

## SOCIAL RELATION NETWORKS IN UT-ONLINE COMMUNITY FORUM

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### ABSTRACT

So far, the existence of a virtual community forum has become a reality and social necessity in an era cybertech. It was also viewed as the electronic frontier of 21st century society that was undoubtedly for reorganizing and redefining to awareness of human being, that ways of their perceptions and explorations no longer limited by time, space, and geographic. Since the early decades of the 1990s, the existence of virtual community forum has attracted much attention and interest to the researchers, because it has significance as a social and cultural capital, and as a socio-technological solution for creating a learning community building forces. The UT-Online community forum is a virtual community forum that was built by (Universitas Terbuka) UT in year 2006 to facilitate students to share and discuss various information, ideas, experiences in relation with academic or/and non-academic. This study examines and explains the contents of relation, social ties and structures of social relation networks in UT-Online Community Forum. The results of the study are important to the distance education institutions for building sense of community to DE students.

**Keywords:** virtual community forum, UT-Online community forum; social relation networks, distance higher education.

### INTRODUCTION

In ODE, one of factor contributed to the lost of social commitment or sense of community to students of ODE are their inability to coordinate the psychosocial aspects such as family, job/task, social functioning, social environment, and so forth (Schuemer, 1993); learning situation, technology, culture, institution, psychology, and/or epistemology (Muis, 1987; Sembiring, 2000; Kadarko, 1992; 2000). These factors caused level of students' persistence of ODE is "low" (Belawati, 1997). Therefore, the biggest challenges facing students of ODE are that of time and space constraints, so they were in isolated, disconnection, distraction, attrition, and low or lost of sense of community (Belawati, 1995; Dueber & Misanchuk, 2001; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Lucking, 2005). One of potential way to reduces those challenges, and to foster a sense of community among students on ODE is building a virtual community forum.

The earliest studies on virtual community forums have made since the last decades of the 20th century, among them by Rheingold (1993), Matteson (1998), Smith & Kollock (1999), Zachry (2000), Ravenscroft & Matheson (2001), Selim (2007), Soong, *et.al.* (2001), Teo, *et.al.* (2003), Mazzolini and Maddison (2003), Patriarcheas and Xenos (2009). In Indonesia, too many virtual community forums developed either br individuals, communities, organizations and/or institutions.

However, the research on these is very rare (Darmayanti, Setiani, & Oetojo, 2007). Meanwhile, the study on UT-Online Community Forum -developed in 2006- was only by Daulay (2009).

On sociological perspective, a virtual community forum is very important for students of ODE to get fully feel balmy to hold responsible in independent situation. The forum can anticipate lost of social commitment or sense of community, it is also to anticipate to time and space constraints, and to foster of students' persistence, study completion, and community consciousness among ODE students (Belawati, 1995; Rovai, 2002; 2005).

This study examines and explains the contents of relation, social ties and structures of social relation networks in UT-Online Community Forum. The results of the study are important to the DE institutions to facilitate interaction and communication, and building sense of community among students.

## METHODS

Research subjects were all (1.073) students at Non-elementary (Non-Pendas) and Elementary (Pendas) study programmes who participated in the Forum since February 2006—December 2009. The number of participants for this study was consisted of 843 Non-Pendas and of 230 Pendas students at Faculty of Education - Universitas Terbuka (FKIP-UT).

The research data collected by documenting "text-based chats"—participant's statements/conversations/discussions—they posted into the Forum since February 2006—December 2009. Number of *text-based chats* collected of 2.467 posts from Non-Pendas students and of 448 posts from Pendas students. Every *text-based chats* analyzed of three elements such as: *contents*, *direction*, and *strength* (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005; Garton, et al., 1997), and then, analyzed by using the Cohen's model of social network analysis (Hanneman & Riddle, 2005; Izquierdo & Hanneman, 2006; Raub et al., 2007) with focused to the contents of relation, social ties and structures of social relation networks among participants in UT-Online Community Forum.

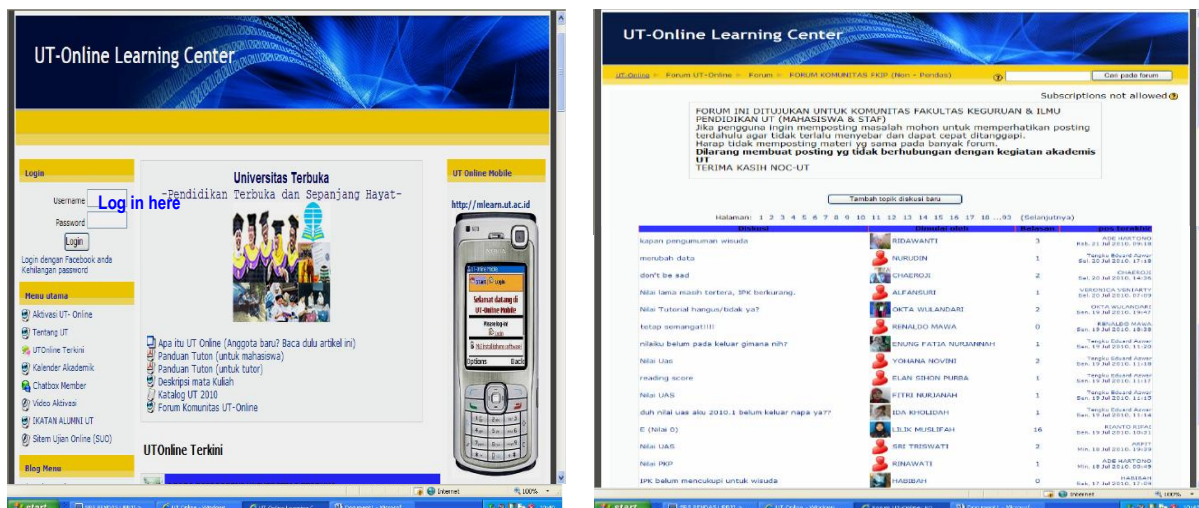


Figure: 1  
Opening page (*left*) and inner page (*right*) of the Faculty of Education Forum

## RESULTS

### Contents of Relation

Within 4 years, there were 45 topics have been discussed and shared among participants in the Forum. It was consisted of informations, ideas, problems, experiences and supports they faced in relation with academic and non-academic affairs. Most academic affairs they discussed and shared were examination scores; tutorial online/tuton; learning materials/Module (i.e. 75.21%=Non-Pendas, and 89.5%=Pendas). Meanwhile, non-academic affairs they discussed and shared were the existence of the students community forums (ie. 24.79%=Non-Pendas, and 10.5%=Pendas).

Topics on examination scores were discussed and shared by 40.51% (Non-Pendas) and 41.2% (Pendas) students in relation with the cases of;

- unclearly, unsurely and unquickly or delay of information on examination scores announcement;
- delay/lack in completion of the cases of examination scores.

Topics on tutorial online/tuton were discussed and shared by 40.51% (Non-Pendas) and 41.2% (Pendas) students, in relation with the constraints, difficulties, and/or problems:

- to open, activate, access and participate in tuton;
- to implement, and initiate of material and/or tasks;
- to improve the quality of the tutorial; and
- to increase the number of tuton courses.

Meanwhile, topics on module/learning materials were discussed and shared by 2.81% (Non-Pendas) and 4.2% (Pendas) students in relation with the cases of;

- delay/absence of the modul/learning materials;
- significance of developing learning materials in softcopy form as the web-supplement which they look more easily accessible, rather than learning materials in hardcopy form like Buku Materi Pokok (BMP/Module).

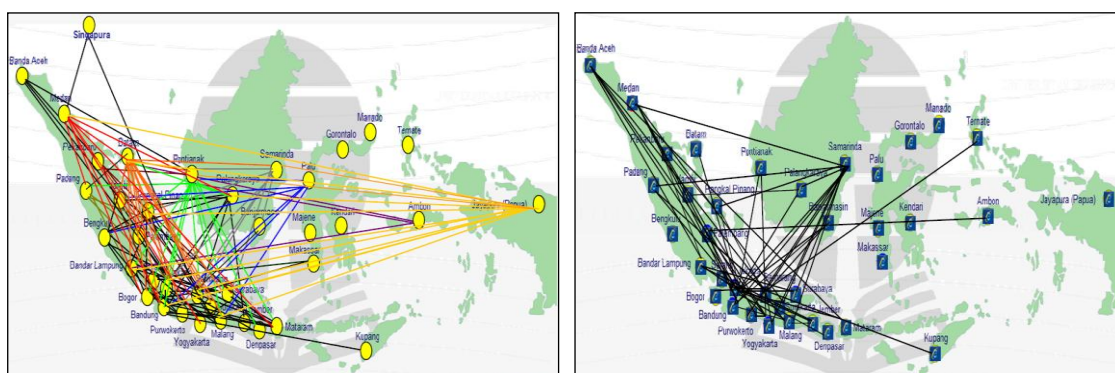
Finally, topics on the existence of the students community forums were discussed and shared by 2.64% (Non-Pendas) and 1.8% (Pendas) students in relation with the:

- significance of Regional Centers (RCs) website development;
- development and expansion of online communication forums to enhance the interaction and communication among students; and/or
- establishment of student forums/activities as a medium to introduction or tighten the brotherhood among them.

Through the contents, students enabled to create straps among them: to interact, communicate, or share on some ideas, information, difficulties; create consensus; and give emotional supports, in relation with academics and/or non-academics affairs they faced. It was also as part of their learning independence and as their effort to build relationships among them became sociable.

### Social Ties

UT-Online Community Forum firstly used by non-elementary (Non-Pendas) students since February 24, 2006, and by elementary (Pendas) students since August 8, 2008 until December 31, 2009 (according to research data collection time limit).



**Figure: 2**  
**The network of social relations among Non-Pendas (*left*) and Pendas (*right*) students inter-RCs in Indonesia**

Within four years, Non-pendas students who have participated in the Forum came from Departments of English Education (22.60%), Physics Education (14.95%), Mathematics Education (14.41%), and Civic Education (3.56%). They also come from 34 UT's RCs entirely in Indonesia such as: Jakarta is 93 students (11.03%), Bandung is 64 students (7.59%), Batam is 28 students (3.32%), Bogor is 27 students (3.2%), Semarang and Purwokerto is each of 26 students (3.08%), and Foreign Affairs (Singapore).

Meanwhile Pendas students who have participated in the Forum came from Departments of Teacher Education for Elementary School (PGSD) (77.08%), and Teacher Education for Early Childhood Education (PGPAUD) (4.74%). They most come from 28 UT's RCs entirely in Indonesia such as Jakarta (10.67%), Semarang (4.35%), Bandung and Yogyakarta is each of 2.77%.

Participants of the Forum are consisting of three entities, each of which reside and be part of building a social unity in the Forum that bounded by and/or need-based academic and non-academic. In this regard, there are not social relations that built on common geographical background of RCs, ethnic, economic, religious, or other things that pretend to other primordial needs.

These three social entities are:

- RCs students in Indonesia and overseas (96.5% Nonpendas, and 93.7% Pendas),
- UT Alumni Association (IKA-UT) (0.12% nonpendas, and 0.4% Pendas), and
- managers and tutors from the UT-Center and RCs (3.38% Nonpendas, and 5.95% Pendas).

Based on the status of gender, most participants were female (51.6%) and male (47.2%). However, judging from the level of participation viewed on the number of posts submitted to the Forum male participants more than female participants with a ratio of 53%: 47% (Non-Pendas) and 60.7%: 39.3% (Pendas). Viewed to the ratio of the number and level of participation, the managers and tutors from the UT-Center and/or the RCs seen as less supportive, primarily to provide direction and/or guidance to participants in particular that many students posted questions, problems/difficulties and

need information or solutions. Comparison of the number of manager/tutor of the UT-Center and RCs with students is 30:841 (Non-Pendas) or only 3.57%; and is 15:236 (Pendas) or only 15.7%. Unbalance the number manager/tutor and students have caused:

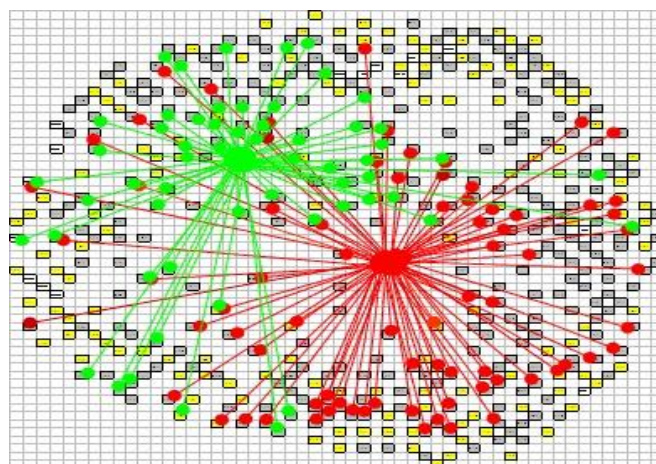
- many students posts who have not answered or addressed, that is 575 or 48.4% (Nonpendas) and 157 or 47.3% (Pendas);
- so many questions, problems/difficulties of academic faced by students and need to get information/explanation/address, only given by other participants and/or alumni without anything solutions.

Generally, the strongest social ties tend to be created on the same of study program among participants (both Non-Pendas and Pendas) because of the closeness of idealism, ideas, experiences and emotional among them, mostly with respect to various questions, difficulties, and/or problems and cases that they faced in academic affairs (examination scores, tuton, exams, etc.).

Social ties among participants on Non-Pendas program had established at between 34 UT's RCs, and on Pendas program had established at between 28 UT's RCs.

Most relations had created to/from UT-Center, in addition to Semarang, Bandung, Purwokerto, Batam, Aceh, and Samarinda. Relations to or from UT-Center has a number of 35.38% (374 relationships for Non-Pendas) and 44.58% (74 relationships for Pendas). These findings indicate that the position and role of UT-Center is very strategic and important in terms of:

- building, managing, and developing social bonds in the Forum;
- creating student awareness to build learning communities (virtual and real) in distance higher education systems;
- providing a guidance and/or direction for participants to solve the questions, problems/difficulties of academic and/or nonacademic they faced.



**Figure: 3**  
**Two participants who have become "stars"**  
**and creating a centrality in the Forums**



Besides, social ties among participants were also show a tendency to centrality of social relations at some participants becoming "*stars*". Based on the contents analyses of text-based chats that they posted into the Forum, the "*stars*" are participant(s) who have enabled to provide support, and to share ideas, experiences and/or information regarding difficulties, problems, or constraints to other participants faced or needed. In consequence, the "*stars*" have enabled to create a sense of community (togetherness), empathy, mutual self-identified on the problems, difficulties, or obstacles encountered. They have also enabled to bind other participants to build interaction-communication with him/her. Even, the *stars* have also enabled forum as a "*trigger*" or "*avant garde*" for other participants to build social networks and social ties in outside the Forum, like Facebook (45 participants), Yahoo Messenger/YM (39 participants), Friendster (five participants), Multiply (two participants). The greatest social networks they built were interaction-personal communication and interaction via personal email (366 emails), telephone/Mobile (1.371 contact numbers). This means that the existence of such forums seems to get enough positive response from students, especially among Non-Pendas participants. While, for Pendas participants were limited to interaction-communication via personal email (five participants) and phone (two contact numbers).

From the participant perspectives, the existence of the Forum viewed important for building to students learning community. Forum has binding power relations among the participants, although to different degrees. Strength of the Forum as a binder of relations among participants depends on the level of complexity or difficulty of information, ideas, or perceived problems facing the participants. The more complex or difficult of the problems they load into discussion, the more the number of participants who interact or communicate.

### **Social Structures**

Social structure of the Forum was multiplexities and formed by variety of social relations among participants. Social relations that shape the overall social structure are: First, *betweenness*, is participants who acted as intermediaries in the network so indirectly create connectivity to the largest network of social relations in overall social structure of the Forum. There are two patterns of betweenness. Firstly, participants who become mediate in the social relations between the "central-central relations".

Second, participants who become mediate in the social relations between "central-central relations", as well as for individual participants who did not have a network of social relationships with other participants and/or central-central relations. Second, *bridge*, is participants became the last intermediaries to the social relation networks in the Forum. If the role does not exist, it will give a different picture on the chart or other networks of social relationships in the Forums.

Third, *centrality*, is the participants became "*center/central*" or "*star(s)*" in the networks of social relations with the largest number of relationships. They have the social power within the network, so they able to build connectivity among participants, either as an intermediary, the builder of proximity relationship, as well as the level of connectivity they have. Tendency to this centrality is most phenomena in relation among participants in the Forum. Centrality is the main building that has formed the overall social structure of the Forum. This phenomenon indicates that the existence and sustainability of the Forum as a virtual social network largely determined by the presence of a sense of community (togetherness), sympathy, mutual self-identified, openness of mind and feelings, and mutual understanding of each other. This centrality is also allowing Forums able to build a sense of social solidarity, a sense of friendship among students, as well as being an important foundation to creating a a sustainable collective awareness among students, because every participant is fostered by a common vision and shared goals.

Fourth, *closeness*, is the participants who have a closed relation networks to other participants, because they need to gain access to information, reference, and/or guidance from other participants in the academic field.

Fifth, *structural cohesion groups*, is the groups within the Forum formed from a small number of participants, that if being removed from the forum will lead to dissolution or rupture of the integrity of the community as a whole.

Sixth, *dyad*, is the groups formed or created in social relations between two peoples who participated in the Forum.

Seventh, *isolated participants*, is participants who did not have anything social relationships to other participants in the Forum, because the lack of their participation in the Forum (only 1-2 posts in 4 years), so they are hardly known by other participants. They do not respond by posting the other participants and they never gave a response to the posting of other participants.

## DISCUSSIONS

As we noted earlier, since 2006-2009, FKIP-UT students at Pendas and Non-pendas programs who participated in the Forum were 1.073 students. They are comprises of 843 Non-Pendas students, and of 230 Pendas students. Compared with the total number of FKIP-UT student in periods 2006-2009 (about 40,000 students), the rate of student participation in the Forum are very small, i.e. approximately 2.75%. The low of their participation were caused they are most from rural areas/outside the city, with availability and capacity of them to utilize of facilities and internet cafes are very limited. They also generally do not have good access in the use of internet facilities, except that their competence in the use of computers and the Internet are also very limited.

From overall the entirely data they posted to the Forum, there are at least seven participants who honestly says that they were still "*clueless*" (*stuttering technology*) or "*new and still lay*" in the use of the Internet". It also so many participants have trouble doing the activation on UT-Online; how to download or to upload task, initiation, or BMP-Online or web-supplement, Student's Academic Progress Form (LKAM) or Examination Scores List (DNU); activation e-book store; etc.

In addition, the Internet penetration rate in Indonesia is about 12.5%. This obstacle seems indeed to be the primary issue for UT's efforts to consistently and aggressively in developing and expanding access to all corners of Indonesia through the development of ICT-based communication facilities, especially for efforts to develop a virtual learning community (Belawati, 2010). The low level of accessibility has also become one of the obstacles to sustaining the forum (Teo et al., 2003).

The findings that students need to obtain information, guidance in the settlement of various cases or issues of academic and non-academic, are the largest reason for students to participate in the Forum. The fact is also seems to be the most important correlate to the success of virtual discussion forums (Soong et al., 2001). Therefore, in the context of DE, the existence of the Forum as a social cyberspace becomes very significant. Forum is not only to overcome the constraints of limited perceived lack of interaction among DE students (Belawati, 1995; Andriani, 2005); or as institutions attempt to meet basic needs in DE system to support the development of student's learning independence in more interactive format (Linn, 1996; Bates, 1995; Verduin & Clark in Simoff & Maher, 1997).

Moreover, the Forum is expected to provide a social networking service (social network) with the potential to support the creation of "*community-building forces*" among FKIP-UT students (James, 1997; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Rovai, 2002; McKenzie & Murphy, 2000; Misanchuk & Dueber, 2001; Dawson, 2006). In other words, the substantive meaning of the Forum for students is that the Forum could be a social media for students to build a sense of togetherness, sympathy, mutual self-identified, openness of mind and feelings, understand to each other, which in turn will awaken a sense of social solidarity, sense of brotherhoods among students (Donath, 1996; Porter, 1997). If this "*sense of*" can be created, the Forum should not be viewed only limited to "*solitary information processors*" which provides "affiliation, support and affirmation". It should also viewed as a social technology that enables interconnected between them to build "a sustainable collective consciousness" among them, who are fostered by a common vision and shared goals (Rheingold, 1993; Figallo, 1999). The fact, the social ties among students in the Forum has not also been fully created a strength and a strong social bond, except to the extent relating to the case/problem-value and Tuton. However, as hypothesized by Rappoport (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tie-network>) on "social ties", that weak of social ties will serve as a crucial bridge for individuals or groups to closer each other. Therefore, behold the power of social ties in a membership forum like communities are basically the result of a combination of weak social ties and strong simultaneously. In this context, the idea of virtual communities need to be placed in the social structure and culture perspectives that is more inclusive, rather than spatial structures that tend to exclusive (Matteson, 1998).

In this context, it is understandable why FKIP-UT students tend to build up further and intensive social relations among them outside the Forum, through forums and virtual discussions and communications through social media such as Friendster (FS), Facebook (FB), multiply, Yahoo Messenger (YM). In line with Granovetter's views (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), that social bonds are created outside the Forum needs to be understood as relations between individuals are formed by the responsibility, trust and mutual awareness, feelings of closeness, intimacy, and mutual serve (reciprocal services) among individuals who do social relations. These social ties seem to be a foundation to create an effective collaboration among FKIP-UT students. It is also a strategic aspect for the community to be able to move in the virtual network.

Other findings were also need to get the attention of the UT is virtually no participation of the manager/tutor of RCs in the Forum. Of the 38 RCs in Indonesia only 4 RCs who participated in the Forum, i.e. each 1 (one) of the manager/tutor from Batam (26 posts), Surabaya (8 posts), Semarang (three posts), and Surakarta (1 post). While a variety of questions, issues/academic difficulties of many students who need information/help information/explanation/response and/or can completed by the manager/tutor of local UPBJJ-UT. Number of responding posts from the manager/tutor UT-Center, IKA-UT, and/or other students suggested that questions, problems/difficulties are asked or confirmed to the UPBJJ-UT, is also less get a response from the manager/tutor local UPBJJ-UT. As result of this situation, we could not deny if these students become "*reluctant*" and no further participation in the Forum. Another result of the very lack of active participation of the UT/UPBJJ manager/tutor is the emergence of various posts of complaints and criticisms in the Forum. Their complaints and criticisms addressed to the UT/UPBJJ as an institution, with a variety of cargo/substance that questioned the commitment or discipline of UT/UPBJJ in the settlement various cases administrative and/or academic student (e.g. delay/complexity of the settlement value/case value, or initiation schedules and materials are late or expired/was never updated, etc.). While the effect of management, tutor and lecturer intervention considered is one important factor for increasing participation into the forums (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003).



## CONCLUSIONS

UT-Online Community Forum as virtual community forum has become a medium of social relation network based on text-chats for UT's students to shares and discusses various information, ideas, and experiences in relation with their academic or/and non-academic problems, based on desires or willingness among them. Forum has created strongest social ties among UT's students, especially for students at the same study programs (Pendas or Nonpendas). The strong social ties have been created because among them have the proximity of idealism, ideas, thought and emotional, which is largely related to questions, difficulties, or problems/cases that they faced in various aspects of academic or nonacademic (exam scores, tuton, learning materials, etc.). The overall of social structure in the forum has established a structure that is multiplexity and formed by variety of social relation patterns among participants, i.e. betweenness, bridge, centrality, closeness, structural cohesion groups, dyad, and isolated participants.

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