VOICING ON VIRTUAL AND FACE TO FACE DISCUSSION

Dr. Hamidah Yamat
Head of Post Graduate Studies, Faculty of Education, UKM
hya_nasir@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT
This paper presents and discusses findings of a study conducted on pre-service teachers' experiences in virtual and face to face discussions. Technology has brought learning nowadays beyond the classroom context or time zone. The learning context and process no longer rely solely on face to face communications in the presence of a teacher. This study was conducted to understand 30 pre-service teachers' experience in using face-to-face (FTF) and virtual discussion. Data was gathered through observations and reflective journals. The finding showed that FTF discussion is still relevant and suitable to be used in the classroom and act as a complement to virtual discussions.

INTRODUCTION
Communication has evolved with technology as people no longer communicate via face-to face (FTF) only but communication can also take place between 2 people millions of miles away from each other. Similarly, ideas, thoughts, information and issues may be shared and discussed without having physical proximity; i.e. virtual communication or discussion. This is because technology has become indispensable in life and prevalent to all fields including education. Recent years have witnessed the use of technology in the classroom through Information Communication Technology (ICT). ICT has changed the way we communicate. Applications such as SKYPE, Window Messenger, Web-Conference, and social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace have made communications easier and faster.

No doubt technology has changed the way people communicate. Studies on virtual discussions documented greater benefits particularly in motivating learners and teachers to interact anytime and anywhere. Unfortunately, there are missing elements in virtual communication which can be found in face-to-face communication. The presence of verbal cues such as gesture, eye contact ensures the efficiency and interactivity of communication or discussion. There has been plethora of research studies attempting to address the differences between in-class face to face discussion and off-class online discussion. However, very few studies have ventured into students' experience to gather insights on the use of FTF and virtual discussion modes. Hence, the purpose of this study is to gather students' perspectives on how they experienced FTF and virtual discussions.

FACE TO FACE (FTF) AND VIRTUAL DISCUSSIONS
One significant aspect in learning is discussion between learners and instructors. Most advocates (e.g. Mayo, 2004; Smith, 2005; Hung, Tan & Cheng, 2005) argue that discussion between both learners and instructors would be a determining factor that either accelerates or impedes the whole learning process. Previously, discussions in the classroom took place in synchronous or face to face context, as it only involves a teacher-students interaction in the classroom. Both must be presented simultaneously at one place in the classroom and within a prescribed time. However, the current trend of communication and discussions is now an asynchronous computer-mediated (CMC) in nature. Due to the rapid growth of technology, the discussion between teacher and students and peers to peers has shifted tremendously which can be accessed at anytime and anywhere outside of the normal class environment and hours.

Prior researches suggest that virtual and FTF discussions have different strengths and weaknesses. Several studies have found that students who were involved in virtual discussions thread were more thoughtful in comparison to students involved in FTF discussion settings as they have ample time to read, think and reflect on their responses; hence the discussions are more explicit, substantive and reasoned (Jonassen & Kwon, 2001; Kim et al., 2007). The complexity of ideas can be found via virtual discussion; perhaps due to the luxury of time to prepare and to put forward their ideas as the discussion can be done at anytime and anywhere (Sotillo, 2000). It is therefore not surprising to see that virtual discussions cited more literature than FTF which relied much on own experiences (Card and Horton, 2000). Moreover, the anonymity of one personality in virtual communication makes them less inhibited to put forward their ideas and become more confident (Warschauer, 1995). It also allows more or all students, instead of only a few or several students in FTF discussion, to respond to the topic. Thus, virtual discussions have the potential to improve peers relationship as they have time to collaborate with each other (Powers and Mitchell, 1997).

Virtual discussions also offer great flexibility to those distance learners who may not have opportunity to meet

or to interact with their learning counterparts (King, 2001). Studies by Mara, Moore & Klimczack, (2004) argued that virtual discussions promote students' critical thinking, knowledge construction and learning autonomy. Not only that, they are also reported to be more active and contribute more in virtual discussion than in FTF discussion (Cress, Kimmerle & Hesse, 2009). Virtual discussion also can be printed out and reviewed later by the students. Students can evaluate and reflect their own strength and weakness as a way to improve themselves (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2011).

Despite the arguments above, virtual discussions also have some drawbacks, particularly the absence of non-verbal cues. Non-verbal cues are specifically significant in discussions as they present feelings and messages that cannot be conveyed literally. Visual cues such as eye contact, body language, volume, facial expression etc cannot be represented using emoticons. They are not equivalent to human gestures let alone to emulate the richness of human expressions. Virtual discussion which is merely on text is unable to convey the tone of the conversation (Tiene, 2000), and this may lead to vague ideas or responses. It requires more extra effort to put into texts or words or whatever they have in mind (De Bruyn, 2004; and Ferdig & Roehler, 2003). Furthermore, virtual discussions rely heavily on the linguistic aspect, so it contained more complicated sentences than those in FTF discussions. Consequently, it is even harder to reach a consensus in virtual discussions as students are given the advantage of time and space to think, reflect and respond. In addition, not all students have the convenience of using computer out of school computer access. They might not have the access as the area may be too remote for broadband connection or wireless spot.

In FTF discussions, teacher is physically present so that he or she will be able to monitor, motivate and to provide assistance whenever needed by the students. Students may not lose their focus and interest to participate in the discussion. In fact, some studies have reported that students in FTF discussions displayed higher satisfaction and motivation (Blau & Barak, 2009).

THE STUDY
The design of this study is qualitative in nature as it aimed to gather insights on students' experiences in FTF and virtual discussions. Hence; it involved a combination of teacher's observational notes and journal reflections. For this study, the participants were 32 pre-service teachers who were divided into two groups. One group was engaged in FTF discussions, while the other group participated in an in-class discussion using virtual discussions. The students were randomly grouped into four discussion groups consisting of six members each. For each group, a leader was selected and allowed to choose on how to conduct the discussion session, via virtual or FTF discussion.

As previously mentioned, there were two instruments for data collection method; observational notes and students' reflective journals. Students' behaviour and attitude shown in virtual and FTF discussions were observed and written as fieldnotes. Students were then required to write their experience at the end of the course. This was to know their perceptions and preference in regards to effective discussions in the classroom. These data were then coded and related themes were extracted.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
It was observed that the students in the FTF discussions were more noisy, lively and interactive as they tried to participate and share opinion in an attempt to reach a consensus. In contrast, in the virtual discussion, the students were very quiet as they were concentrating in front of the computers. In one of the tutorial sessions, a student failed to follow the instruction from teacher as he went to a wrong online discussion group and unfortunately it could only be detected at the later part of the discussion as it took longer time to be detected by the teacher.

The discussions in the FTF tutorials were observed and monitored by the teacher. Hence, less misinterpretations occurred as students were observed being able to ask and to clarify things. The discussions usually ended in the prescribed time as they knew that they had been observed by the teacher. In contrast, for virtual discussions, the students were observed taking longer time to complete their tasks and asking for extra time; thus resulted in a five minutes delay every time.

In terms of group leaders' involvement, the leaders in the FTF discussions were observed to be actively assisting their fellow members and became moderators and mediators between their group members and the teacher. This was missing in virtual discussions. The leaders in virtual discussions were observed to play a more relaxed role and were sometimes observed not involved in the discussions even from the beginning of the session.

Meanwhile, 17 key-themes were identified from the constant comparative analysis of the reflective journals

identified. In FTF discussions, the advantages denoted in these sub-themes were: *emotion, energy, fluidity, eases of exchanges, ability to read nonverbal sign and immediate feedback*. In their reflective journals, students mentioned that *FTF ensure prompt feedback* and whatever comments and points received from members cited as *memorable*. Students felt *confidence to defend [their] own stance* and *change perspectives based from the feedback received even by looking at frowned face*. On the other hand, for virtual discussions, the sub-themes were *ability to take the time to respond and reflect, provide more information* and *deeper analysis* and *opportunity to quieter students to participate*.

There were top five identified themes related to this study; *atmosphere, responses, efficiency, interactivity* and *communication*. Only atmosphere scored a positive value towards virtual discussion and the rest to FTF discussions.

4.1 Atmosphere
This theme revolves around authenticity, comfort, aggression, equal access and dominance. In virtual discussions the atmosphere was less aggressive, offered equal opportunities to all members to voice out opinion and more comfortable. Thus, online discussion is more appropriate to group members who are shy and introvert. This in parallel with study by Belcher (1999) that mentioned virtual discussions would most likely benefit students who are shy, introvert and reticent.

4.2 Responses
The finding has shown that FTF discussions guarantee prompt reply than in virtual discussions. Students prefer to receive immediate feedback, response or comments for them to react or act upon. Virtual discussions might frustrate students who in need of instant response as the ability to post simultaneous response by group members could not be assured due to differences in ability to project ideas and also the typing ability.

4.3 Efficiency
One of the strength of FTF discussions and confirmed by numerous studies is its efficiency. In certain tasks or activities in the classroom which require prompt decision by all group members, FTF discussion is the best option. This finding is parallel to other studies found in Meyer (2003) and Jonassen and Kwon (2001). Those studies have highlighted that virtual discussions needed more time in reaching consensus in certain matter instantly as group members spend more time to articulate ideas and writing in words.

4.4 Interactivity
The other focal point of FTF discussions as highlighted by this study is the element of interactivity. Few might have the notions that discussion via virtual involves more interaction as shown by popular trend of Facebook and Twitter. Nevertheless, participants in this study regarded FTF discussions was more multidirectional. The discussion process was more dynamic and interactive in the situation whenever one of the group members expressed his or her ideas; the others promptly made complementary remarks, comments or clarification. This unfortunately could not be found much in virtual discussions, the discussions tend to be restricted and tended to be one way. This argument is consistent with a study by Card and Horton (2000) who claimed that technologies do not necessarily promote two ways interaction.

4.5 Communication
Communication in FTF discussions is much easier to comprehend and natural as compared to virtual discussions. It is easier in the sense that FTF interactions usually supported by non-verbal cues such as tone, gesture, facial expression, body language, eye contact and many more. Thus, the explanation, ideas and discussion could be put forward naturally without much concern in paying attention to grammar or sentence structure. Thus, non-verbal cues would help each group members to comprehend the message vividly. Although in virtual discussions, a member might use emoticon to represent how they feel in saying certain things, it was not enough to make discussion clearer and natural.

CONCLUSIONS
The findings from this study show that FTF discussion is significant and relevant in learning process though numerous literatures are in support of virtual discussion. This means that FTF should not be disregarded in learning and to claim one superior than another is inappropriate. Each discussion mode has its weakness(es) and strength(s) and a combination of those two can be seen as complementing each other. In certain subjects which require short span of discussion, FTF may be more suitable but if certain topics need to be divulged more with evidence and research, perhaps virtual discussion is appropriate. Some students in this study had voiced out the necessity to blend FTF and virtual discussions. This can be found in Tiene's (2000) study that undergraduate

students reported they did not want FTF discussions format to be replaced by virtual discussions and demanded for a blended approach.

Hence, it is significant to teacher to remember that FTF discussion is not an obsolete approach despite the growing popularity of virtual tools such as messenger or Facebook chats and must not regard virtual as the only best format for learning process. It could be considered as a feasible alternative to other form of classroom communication (Asterhan & Eisenmann, 2011).

Discussions are the heart of learning process either it is conducted FTF or virtually. Both modes have with them advantages and disadvantages. Based from this study, we can conclude that FTF is still relevant and suitable to be used as classroom mode of discussions and complementing on what can be offered by virtual discussions.

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