Creating a Sense of Place in Online Learning

Mesti Woro Mahatmi[1]
[1] Universitas Teknologi Digital Indonesia
E-mail: [1]florentina.mesti@gmail.com*
*Coresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Since the increase of Covid 19 cases, the government has affirmed the implementation of online learning for all students, including university students. Online learning is a learning process conducted in a network that utilizes the internet, without face-to-face interactions. In practice, online learning has many obstacles which affect the success of students in the courses. Creating a sense of place in online learning can be done by improving communication between lecturers and students: humanization of students, the socialization process related to online learning, the importance of the role of lecturers in online learning, the contribution of students in online learning, learning media, guidelines and learning targets. With a conducive learning atmosphere, optimizing the role of lecturers and student contributions, can meet the desired learning targets. Efforts are made to achieve effective communication. The success of learning depends on the lecturers and students, each of which has a role that cannot be ruled out. The role of technology has a significant effect on the online learning process, such as internet access, communication media, and learning media. In the end, this effective communication effort is expected to be able to encourage students to play a maximum role in online learning, especially in situations where face-to-face learning is not possible, such as during a pandemic.

Keywords: *online learning, higher education, sense of place, communication between lecturers and students, effective communication*

INTRODUCTION

The covid-19 virus outbreak in Indonesia has also affected the education sector. Many educational institutions have stopped face-to-face activities to curb the spread of the virus. This limitation of teaching and learning activities occurs at the elementary, middle school to university level. Based on the Circular of the Minister of Education and Culture, Number 36962 / MPK.A / HK / 2020 concerning Online Learning and Working from Home to Prevent the Spread of Covid-19 on March 17, 2020, it is stated that the government affirms the implementation of online learning for students (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2020).

According to Pohan (Levine & Winduwati, 2021) online learning is a learning process in a network that utilizes the internet without meeting face to face; at the university level, lecturers and students are in separate places. Online learning is categorized as distance learning. Distance learning has certain characteristics, such as minimal face-to-face interactions between lecturers

and students (Mayende, Prinz, & Isabwe, 2017) . Students are required to learn a lot independently because physical classroom interactions are not allowed.

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Changes from face-to-face learning to online learning are not easy to adapt. There are those who think online learning is just a matter of having online presence, exams and then achieving the required grades to pass. However, in reality, the application of online learning is challenging. It needs encouragement from lecturers to students to consistently work on assignments, take part in discussions, and take final exams. The material presented through face-to-face interactions is believed to be easier for students to understand than that in online learning. Besides, the communication that occurs in cyberspace can sometimes be interpreted variously, for example, when the lecturer answers students' questions via short messages in a very few words or in a very short text, they can be interpreted as being angry or that they do not care. This is not necessarily the case, though. Facial expressions, tone of voice, or body language cannot optimally support online communication.

These kinds of supports are possible to take place when learning is done via video conference. According to research in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, students learn better when they are actively engaged than just passively listening to the lectures (Fung, Magdaline, & Kamei, 2020). The pattern of communication in the classroom will depend on the character of each lecturer. However, in online learning, the lecturer needs to get out of plain communication patterns, and needs to be more sympathetic to students. Providing motivation to students is a way that is believed to increase students' enthusiasm for learning. The following is a statement that supports the importance of interaction with students:

> *The most deliberate change in e-mail communication came in the form of personal touches to e-mails, which consisted of information meant to encourage the students and make them feel comfortable with the course. For example, I included content to offer general encouragement by saying things such as "don't give up, the semester is almost over and your hard work will pay off," or reminding students I was happy to help them in any way* (Dickinson, 2017)

The interaction between lecturers and students is a significant way to establish engagement and emotional relationships in online learning. Northcote introduces the term sense of place, which is a connection between lecturers and students that is established based on identity, discourse or topic being discussed, and also the values agreed upon and shared between them(Northcote, 2008). Marrett and Harvey stated that;

> *The connection between upholding a sense of community and a sense of place is also reliant upon the sense of identity held by each of the individual teachers and students involved: "A sense of community comes from a sense of shared identity, discourse or values* (Northcote, 2008)

In terms of psychology, Fritz Steele (Cross, 2001) suggests "*Sense of Place is the particular experience of a person in a particular setting (feeling stimulated, excited, joyous, expansive, and so forth).*" This is defined as the emotional relationship between humans and a certain place or environment. Online learning can be interpreted in various ways; some see it from the strength point, but many highlight the weaknesses. The concept of sense of place can support the quality of online learning. "*Sense of place in online learning contexts can support and enhance the quality of student learning in higher education courses which have online components*". The concept of sense of place aims to invite students to commit to class and be able to implement the knowledge they learn. Without a sense of belonging to the class, students find it difficult to contribute to online learning. Jurik et al. (Alawamleh, Al-Twait, & Al-Saht, 2020) state that, "*Verbal teacher-student interactions and student characteristics are meaningful for student*

learning and motivation." This is expected to reduce conflicts or students' underestimation toward online learning.

Communication Efforts in Online Learning

Things that need to be done to improve the quality of educational communication are (Wisman, 2017): identifying communication objectives, selecting appropriate media, assessing purpose, attractiveness and credibility. The communication targets in educational communication carried out by the lecturers are the enrolled students. Currently, those who enroll are ranging from 18-22 years old; those who were born in 1999 - 2003.This means that the targets of communication are the Z generation or the internet generation (born in 1995 - 2010) who are used to technology and gadgets from very early age, which of course will affect their characters. Lecturers are required to be able to keep up with the students well. Some of the media that are often used for online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic are Zoom and Google Meet. In addition, online lectures are also assisted by other media such as E - Learning, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, and Google Drive. The goal is to create effective online learning for lecturers and students. Attractiveness in online classes can be manifested in various strategies according to the competence of each lecturer and in ways that are relevant to the courses being taught, either theoretical or practicum courses. The credibility of lecturers as material providers cannot be generalized. Senior lecturers with high teaching loads or maximum teaching hours do not necessarily have better credibility than the young lecturers do. The level of technological literacy, communication methods and creativity in building interactions will determine the effectiveness. Research conducted by Domenech-Betoret & Gomez-Artiga (Alawamleh et al., 2020) found that, "*The relationship among students 'and instructors' thinking styles, student psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness), and their reports of intrinsic motivation in the psychology degree contex*t".

When it is carried out effectively, communication established by the lecturers will, off course, be a significant factor in supporting online learning. "*Effective communication is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, knowledge and information in such a way as to fulfill the purpose or intent in the best possible way*"(Alawamleh et al., 2020). When lecturers and students interact with each other, the communication they do is not only for transferring knowledge, but also for gaining understanding or developing relationships related to the academic world. Valentzas & Borni states;

> *Therefore, effective communication serves the purpose it was intended or built for. Possible objectives may be to make changes, to encourage action, to create awareness, to educate or to convey some idea or perspective. Good communication means talking and listening* (Alawamleh et al., 2020)

From the statement mentioned above, communication is effective if it gives the results according to the original goal or plan. In the context of online learning for knowledge transfer or understanding the material, it is effective if it can encourage students to be more active and enthusiastic in learning. Based on The Learning Pyramid Theory proposed by the National Training Laboratories (Magennis & Farrell, 2005), learning will be effective if more and more students are involved in the process. The learning stage will be maximized if students are involved in the discussion process, practice directly and participate in the teaching course material in forms, such a presentation. The pyramids believes that with active learning methods, student memory will reach 90%.
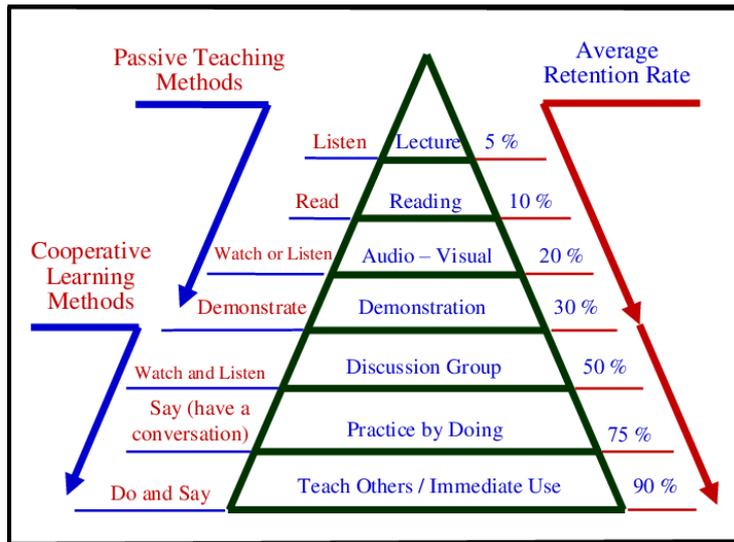
Figure 1. The Learning Pyramid
Source: Al-Badrawy, 2017

It should be emphasized that in addition to ongoing communication between lecturers and students, or among students, parties involved in online learning can also listen to each other. *"The teaching and learning process shall not take place without communication"* (Alawamleh et al., 2020). It is important for teachers to explain these learning targets and present a transparent assessment scheme. Provide as much feedback as possible to students, so that they understand what is right or wrong regarding the material being studied. For example, evaluating answers to assignments and exams. At the same time, lecturers keep motivating students to be more actively participating in the online learning process. Northcote provides six recommendation points that lecturer can do so that students have a sense of place in online learning (Northcote, 2008).
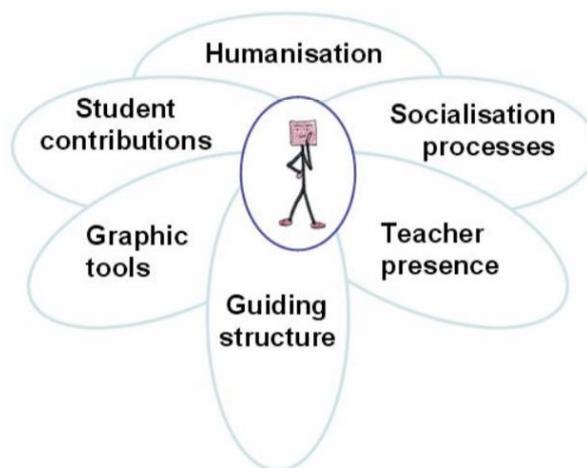

Figure 2. Creating a Sense of Place in Online Learning
Source: Northcote, 2008

The first attempt is **humanization**. Pandemic situation should not be a barrier to communicating with students. As an introductory, lecturers can do ice breaking with an

introduction at the beginning of the meeting. Lecturers can provide contact addresses to students so that communication related to lectures can continue even without face-to-face interactions. Contacts can be made in the form of email addresses or cell phone numbers; the aim is to make it easier for students to consult during online lectures. With smooth and well-established communication, it is hoped that it can increase student attachment to the class.

> *If teaching staff brings compassion, empathy and open-mindedness to their course design, then teaching and learning can gain enormous rewards from the advances in technology as the online environment supports the expression of human values* (Northcote, 2008).

If the lecturer is open to students, it is hoped that it will encourage the students to do the same to the lecturer as well as their classmates. During online learning, the rules that are applied to students still remain, but the application is not as rigid as in offline learning. For example, the deadline of the assignments submission tends to be more lax. Students tend to argue if the lecturers are too rigid about online learning techniques. Even though there is no face-to-face interaction, the awkward interactions between lecturers and students can be saved by inserting humor, making eye contact or other forms of hospitality when conducting lectures via video conference. Communication is carried out in soft manners because students need to interact with lecturers without feeling intimidated. It does not take much to change the rules or materials being taught, but simple actions that can reduce the psychological distance between people. Actually, the ways of communication that are applied in online learning are not much different from those of offline learning. In their research, (Alawamleh et al., 2020) suggest that teachers must communicate with their students, both through formal and informal channels. The formal channels can be through online platforms (E-learning), conference calls (Google Meet, Zoom Meeting) and email. Meanwhile, informal channels can be done via short messages such as SMS or WhatsApp Group. Effective communication methods are expected to encourage students to take an active role in online learning. Lecturers choose a language that is comforting to hear, easy to understand and universal (not a regional language) because students' backgrounds can vary.

The second effort is the **socialization process.** Avoid online learning with one-way interaction, as students cannot evaluate their learning process. With a one-way system, lecturers and students find it difficult to get input and new ideas that can be discussed further. At the first meeting, if possible, you can organize online lectures via video and discuss the syllabus or lecture contract.

> *When thinking about my own verbal immediacy behaviours, I thought about the things I was saying and how the signals I was sending when communicating could have impacted my online students. More specifically, I was considering the rapport I was building with students through the tone of my correspondence* (Dickinson, 2017)

Build interactions in groups, such as informing about lecture materials uploaded at a certain time or discussing certain materials. If the lecturer encourages interaction from the beginning of the meeting, it is hoped that students will not hesitate to ask questions or give comments during the lectures.

The third effort is **student contribution**. Online learning does not require lecturers and students to meet collectively on a continuous basis, but it allows flexibility for students to understand material according to their ability level in the environment and schedule that each student has. Stone & Perumean - Chaney put it this way:

> *Online courses do not require students to meet as a group on a regular basis, but instead they allow the flexibility and freedom for students to learn at their own pace in the environment most convenient for the demands of their schedules* (Dickinson, 2017)

Online learning is different from offline learning. Lecturers provide teaching materials and facilitate their explanations, both by video conferencing and video recordings. To be effective, lecturers do not just provide material, but also try to involve students in the learning and encourage interaction among students. In online learning, students are required to learn independently and play more active roles. Open a room for discussions so that students can communicate their ideas and lecturers can respond to students' questions or discussions. Create a class group, for example via the WhatsApp Group. To be organized, the lecturer can appoint a student as the class coordinator. Lecturers can bridge interactions among students, either in the form of discussions or joint projects. The lecturer motivates the students to take advantage of the interactions among them. Students should not just be passive observers, but must feel challenged to explore other references or go beyond the provided materials. Students can develop their communication skills because they dare to convey ideas and ask questions if there is something they do not understand. By contributing actively, students train themselves to think analytically. Students' contribution can also help them understand about communication technology, for example how to make video presentations and how to share these videos in cloud storage (e.g. Google Drive).

The fourth effort is **teacher presence.** A pandemic situation is turning face-to-face learning into full online learning. In online learning, the role of a teacher or lecturer is as significant as it is in face-to-face learning. Lecturers are not merely the ones who present, but also those to whom the students could rely on. Students need a leader who can direct the online learning, such as setting the learning techniques and learning goals to achieve. With the support of the lecturer, students do not feel lost and neglected in class. The online learning environment will provide opportunities for lecturers to play their role optimally. Lecturers are directed to communicate openly, make commitments to the class, and are willing to respond to student's questions regarding the learning materials. Lecturer's support will increase the student's sense of place. Therefore, the lecturers do not only serve as content and information providers, but also be the ones who are required to have communication and moderation skills. This communication is expected to be the lecturer's evaluation of the online learning process. Announcements that communicate online learning progress need to be made so that participants are aware of the lecturers' presence and role, such as vacation time, exam schedules or any other simple administrative information.

The fifth effort is **learning media (graphic tools**). It is important to not only focusing on literature-based learning, but also encouraging learning based on experiences in the field. It is better if the lecturer can figure out the creative ways that can be adopted by the students so that the material can be delivered well, in a fun way, such as by making videos or virtual face to face interaction, understanding the features existing in new media and the techniques to operate, and also understanding the popular media which can be accepted by many students. When evaluating online learning, Bailey & Card (Dickinson, 2017) state that online learning can be as effective as offline learning if the lecturers can deliver the material in an organized manner, show seriousness in mentoring the students, and have intense communication with the students via email, video conference, or messenger groups. Ensure that technical matters can be handled properly, such as video quality and communication methods that are not monotonous.

Research at the University of Agder (Mayende et al., 2017), states that it is better to find time to hold lectures in video conferencing than to record material and give it to students to play at any time. They stated that live lectures were more valuable than playing back videos from lecturers. This experience, it is not a good idea to run video lectures as non-timed playback, but rather organize several time slots where the students can meet at the same time. The following forms of learning are recommended (Mayende et al., 2017)

1. Individual content: uploading material through the E-learning website which allows students to access and store material privately.

2. Joint content: a content that is formed for the benefit of all online learning participants, e.g., via Google Drive. For example, uploading a video and then discussing it together through online forums.
3. Learning group: this can be applied if you want to hold a presentation / group project, for example, you can use the session class feature in zoom meetings.
4. Mentoring (coaching) for groups: this can be applied to help group online learning. Students need to be encouraged by the lecturer so that the group discussion can continue to take place and be effective. Here, the function of the lecturer is as a mediator or a mentor for the students. Discussions do not always produce conclusions, but at least they can encourage students to have the courage to express their opinions.
5. Peer-to-peer evaluation and assessment: it is a feedback evaluation mechanism in the online learning process. The assessment mechanism can be done individually or in groups, for example, in the form of a quiz or a specific task. Regular responses from students can help evaluate their level of understanding.

The sixth effort is a **guiding structure**. Guidelines used in online learning should be conveyed to students; the learning outcomes of the subjects, the topics of each meeting, the learning methods used (presentations, discussions, assignments), up to the media employed (computers, projectors, internet access). Syllabus and *RPS* (Semester Learning Plan) will be useful for lecturers and students themselves. After the Semester Learning Plan (*RPS*) is well structured, the lecturers can carry out teaching and learning in the classroom effectively and efficiently (Nurdin, 2018)

CONCLUSION

Both offline and online learning have their respective advantages. In a pandemic situation, online learning is still an effective solution to support academics productivity. If communication between lecturers and students can be improved, it is expected that it will support students to remain productive during the pandemic. Paxton (Northcote, 2008) states that:

> The literature clearly shows that "successful" online courses have been able to overcome the disinviting aspects of the medium by applying the technologies to "humanise" the environment and establish a "social presence" of all participants**; to encourage** cooperation and collaboration between individuals, groups, and online educators / facilitators**; to stimulate** a much more meaningful view of the subject matter being taught; and **to use operational activities** which specifically address the disinvitation aspects on online learning.

The objectives of online learning are no different from those of face-to-face learning, namely as a bond between teachers and students, an exchange of information (knowledge), and to exchange ideas with one another. It should be understood that not all students have the initiative, independent learning or autonomy in learning, and good communication skill. Although there are efforts from the lecturer's side to improve communication effectively with the students, in the end, the success of online learning also depends on the characteristics of the students involved. By increasing students' engagement in online learning, it is hoped that it can produce maximum learning output.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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