Managing Electronic Discussion Forums to Support Character Building

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Discussion is part of the activities in learning. The discussion also is also conducted in e-learning. It is expected that the e-forums enable learners to have virtual interaction more intensively. An early observation shows that one of the activities most students did during e-learning is downloading the materials. It is 45.32 % of the students who joined in the discussion forums. The most common activity of this group of students is responding the posted message. What can the teacher do to stimulate the students to be more active, to have more initiative and motivated?

Learning through e-discussion forums is a process. It can be evaluated and (re-) designed to develop learners' characters. This paper offers some ideas to manage the electronic discussion forum to facilitate the students to participate more actively and at the same time the forum can help the students develop their characters. Further, this paper will discuss what the teacher can plan and do to manage electronic disscussion forums. Other points to share are the ones on reasonable learning activities in e-discussion forums and their contribution to character building.

Keywords: *e-discussion, learning activities, character building*

A. Introduction

E-learning emerges in various forms using different terms such as distance learning, open learning, online learning, blended learning, a face-to-face learning course with additional online materials (Dudeney and Hockly, 2007). The development or even shift of the culture from face-to-face lesson delivery to electronic learning demands patience and teacher's creativity to make the educational activities remain taking place. Dealing with people (teacher and fellow students) in teaching and learning process may have in one side differences compared with interacting with computer and its users. However, learning objectives can be one thing in common. This paper shares some ideas on managing electronic discussion forums including examples on the activities, and relating the e-forums to character building.

B. Managing E-discussion

There are some ideas to manage the electronic discussion forum. The teacher or instructor and students as the participants in the e-discussion play their roles to participate in the forum. It is common to happen, especially in the hybrid e-learning that the teacher or instructor stimulates the class to discuss a certain topic. The students respond by asking and/or answering questions either from the teacher or from their mates. An online teacher should try to personalize the educational approach so as to minimize the transactional distance. Like what a teacher does, to manage the e-discussion, the teacher must be supportive and encouraging, give ample feedback, be a good role model, be appropriately informal, and elicit discussion (Bender, 2003: 11). The teacher is a model who is a guru "*digugu dan ditiru.*" He or she must be fair, objective, wise and professional in managing and

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monitoring the run of the discussion. Motivating as many learners as possible through his or her words, texts, or voice to encourage them to actively participate in the discussion. The teacher should be able to take their roles as teacher, educator, motivator, evaluator, etc. (Mulyasa, 2005: 37-65).

One of the lessons learned from the previous e-discussion forums the writer joined is that certain rules need to be set for the discussion forum. Setting rules of the discussion in the virtual world is important. Although the students in the e-discussion forum do not meet face-to-face, they must be aware that they communicate with humans not with the computer. Therefore, the 'rules' for effective online communication in their interaction must be taken into account (Dudeney and Hockly, 2007: 63). Some examples of the netiquette rules are not using only capital letters since this is perceived as yelling or shouting, identifying the topic in the subject line, greeting, etc. Schwartz (2002: 28) suggests maxims or wise saying to live by, the ones that have motivational and moral significance, and he also introduces honor code systems.

Bender (2003: 47) suggests how to engage the students: by contacting each student individually. This can be in the form of informal first discussion topic, student interview each other, providing a hook, etc. To facilitate and stimulate the online discussion, it is better that the teacher defines the expectation for discussion. He or she can ask as well who starts the discussion by raising a question or stating a view, and who wraps up the discussion at the end of each forum or every week. Teacher's dominant roles in the discussion can be avoided accordingly. Some other things to do are describing the frequency of student participation (e.g. each has to post at least one message and one reply responding to a friend's posting) and dead-lining the task submission, if necessary.

An early observation shows that one of the activities most students did during e-learning is downloading the materials. Less than half of them (45.32 %) joined in the discussion forums. The most common activity of this group of students is responding the posted message. To be actively involved in the discussion, the students can reply messages which can be questions, understanding on the topics discussed, criticism, etc. Exchanging exercises to have reinforcement on the materials discussed can also be done. Continuing the discussion 'beyond' the existing discussion forum can be facilitated by providing external links to teacher's and students' blogs or related websites.

Another facet of e-discussion is through text and/or voice chatting. The teacher and the students can at the same time go online to share a subject matter. Various types of chatting enable students to develop different language skills.

As an education process, the electronic discussion forum needs to be evaluated. Evaluation may cover the one for the course, participant learning achievement and teacher's performance. Self-reflection from the teacher, research and feedback from the learners are recommended to be conducted. Simple survey can be designed by the teacher to obtain the feedback, or the teacher can adapt it from templates available in online survey service such as http://www.surveymonkey.com, and http://www.esurveyspro.com. In addition, sharing with colleagues can also of help in evaluating the learning activities. Inviting colleagues to criticize and suggest the teaching and learning activities helps the teacher to see more honestly and objectively what he/she and the students have done.

C.   Character Building and E-discussion Forum.

Thomas Lickona (in Parkay and Stanford, 1998: 280-281) suggests a comprehensive approach to values and character education. There are twelve points to consider, they are: the role of the teacher as caregiver, model and mentor, creating a moral community, practicing moral discipline, creating a democratic classroom environment, teaching values through the curriculum, using cooperative learning, developing the "conscience of craft," encouraging moral reflection, teaching conflict resolution, fostering caring beyond the classroom, creating a positive moral culture and recruiting parents and the community as partners in character education. Those are based on respect and responsibility. In practice, those points on characters and values can be realized in e-discussion forums by involving both the teacher and students. Through his or her texts, the teacher can be a model and motivator in creating an enjoyable electronic learning community. He or she designs activities that make the students actively involved in learning and working with their peers.

Further, the Indonesia's long term national development is also directed to achieve the goals of having strong national characters, national competitiveness, highly valued behavior and morality. Among the values to realize are being responsible, honest, respectful, tolerant, self-confident, cooperative with others (Suyanto, in . http://mandikdasmen.kemdiknas.go.id/web/pages/urgensi.html). To implement character education, Madya (2011: 86) states the importance of needs analysis on the characters required before setting the teaching and learning strategies and doing the evaluation. Related to the themes of national character building, Zuchdi (2011) states that it is to develop a generation that is "*jurdastangli*" (*jujur, cerdas, tangguh, peduli*). At the same time, education is directed toward creative and critical thinking, inovation and problem solving.

Before conducting the elearning, a teacher needs to analyze which points of character can be included. Then, the teacher can design the strategies for the teaching and learning process. Referring to the curriculum, the teacher can select suitable subject matters to discuss, offer various activities at which the students can participate, provide motivating feedback, etc. The e-discussion that is well-managed enables students to develop their characters. Involving in the activities such as asking questions, answering questions, criticizing, chatting, discussing, practicing (language), reasoning, reviewing, sharing ideas, summarizing, etc. students can learn cognitively and affectively. Avoiding plagiarism makes them develop trustworthiness and responsibility. Through the interaction in the forum they can also develop their responsibility, cooperation with peers, discipline, honesty, tolerance, confidence, etc. At the same time, students joining electronic discussion forums can develop their style as autonomous and independent learners.

A survey conducted by Fatimah (2010) reveals that e-discussion forum facilitates students to develop their learning strategies supporting their character building. Students in the e-discussion forum apply direct strategies i.e. memory and cognitive strategies; they create mental linkage (15.79%) and review the materials (5.26%) in developing their memory strategies. Also, they have three other strategies to help them learn the subject matter. The activities are practicing (36.84%), analyzing and reasoning (10.52%) and creating structure for input and output (5.26%).

In addition, the result of the survey shows that indirect strategies are also employed. The strategies include metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The details for each of the indirect strategies are centering learning (42.11%), encouraging learner's self (36.84%), taking learner's emotional temperature (31.58%), asking questions (68.42%), cooperating with others (42.11%) and empathizing with others (73.68%).

Learning strategies: direct and indirect strategies	Activities:	Character building:
creating mental linkage reviewing the materials practicing analyzing and reasoning creating structure for input and output centering learning encouraging learner's self taking learner's emotional temperature asking questions cooperating with others emphatizing with others	Asking questions Answering questions Criticizing Chatting Discussing Practicing (language) Reasoning Reviewing Sharing ideas Summarizing Etc.	Caring Considerate Cooperating with others Discipline Honest Responsible Self-confident Tolerant

D.   Closing Remark

Discussion forums which are conducted virtually can also be one of the activities to reflect upon, identify and affirm values to hold. Through the discussion, the teacher and students take their educational roles and have efforts that help them promote their moral education.

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