WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT FEEDBACK: ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN STUDENTS' STUDIES – EXPERIENCES OF IDL STUDENTS; KNUST

Joseph Addinyia Mensah and Collins Kwabena Osei;
Centre for Distance and Continuing Education, Institute of Distance Learning, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.

ABSTRACT

The study was to assess the effectiveness of written assignment feedback on the studies of both postgraduate and undergraduate students of the Institute of Distance Learning, KNUST. Structured questionnaire was administered to 120 and 108 postgraduate and undergraduate students respectively. Random sampling was employed in the selection of respondents. For the undergraduate students, 58.3% indicated that assignments are not marked and returned promptly. On the issue of whether marked assignments come with facilitators' written comments, 66.7% indicated that no such thing occurs. However, despite the fact that there are no written assignment feedbacks, 61.1% ascertained that the feedback serves as incentive to improve learning. With the graduate students, 58.3% indicated that assignments are not marked and returned promptly, while on the issue of marked assignments coming with facilitators' written comments, 65.8% declared that no written comments come with the marked assignments. However, 61.7% ascertained that the feedbacks serve as incentive to improve the learning process. There was however the general view that the facilitators' written comments on marked assignments would also be helpful in their studies.

Keywords: assignment feedback, written comments.

INTRODUCTION

Education, whether it is at a distance or not, depends upon two-way communication. In distance education there is a growing need for, and appreciation of, sustained two-way communication in the process of analyzing and developing knowledge. Meeting the demands of an educational transaction at a distance is dependent upon communication technologies, which provide frequent and regular interaction between teacher and learner, as well as among learners.

In the distance education system learner support services play an instrumental role in making the two-way educational communication possible. According to Keegan (1989), distance education is distinguished from private study and teach-yourself programs due to the provision of learner support services. The main objectives of these support services are to motivate learners, keep them on the right track, encourage them to make use of the facilities provided and above all, facilitate their learning.

The services are manifested through activities such as advice or counseling, tutoring individually and in groups, the learning of study skills, peer group support, feedback concerning assessment and progress, language support, career guidance and administrative problem solving (Tait, 1995). Hui (1989) also defined learner support as the support incorporated within the self-learning materials, the learning system and assignment marking.

Feedback in learners' assignment responses, generally comes in the form of a grade and where time permits, comments along the margin to provide the students with a better idea of the rationale behind acceptable and not so acceptable answers (Mei, 1999).

Tutor-comments on learner's assignment responses play a crucial role in most schemes of distance education. This is because the learners' face-to-face contact with their tutors is relatively short hence teaching has to be carried out by means of comments on assignment responses. Most of the help which a distance learner gets in terms of academic support is the tutor's comments on the assignment responses.

Providing quality feedback to distance learners is particularly important because the learners have fewer opportunities to ask for clarification on assignments or comments about their assignments. According to Black and William (1998), the provision of feedback on learners' assignment responses allow learners to feel connected to the class, thus making them feel more comfortable. Furthermore, learners get a better sense of what content they have mastered and what areas they are weak in, allowing them to focus their efforts where they are weakest and feel more positive about the learning process because they feel as though someone is interested in their progress.

Most distance learners are new to the distance mode hence, it is the duty of the tutor to initiate communication straight away, and this can be done through written comments on assignment responses. The tutor has to be conscious of the fact that the distance learner is "isolated" from his/her peers and is, in most cases, an adult with several social commitments and domestic responsibilities. Thus the learner is more susceptible to anxiety and frustration from being in "isolation". Therefore, the tutor should help the learner to overcome the difficulties caused by "isolation" and make his/her communication – through written comments – academically useful (Koul, 2000).

The tutor's written comments compensate for personal mannerisms, peculiar gestures, smiles and tilts of the brows etc. The comments must therefore have to be well thought out, palatable, precise and pedagogically purposeful. A teacher in the traditional classroom helps learners to communicate with written materials presented as bits of information or with material delivered orally or that referred to, to be looked up in the libraries, and a teacher in the distance mode does much the same not through 'word of mouth' but through 'word of hand' – the comments on the assignment responses.

The most significant implication of this contrast is that to help the learner, a distance tutor should not rest content with scribbling a grade at the top of an assignment response. He must find ways to communicate with and help the learner respond to the course units. By not writing any comments on the assignment responses, in spite of having graded them, he ceases to be an effective tutor and exists as a mere examiner who grades or marks an assignment response and is not called upon to explain his stand (Koul, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to find out whether marked learners' assignment responses come with tutor comments, the types of comments written by tutors and the effects of these comments on the studies of the learners.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of study was derived from undergraduate and postgraduate learners pursuing programmes offered by the Institute of Distance Learning. In all, 120 and 110 post graduate and undergraduate learners respectively were involved in the study. Data for this study were collected using a questionnaire as well as observation methods, and analysed using SPSS. Simple percentages were used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results from the questionnaire indicated the following;

Undergraduates (Sample size – 110)
- 58.3% were of the view that assignments are not marked promptly and given back to them.
- 66.7% indicated that the marked assignments do not have any tutor comments apart from the marks.
- 61.1% ascertained that the feedback they get motivates them to learn.

Postgraduates (Sample size – 120)
- 58.3% indicated late return of marked assignment responses.
- 65.8% were of the view that the marked assignment responses have no tutor comments.
- 61.7% indicated that they were motivated by the feedback from the marked assignment responses.

The observations made on some marked assignment responses showed that only marks or numerical grades were given. However, some had "Good" or "Very Good" on them.

About 58.3% of the learners both post graduate and undergraduates respectively, declared that they do not get their marked assignment responses early enough from the tutors. This is in bad taste as feedback needs to come while learners are still mindful of the topic, assignment or performance in question (Brookhart, 2008). It needs to come while they still think of the learning goal as a learning goal; that is, something they are still striving for, not something they already did. In other words, it especially needs to come while they still have some reason to work on the learning target. When marked assignment responses are given to learners at a later time, the feedback becomes pointless to the learners.

Generally 66.7% of the undergraduate and 65.8% of the postgraduate learners indicated that marked assignment responses come with grades but no tutor comments. This was confirmed through the observation of some of their marked scripts. Several investigations have been

made on the effects of grades versus comments on the performance of learners (Page, 1958, Stewart and White, 1976). They ascertained that writing comments was more effective for learning than giving grades. Due to the lack of frequent face-to-face interaction that a conventional classroom setting offers, tutor comments on assignment responses take on added importance and must be frequent. Bender *et al.* (2006) noted that it is best to offer feedback on all assignments within 48 hours. This ensures feedback is timely and allows learners sufficient time to conform to instructor expectations. Every graded activity should include meaningful feedback particular to each individual learner. This is because feedback describes specific qualities of the work in relation to the learning targets, makes observations about learners' learning processes and strategies that will help them figure out how to improve and fosters learner self-efficacy by drawing connections between learners' work and their mindful, intentional efforts.

Bender *et al.* (2006) stressed that providing feedback is absolutely critical for learner success. Feedback should be positive and constructive with the objective to do no harm to the learner. Feedback should provide specific guidance and direction. Letting the learner know they did a great job on an assignment for instance may not be sufficient feedback. A tutor needs to specify why the work was done well or explain what the learner could do to make improvements (Bender *et al.*, 2006).

A study by Butler and Nisan (1986) on the effects of grades (evaluative), comments (descriptive), or no feedback on both learning and motivation indicated that learners who received descriptive comments were motivated and performed better in subsequent assignments. Those who received grades as feedback, though performed well in subsequent assignments, were less motivated, and lastly those who received no feedback performed poorly and were less motivated. In this study however, most of the learners 61.1% and 61.7% of undergraduate and postgraduate learners respectively, were of the view that the graded assignment responses motivate them in the learning process. This may be attributed to the fact that the learners are not used to tutor comments on their assignment responses hence were satisfied with just the grades.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was ascertained from the study that marked assignment responses do not get to learners on time while they are still mindful of the learning target and still have time to act on it. Furthermore, learners' assignment responses are only graded without any tutor comments, and this keeps the learners in limbo, and may not know the best way to solve or write the assignment. However, the learners indicated that they were motivated by the grades they have on their assignment responses, which is contrary to the results of other studies.

It is recommended that a set of assignments should be given to the learners at the beginning of the semester with their deadlines or date of submission to enable learners hand them in on time and for the tutors too to have enough time to go through and write comments. Also, tutors should be schooled on how to write comments on assignment responses since they enhance understanding and learning.

REFERENCES

Bender, S. L., Brewer, J. and Whale, R., (2006) Communicating with Online Learners. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and distance Learning 3(6),* 33-39

Black, P. and William, D. (1998) Assessment and classroom learning, *Assessment in Education, 5(1),* 7-74

Brookhart S. M. (2008) *How to give Effective Feedback to your Students*, VA. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Butler, R. and Nisan, M. (1986) effects of no feedback, task-related comments, and grades in intrinsic motivation and performance *Journal of Educational Psychology, 78,* 210-216

Hui, H. W. (1989)"Support for students in a distance learning programme – an experience with a course in Fashion and Clothing Manufacture", in A. Tait (ed.) *Conference papers: Interaction and Independence: Student Support in Distance Education and Open Learning, Cambridge:* The Open University

Keegan, D. (1989) Foundations of Distance Education, London: Croom Helm, 45

Koul, B. N. (2000) *IGNOU Handbook 3, Learner Support Services*, New Delhi, Department of Distance Education, IGNOU, 9-11

Mei, W. S. (1999) Feedback-From Teacher to Student, http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/cdtlhome/pubs.htm

Page, E. B. (1958) Teacher comments and student performance: A seventy-four classroom experiment in school motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 49,* 173-181.

Stewart, L. G., and White, M. A. (1976) Teacher comments, letter grades and student performance: What do we really know? *Journal of Educational Psychology, 68,* 480-500

Tait, A. (1995) "Student Support in Open and Distance Learning", in Fred Lockwood (ed.) *Open and Distance Learning Today*, London: Routledge, p 232