Learners Attitude, Students Social Ability and Their Influence to E-mentoring

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Online learning has become popular in educational institutions. There are numerous studies focusing on learners’ readiness for online learning. However, the growth of online learning offers opportunities for teachers to create mentors online to support students’ engagement in learning. E-mentoring enables teachers to interact with students through email, online chat, and online bulletin boards regardless of geographic location. The purpose of this research is to discuss learners’ attitude and their social ability toward e-mentoring. The aims of this research were to improve understanding of learners’ attitude and their social ability in engaging with their online mentors. Understanding learners’ attitude and their online social ability enables program developers to establish communication patterns and program goals that meet participant needs. A survey analysis was carried out. A total of 205 participants were asked to answer a questionnaire. The findings highlight the significance of learners’ attitude, and their online social ability. Learners’ social presence was found to be important as to ensure students’ engagement with their e-mentor. Based on the findings, this research proposed ways to strengthen mentor online.

**Keywords:** Learners’ Attitude, Students’ Social Ability, social presence, online learning, e-mentoring

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**I– INTRODUCTION**

Online learning has become a popular tool for learning. This is because people are looking for flexible learning to accommodate their needs for improvements. Further, online learning activity is based on learner autonomy and interactive learning actions (Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 2007a). Consequently, learners have the opportunity to expand their learning regardless of time and location. This makes online learning popular among distance learners.

Most universities have also incorporated online learning in their teaching (Artino & Stephens, 2009). Online teaching offers vast opportunities to expand learning environments for diverse student populations (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). In addition, Pituch and Lee (2006) noted that students will get various instructional aids and communication methods from online learning. However, An, Shin, and Lim (2009) in their review found that most students did not participate and interact actively in online learning discussions. In fact, Fung (2004) stated that students in a distance learning course...
were quite passive in raising questions and sharing ideas through online discussion, the main reason given being lack of time.

Learning is a social process, and the growth of internet has supported new kind of learning (Bruckman, 2002). However, students also need teacher to facilitate online discussion forum in order to give direction, which make students more comfortable about their discussion (Tianyi, Tianguang, Ring, & Wei, 2007). Perhaps one way to encourage students’ involvement in e-learning is by developing mentor-mentee program. These views were supported by Adams and Crews (2004) which states that e-mentoring or telementoring are viable tools to help students become involve in e-learning.

Therefore this study examines on how to facilitate student’s engagement in online learning. Thus the goal of this research are; first, to find out students social ability in online learning as to enhance their engagement to their mentor; second, the researchers sought to explore learners’ attitude toward online learning as to enhance learner participation to their mentor.

II- Literature Review

E-mentoring

Bierema and Hill (2005) defined e-mentoring as “a computer mediated, mutually worthwhile between a mentor and a protégé that provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling, that is often boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different from traditional face-to-face mentoring”. On the other hand, Single and Muller (2001) described e-mentoring as the merger of mentoring with electronic communications and has also been termed telementoring, cybermentoring, or virtual mentoring.

E-mentoring can be used to facilitate online learning where learners and teachers can interact through e-mail, chat room, bulletin board, forum and discussion regardless of their location. Online learners usually experiences isolation in online learning environment because they are at a distance. Previous research demonstrated that students reported confusion, anxiety and frustration due to lack of prompt or clear feedback from the instructors, and from ambiguous instructions on the Web site and in e-mail (Hara & Kling, 2001). However, the present research believed that when online mentor participated actively students engagement will increase.

Kasprisin, Single, Single, and Muller (2003) suggested that there are three element in measuring e-mentoring, that is involvement, satisfaction and value. The author define Involvement as “the frequency of contact between mentor and protégé”, and satisfaction as “level of comfort and satisfaction for the aspect of the e-mentor”. For the purpose of this research value is define “as how much experience mentors contribute to learners learning”.

Learner attitude

Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, and Yeh (2008) define learner attitude as “learner impression
of participating in e-learning activities through computer usage”. In order to understand what makes learner engage in online learning, the present research believed that learner attitude play a significant role. This is because online learning environment allow students to arrange their own learning. Students are forced to take active role in their learning as online learning environment is not teacher centered. Students may engage in online learning, control the learning time and procedures by themselves (Liaw et al., 2007a).

Ho and Kuo (2010) argue that learner’s computer attitudes play a significant role in the usability of online learning. Prior studies have shown that attitude and self efficacy have been identified as important factors that affect learner’s motivation, interest and performance in internet based learning environments (Peng, Tsai, & Wu, 2006). Sun et al. (2008) cited Piccoli, Ahmad, and Ives (2001) finding noted that when learner are not afraid of complexity in information technology (positive attitude), learner will become more satisfied and effective in online learning. Their review also finds that attitude influences learning interest (Hannafin & Cole, 1983).

Following research from Liaw, Huang, and Chen (2007b), there are three aspects of learner attitude that link to online learning environment. First; online learning as self-paced learning environment as learner can control their learning time and procedures. Second; online learning environment provides learners with various assisted function such as teacher-made online instruction. This function offer opportunities for teacher to be assisted tutor. Third; online learning provides multimedia instruction environment because it uses multimedia to support online teaching.

Previous research indicates that online learning methods are often less guided and self directed (Oh & Lim, 2005). They noted that there are learners who prefer direct and guided instruction, thus without proper guideline, the learner may get lost due to incapability to adapt to online environment. Hence, the present research hypotheses are;

H1a:Learner’s attitude pertaining to (learner autonomy environment, teacher as assisted tutor, multimedia instruction) will influence involvement with e-mentor

H1b:Learner’s attitude pertaining to (learner autonomy environment, teacher as assisted tutor, multimedia instruction) will influence satisfaction with e-mentor

H1c:Learner’s attitude pertaining to (learner autonomy environment, teacher as assisted tutor, multimedia instruction) will influence value of participation with e-mentor

**Social Ability**

The nature of online learning enable participants to communicate at the distance. However this communication requires participants to possess trust beliefs, norms and values to determine successful collaborations (Kirschner & Kreijns, 2005). Further they also noted that the social aspects mentioned above do not occur “by themselves”. A person needs to develop their own socialization as to belong to the community.
Social ability in e-mentoring become important to how participants associate themselves socially within online community. Participant’s social ability explains how participants experience and perceive social interaction while they make relations with other individual, use social practice tools, and undertake task in online learning environment (Laffey, Lin, & Lin, 2006).

Leong (2011) in his review found that researchers studying interactions in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) systems have used social presence to study interaction, communication, and collaborative learning. Similarly Sung and Mayer (2012) stated that an important concept that has been explored in relation to social interaction in online learning environments is social presence. They also found that social presence act as one of the most important aspects of online learning and a key to understanding person-to-person telecommunication.

Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010) defined social presence as “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities”. Whilst research done by Lin, Lin, and Laffey (2008) conclude that in online learning environments social presence includes the sense of “being there” and the sense of “being there with others”. A study by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that social presence is a predictors of learners satisfaction. However a review by Sung and Mayer (2012) found that lack of social presence may lead to a high level of frustration, a negative attitude toward the teacher’s effectiveness and a lower level of affective learning. Therefore, this study proposes two hypotheses;

H2a: Social ability pertaining to social presence (the social presence of peers, and instructors) will influence involvement with e-mentor.

H2b: Social ability pertaining to social presence (the social presence of peers, and instructors) will influence value of participation with e-mentor

III- Methodology

The purpose of this research is to discuss learners attitude and their social ability toward e-mentoring. The aims of this research was to improve understanding of learners attitude and their online social ability in order to engage to their mentor.

The study was conducted at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia. The School of Distance Education was chosen due to the nature of their learners are adult learners, who are geographically dispersed and have conflicting schedules. Students meet their teachers both on-line and face-to-face during intensive weeks.

E-portal was designed to cater teaching and learning processes at School of Distance Education. The purpose of e-portal is to help students in learning processes. E-portal enable students to access learning material, e-mail, live chat sessions, online discussions, forums, quizzes and assignment at
any place at any time. All students are required to use e-learning portal for their discussion, which allows teachers-students, and students-students asynchronous interaction. The teacher will act as a mentor to the students. Data was gathered through self-administered questionnaires.

A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed to the students with different program namely humanities, social sciences, management and sciences. The overall response rate was 41% (205 students). Table 1 reports the demographic information.

Table 1: Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Numbers of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>46.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>67.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sciences</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>22.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 4</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In measuring learner’s attitude pertaining to online learning environment, the researchers adopted a questionnaire from Liaw et al. (2007b). These items measures respondents’ attitude pertaining to online learning that is learner autonomy environment, teacher as assisted tutor and multimedia instruction. Respondents indicated on a 5-point likert scale, with 1= “strongly disagree” to 5= “strongly agree”.

In measuring social presents, the researchers adopted a questionnaire from Swan and Shih (2005). These items measures respondents’ perceptions of the social presence of peers, and instructors.

E-mentoring was measured by adopting a questionnaire from Kaspirin and Single (2005).
These items measured e-mentoring from three perspectives that is involvement, satisfaction and value. Respondents indicated on a 5-point likert scale, with 1= “not at all” to 5= “very much”.

IV- Result

To determine whether learners’ attitude influence e-mentoring, multiple regression analysis was conducted. Regression analysis was used to predict independent variable namely learners’ attitude (learner autonomy environment, teacher as assisted tutor and multimedia instruction) and dependent variables that is e-mentoring (involvement with e-mentor, satisfaction and value of participation). However based on factor analysis result, there are two types of learners’ attitude namely learner autonomy environment and teacher as assisted tutor. There are two types of e-mentoring measurement that is involvement and value of participation. The results from regression analysis are shown in Table 2 and table 3.

Table 2 shows the result of learners’ attitude and involvement with e-mentor. The results of this analysis shows that there is a moderate linear correlation between variables, $R =.22$ with $R^2=0.049$, indicating approximately 5% of the variance of learners’ attitude contribute to involvement with e-mentor. It was found that learner autonomy environment predicted involvement with mentor ($\beta =.237, p<0.5$), while teacher as assisted tutor is insignificant. Therefore hypothesis 1a is partly supported.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Involvement with e-mentor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$t$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (constant)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learner autonomy environment</td>
<td>.237</td>
<td>3.207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher as assisted tutor</td>
<td>-.097</td>
<td>-1.312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.154*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**P<0.05

Table 3 shows the result of learners’ attitude and value of participation. The regression analysis result indicate that the two variables explained 22.4% of the variance ($F= 28.798, p<0.01$). It was found that learner autonomy environment predicted value of participation ($\beta =.405, p<0.00$), as did teacher as assisted tutor ($\beta =.143, p<0.339$). Therefore hypotheses 1c is partly supported.
Table 3: Multi Regression Results Learners’ Attitude and Value of participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Value of Participation</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (constant)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learner autonomy environment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.405</td>
<td>6.100</td>
<td>.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher as assisted tutor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>2.150</td>
<td>.033**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.224</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28.798**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**P<0.05, p<0.01**

To determine whether social ability pertaining to social presence (social presence of peers, and instructors) influence e-mentoring, simple regression analysis was conducted. The result of factor analysis shows that social presence consist of single measurement. It was rename as social presence.

Table 4 shows the result of social presence and involvement with mentor. Result from simple regression analysis indicated that social presence explained .049% of the variance (F= 10.441, p<0.05). It was found that social presence predicted involvement with mentor (β=.221, p<0.05), Therefore hypotheses 2a is supported.

Table 4: Simple Regression Results Social Presence and involvement with mentor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Involvement with mentor</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (constant)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.247</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social presence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>3.227</td>
<td>.001**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.049</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.441**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**P<0.05**

Table 5 shows the result of social presence and value of participation. The result of the regression indicated social presence explained .043% of the variance F= (45.680, p<0.01). It was found that social presence predicted involvement with mentor (β=.221, p<0.05), Therefore hypotheses 2b is supported.

Table 5: Simple Regression Results Social Presence and value of participation
V - Discussion

The main purpose of this study is to examine the impact of learner attitude and social ability as to facilitate mentoring online. Future trends have shown that e-mentoring has became more popular (Kasprisin et al., 2003). To enhance e-mentoring, both learner attitude and social ability pertaining to social presence plays a prominent role to ensure continuous commitment.

In testing the hypothesis, it is noted that learners’ attitude pertaining to learner autonomy environment contribute to learners’ involvement with e-mentor. Learners who take charge of their own learning are engaging more to their teacher/mentor. They tend to have more contacts with the teachers/mentor because they appreciate the flexibility of online learning. Further, learners who are taking charge of their own learning are responsible to their own learning (Chang, 2005).

Another important finding was learners’ attitude pertaining to online learning environment also contribute to learners’ value of participation. Learners who perceived that their mentor have lots of experience tend to engage more in e-mentoring. This is possibly true for learners’ who control their own learning as they can see that their mentor is a valuable source for knowledge. More Experienced teachers/mentors demand high quality work from their students (Young, 2006). From learners’ perspective, effective teachers/mentors give challenging work and more work to students (Marsch, 2001 in Young, 2010). This study also showed learners’ perception that if a teacher act as assisted tutor the students will also tend to engage to their mentor. When learners are comfortable with teachers/mentors help, they are more willing to communicate with their mentor. Further, it also removes barriers between learners and teacher/mentor when learners feel that they have given considerable attention in their learning.

The present study hypothesized students who possess social ability tend to engage in e-mentoring. There are two elements in measuring student engagement to their e-mentor that is involvement with the mentor and value of participation.

The result reveal that social presence is a significant predictor to e-mentoring. The researchers
belief when a students have the social ability pertaining to social presence they will get engage to their mentors. In other words, students who possessed social presence will get involve to the mentors and valuing their participation in e-mentoring. Students with social presence will highly valued participation in e-mentoring. Students are better able to project their presence in online interaction which encourages online participation. This finding is in agreement with Venkatesh and Johnson (2002) findings which showed that social richness have an effect on usage behavior.

VI- Conclusion

Learners attitude and Social presence does play a role in e-mentoring. Students should establish their social ability as to socialize in virtual world. There is therefore a definite need for instructional design to consider socialization features in their design since online students are isolated and remote. This study also provide insight for institutional to consider learners’ attitude in designing mentor online. Mentor online is a great help for learners who are geographically disperse. Online learners need teachers to initiate the discussion to collaborate in online learning. Some student may get lost without teachers assistance and help. Therefore, online teachers/mentors need to build a relationship with their learners to increase participation.

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