

## IMPROVING CURRICULUM THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING PEDAGOGY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of blended learning pedagogy in open and distance learning (ODL), involving two universities in Southeast Asia, STOU Thailand and UT Indonesia. The purpose of this study is to understand the issues related to the implementation of blended-learning pedagogy. Qualitative case study was employed to optimize my understanding of the blended learning phenomena gathered through semi-structured interview and documentary analysis. Whilst they operated in different educational settings, these two universities shared similarities. They have developed blended learning pedagogy to promote students' learning classified into three dimensions: printed learning materials, F2F sessions, and online learning. Printed materials, however, may be identified as a major one and online learning have been regarded as strategic policies for further development. They have been equipped with their VLE; the use of VLE helped these universities to provide two-way traffic communications. This study identifies some strategic best practices in developing blended learning pedagogies in ODL universities in Southeast Asia. This study also provides practical recommendation that internet-based instruction is now becoming a strategic choice for ODL in developing countries to widening access and to meet challenges for better future.

**Keywords:** Open and distance learning, blended learning, curriculum improvement, pedagogy.

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems worldwide, particularly distance teaching universities (DTUs), are currently influenced by a number of common trends, frequently interconnected, that demand for ongoing change and adaption. The organisational changes and the stress on formulation and implementation of managing their academic support services and all learning support programs have been regarded as strategic issues in distance higher education systems for improving their quality of curriculum. The DTUs must prepare themselves to meet the demands of the decade when many more universities will be required to sustain the fast growing global competition. Currently, one of the strategic issues in improving quality of teaching learning services is to how DTUs manage blended learning pedagogies to support student success. While many distance learners in the Southeast Asia mostly depend on their teachers for face-to-face (F2F) tutorial sessions, the use of online learning has been regarded as a new demand.

The advancement educational technology and modern communication media have a significant impact on the delivery modes of distance education (DE). As electronic communications technologies more common and advanced since early 1990s, the use of computer-mediated communications (CMC) has broaden the opportunities for the growing of distance education (Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008; Schlosser & Simonson 2006; Simpson, 2002). The use of CMC in learning allows the transfer of information between individuals in many ways either asynchronous such as discussion boards or synchronous such as real-

time audio and video (Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008). Nowadays, computer networks are becoming commonplace and convenient way to distribute learning materials; they have made online learning programs more attractive to both students and distance teaching providers (Ally, 2004; Anderson, 2004; Koontz, Li, & Compora, 2006). Keegan (2000) adds that the information and communications technology (ICT) associated with the electronics revolution of the 1980s made it possible to teach face-to-face at a distance. According to Kaufman (1986), "the marriage of computers with communications technology" (p. 297) has provided a significant impact on developing and delivering learning materials in various instructional modes. The delivery modes of instruction in distance education have been changed from paper based and processed correspondence study to web-based instruction and other kinds of online learning programs that leads to the possibilities of virtual learning environments (Han, Dresdow, Gail, & Plunkett, 2003; Haughey, Evans, & Murphy, 2008).

While the use of online computer networks have gained pre-eminence in developed countries, in developing countries such as Thailand and Indonesia, not all people have the same opinion with the adoption of online learning deliveries. The importation of online learning programs from the developed countries to developing countries tends to be discouraging and difficult for students. Some researchers, such as Luschei, Dimyati, and Padmo, (2008) and Riana, Zuhairi, and Maria (2006) disclosed that the innovation of online learning in developing countries, such as Indonesia, has proved a daunting task simply because many students in developing countries do not have access to the Internet. Access to online learning is relatively difficult for many students residing in rural and remote regions of the country. Moore and Kearsley (2005) disclosed that distance education is much more complex than simply integrating technology in a conventional classroom. Others, such as Baturay and Yukselturk (2015) suggested that "Meeting learners' expectations such as...user-friendly, easily accessible and an effective learning environment is important for their success" (p. 9). Therefore, it is important for DTUs to seek ways to better understand how to integrate ICT in designing blended learning strategies. The need for analyzing the strengths and weaknesses as well as future opportunities and challenges of employing advanced educational technology as part of blended learning pedagogies may become a critical issue.

These challenges have enticed for an examination of curriculum improvement specifically in teaching learning provisions in DTUs. At this point, it seems important to study blended learning deliveries at distance teaching institutions involving printed learning materials, F2F tutorial sessions, and online learning. Two DTUs in Southeast Asia, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) in Thailand and Universitas Terbuka (UT) in Indonesia, have been selected to support the purpose of this study. The rationale behind the selection of these universities is determined on the basis that the universities are expected to advance my understanding of blended learning pedagogies in the DTU context in the Southeast Asia. They are state universities which employs a single mode distance education system. STOU and UT have been designed to facilitate a widening access to higher education using a single mode distance education system incorporating the use of print, F2F tutorials, and online learning (as their major learning services) for teaching distance students.

## **PURPOSE**

The specific objectives of this study is to disclose the different approaches and methods in developing and implementing blended learning pedagogy, as well as compare and contrast their key characteristics.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative case study to explore how blended learning pedagogy has been implemented in these two universities with different social, cultural, and educational settings. Qualitative case study allows the researcher to understand blended learning pedagogy in particular distance teaching institutions i.e. UT Indonesia and STOU Thailand. These universities were selected based on the reasons that they are single mode universities that employ a distance education system incorporating the use of blended learning deliveries; both universities employ F2F tutorials and online learning supported by printed learning materials as their current learning services. Besides, these two institutions also share contextual relevance in many respects; they share socio-economic, cultural, geographic, and developmental features as they operate in neighbouring and developing countries.

To support the present research which attempts to optimize my understanding of the blended learning phenomena in the two universities, the selection of the participants becomes an important part of this study. This research involved faculties and policy contributors in the two universities who have knowledge and experience in the field being explored. There were six key informants in each university coming from different units included top management level, head of faculty, head of regional office, academic staff, tutor, and head of quality assurance center. When the fieldwork was conducted, however, there was a change of the interview schedule and the number of the key respondents at both universities. At STOU, I was not able to conduct an interview with the participant from the regional office due to her healthcare reason. Meanwhile, at UT, there was eight people being interviewed as it was suggested by management. All participants were identified and approved management of UT and STOU based on consideration that they possess required information and willing to provide significant contributions to the blended learning programs and research questions under investigation. Prior to the study being conducted, research approvals from UT and STOU as well as informed consent from participants being involved in this study were obtained for the purpose of ethical considerations.

## RESULTS FROM INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDY

The separation of teaching providers and students in distance education environments necessitates the provision of an effective support system for students. It was reported that in order to remove students' barriers for learning, the three universities selected in this study have developed blended learning pedagogies. The blended learning pedagogies were delivered through diverse printed-learning materials combined with F2F tutorials, and online learning as their major teaching-learning modes. The following section summarizes as to how these two universities improve their curriculum through blended learning pedagogies in order to support student learning.

### **Part I: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) Thailand Blended Learning Programs**

STOU's educational system allowed students to use their free time to study independently, rather than having to enter conventional universities (STOU, 2004). The university has developed a variety of learning materials and employed different instructional delivery modes through highlighting the need for students to initiate and manage their own learning approaches and strategies. To support its curriculum, textbooks have been developed for all subjects as major media to promote student independent learning. Other media such as CD and DVD have been also developed to equip and promote students' self-managed learning (STOU-01). The university has also been equipped by STOU's television channel to reach students learning experience at home (STOU-04).

To support student learning, the university has also provided F2F tutorials. Tutorial sessions were provided based on the requirement determined by curriculum developers. As

F2F was not compulsory for distance learners, tutorial sessions are developed only for some courses that are difficult for students (STOU-03). Special intensive tutorial services were also delivered for very difficult courses involving students who could not pass a final exam (STOU-06). F2F tutorials were conducted at STOU's learning centers spreading out all over the country. One of the key informants explained in more detail in terms of how F2F services were carried out:

*We have 15 units in our textbooks and we divide by three. So the first time we have face-to-face tutorial, students have to read the first 5 units before they go to the tutorial, and the professor will brief on these 5 units, and if they have any questions they can ask. And for the second time, another 5 units add for the third, 5 units. (STOU-04)*

F2F general tutorial sessions, not special tutorial classes, were managed by the Office of Educational Services with the objectives to (1) assist students in enhancing their understanding of academic content and (2) provide students' access to academic guidance and support services provided by the university.

Currently, the use of Internet network for educational purposes has been placed as a strategic issue, especially for graduate students. At STOU, the development of the Internet-based support services was available for graduate students as it was confirmed by a participant that "professors have the web board of the School. We have students come every day to the web board to ask some questions" (STOU-04). The faculty also integrated social media networks for their instructional process. The participant revealed this as follows:

*I created Facebook pages for my courses and also students come to my Facebook .... When they have a problem, they can post on Facebook and I answer them and try to help them ... some students, they develop their Facebook, only that group. (STOU-04)*

The university has developed fully online courses as a new prototype to support student learning. The participant explained this as follows: "the policy has changed. We don't have online courses for undergraduates" (STOU-04) but now the university has developed fully online course as a new prototype for the English curriculum. The participant went on to explain:

*They have the course where students have to be online at a certain time. And the students will get into groups.... They don't have face to face. This is the new prototype for STOU. Formerly, we had to submit the textbook, but they don't have textbooks, they have electronic modules. And they set the time for students, which time they have to chat. (STOU-04)*

The university has also employed a policy to promote Internet-based support services through the development of the electronic seminar (e-seminar). Application for this e-seminar is developed using the Moodle online program (STOU-04).

To support the implementation of online learning and other internet-based instruction, STOU's leaning support areas has moved forward in line with the advancement of educational technology. The university has developed electronic modules and fully online courses, synchronous teaching delivery for English curriculum, web boards, e-seminars for graduate students, a-tutor, Moodle and the Design for Learning (D4L) program (STOU-04).

In meeting the challenges for the future, the university has also employed an Internet network to support student success.

### **Student Development Activities to Support Blended Learning Programs**

To support the implementation of the university blended learning pedagogies, STOU provides different counseling and information services and various student activities to support student success. The Counselling Section under the Office of Educational Services arranged counselling services for students starting from their enrolment until their completion. Key interview subject from that office explained that counselling activities consisted of guidance for interested people, orientation for new students, educational and professional counseling services and graduate counseling services (STOU-05). The KI went on to explain in more detail of these support services:

*We have some programs...First is orientation. This is an opportunity for anybody to come and participate. We invite them...There is also a personal counselor program, for which we sent letters to the students informing them of who their personal counselor is, then they can contact this person at any time up until they graduate. We also keep in contact. We send e-mails once a month, just to those who need it. First we will survey and if they need help they will send us a request. These are services we provide to students. (STOU-05)*

As distance teaching institution, the university provides individual and group counseling on specific learning problems and information on professional development delivered in order to support student success. With regard to the counselling services, the KI confirmed that "counseling by face-to-face appointments has very few students. It's more common to have counseling by phone" (STOU-05).

Mostly KIs revealed that STOU's Student Clubs were the best place for students to go. Student clubs have been endorsed to promote student activities and supplement curricular activities. The clubs provided opportunities for students to come and see each other, share their knowledge and experience, and get involve in STOU academic and non-academic programs including. These student clubs were arranged by the students themselves, are in 76 provinces scattered the country. The more detailed information of student clubs was provided by one KI as follows:

*At STOU we have student clubs for each province – we have 76 provinces. And we ask students in each province to create their STOU student club. If they have some problems they can join together and go to their club, meet together, and ask the senior students to help them. And some student clubs have their projects. STOU provides the budget for them to do their small projects. Some projects they did, like tutoring "brother helps sister" [pi chuai nong]. They create projects to help each other to study, to pass. (STOU-04)*

The university has appointed advisors for each student club with three main objectives: first, to provide academic counseling and career to community college students. Second was to manage participating students, and third was to manage student's work as planned. One of the KIs stated that

*Maybe one province has three advisors. And sometimes we go to join their projects – go to their provinces when they have an event or project. They invite the advisors to go and join them. If we have time, we go to encourage them. (STOU-04)*

For each student club, the professors had to select which student club they would like to be the member of. This was professors' responsibility to provide support for student success.

## **Part II: Universitas Terbuka (UT) Indonesia**

### **Blended Learning Programs**

From the interview data, supported by official documents, it was found that the employment of blended learning pedagogy to support student learning has also been applied at UT. As a DTU, UT is very focused in developing different modes of teaching deliveries to support students' independent learning. Blended learning strategies involve developing self-explanatory printed materials as a major source for student learning. The university also developed audio-video programs, F2F and online tutorials, correspondence tutorials through UT magazine (*Komunika*), and broadcasting tutorials via radio and television programs. In general, however, there were three major instructional delivery methods: self-directed learning using printed learning materials, F2F tutorials, and online learning.

It was disclosed that UT has developed learning materials (modules) that were specifically designed for independent study (UT-09). The writing of learning materials was done in a structured way in order to ensure quality and completion as scheduled, starting with a workshop on learning materials development. Before 2010, workshop on learning materials development was only limited to sharing perception about subject design, technical explanation about format of writing and duration of writing and contract signing. The components contain targets of learning to be achieved by students after learning the materials and details of materials to be discussed, types of media and learning supports provided, as well as evaluation tools used to measure student's mastery of the learning. Therefore, course guideline was presented to the writers at the workshop and it became the basis for writing learning materials. Moreover, the guideline also set the number of pages per module. Number of pages is set based on the time spent by students to read and understand the materials presented on each page. UT set that for subject with calculation, the number of pages for each module is 30-40 pages and for the non-calculation subject, the number was 50-60 pages.

In line with the activity of curriculum reanalysis, each study program identifies the subject offered with regard to its learning outcome including the suitability of learning outcome with the level of competence. In addition, the study program also analyzes the credit points of each subject and number of pages of each module used. The result of study shows that there are learning materials which are not in line with the existing regulation. The result of study is used to revise the learning materials which are not in line with existing regulation. Revision is done in accordance with the age of the learning materials.

One of the respondents explained that all printed learning materials have been regarded as major resource for student independent learning. Thus, all printed-learning materials have been developed as self-contained or self-instruction. The respondent explained further that "students can understand the teaching materials without help from others because all the information necessary to understand the teaching materials is available in their modules" (UT-09). Another respondent also recounted that:

*UT learning materials have been developed in such a way in accordance with the principle of self-contained so that they can be studied independently by individual students.... By reading their modules, it is hoped that students can fully understand the content without getting help from instructors, because modules represent their lecturers in distance education system. (UT-07)*

In addition to the use of self-contained learning materials, the university has also developed F2F tutorial sessions to support student learning. F2F tutorial deliveries were provided based on the curriculum requirements and students' requests. F2F tutorial services were organised by regional offices all over the country and conducted on weekends. The key respondent from regional office described these F2F tutorial services as follows:



*The major mode of learning support services that we provide are face-to-face tutorials... The implementation of F2F tutorial sessions are controlled by regional office and audited by external auditors. The results of these quality assessments are recorded and analysed for appropriate improvement. (UT-09)*

To ensure the quality of F2F tutorial sessions in promoting students' learning, the university has developed tutorial kits since 2007. The main purpose of this tool was to standardise the implementation of F2F services in all 37 regional offices throughout Indonesia (UT, 2010).

Further, online learning deliveries were now becoming the more popular mode of teaching at the university. UT has implemented online services, including those designed for tutorials, web-based supplementary materials, self-exercise tests, and online counselling. Online learning services were used to decrease the constraints of distance and time. The number of online courses increased in response to students' demand and so did the availability of access points in different regions all over the country (UT-05; UT-06). When this study was conducted, it was reported that all academic staff were very busy in preparing the implementation of new policies to offer online learning services for all courses in 2013. These preparation steps include developing online tutorial scripts and conducting online tutor trainings involving internal and external academic staff.

#### **Student Services to Support the Implementation Blended Learning Programs**

To support student success, UT has developed different students support programs. It was reported that the university provided support services in the following areas: independent learning manuals, study skills workshop, and counselling program, (UT-05). These support services can be elaborated as follows.

**Study skills workshops**—these workshops were provided during orientation sessions addressing a crucial issue for new enrolments, how to be successful as distance learners. This program was conducted at 37 UT's regional centers to help new students into the distance education system. In this workshop, staff at UT's regional offices get involve in educating new students about distance education system. In addition, students were trained how to improve their reading skills, how to create an email account as their identities to access for UT Online ranging from registration, purchasing of teaching materials, registering for tutorial sessions, checking their academic grades, and reporting their academic problem (UT-09).

**Counselling services**—counselling services were available at regional offices to all students for free with the aim to provide opportunities for students to explore issues of concern and to discover ways of learning in the distance education system. Counselling programs have been carried out by assigned academic staff for local students in every sub-district. Counseling services might include time management, motivation, and different concerns regarding academic and non-academic issues. Local students could meet in person or using different media with their counselors called *Penanggung Jawab Wilayah* during operational hours at regional offices or during F2F tutorial sessions (UT-09).

UT also encouraged students to be involved in different student support activities. In order to get students involved more, UT has designed and implemented a number of student activities in its 37 Regional Centers. The activities took the form of Scientific Discussion, Sports and Art Festival, student academic achievement, and student writing competitions. In addition, UT also participated actively in activities carried out by the Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE), such as English debate competition, Math and Science National Olympic, and business model competition. To ensure smooth running of student activities, UT has developed a guideline for student activities which is in line with the guideline issued by DGHE.

Student activities, the Scientific Discussion, Sports and Art Festival, for example, have been developed to reduce communication gap between students. This kind of activities, even though periodically done in 4-5 days per year, can be expected to reduce the "loneliness" or "alienation" felt by most students in distance education system. These students' activities have been regarded as a forum for students to share experience in order to internalize distance learning system. This activity will give new motivation to students who take part in this kind of activity which is expected to affect their academic achievement.

## DISCUSSION

This section discusses the implementation of blended learning pedagogy in each university viewed from three major theories in distance education i.e. interaction and communication theory (Holmberg, 1995), autonomy and independence theory (Moore, 1994), and community of inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

### The Implementation of Blended Learning Pedagogy at STOU

Based on the results as presented at the outset, it discloses that curriculum at STOU have been developed in such a way to support a high degree of flexibility for students and instructors to maintain their interaction and communication. Different methods for supporting the implementation of blended learning have been carried out involving self-instruction learning materials combined with different learning services. The university developed different learning support programs to increase student teacher interaction that include F2F, telephone call, and internet-based communication. Although F2F tutorials is not compulsory for students, it seems that residential meeting at student clubs and F2F sessions at learning centers have become a critical element for promoting Holmberg's (1985) interaction and communication to support student learning. One KI explained "I have to go three times... for face-to-face tutorials...and I will teach my students, sometimes in a big group or sometimes in a small group, give assignments, and sometimes the small group can present the assignment in front of the class (STOU-04).

The development of personal relationship, as it has been addressed in interaction and communication theory (Holmberg, 2003), has also been carried out by distance through telephone call in order to help students in their learning process. A faculty member who was assigned as a KI for this study highlighted the importance of willingness to provide help and develop personal relationship with distance learners as follows:

*We are an open university. You have many types of students, and you have to be prepared to help...for example – student who called from Dubai. Every time that she called I explained to her, and she felt very good, and she also said "You are a good teacher. You have time for me." Even for the master's thesis advisees, I think if I have a good relationship with them, maybe it can motivate them to work successfully. If they have a problem, they can come see me. I never refuse my students, never. If I have time, I will help them. (STOU-04)*

With regard to the importance of teaching learning conversation in the context of DE environment (Holmberg, 2007), this KI has also addressed a very crucial point by giving her advice that feeling of empathy (Holmberg, 2003) is very important to motivate student learning (STOU-04). The KI went on to clarify that creating atmosphere for friendliness (Holmberg, 2003) was necessary to promoting trust in personal relationship.

*The atmosphere, you have to try to be their friend. You have to be friendly to them. They can tell you anything – not only just study problems, but even family problems, personal problems. Some students ask me and if I have some comments I will tell them...When I can talk with them and the students tell their personal problems, that's when he or she trusts you, right? That's why they would like to get some suggestions from you.*



Student-instructor contact has been viewed as essential by faculty at STOU that involved language matter as it was confirmed that “language is very important. The sentences that you use to talk to the students are very important and the tone that you use to talk to them” (STOU-04).

Correspond to Wedemeyer’s (1981) and Moore’s (1994) autonomy and independence theory, from the beginning STOU has been totally devoted to use an instructional system which enable their students to study by themselves with or without having assistance from tutors or instructors. The University educational system “allow students to use their free time to study independently, rather than having to enter a traditional classroom setting” (STOU, 1996). To support this educational system, STOU has long been involved in implementing instructional deliveries that enable students to enjoy learning services at their home, learning at the back door (Wedemeyer, 1981). Students receive their teaching services through different forms of educational media:

- *Learning materials (workbooks, modules, CD, DVD) sent through postal service*  
The University aimed to enable students to study independently, develop their thought and apply knowledge from various sources and use self-contained textbooks as their major media (STOU-04). Printed modules might include content, concepts, activities and guidance (STOU, 2004). The University has also developed supplementary media to enhance student understanding and support students’ independency. These included audio-visual media (CD and DVD) (STOU-01).
- *Radio programs and television channels*  
The University has delivered instructional services to support students’ independence through radio and television programs. The programs have been produced in different formats such as dramas, discussions, and interviews (STOU, 1996; STOU, 2004, Sungkatavat & Boonyarataphan, 2012).

STOU also has been involved in providing different learning services for students in their localities. These services included:

- *Self-study at STOU corners in provincial and municipal public libraries*  
The University has set up 75 STOU corners in provincial libraries. These corners set up through partnerships with the Department of Non-formal Education, Ministry of Education (STOU, 2004).
- *Attending F2F tutorial session at learning centers*  
As presented at the previous section that STOU provides F2F sessions to help independent learners as a non-compulsory mode. F2F tutorials have been served for three times per semester for selected courses

Through the use of different media and teaching deliveries, independent learners residing in different provinces throughout the country have their opportunity to study by themselves in accordance with their own time and space, individual convenience, and interests.

Further, in line with the community of inquiry model for distance education (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), the University online learning platform has also been used to support and strengthen student learning. Faculty members must not only went to learning centers for F2Fsessions but also carried out instructional services through online discussion forums available for graduate students. These online forum discussions seem to be crucial that enable students to learn and construct knowledge beyond classroom. The forums allow STOU students to enlarge their knowledge and enrich their experience through posting and dialogue with online tutors and peers. One of the interview subjects confirmed that the

University has employed Moodle program and D4L to support virtual learning environment (STOU-04).

*We have Moodle and D4L. D4L is suitable for Ph.D. students, but Moodle is maybe better for master's degree. But you can mix together on the course team...D4L was developed by the University of Waterloo in Canada. D4L [Design for Learning]. First, they developed the learning model. They said the students can learn by using the T5 model...They developed this model first, and after that they progressed to D4L, and they wrote their own software. They developed their own LMS.*

When the researchers asked the KI about how this D4L program could support online collaborative learning, the KI went on to explain that:

*Yeah so they [students] have to practice together. Especially for the D4L LMS. So if we use D4L we have to follow this rule. First, you have to work alone. And after you finish, you upload your assignment and your friend will download and criticize it and give the feedback for you, and when you read the feedback, you have to criticize the feedback. Is it good feedback or not? Did your friend write the feedback based on the theory, or based on their thinking? Something like that. After that, for the last one – task 4 – they will know who is in their group. They will work together and give feedback from everything, and write only one paper and submit it to the professor.*

This forum was an asynchronous interaction medium that involved instructors posted an individual assignments or group assignments or questions and later students posting their responses whilst instructors monitor every student's participation in the discussion. The use of D4L program has supported two-way communications and promoted collaborative partnerships among students, teachers, and peers.

### **The Implementation of Blended Learning Pedagogy at UT**

Instructional processes at UT have been designed in line with its nature as higher education that adopted distance learning system. Through this learning system, the delivery of its instructional processes has been developed in order to promote autonomous and independent learning (Moore, 1994; Wedemeyer, 1981). This autonomous and independent learning emphasised the dynamic role of students in organising their study and reducing the role of instructors as well as those of the university. In order words, self-managed learning or self-directed learning became important aspect that should be posed by distance learners. One of the KIs addressed this as follows:

*Self-directed learning is important in distance education. Students have freedom to decide whether they want to learn through modules and do not want to be involved in tutorial. It's up to them. Therefore, any instructional process whether it is self-study, study groups, tutorials and others should be able to raise student self-direction and autonomy. Students' autonomy is in terms of how fast they want to finish their study? What teaching learning deliveries they want to choose? When they want to learn? When they want to graduate? It is absolutely up to them. However, they must achieve the same standards of competencies. (UT-01)*

This participant recounted this self-directed issue by mentioning, "In distance education, students must have a drive for self-direction. They must develop their self-directed learning by themselves. If they cannot, it is our responsibility to make sure they have self-direction for learning (UT-01).

The university has engaged in different methods in providing appropriate choice for students to be involved in learning based on their time and learning methods. As it was articulated by one respondent as follows:

*Vice Rector in Academic Affairs has done a lot to make sure students have opportunity to develop their independent learning skills. Numerous efforts have been set involving a variety of learning resources delivered through online such as iTV. Learning support services have been integrated and enriched to promote better student learning. Many media are used to ensure that students can learn according to their conditions and pleasure. (UT-01)*

Another participant noted that all learning materials and various instructional deliveries have been developed "in order to support student learning independence. We develop self-Contained module, audio-video cassette, web supplements and study guide in order to promote independent learning" (UT-04).

Closely aligned to interaction and communication theory (Holmberg, 1994), the enhancement of communication and interaction among participants in learning process has become major principle at the university which required significant efforts to organise learner support services. Since its early operation, UT has been equipped by learner support system in order to establish communication among all learning parties. In line with the advancement of information and communication technology, UT has also put forward different strategies to integrate current technology for instructional purposes that support interaction and communication among teaching learning parties. One of the KIs highlighted this as follows:

*I think communication is important for students because they need friends to talk. To establish social relationship, we provide F2F activities. UT also provides good online forums... It seems to me that there is no obstacle for students to interact with peers for interaction. For PGSD students, for example, they come every weekend during tutorial sessions. They can talk and share with tutors and other peers. (UT-01)*

The importance of interaction and communication for students' learning also confirmed by another participant who was a senior tutor at the university; he argued that in distance education:

*There are students who feel lonely and isolated, no friends to talk. So communication between tutors and students is needed. Not all students are able to learn relying on modules or other learning resources that we prepared. Two-way communication is necessary to motivate students' learning. (UT-07)*

When the researcher asked about feeling of empathy, this KI expressed that feeling of empathy and good relationship, based on his experience as tutor, were beneficial for both students and tutors. As he noted as follows:

*By establishing good communication, empathy and maintain a close relationship, tutors can help students to be more openly expressed their problems they face. Good relationships promote student success. In every tutorial session, I always try to establish friendly communication and establish good relationships with my students so that they trust, open and willing to express their problems during study. I can see that empathy motivate my students to study. (UT-07)*

According to one participant who responsible for student affairs areas, good relationships with students can be facilitated by various means such as telephone call, email, online

forum, or students can come for F2F consultation. This KI argued that “for us, developing communication with our students is needed not only for motivating their learning but also to decrease feeling of distance between students and ourselves as teaching providers (UT-06).

To support student learning, UT has also initiated online learning to provide different learning mode for students who have internet access. Online learning program has been offered in line with the growing needs of students’ demand. The increasing access to internet along with decreasing cost in using internet has steered new demand for intensifying interaction and two ways communication through UT online (UT, 2010). Online learning has been considered as crucial component in learner support areas specifically for promoting communication among instructional parties and supporting the idea of community of inquiry through online collaborative learning.

Even though there is no specific statement spelled out by respondents about the adoption of Community of Inquiry (COI), there are series of evidence representing the idea of how teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence have been maintained in UT online learning deliveries. One of the KIs explained his experience as follows:

*Before starting online tutorials, I have to develop 8 quality topics for discussions and 3 assignments that will be uploaded regularly during one semester. In this online discussion forum, I have to direct the discussion and encourage participants to participate in the discussion. (UT-07)*

Another respondent recounted about the importance of tutor in moderating online collaborative learning. The respondent noted that:

*Tutors must initiate the discussion in online tutorials presenting materials to initiate collaborative learning. Tutors must encourage students to express opinions and provide respond to others’ ideas. I see English course interaction is very well because it is supported by a good tutor, active, and responsive. This leads students to actively involve in the online discussion forum. (UT-05)*

Concerning the role of tutor in creating social presence, one KI argued that collaborative learning through online discussion support virtual learning community. This KI noted that:

*In online learning, I post what we call materi inisiasi [initiation learning materials] first to stimulate student learning initiatives and develop collaborative learning. I must also post my own opinion, respond to students’ view. Students also do the same thing. Online learning provides opportunity to employ learner-centered approach...I think this approach allows for discussion and it is good to develop sense of community. (UT-07)*

The respondent expressed that virtual learning community through online discussion forum provided good opportunity for tutors and students for knowledge exchange and promote students’ success. Students have opportunity to take part in the discussion and expressed their ideas and respect different perspectives. (UT-07)

## CONCLUSION

This comparative study confirms that the two ODL providers involved in this study shared similarities in developing and implementing blended learning programs to support their students. These universities exemplified some common comparison in providing modifying blended learning services for their students incorporating self-managed learning using self-instructional materials, F2F tutorial sessions, online learning, mobile learning (M-learning), and tutorial by radio and television. However, self-instruction learning materials, F2F sessions, and online tutorials have been regarded as their major teaching deliveries.

Since their early operation, these universities have long been involved in employing self-instructional materials to promote self-directed learning. According to STOU (2004), self-instructional materials “enable students to study by themselves without having entered conventional classrooms” (p. 22). The university’s distance system also allows students to study “in different localities with the opportunity to study by themselves in accordance with their individual circumstances and interests” (p. 22). To support self-managed learning, STOU has developed mixed media packets comprised of textbooks, workbooks, cassette and video tapes, radio and television programs, tutorials, and practice in STOU’s study centers (STOU, 2004). Self-directed or self-managed learning requires distance learners to have initiative, self-discipline, and strong motivation to study. According to UT (2010), self-directed learning addresses the needs for students to initiate, develop, and manage their own learning approaches and strategies. Self-managed learning also acquires all distance learners to build their internal drives to become independent learners.

To support student success, these universities also have advanced to facilitate real communication among tutors, counsellors, and students through different channels such as F2F tutorial sessions. Whilst F2F tutorials have commonly been removed for DTUs in developed countries, this study disclosed that F2F tutorial sessions have been identified as major academic services provided at STOU and UT. The universities have moved on some scholars’ ideas in distance education, such as Keegan (1998) and Holmberg (1995). F2F provisions as one of the learning support services in DTUs have been addressed by Holmberg (1995) as follows:

*In many distance education programmes there are also elements of face-to-face interaction between tutors and students .... [F2F] interaction as a supplement to distance study can be applied in more profitable ways ... the occurrences of [F2F] is dependent of the possibility, opportunity, and inclination of students to go to and take part in [F2F] meetings. (pp. 113-115)*

Moore and Kearsley (2012) also stressed that although an increasingly large range of materials for students were delivered by the Internet, some learner support services were better provided in a F2F group setting. In this research, it was confirmed that F2F tutorial sessions at the two universities have commonly been conducted in their study centers or learning centers. At STOU, the purpose of F2F services is to expand students’ knowledge and understanding of course content. These services are provided by qualified tutors from either STOU or other universities and agencies (STOU, 2004). At UT, F2F provisions have been integrated into its learning support services along with self-managed learning and online learning services (UT, 2010). The roles and responsibilities of tutors and other issues relating to teaching learning provisions have been highlighted in their quality manuals to ensure the quality of tutorial services. Tutors at STOU and UT must be involved in continuous quality improvement by looking out for innovative instructional strategies to enhance their tutorial practices, not only in performing F2F tutorials but also in moderating online discussion forums.

The current advancement of educational technology has also enhanced the quality of real communication among teaching learning participants. The use of e-mail, telephone, video conferences, and Webinars has become common practices that support Holmberg’s (2011) current works—teaching-learning conversations. The advancement and use of computer-mediated communication has gradually revolutionized the new practice of distance education in these two universities. The availability of online learning platforms at STOU and UT seemed very important in supporting students’ learning. Online learning has empowered distance students to interact with tutors and other students in more flexible ways (Magano & Carvalho, 2010). At STOU, for example, online learning services have been delivered for graduate programs (STOU-04). The use of online learning allowed the

students to update teaching content from tutors and online discussion that fit with their own schedules.

At STOU, web boards have been operated to promote students' learning and support tutor–learner interaction (STOU, 2004). The employment of online learning services has strengthened student engagement and improved student experience in the instructional process (STOU-04). The use of online learning provisions allowed faculty to invite student engagement in the instructional process, such as through a discussion forum. Since STOU served students residing throughout the country, it seemed important to promote student engagement to address their interests, thinking, and contributions to the teaching learning process.

UT also shared a long experience, similar to that of STOU, in involving online learning for promoting students' learning. UT-Online was launched in 2002 (UT-03), based on the assumption that this service could significantly extend students' access to UT's services. Currently, fully online programs have also been offered in response to market demands (UT, 2010). According to UT (2010), the university's innovation in the use of the Internet for instructional purposes could be seen as a pioneering initiative in the Indonesian higher education landscape. UT has implemented and continually improved its online learning services in line with an increasing trend of using these services by UT students and the availability of access points in students' local areas throughout the country (UT, 2010).

The implementation of online learning exemplified by STOU and UT has potential to bring learning opportunities to a larger number of students that meets the needs for mass higher education. Online learning services at these universities have offered significant contributions to expanding access, enabling universities to teach far more students than they would otherwise be able to do, to teach more students living at a distance from the campus (Holmberg, 1995). Indonesia, the country with a very large population was a good example in this matter. UT, which has been equipped with various learning support services, has the advantage of enrolling a large number of students.

From the results discussed in the outset, this study affirms that the implementation of blended learning pedagogies in DTUs resonates with the major theory in distance education, interaction and communication theory (Holmberg, 1995), autonomy and independence theory (Moore, 1994), and community of inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The findings of this research may confirm the two selected universities employed printed learning materials for supporting students' independent and autonomous study (Moore, 1994). These universities developed different programs to support the interaction and communication ( Holmberg, 1995) and currently the universities also heavily involved in developing online learning deliveries that addressed social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Although this research is very limited and interpretative paradigm in nature, it is hoped the findings provide some understandings on how the existing theories in distance education may be used for analytical lens and point out the practice of QA program in DTUs. These findings, in some ways, confirm that there is a mutual relationship between theory and practice of distance education; they inform each other.

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