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Submission date: 18-Aug-2017 12:35AM (UTC-0700)
Submission ID: 837979637
File name: 442-1112-1-SM.docx (78.53K)
Word count: 4870
Character count: 27742

KINETIK, Vol.1, No.1, Mei 2016, Hal. 103-111
ISSN : 2503-2259,
E-ISSN : 2503-2267

The Use of PythonTutor on Programming Laboratory Session: Student Perspectives

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Abstract

Based on the fact that the impact of educational tools can only be measured accurately through student-centered evaluation, this paper proposes a long-term in-class evaluation for PythonTutor, a Program Visualization tool developed by Guo. Such evaluation involves 53 students from 4 Basic Data Structure classes, which were held in the even semester of 2016/2017 academic year. It is conducted based on questionnaire survey, which is asked to the students after they have used PythonTutor in their half of programming laboratory sessions. In general, there are three findings from this work. Firstly, PythonTutor helps students to complete programming laboratory tasks, specifically for Basic Data Structure material. Secondly, PythonTutor helps students to understand general programming aspects which are execution flow, variable content change, method invocation sequence, object reference, syntax error, and logic error. Finally, based on student perspectives, PythonTutor is a helpful tool which affects the students positively.

Keywords: *Questionnaire Survey, Program Visualization, Educational Tool, Laboratory Session, Programming*

1. Introduction

According to the fact that learning programming is a non-trivial task for students (1–4), especially for the novice ones, numerous educational tools have been developed to simplify such task. These tools aim to help at many levels, starting from algorithm to implementation level. In most occasions, they are developed with visualization as its main concern since such feature is believed to enhance student understanding further. Visualization-centric educational tool which aims algorithm as its target material is frequently referred as Algorithm Visualization (AV) tool (5) whereas such tool which aims programming (i.e. implementation level) as its target is referred as Program Visualization (PV) tool (6).

PythonTutor is a PV tool which is designed as a web-based application with responsive UI (7). It can be accessed from anywhere and can be used on various machines such as personal computer, laptop, tab, or smartphone. In this paper, the use of such tool in data structure laboratory session will be evaluated through a long-term in-class evaluation. In general, there are three objectives aimed in this work which are: 1) evaluating PythonTutor's impact for completing programming laboratory task per data structure material; 2) evaluating PythonTutor's impact for understanding programming aspects during programming laboratory session; and 3) collecting student experiences about the use of PythonTutor in programming laboratory session. The results of these objectives will be collected through questionnaire survey.

The survey was given to 53 students from 4 Basic Data Structure classes, which were held in the even semester of 2016/2017 academic year. To mitigate the bias, before asked to fill up the survey, the students should use PythonTutor on half of the course sessions. They are required to use the tool for completing their programming laboratory task, in particular understanding their own code and error. The findings of this work are expected to provide a brief insight for Information Technology (IT) lecturer who plan to incorporate PythonTutor as their supplementary learning tool. They could exploit the positive impacts of PythonTutor reported in this paper while mitigating the negative ones.

Sitasi : Wicaksono, Galih Wasis; Al-Rizki, Muhammad Andi. Peningkatan Kualitas Evaluasi Mutu Akademik Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang melalui Sistem Informasi Mutu (SIMUTU). KINETIK, [S.l.], v. 1, n. 1, p. 1-8, oct. 2016. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.22219/kinetik.v1i1.3
Makalah dikirim 26 Februari 2016; Revisi 1 Mei 2016; Diterima 1 Juni 2016

2. Related Works

In order to tackle emerging issues regarding to university students, several student-centered researches are developed. Some examples of such researches are source code plagiarism detection (8), alumni tracer (9), student outcome prediction (10), and educational tool development (11). These researches are often referred as student-centered researches since they rely heavily on student data, such as student experience, behavior, and achievement, during their development and/or evaluation. Yet, when compared to other researches, educational tool development is the most student-centered one since its effectiveness can only be measured based on student perspectives and grades.

In IT major, educational tools are often developed to teach non-trivial materials such as algorithm and programming. On the one hand, for teaching algorithm, educational tools are roughly classified into two major categories which are conventional and Algorithm Visualization (AV) tools. Conventional tools refer to educational tools which are developed as a standard GUI application. Complexitor (12,13), which aims to teach algorithm complexity in empirical manner, is an example which falls into this category. Algorithm Visualization (AV) tools, however, refer to educational tools which are focused on visualization as its main components (5). These tools aim to teach how standard algorithms work through descriptive visualization. VisuAlgo (14,15), AP-ASD1 (16), AP-SA (17), and AP-BB (18) are several tools which fall into this category. On the other hand, for teaching programming, most educational tools are focused on visualizing and animating program aspects based on its runtime execution (6). Several examples of such kind of tool are Jeliot 3 (19), JIVE (20), VILLE (21), and PythonTutor (7). Among these mentioned tools, PythonTutor is the only tool which is designed as a web-based application.

PythonTutor is a web-based program visualization tool which is initially focused on visualizing Python programming language (7). However, as the further development of PythonTutor is conducted, several popular programming languages such as Java and C++ are also incorporated. Unlike other program visualization tools, PythonTutor is designed as a web-based application with responsive UI for the sake of accessibility and ease of use. Users can access it from anywhere as long as they are connected with the internet and they can use it on various machines, either on personal computer, laptop, tab, or smartphone.

According to the fact that several educational tools have been evaluated on real programming courses to measure their effectiveness comprehensively (4,11), this paper proposes a long-term in-class evaluation about the use of PythonTutor in programming laboratory session. To the best of our knowledge, there is no related work which discusses such topic. For our case study, we use 4 classes of Basic Data Structure course which were conducted on even semester of 2016/2017 academic year. The students are required to use such tool for completing laboratory task in half of the course sessions (7 of 14 laboratory sessions) and asked to fill up a questionnaire at the end of the course. The questionnaire results are then reported as the results of this paper.

3. Methodology

In general, there are three objectives that will be measured in this paper. These objectives are: 1) evaluating PythonTutor's impact for completing programming laboratory task per data structure material; 2) evaluating PythonTutor's impact for understanding programming aspects during programming laboratory session; and 3) collecting student experiences about the use of PythonTutor in programming laboratory session. These objectives will be achieved by collecting respondent's answers toward questionnaire survey. Our respondents are undergraduate students from 4 Basic Data Structure classes in even semester of 2016/2017 academic year, where most of the students are from the class of 2016. The detail of respondent statistics toward these classes can be seen in Table 1. For each class, its total number of respondents is lower than its total number of students since some students might give up at the middle of the semester or did not come at the questionnaire session. Despite such issues, in general, the proportion of involved respondents toward class students is still considerably high (85.483%).

To mitigate questionnaire biases, before the respondents are asked to fill up the questionnaire, they should experience two kinds of programming laboratory session for one semester. One of them is the session that is intervened with PythonTutor whereas the other one is the conventional one (without the use of PythonTutor). Both kinds of session will be

conducted on 4 classes alternately where session distribution detail can be seen on Table 2. In general, PythonTutor's intervention will be applied at odd weeks for class C and D and even weeks for class A and B. We intentionally put the intervened session alternately among classes so that we can gather the impact of PythonTutor for all course materials while providing conventional laboratory session as a baseline for the respondents. Each time a session is intervened with the use of PythonTutor, the respondents will be asked to understand their own code and error through the information provided on PythonTutor. In other words, we encourage the respondents to use PythonTutor as a supplementary aid for completing programming laboratory tasks.

Table 1 Respondent Statistics

Class	Total Number of Students	Total Number of Respondents
A	15	14
B	10	9
C	19	14
D	18	16
Total	62	53

Table 2 The Intervention Schedule of PythonTutor

Week	Class			
	A	B	C	D
1st week: The Introduction of Abstract Data Type (ADT)			✓	✓
2nd week: Simple Interaction between ADTs	✓	✓		
3rd week: Array of ADT			✓	✓
4th week: ADT Array	✓	✓		
5th week: ADT Stack			✓	✓
6th week: ADT Queue	✓	✓		
7th week: Insertion and Deletion of ADT Linked List			✓	✓
8th week: Supplementary Methods of ADT Linked List	✓	✓		
9th week: Interaction between ADT Linked List			✓	✓
10th week: ADT Queue with Linked List as Its Internal Structure	✓	✓		
11th week: ADT Priority Queue			✓	✓
12th week: ADT Double-pointer Linked List	✓	✓		
13th week: ADT Circular Linked List			✓	✓
14th week: Shell and Merge Sort	✓	✓		

At the end of 14th week, all respondents will be asked to fill a questionnaire where its questions reflect our three objectives. It consists of 14 questions which details can be seen on Table 3. For convenient reference at the rest of this paper, each question will be assigned with a unique ID. Generally speaking, the questions are classified into three categories regarding to its objective. Q1-Q7 refer to the first objective; Q8-Q13 refer to the second objective; and Q14 refers to the last one. It is important to note that the intervened sessions referred by Q1-Q7 rely heavily on student class. For example, the 1st intervened session of class A and B is the 2nd course week which discusses about simple interaction between ADTs. It is different with the 1st intervened session of class C and D, which is the 1st course week that discusses about the introduction of ADT. These differences are the consequences of our proposed session distribution where not all classes are intervened with PythonTutor on similar course material.

Q1-Q7 should be answered in 7-points Likert scale where 1 represents extremely strong disagreement, 2 represents strong disagreement, 3 represents weak disagreement, 4 represents neutral, 5 represents weak agreement, 6 represents strong agreement, and 7 represents extremely strong agreement. Respondent answers of these questions will be used to evaluate which course material is affected the most and the least by PythonTutor. Q8-Q13

 ISSN: 2503-2259; E-ISSN: 2503-2267

should be answered in similar manner with Q1-Q7. They should be answered in 7-points Likert scale. Respondent answers of these question will be used to evaluate which programming aspect is affected the most and the least by PythonTutor. In our case, we incorporate 6 programming aspects which are execution flow, variable content change, method invocation sequence, object reference, syntax error, and logic error. These aspects are involved on questionnaire questions from Q8 to Q13 respectively. Q14 is an open question, which means that it should be answered with several natural language sentences. This question aims to provide compiled student experiences regarding to PythonTutor's usage in programming laboratory session.

Table 3 Survey Questions

ID	Statement
Q1	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 1st intervened session
Q2	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 2rd intervened session
Q3	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 3rd intervened session
Q4	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 4th intervened session
Q5	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 5th intervened session
Q6	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 6th intervened session
Q7	PythonTutor helps student to complete programming laboratory task on the 7th intervened session
Q8	PythonTutor helps student to understand the execution flow of running program
Q9	PythonTutor helps student to understand how variable content changes
Q10	PythonTutor helps student to understand the sequence of method invocation
Q11	PythonTutor helps student to understand the concept of object reference
Q12	PythonTutor helps student to understand syntax error
Q13	PythonTutor helps student to understand logic error
Q14	Please provide one of your own experience about the use of PythonTutor in programming laboratory session.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Result of Evaluating PythonTutor's Impact in Laboratory Session per Course Material

The result of questionnaire survey regarding PythonTutor's impact in laboratory session per data structure material (Q1-Q7) is split into twofold which are the result of the odd weeks (from class C and D) and the result of the even weeks (from class A and B). These results, which are displayed as box-and-whisker plots, can be seen on Figure 1 and Figure 2 respectively. Generally speaking, all intervened sessions yield positive feedbacks since average values for each statement (displayed as an *x* symbol on the plot) are higher than 5 (more than weak agreement). Some boxes from the result of the odd weeks is smaller than the result of the even weeks since the respondents from class C and D tended to share higher agreement level when compared to the respondents from remaining classes.

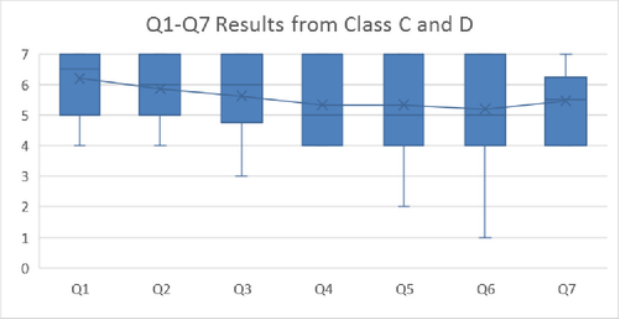

Figure 1 Q1-Q7 Results for Odd Weeks, which were Collected from Class C and D

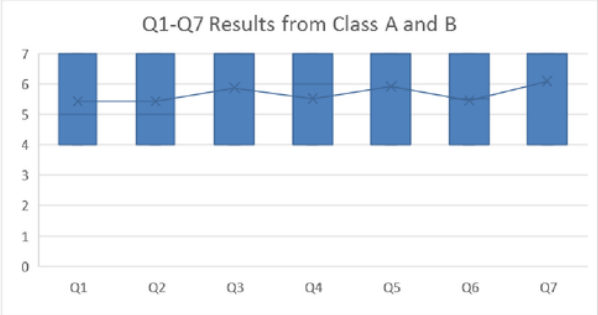

Figure 2 Q1-Q7 Results for Even Weeks, which were Collected from Class A and B

According to Figure 1, for class C and D, the 1st intervened session yields the highest average score whereas the 6th intervened session yields the lowest average one. On the one hand, these respondents agree that PythonTutor helps student the most when completing laboratory task about the introduction of ADT. Such finding is natural since the task given on such session is the simplest one when compared to other tasks. Simple task may enhance respondent's focus toward the information provided on PythonTutor since their focus will not be distracted by task difficulty. There are two reasons why task given on such session is the simplest one: 1) the session was given at the beginning of the course, which means that its task difficulty would be the lowest one. As we know, in most occasions, the materials given on a course would have a non-decreasing difficulty, starting from the lowest one at the beginning of the course; and 2) in our case, the task given on that session was split into several independent smaller sub-tasks. Therefore, it might be easier to complete the given tasks since the scope for each sub-task should be narrower than the task itself due to their problem independence. On the other hand, these respondents agree that PythonTutor helps student the least when completing laboratory task about ADT Priority Queue. Even though its difficulty is quite similar with Circular Linked List on the 7th intervened session, the respondents feel such task is still more difficult since they were asked to write *enqueue* method from ADT Priority Queue. Such method involves three insertion mechanism which might confuse the respondents when completing the task.

Several results from Figure 1 have a long whisker either at the top or the bottom of the box. It means that several respondents had uncommon response. For Q1, Q2, Q3, Q5, and Q6, several respondents provide lower response than the usual one since they prefer conventional laboratory session rather than the intervened one. For Q7, only several respondents put 7 as their responses since, according to our informal in-class observation, they feel that PythonTutor's reference visualization for Circular Linked List is not descriptive enough. PythonTutor put several edges to visualize object references. Yet, such edges become visually complicated when the pointer of Circular Linked List's last element refers to its first element.

According to Figure 2, for class A and B, the 7th intervened session yields the highest average score whereas the 1st and 2nd sessions yields the lowest average one. The 7th intervened session, which material is shell and merge sort, is considered as the most helped session since it was the only task from class intervened sessions which was split into two independent sub-tasks. Splitting the task into smaller independent sub-tasks might generate simpler task, which might help the respondents to focus on the information provided on PythonTutor rather than the task difficulty. The 1st and 2nd intervened sessions, on the contrary, are considered as the least helped sessions since some respondents in class A and B have never used the tool before and they need to adapt themselves with the tool while completing the task. It is quite different with the respondents from class C and D where almost all of them have used the PythonTutor beforehand in Introductory Programming, a predecessor of our evaluated course. As seen in Figure 2, there is no whisker shown either at the top or the bottom of the boxes. Thus, it can be concluded that all respondents from class A and B have a high level of agreement regarding to their responses.

4.2. The Result of Evaluating PythonTutor's Impact in Laboratory Session per Programming Aspect

The result of questionnaire survey regarding to PythonTutor's impact in laboratory session per programming aspect (Q8-Q13) can be seen on Figure 3 as a box-and-whisker plot. Q8-Q13 are designed to evaluate the impact of PythonTutor toward execution flow, variable content change, method invocation sequence, object reference, syntax error, and logic error respectively. In general, all programming aspects are affected positively since average values for each statement (displayed as an *x* symbol on the plot) are higher than 5 (more than weak agreement).

Among evaluated aspects, execution flow (Q8) yields the highest average value based on twofold. On the one hand, such aspect is inseparable to source code. The students cannot create any source code if they do not understand about execution flow. Other aspects such as object reference and method invocation do not generate such significant impact since they are only required on several occasions while creating the source code. The students can still create some codes even though they do not understand these aspects. On the other hand, such aspect is the main concern of PythonTutor as a PV tool. It is natural that programming aspect which included as the main concern is affected the most by the use of that tool.

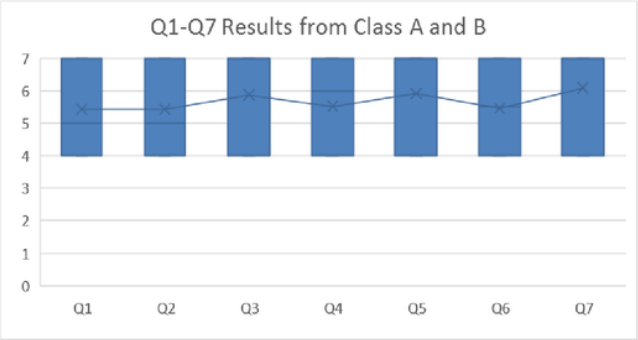

Figure 3 Q8-Q14 Results from Four Classes, A, B, C, and D

Q13, which is focused on evaluating whether PythonTutor helps student to understand logic error, yields the lowest average score among other aspects. Based on our in-class observation, most respondents tend to check such error on standard IDE (i.e. Python IDLE) instead of PythonTutor. At first, they will use PythonTutor to check how their code works. However, if a logic error occurred, they will copy the code to standard IDE and track the error on there. When informally asked about why they do such thing, the respondents answer that the standard IDE is more convenient for them to solve an error. Such behavior is also conducted by the respondents when the syntax error is occurred. That is why Q12, which is focused on

evaluating whether PythonTutor helps student to understand syntax error, also yields a considerably low average score when compared to other statements.

Several results from Figure 3 have a long whisker at the bottom of the box since some respondents think that such tool is not beneficial for helping students to understand some programming aspects. Q11, which is focused on evaluating whether PythonTutor helps student to understand the concept of object reference, is the only statement which has no whisker at the bottom of the box. Thus, it can be stated that all respondents have high level agreement regarding such impact, even though its average value is considerably low when compared to other statements.

4.3. Compiled Student Experiences about PythonTutor Usage in Programming Laboratory Session

Compiled result of questionnaire survey regarding to student experiences about the use of PythonTutor in programming laboratory session (Q14) can be seen on Table 4. These experiences are generalized based on their main effect and displayed in decreasing order of occurrences. For convenient reference at the rest of this paper, each experience is assigned with a unique ID. It is important to note that such experiences are only taken from 48 of 53 respondents since the remaining 5 respondents did not provide detailed experiences. They only stated that such tool had helped them a lot. In addition, since we limit the respondents to write only one experience, it can be assumed that their responses would be the most memorable one for them

Table 4 Compiled Student Experiences

ID	Experience	Occurrences
E1	PythonTutor helps the respondents to find errors	16
E2	Early adaptation to PythonTutor takes a considerable amount of time	12
E3	PythonTutor helps the respondents to know how their code work	8
E4	Slow internet connection discourages the respondents to use PythonTutor	4
E5	Several technical issues are occurred while copying the code to PythonTutor	4
E6	PythonTutor does not help the respondents to solve found errors	2
E7	PythonTutor helps the respondents to sharpen their logical thinking	1
E8	PythonTutor helps the respondents to complete their programming task faster	1

E1 experience, which is felt by 16 respondents, claims that PythonTutor helps the respondents to find errors. The respondents argue that several errors (either syntax or logic) could be found efficiently by visualizing the program through PythonTutor. However, even though such tool helps them to find the errors, they do not state that such tool is also valuable for solving the errors. From other respondent experiences (E6), 2 respondents even explicitly state that such tool does not help them to solve the errors. When discovered further, these respondents feel that standard IDE have more comprehensive features for solving errors rather than PythonTutor. This finding is natural since PythonTutor is not specifically designed to help student for solving errors.

E2 experience, which is felt by 12 respondents, claims that PythonTutor is quite difficult to be used for the first time. The respondents state that they take a considerable amount of time before getting used to it. According to their experiences, PythonTutor's UI is less intuitive for them as the first-time users. However, we believe that this issue could be easily handled by providing proper and comprehensive tutorial session beforehand.

E3 experience, which is felt by 8 respondents, claims that PythonTutor helps the respondents to know how their code works. The respondents state that PythonTutor have several unique features which help them to understand more about their code's running behavior. According to their experiences, among these features, source code line highlight and variable content view are the two most helpful ones. They state that both features are

 ISSN: 2503-2259; E-ISSN: 2503-2267

descriptive enough to show code behavior and they usually focus on these features to understand their code and error.

E4 experience, which is felt by 4 respondents, claims that slow internet connection discourages the respondents to use PythonTutor. Slow connection slows down PythonTutor's processes, particularly in user interaction. As a result, visualizing a program on such condition might take longer time than necessary. Such event is discouraging for most respondents since they should complete the programming task in a limited time. Lagged processes on PythonTutor might cut up their working time drastically. In most occasions, if the internet connection is slow, the respondents do not use the PythonTutor and rely heavily on the standard IDE instead. In fact, this issue could be easily handled either by providing PythonTutor in an offline mode or increasing the bandwidth of given internet connection. We will apply one of these solutions in the future use of PythonTutor.

E5, which is felt by 4 respondents, claims that several technical issues are occurred while copying the code to PythonTutor. Some of the respondents experience the issue regarding changed Python version whereas the others experience the issue regarding importing additional file/library. Similar with E2, we believe that such issues could be handled easily by providing a proper tutorial session.

E6, which is felt by 2 respondents, claims that PythonTutor do not help the respondents to solve found errors. The respondents state that it is hard to track and solve found errors on PythonTutor. In contrast with standard IDE, PythonTutor is not featured with comprehensive features for tracking and solving errors. Thus, it is natural that the respondents would feel that way.

E7, which is felt by 1 respondent, claims that PythonTutor helps the respondent to sharpen his/her logical thinking. He/she believes that such tool has helped him/her a lot, especially for understanding execution logic on the program. E8, on the other hand, which is also felt by only 1 respondent, claims that PythonTutor helps the respondent to complete his/her programming task faster. He/she states that, for his/her case, tasks from intervened sessions were done in shorter time when compared to tasks from conventional sessions.

5. Conclusions and Future Works

This paper presents student perspectives toward the use of PythonTutor for completing data structure programming task in laboratory session. The perspectives are collected from 4 classes of Basic Data Structure course, which were held in even semester of 2016/2017 academic year. To avoid biased result, student perspectives are only collected after the students have tried the tools for a half of the course sessions while experiencing the conventional laboratory session on the other half. According to our respondents, PythonTutor provides positive impacts for completing Basic Data Structure laboratory tasks and understanding general programming aspects (i.e. execution flow, variable content change, method invocation sequence, object reference, syntax error, and logic error). In addition, such tool also provides positive feedbacks when perceived from student experiences in general. Even though some of the experiences are the negative ones, we do believe that such positive impacts outweigh the negative ones and several strategies can be applied to mitigate the negative effects.

For future works, we plan to evaluate the impact of PythonTutor through student's grade. Such results are expected to complement our current work so that we could see the impact from both perspectives: qualitative and quantitative perspective. Moreover, we also plan to develop an upgraded version of PythonTutor, which is focused to mitigate the negative feedbacks that are reported in this work. Hopefully, such tool may help students to learn programming, especially in our university.

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