor engage the learner in a variety of ways? (e.g. posing engaging questions, eliciting responses or engaging the learners in an activity/ task?	<p>Demonstrated all the following:</p> <p>(i) Question was posted to engage learner</p> <p>(ii) Learners were referred to other resources /material (website, books, etc)</p> <p>(iii) Learners were asked to do activity or exercise which required mental effort</p>	<p>Demonstrated any of the 2:</p> <p>(i) Question was posted to engage learner</p> <p>(ii) Learners were referred to other resources /material (website, books, etc)</p> <p>(iii) Learners were asked to do activity or exercise require mental effort</p>	<p>Demonstrated only 1 of the following:</p> <p>(i) Question was posted to engage learner</p> <p>(ii) Learners were referred to other resources /material (website, books, etc)</p> <p>(iii) Learners were asked to do activity or exercise require mental effort</p>	<p>Did not engage learner in any way. Only replying non subject content matters/issues.</p>

(4) Knowledge Building	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Requires more efforts
<p>Did the tutor support knowledge building among learners? (e.g. do you think this answer is well explained?, .. are there any websites that we can refer to justify or explain this idea ... I'm going to provide with a website, please read and provide your feedback...)</p>	<p>Demonstrated all the following: (i) New knowledge was created – learners were able to come up with answers to their question (ii) Progressive information gathering – learning was connected from one topic to another.</p>	<p>Demonstrated only 1 of the following: (i) New knowledge was created – learners were able to come up with answers to their question (ii) Progressive information gathering – learning was connected from one topic to another.</p>	<p>Guided discovery - providing means in how to answer learner's question but answer was not given directly.</p>	<p>Gave direct answers to questions posted by learner without challenging mind.</p>

(5) Encourage Higher Order Thinking	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Requires more efforts
Did the tutor encourage critical thinking/ analysis/ synthesis? (e.g was there compare and contrast of information, were the students ask to draw conclusions, were the students ask to judge the credibility of information. ..)	<p>Demonstrated all the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Required learners to analyse information (ii) Required learners to synthesize information (iii) Required learners to evaluate(judge) information 	<p>Demonstrated any 2 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Required learners to analyse information (ii) Required learners to synthesize information (iii) Required learners to evaluate(judge) information 	<p>Demonstrated only 1 of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Required learners to analyse information (ii) Required learners to synthesize information (iii) Required learners to evaluate(judge) information 	<p>Asked low level thinking questions (close questions have predictable responses and usually require factual recall rather than high level thinking). Example: State (nyatakan), list down (senaraikan, ...)</p>

(6) Collaborative Learning	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Requires more efforts
<p>Did the tutor support interactive learning, were learners encouraged to be responsible for one another's learning and sharing of ideas.</p>	<p>Demonstrated all the following:</p> <p>(i) Tutor promoted interactive learning.</p> <p>(ii) Tutor supported learners by using various techniques such as probing, asking groups to reflect and challenge each other's ideas</p> <p>(iii) Groups are self-supervised and group activities are self organized</p>	<p>Demonstrated any 2 of the following:</p> <p>(i) Tutor promoted interactive learning.</p> <p>(ii) Tutor supported learners by using various techniques such as probing, asking groups to reflect and challenge each other's ideas</p> <p>(iii) Groups are self-supervised and group activities are self organized</p>	<p>Demonstrated only 1 of the following:</p> <p>(i) Tutor promoted interactive learning.</p> <p>(ii) Tutor supported learners by using various techniques such as probing, asking groups to reflect and challenge each other's ideas</p> <p>(iii) Groups are self-supervised and group activities are self organized</p>	<p>Did not encourage collaborative learning</p>

(7) Technology Support	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Requires more efforts
<p>Did the tutor impart knowledge in technology effectively and provide insight into knowledge and skills important to develop in learners.</p>	<p>Demonstrated all the following:</p> <p>(i) Tutor provided support in hardware applications, which included familiarizing learners with computers and managing limited hardware resources.</p> <p>(ii) Tutor provided support in general software applications which included explaining the meanings of certain terms; teaching students certain skills such as using a search engine and copying and pasting; and how to manage MS Windows</p> <p>(iii) Tutor provided support in specific software applications which included teaching students how to access the web template, button functions and navigation as well as how to input information and save it.</p>	<p>Demonstrated any 2 of the following:</p> <p>(i) Tutor provided support in hardware applications, which included familiarizing learners with computers and managing limited hardware resources.</p> <p>(ii) Tutor provided support in general software applications which included explaining the meanings of certain terms; teaching students certain skills such as using a search engine and copying and pasting; and how to manage MS Windows</p> <p>(iii) Tutor provided support in specific software applications which included teaching students how to access the web template, button functions and navigation as well as how to input information and save it.</p>	<p>Demonstrated only 1 of the following:</p> <p>(i) Tutor provided support in hardware applications, which included familiarizing learners with computers and managing limited hardware resources.</p> <p>(ii) Tutor provided support in general software applications which included explaining the meanings of certain terms; teaching students certain skills such as using a search engine and copying and pasting; and how to manage MS Windows</p> <p>(iii) Tutor provided support in specific software applications which included teaching students how to access the web template, button functions and navigation as well as how to input information and save it.</p>	<p>Did not encourage learners in any way.</p>

APPENDIX 3

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DATA COLLECTION FORM

Posting No	Motivation	Communication	Engaging the Learner	Knowledge Building	Encourage Higher Order Thinking	Collaborative Learning	Technology Support
TOTAL							

TUTOR NAME:

SUBJECT CODE:

APPENDIX 4

Student Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum*

The aim of this questionnaire is to determine your perception on the effectiveness of the OUM online discussion forum. The information provided will be kept confidential, and will only be used for the purpose of research and further improvement in the services provided by OUM.

To help you understand better some terminologies used in this questionnaire, please refer to the table below:

Terms	Description
Programme of study	One programme of study (for e.g. Bachelor of Business Administration)
Course	One selected course that you are studying (for e.g. OUMH 1103: Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners)
Tutor	OUM personnel who guides you in the face-to-face classroom as well as in the online forum.
Learning Centre	Location of your face-to-face tutorial (or "PPU")
Online Discussion Forum	The space where discussion is carried out between your tutor and you.
Learning Management System	The learning platform available online to you (here it is myLMS).

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SECTION A: General Information

For the following items, please fill in the blanks or click on the radio button that best represent your status.

1. Your faculty:
2. You are student of: Open Market (not BPG) Bahagian Pendidikan Guru (BPG)
2. Your programme of study: e.g. Bachelor of
3. Name of a course/subject selected for this questionnaire: e.g. Matematik Persediaan

4. Age group:
 < 25 years 25 – 30 years 31 – 35 years 36 – 40 years
 41 – 45 years 46 – 50 years
5. Gender:
 Male Female
6. How many semesters have you completed your course of study
7. Number of credits taken thus far:
8. Does your programme of study have a face-to-face component?
 Yes No
10. Learning centre for face-to-face component:
11. Do you have a computer at home?
 Yes No
12. Do you have an Internet connection at home?
 Yes No
13. If yes for item 12, your Internet account is speed is normally
20-30 31-40 41-50
14. Where do you access myLMS most?
 home office cybercafe other (please specify) :
.....
15. How would you rate your Internet skills (e.g. Web searches, downloading, etc.)?
 Beginner Intermediate Advance

SECTION B : Perceptions on Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum

For each of the following statements, please indicate the extent you agree by clicking on the radio button.

Part 1: Content of the online discussion forum

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	The online discussion content was relevant to the course.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	The online discussion content challenged my thinking.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	The online discussion helped me understand difficult content better.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	The online discussion content was a continuous discussion from the face-to-face tutorial classroom.	<input type="radio"/>					
5.	The reference materials (e.g. web link, notes) provided were relevant to the course.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 2: Interaction in the online discussion forum

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Interaction between the tutor and students was well distributed throughout the semester.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	Interaction between classmates helped me improved in my understanding of certain content.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	Only a few classmates interacted in the online discussion forum.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	My tutor encouraged all classmates to interact with each other	<input type="radio"/>					
5.	Interaction between the tutor and students helped me in my learning of the course.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 3: Feedback received from tutor

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Dis-agree	Strongly Dis-agree
1.	The tutor provided timely feedback to my questions.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	The tutor provided correct feedback to my questions.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	The tutor gave me more related information.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	I understood the tutor's feedback.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 4: Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Dis-agree	Strongly Dis-agree
1.	The tutor encouraged me to participate in the online discussion forum.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	The tutor motivated me to participate by acknowledging my participation.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	The tutor motivated me by using my responses for further discussions.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	The tutor motivated learners by constantly thanking them for responding to online discussions.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 5: General Features of MyLMS

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Dis-agree	Strongly Dis-agree
1.	I do not know how to access myLMS.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	I am able to access myLMS easily.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	When I post my responses, the time taken for the server to process was	<input type="radio"/>					

APPENDIX 5

Tutor Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum*

The aim of this questionnaire is to determine your perception on the effectiveness of the OUM online discussion forum. The information provided will be kept confidential, and will only be used for the purpose of research and further improvement in the services provided by OUM.

To help you understand better some terminologies used in this questionnaire, please refer to the table below:

Terms	Description
Programme of study	One programme of study (for e.g. Bachelor of Business Administration)
Course	One selected course that you are studying (for eg. OUMH 1103: Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners)
Tutor	OUM personnel who guides you in the face-to-face classroom as well as in the online forum.
Learning Centre	Location of your face-to-face tutorial (or "PPU")
Online Discussion Forum	The space where discussion is carried out between your tutor and you.
Learning Management System	The learning platform available online to you (here it is myLMS).

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SECTION A: General Information

For the following items, please fill in the blanks or click on the radio button that best represent your status.

1. You are a tutor for faculty:
2. The programme that you are teaching
3. Select a subject you are teaching for the purpose of this questionnaire :
4. Age group:
 < 25 years 25 – 30 years 31 – 35 years 36 – 40 years

- 41 – 45 years 46 – 50 years
5. Gender:
- Male Female
6. How many semester have you been teaching with OUM: e.g. 1, 2,3.....8
7. Does your programme of study have a face-to-face component?
- Yes No
10. Learning centre for face-to-face component: e.g. Maktab Perguruan Perlis
11. Do you have a computer at home?
- Yes No
12. Do you have an Internet connection at home?
- Yes No
13. If yes for item 12, your Internet account is with:
- Jaring TmNet MaxisNet
 Other (please specify):
14. Where are you accessing Internet most?
- home office cybercafe other (pleasespecify) :
15. How would you rate your Internet skills (e.g. Web searches, downloading, etc.)?
- Beginner Intermediate Advance

SECTION B : Perceptions on Effectiveness of Online Discussion Forum

For each of the following statements, please indicate the extend you agree by clicking on the radio button.

Part 1: Content of the online discussion forum

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	The online discussion content was relevant to the course.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	The online discussion content	<input type="radio"/>					

	challenged learner's thinking.						
3.	The online discussion helped learners understand difficult content better.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	The online discussion content was a continuous discussion from the face-to-face tutorial classroom.	<input type="radio"/>					
5.	The reference materials (e.g. web link, notes) provided were relevant to the course.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 2: Interaction in the online discussion forum

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Interaction between the learners and me was well distributed throughout the semester.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	Interaction between learners helped them improved in their understanding of certain content.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	Only a few learners interacted in the online discussion forum.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	I encouraged all learners to interact with each other	<input type="radio"/>					
5.	Interaction between the learners and me helped the learners in their learning of the course.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 3: Feedback received from tutor

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I provided timely feedback to learners' questions.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	I provided correct feedback to learners' questions.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	I gave learners more related information.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	Learners understood my feedback.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 4: Motivational Strategies Used by Tutor

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Dis-agree	Strongly Dis-agree
1.	I encouraged learners to participate in the online discussion forum.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	I motivated learners to participate by acknowledging their participation.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	I motivated learners by using their responses for further discussions.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	I motivated learners by constantly thanking them for responding to online discussions.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 5: General Features of MyLMS

		Not Available	Strongly Agree	Agree	Un-decided	Dis-agree	Strongly Dis-agree
1.	I do not know how to access myLMS.	<input type="radio"/>					
2.	I am able to access myLMS easily.	<input type="radio"/>					
3.	When I post my responses, the time taken for the server to process was fast.	<input type="radio"/>					
4.	When I post my responses, I have a time-out problem and as such I loose my messages.	<input type="radio"/>					
5.	I am happy with the way the discussion forum is displayed on the screen.	<input type="radio"/>					
6.	I think the 5% marks for myLMS participation should be increased.	<input type="radio"/>					

Part 6: Online discussion participation level

		More than 3 times a week	At least 3 times a week	At least 1-2 times a week	Less than 1 time a week	Never came online
1.	I was online in the discussion forum on at an average of (choose whichever is closest).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2.	The learners were online in the discussion forum on at average of (choose whichever is closest).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Any other comments

SUBMIT QUESTIONNAIRE

RESET

Thank you for you time and effort.