

Factors Influencing the Use of E-Forums among Undergraduates: An Exploratory Study at Universiti Putra Malaysia

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Abstract: In this paper, the researchers describe a study that aims to explore the factors that can influence the use of e-forums in Putra LMS, the official Learning Management System of Universiti Putra Malaysia. Seven factors have been identified based on past studies: behavior - instructors or moderators and peers, discussion contents, knowledge, individual characteristic, technical aspect, incentives and time constraints. The study is currently underway and the outcome of this study will be pertinent to instructors to encourage more students to utilize e-forums as a means to enhance and sustain their knowledge learnt.

Keywords: Factors, use of E-forums, undergraduates

Introduction

Student discussion is a crucial component in interactive online learning environment [16, 6, 4, 21]. Discussion is a dynamic approach that encourages student interaction and active participation in the teaching-learning process [19]. In order to create an active student discussion, they have to communicate with one another. The major advantage of discussions is the total quantity of interactions that occur and the learning that results from the interaction [18]. Student participations are crucial in order for the discussion activity to be successful [5, 21]. However, interaction among students is more complicated to support [7]. Undoubtedly, even though e-forums are available 24 hours 7 days a week, it does not mean students will use it effectively [21] and participate actively [12]. Problems usually arise when the majority of students only posted one message only and never participated again; hence, no further communication occurs [7]. Therefore, understanding how to promote student contribution in e-forums has become increasingly crucial [2].

1.1 Factors influencing the use of e-forums

Past studies have shown that, several factors contribute to student participation in e-forums. The factors are: (a) behavior - instructors or moderators and peers [8, 10, 9, 11, 13, 20]; (b) discussion contents [8, 10, 3, 14]; (c) knowledge [10, 7, 11, 15]; (d) individual characteristic [10, 1, 15, 20]; (e) technical aspect [10, 12, 17]; (f) incentives [10, 5, 7, 20]; and (g) time constraint [2].

1.2 Research Framework

The research framework was developed based on the literature review of past studies. The research framework is illustrated in Figure 1. The independent variables of this study are; behavior (instructor/moderator and peers), discussion contents, knowledge, individual

characteristics, technical aspect, incentive and time constrain. The dependent variable of this study is the use of e-forums in terms of students' contribution or participation in e-forums.

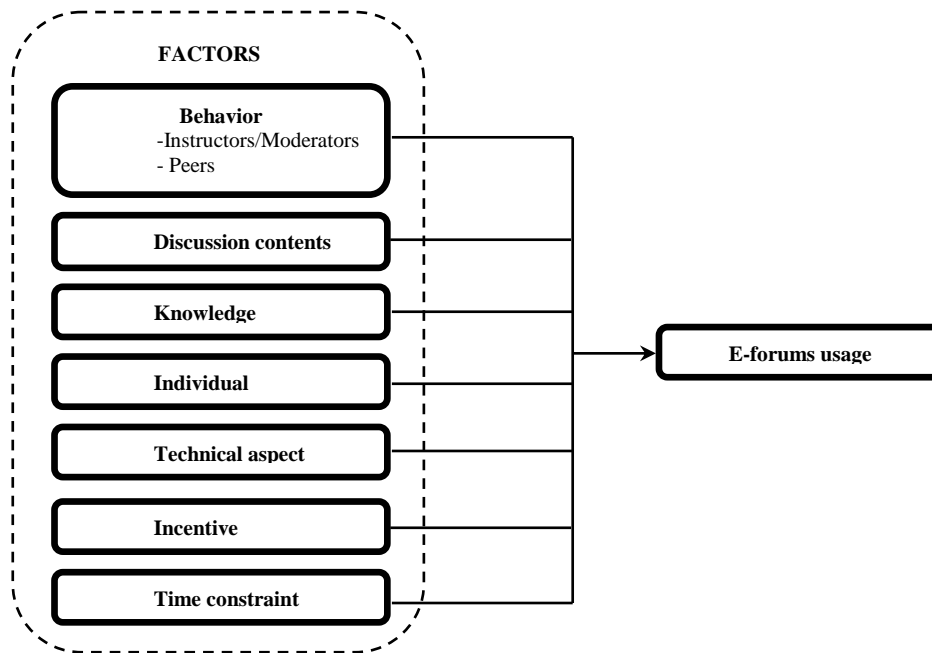


Figure 1: Research Framework

2. Research Objective and Research Questions

The main objective of this study is to investigate the factors influencing the use of e-forums in an Learning Management System among undergraduates at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The research questions of this study are listed as follows:

- What is the extent of e-forums use in the Putra LMS?
- Which is the best predictor of factor influencing the use of e-forums: behavior, discussion contents, knowledge, individual characteristics, technical aspect, incentive, or time constraint?

3. Research Method

3.1 Population and Sample of the study

The population of this study is the undergraduate students at UPM who are using e-forums in addition to the conventional learning. The researchers will acquire the list of lecturers who are active users of the Putra LMS from the Centre of Academic Development (CADE), UPM. Based on the name list, researchers will then identify lecturers who are using e-forums as part of their instructions. The accessible population for this study will be the total numbers of students obtained from the student name list name given by the respective lecturers. The sample size for this study is 106 undergraduate students. This figure is derived from the formula $N \geq 50 + 8(7)$ where seven is the number of independent variables measured [22].

3.2 Instrument

Three instruments are use in order to collect data for this study: (a) students' postings on the e-forums; (b) survey questionnaire measuring the seven aforementioned factors; and (c) interview sessions with students where they will be asked for their opinions in relation to the factors influencing their e-forums use.

4. Concluding Remarks

Data collection will commence in late December of 2010. The findings of this study will be crucial to instructors who face challenges when encouraging their students to participate in e-forums discussions.

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