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**“Stickability” in Online Autonomous Literature Learning Programmes: Strategies For Sustaining Learner Interest And Motivation**

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Abstract

The Malaysian education system, because of its strong orientation towards national based assessment, has generally produced students who are unable to operate autonomously. The culture and tradition of Malaysians too has not encouraged independence and autonomy among students. When these students enter the university, they expect the spoon-feeding they have been used to, to take place. However, courses at the university require students to be more proactive, and to rely less on their instructors. The introduction of e-learning in many universities significantly contrasts with the traditional type of teaching students are so used to, hence exposing areas of limitation in students ability to participate and produce within the learning context. This paper views e-learning, and the enormous opportunities it presents as a boon to higher education, especially in the development of the learners' creative and critical abilities. The paper presents a basic profile of Malaysian literature undergraduates as a background to discussion of problems and challenges of teaching literature to Malaysian students. It also describes some online autonomous learning strategies developed as part of a national research project, used in the teaching of literature and the results related to developing student “stickability” to the courseware and its activities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The use of online autonomous learning programmes has often been associated with proficiency-type courses. In Malaysia the teaching of content courses using the online mode is in its infancy. Traditionally, the education system in Malaysia has not provided much room for learner autonomy. The culture and tradition of the people too has not encouraged independence and autonomy among students. As such students are overly teacher dependent and have to be spoon-fed with information. Even though attempts have been made by the Ministry of Education over the years to wean students away from total teacher dependence and towards greater self-reliance and peer dependence it has not been very fruitful. As a result even at tertiary level students have not acquired autonomy and independence, as revealed by Thang (2004).

The above situation becomes doubly difficult in the context of teaching literature. The heyday for literature in English as an academic subject within the Malaysian education system was during British rule of Malaya and the post-independence period, when English remained the medium of instruction. The change in the medium of instruction to Malay in the 1970s also meant a change in the overall objective of education in the country, to one directed at nation building. Within this new paradigm there was little emphasis on the teaching of literature in English. Literature only remained available to students, as an elective subject in forms four, five and six.

In the early nineties the Ministry of Education reintroduced literature in English to all secondary students through the Class Reader programme. The books in this programme consisted mainly of abridged texts that were directed at encouraging and instilling reading habits among students, apart from exposing them to culture and values from around the world.

In the year 2000, the Ministry of Education took a bold step by introducing a tested literature-in-English component to the English language syllabus for secondary schools. This means that all Malaysian students at the secondary level have to study and sit for examinations that evaluate their understanding and appreciation of literary texts. This is a bold step because a majority of the students and teachers in Malaysian secondary schools have little previous exposure to literature and literature teaching methodology because of the long absence of literature in English in the Malaysian English language syllabus (Ganakumaran, 2003). The overall limited presence of the subject in mainstream education, together with the declining standards in English language has created a kind of fear or phobia for the subject. Malaysian students generally show no interest in the subject, either because of a lack of exposure or lack of confidence in their linguistic as well as their critical and creative abilities. However in institutions of higher education, students who opt to do degrees in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) and English language Studies are compelled to offer literature courses. Furthermore as

these institutions begin to move towards technology-based education through fully or partially online courses, students’ become doubly challenged as they also lose human support in the teaching-learning context. This situation creates additional apprehension

The concept of student autonomy has been debated for a long time. Benson highlights the problematics of defining autonomy:

*Researchers on autonomy were aware that in order to develop autonomy, learners needed to be free from the direction and control of others. At the same time, they were well aware that learners who chose, or were forced by circumstances, to study languages in isolation from teachers and other learners, would not necessarily develop autonomy.*  
(Benson, 2001; 11)

In other words, the students would need to have self-motivation and interest in learning via autonomous means before they would be receptive to learning.

There may be many reasons for the widespread apprehension and resistance towards online autonomous study. Research (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2002; Appel & Gilabert 2002; Thang, 2005a & b) has identified amongst others the following reasons:

### **Fundamental Skill And Psycho-Social Deficiencies**

Many Malaysian students lack basic computer (PC) and typing skills. Good typing skills and some technical knowledge will help learners participate effectively in online interactive programmes. Many learners also find it difficult and lonely working by themselves on tasks and educational objectives delivered through computer screens. They find the challenge of fending for themselves and being responsible for their own learning, without a readily available teacher, daunting. Therefore learner training on the goals and expectations of online programmes is vital to ensure that socialization problems do not occur.

### **Participation Challenge**

Most online programmes are designed targeting total learner autonomy. This means that students can and may work alone and at their own pace. One challenge that this model poses is that it often totally contradicts conventional classroom teaching methodologies which encourage social learning approaches through cooperative and collaborative learning. Students, who have over the years become accustomed to such learning

environments, find it challenging to adapt to online programme expectations, implementation and goals. Furthermore, the conventional online autonomous learning programme is also in conflict with learning styles and intelligences that are interpersonal.

### **Motivation Deficiencies**

It is not surprising that the greatest challenge to online autonomous learning is not so much the technology or the subject matter but learner motivation for sustained participation in online learning. Harasim (1995) believes that the most important characteristic for students' success in this mode of learning is motivation. The reasons for the lack of motivation have already been discussed in the sections above and are related to lack of competencies, literacies and conflicts with personal learning styles and intelligences.

### **Responses To Learning And Feedback Deficiencies**

Giving immediate feedback and responses to learner tasks and contributions has always been strongly advocated in conventional classroom teaching. This enables learners to be corrected or to self-correct and progress smoothly along the learning continuum. Online learning programmes which propagate independence from traditional boundaries of teaching-learning time and space may be unable to meet learners' needs for immediate responses or feedback to their work. Delayed feedback often leads to frustration and loss of motivation.

The push for e-learning in universities significantly contrasts with the traditional types of teaching students are so used to, hence exposing areas of limitations in students' ability to participate and produce within the learning context. This paper advocates e-learning, and the enormous opportunities it presents to higher education, especially in the development of the learners' creative and critical abilities. The paper presents a basic profile of Malaysian literature undergraduates as a background to discussions on problems and challenges of teaching literature to Malaysian students. It also describes a series of online autonomous learning strategies developed as part of a national research project used in the teaching of literature and how the strategies are conceptualized to ensure sustained learner motivation and learner participation in the online programme.

The study of learner motivation and participation was undertaken with the understanding that in reality, there are many features that influence and overlap each other in rendering a complete picture of the human motivational process. An accurate suggestion of this is

rendered by Marion Williams & Bob Burden (1997 cited in Dornyei, 2001) as depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors Of Motivation

Internal Factors	External Factors
<p>Intrinsic interest of activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Arousal of curiosity</i></li> <li>• <i>Optimal degree of challenge</i></li> </ul> <p>Perceived value if activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Personal relevance</i></li> <li>• <i>Anticipated value of outcomes</i></li> <li>• <i>Intrinsic value attributed to the activity</i></li> </ul> <p>Sense of agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Locus of causality</i></li> <li>• <i>Locus of control re: process &amp; outcomes</i></li> <li>• <i>Ability to set appropriate goals</i></li> </ul> <p>Mastery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Feelings of competence</i></li> <li>• <i>Awareness of developing skills &amp; mastery in a chosen area</i></li> <li>• <i>Self-efficacy</i></li> </ul> <p>Self- concept</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Realistic awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses in skills required</i></li> <li>• <i>Personal definitions &amp; judgements of success and failure</i></li> <li>• <i>Self-worth concern</i></li> <li>• <i>Learned helplessness</i></li> </ul> <p>Attitudes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>To language learning in general</i></li> <li>• <i>To the target language</i></li> <li>• <i>To the target language community &amp; culture</i></li> </ul> <p>Other affective states</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Confidence</i></li> <li>• <i>Anxiety, fear</i></li> </ul> <p>Developmental age and stage</p> <p>Gender</p>	<p>Significant Others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Parents</i></li> <li>• <i>Teachers</i></li> <li>• <i>Peers</i></li> </ul> <p>The nature of interaction with significant others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mediated learning experiences</i></li> <li>• <i>The nature and amount of feedback</i></li> <li>• <i>Rewards</i></li> <li>• <i>The nature and amount of appropriate praise</i></li> <li>• <i>Punishments, sanctions</i></li> </ul> <p>The Learning Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Comfort</i></li> <li>• <i>Resources</i></li> <li>• <i>Time of day, week, year</i></li> <li>• <i>Size of class and school</i></li> <li>• <i>Class and school ethos</i></li> </ul> <p>The broader context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Wider family networks</i></li> <li>• <i>The local education system</i></li> <li>• <i>Conflicting interests</i></li> <li>• <i>Cultural norms</i></li> </ul> <p>Societal expectations and attitudes</p>

The table gives a simple breakdown of elements that influence human motivation for learning. Williams and Burden have divided these factors into two separate columns to identify factors that are internal in nature and difficult to quantify scientifically as internal factors; and those factors that can be physically seen or measured outside the individual psyche as external factors. These two broad classifications also translate into the earlier explained intrinsic and extrinsic value that motivates learning.

## **PROFILE OF THE LITERATURE LEARNER**

In order to prepare online material that would be most effective and attractive to a wide range of students, a detailed profile of the kind of students subscribing to the course was constructed. The profiling included the social, educational and economic background of the students, their learning habits, learning styles preferences and so on. The profiling of the literature student for this research was done with the aid of a questionnaire consisting of 82 items, adapted from the Munby model (1978).

The data collected through the questionnaire was analyzed using the SPSS software and provided a wide range of information. For the purpose of this paper only selected information is used to profile the literature student. In attempting to categorize the students according to learning styles, the data revealed that the respondents were equally distributed into the different learning styles such as inductive, reflective, intuitive, deductive, electronic, and autonomous. This could be due to the fact that literature students appropriate different learning styles for different purposes and normally do not subscribe to one or two particular learning styles only. Informal interviews with some of the respondents confirmed this for a fact.

The issue of learner profile is highlighted in this paper only to exemplify its importance and use in the construction of online strategies that are learner-centered. This is crucial to ascertain that the programme and its mechanism will engage learner interest and motivation in a sustained manner.

The data that follows is derived from the research findings presented at a national colloquium and published in the Proceedings of the colloquium “Autonomous Learning in Language and Literature via Technology: Pathways and Challenges (2004), and also published in the proceedings of ISEL 2003 in a paper entitled *Going e: Literature students’ preparedness to embrace technology* by Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Ganakumaran Subramaniam and Fiona Lalitha Sadagopan.

## **Race**

The study was also designed to investigate whether there were any particular patterns in terms of race in categorizing the students according to learning styles. The results were:

### ***Malay Undergraduates***

- The analysis showed that a significant number of Malay students are inductive, reflective and intuitive learners. There were no significant numbers of deductive learners among Malay students.
- Malay students also showed a significant preference for classroom learning.
- However this is contrasted with findings that suggest a significant number also prefer autonomous learning. An explanation for this may be that in practice Malay students are comfortable and confident in the traditional classroom but they realize the importance of independence and autonomy in all aspects of life as envisaged by the community leaders.
- All Malay respondents showed a significant correlation with learning styles, electronic learning, teacher-centered learning, classroom learning, autonomous learning and individual learning.

### ***Chinese Undergraduates***

- The analysis showed that Chinese learners cut across all four learning style groupings.
- Chinese learners showed a significant preference for teacher-centered learning, classroom learning and individualized learning. This again could be attributed to their culture and social values which stress communal strength and working in groups. However, as students at tertiary level they are also aware of the importance of being independent and self-directed.
- It is also interesting to note that Chinese deductive learners showed the greatest correlation with autonomous and individualized learning, whereas Chinese inductive learners showed a correlation with classroom learning. This finding correlates with literature that suggests that inductive learners prefer and need more formal theoretical and conceptual input for learning to take place. In contrast, deductive learners are more comfortable in informal and self-directed learning situations.

### ***Indian Undergraduates***

- The analysis showed significant numbers of Indian students as being inductive, reflective and intuitive learners. There was no significant number for deductive learning for Indian students.

- Indian students generally showed a greater correlation with learning styles and teacher centered learning, classroom learning, autonomous learning and individualized learning.
- Indian reflective learners showed no significant correlation with any of the variables.
- Indians showed a greater tendency towards reflective learning in comparison to Chinese learners. This finding suggests that Indian undergraduates require a longer time on task for effective learning to take place through reflection and conceptualization. Hence, the online programme would work ideally with such students provided they are systematic and disciplined in working through the programme.

### ***Bumiputra (Aboriginal) Undergraduates***

- The analysis showed significant numbers of Bumiputra (Bumiputra students are the members of native ethnic groups of Malaysia) students are inductive, deductive and intuitive learners. There was no significant evidence of reflective learning for Bumiputra students
- Bumiputra learners showed a significant correlation with learning styles and teacher-centered learning as well as autonomous learning
- Bumiputra students also showed a greater inclination towards electronic learning compared to Indian students. This surprising finding has been linked, through interviews, to the Bumiputra belief that they need to work extra hard to succeed in a challenging environment. Many Bumiputra students in universities have also had the opportunity to spend their secondary education years in boarding schools or matriculation centers.

### **Gender**

#### ***Male***

- The data showed male students are significantly distributed across inductive, reflective and intuitive learning style groupings.
- Male students showed a greater correlation with reflective learning styles.
- They also showed a significant preference for classroom learning, autonomous learning and individualized learning.



**Female:**

- Female learners showed a significant distribution across all four learning styles.
- They also showed a significant correlation with learning styles and electronic learning, teacher centered learning, classroom learning, autonomous learning and individualized learning.
- Female students showed a greater correlation with intuitive learning.

**General Conclusions:**

- Both genders showed a greater significant preference for teacher centered learning compared to electronic learning and classroom learning.
- This generally suggests that Malaysian learners prefer linear, systematic and progressively organized and developed learning programmes.

**Computer Usage among Malaysian Undergraduates**

- The general pattern of computer usage among all learners was between 5-9 hours per week. This is due to the fact that most students still rely very heavily on the faculty’s computer labs to do most of their work. They also find that it is extremely expensive to use the cybercafés at their halls of residence. As for those who have their own computers, they are unable to connect to the internet as there are no Local Area Network or Wireless Network facilities in their rooms.
- Only 17% of the total population spent more than 20 hours per week in front of the computer and these are students who travel from home or those staying outside campus.
- A significant number of students (more than 30%) spent less than 5 hrs a week working with computers. These are students who either are not computer savvy or cannot afford the high cost of cybercafés.

Based on the above learner profile and their associated needs, the research team of Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Ganakumaran.Subramnaim., and Nackeeran Sivapunniam, funded by an Intensified Research in Priority Area grant, embarked on a project to develop an online programme for undergraduate Bachelor of Arts in English Language Studies (B.A.ELS) students at the National University of Malaysia. The focus of this paper will be the findings from the online Literature programme for the B.A ELS students. This online programme demands that the students register for the *Learning Care Platform* to have access to the online notes, resources and exercises. The purpose of this programme is to provide further information, resources and assistance to help students have a better understanding of the literary texts and theories. The programme is also designed to

develop students’ autonomy, awareness and motivation in analyzing various literary genres. This online programme works in tandem with normal face-to-face classroom teaching.

### Creating Stickability: Sustaining Learner Interest And Participation

This research project explored several ways to sustain learner interest and participation in the literature online programme. The risk that learners would remain in the comfort zones because of the availability of face-to-face teaching was a fear. Hence the online programme was designed with continuity of learning experiences in mind, which would lead learners through controlled participation to totally free engagement in the Learning Care Platform.

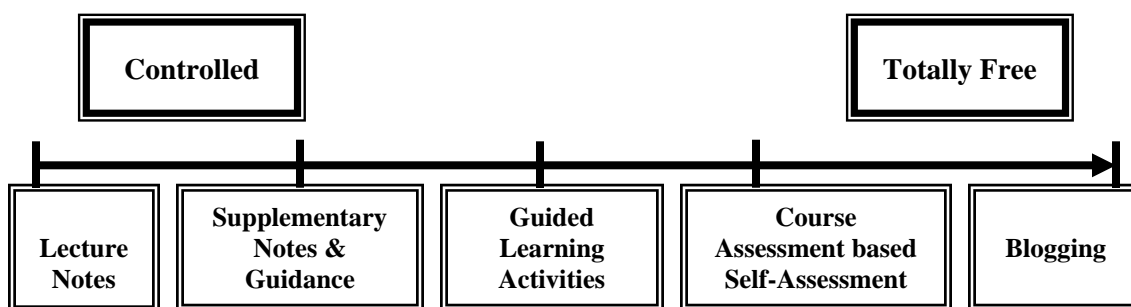


Figure 1: Learning Care Platform

As presented in the above diagram the literature online programme is tailored in such a way that at initial stages learners have little option but to engage with the Learning Care Platform. This situation is created in the following manner:

#### Lecture Notes

In the early weeks of the course (weeks 1-5) learners are introduced to topics through face-to-face lectures following which lecture notes are placed in the Learning Care Platform. Consequently, learners are asked to log on and download the notes they require. Malaysian students having been totally reliant on notes and hand-outs from their teachers never fail to do the expected. As the weeks progress, certain topics are not covered through face-to-face teaching but notes related to the topics are however placed on the

platform. Learners are required to read these notes before participating in small group tutorials with the course instructor.

### **Supplementary Guidance and Notes**

Apart from lecture notes the platform also contains supplementary material that may be used by learners to better understand the literary text, elements, theories or issues featured in the course. Though it is not compulsory or necessary for students to access and use these notes, a majority of the students do, for the simple reason that they do not want to lose out on valuable information available to other course members.

### **Guided Learning Activities**

This aspect of the Learning Care focuses on helping learners work out and interpret literary texts through a systematic series of progressively designed learning activities. The focus of these activities is learning and helping learners develop literary skills and competencies necessary to succeed in the course. It is noted that many students prefer to attempt these learning activities rather than be reliant on coursemates or instructors who work to time. It is only in instances when these activities fail to help that they venture to seek the instructors’ assistance. Often these activities are designed to prepare learners for course assessments.

### **Course Assessment based Self-Assessment**

This section on self-assessment contains activities that cover the skills and competencies that are addressed in the actual course assessment. Learners are informed of this feature at the beginning of the course. Self-assessment activities are varied and cover all topics offered in the course. Learners never fail to engage in these activities as they understand the value the practice may offer to their eventual performance in course exams. This section works well with Malaysian students who have all along been focused on examination performance and achievement. Students who are not examination oriented tend to visit this section at the last minute in efforts to prepare for exams.

### **Blogging**

Blogging or chatting with a specific purpose on a fixed topic is another feature of the Learning Care Platform. The definition of blogging varies according to its format. Walker (cited in Wong, 2005) defines a web log as something that may be charted on a

continuum from confessional, online diaries to logs tracking specific topics or activities through links and commentary. Hence, along the continuum of the different types of blogs, there are the more “open” blogging community at one end, and the “closed” community at the other. Personal blogs on the Internet are usually open to comments from anyone who has come across the website, while certain sites are limited to members and require one’s username and password to participate in the blogging activity (Wong, 2005). In this research, the blogging activity going on in the Forum section falls within the domain “closed” type blogs, because the blogging community consists of undergraduates subscribing to a particular course. These people are the only ones who are able to access the facilities in the *Learning Care* learning management system.

For the blogging section of the autonomous learning programme, the course instructor normally initiates discussion topics based on pertinent areas/texts in the course. Learners are told that their participation is monitored and may feature in the award of 10% of the course marks set aside for class participation. After an initial period of apprehension and lack of confidence learners begin engaging in the blogging activity. Slowly the activity takes life and many students begin participating enthusiastically. The instructor simply plays the role of a moderator and can participate either as himself or using a pseudonym. Ultimately many students find it a liberating and enriching experience as they are less inhibited by matters related to “face”, language limitations and literary competence.

Complementing all the above techniques and strategies is the platforms capacity for interactivity and multimedia support. Initial interest of most students is drawn towards sophisticated but useful multimedia elements that support their learning.

## **Features of the Learning Care Platform**

### ***The Portal***

This educational portal is managed by the University and it is possible for every faculty and school to make use of it to place their learning material online. The portal enables the managers to control portfolio information, announcements, notes, documents, forums, learning tracks, links, references, news and assignments.

The screenshot shows a web page titled "WEB BASED LITERATURE EXERCISES". On the left, there is a navigation menu with the following options: "MAIN PAGE", "JMATCH (SET 1)", "JMATCH (SET 2)", "JQUIZ (SET 1)", and "JQUIZ (SET 2)". Below the menu, there are instructions for two activities: "JMatch" (Choose the correct sentence and click to match with statement) and "JQuiz" (Type the answers in the box and click the Hint button to check the clue). The main content area contains an "Objective" (To develop a learner training program...), a "Rationale" (Learners are helped to deepen their understanding...), and a link to "Listen to the text (Kehinde)". At the bottom, there is a navigation bar with links for "Main Menu", "JMatch (Set 1)", "JMatch (Set 2)", "JQuiz (Set 1)", and "JQuiz (Set 2)". A banner at the bottom states "This site is optimized for Microsoft Internet Explorer" with the browser logo.

Figure 2: The Learning Care Platform

### ***Task-Based Involvement***

All short and long exercises pertaining to the course are placed online and students are encouraged to do as many exercises as possible to better understand the text. The exercises are automatically corrected by the programme and relevant and guiding feedback is given to help students monitor their own learning process and progress. The programme enables the teacher to keep track of the students' activities on line via the Learning **Track** function.

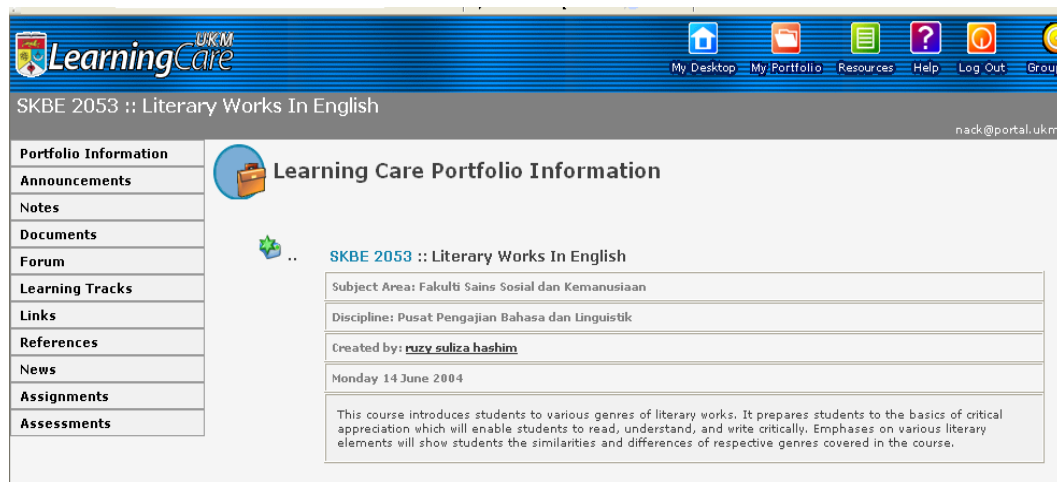


Figure 3: Features of Learning Care Platform

Students are also encouraged to do a self-assessment online to assess their progress from time to time. This assessment is not monitored by the course coordinator to encourage students to be independent and realistic.

As mentioned earlier, the programme enables the course coordinator to keep track of some of the online activities which include the logging time and duration of students' access. Tracking the logging hours enables the teacher to monitor the frequency and length of the online activities of the students.

### ***Blogging***

One of the most useful and much participated-in online activities is the web forum. Here students are encouraged to participate frequently in discussions pertaining to the prescribed texts. The forum carries new topics frequently and each topic has received between 30-50 responses from the students and the number is gradually increasing. Involvement in the web forum carries 10% of the total grade.

Blogging or chatting with a specific purpose on a fixed topic is a new phenomenon. This is a spin-off of the forum and seems to be getting ever more popular among students. If blogging is carefully manipulated, it can contribute very positively towards the learning process as learner inhibition is greatly reduced.

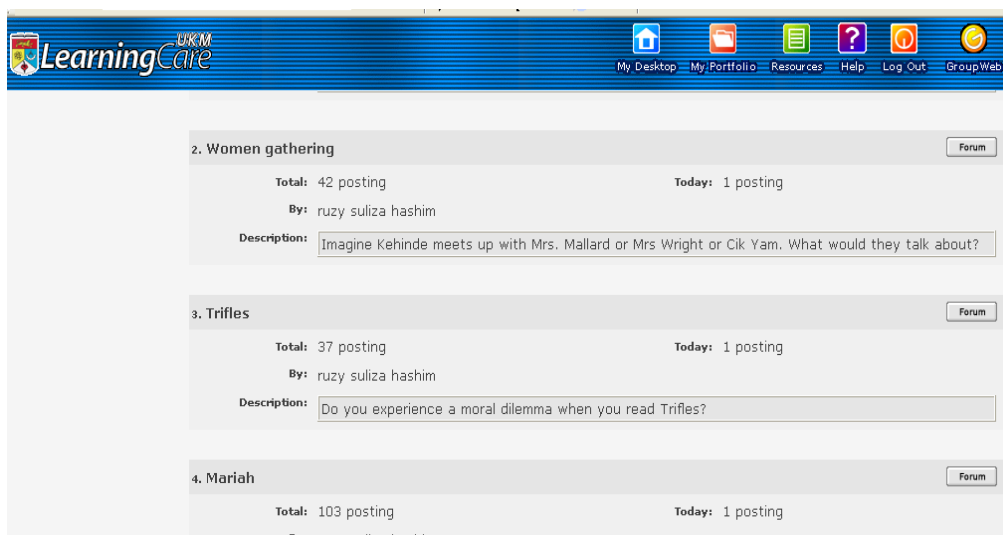


Figure 4: Blogging

## Conclusion

This research has shown that the success of most online courses lies in their ability to sustain learner interest and motivation through various means designed to reach learners intrinsically and extrinsically. Plants (1995) states that “stickability” is driven by commitment rather than compliance. Reliance on compliance may to a certain extent diminish the value of the stickability structures presented in this paper. However it may be worth remembering that change is often marked by resistance and challenge. Hence planned change offers constructive and goal-centered avenues to subtly alter motives and actions (Leigh & Walters, 1998; Carnall 2003). Along the lines of this argument this research conducted at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, National University of Malaysia offers some constructs for others to build upon in developing online learning programmes with the strong glue of “stickability”.



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**Note:**

This paper draws its data from an IRPA Research project entitled *Developing Autonomous Learner Programmes in Language and Literature for First Year Undergraduates* (61 07-02-02-0015-EA169) conducted by Ruzy Suliza Hashim, Ganakumaran Subramaniam, Koo Yew Lie, Lee Su Kim, Mohd. Sallehudin Abd. Aziz, Nackeran Sivapunniam and Thang Siew Ming.