Improving feedback of students in open distance learning courses current practices and new directions in WOU

URL	http://weko.wou.edu.my/?action=repository_uri&itemid=414

IMPROVING FEEDBACK OF STUDENTS IN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES: CURRENT PRACTICES AND NEW DIRECTIONS in WOU.

Jasmine Selvarani Emmanuel

School of Foundation and Liberal Studies
Wawasan Open University
54, Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah,
10050 Penang
Malaysia
Sustainability, Access, Equity and Quality

Summary

This paper will discuss the evidence-based strategies that are efficient for providing feedback to students pursuing undergraduate education through open distance learning (ODL) programmes. The strategies discussed are grouped in categories including course design, faculty roles and student participation. The paper will also discuss how integrating diverse feedback methods into course design will promote efficiency in ODL courses while allowing students to acquire and learn professional skills such as self-reflection and learner autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, there has been a tendency for institutions involved in open distance education to adopt and follow models of assessment developed for the traditional face-to-face situations. Much of it has been the correction of faults in students' work (Corder, 1967, 1971) and carried out as discrete processes. Owing to this, there has also been expressed concern on whether the feedback provided is meaningful to students. Keeping in mind that in open distance learning feedback helps overcome isolation and reassures learners that they are completing assignments according to the learning outcomes of the course and expectations of faculty, recently, the focus and attention have been gradually turned to the main people involved and that are the tutors and learners concerned. It also cannot be denied that that tutors' and students' beliefs in what feedback should provide is much conditioned by the institutions they work for and where they study.

Another key point to note is that many tutors come from the pool of industry and may not have been exposed to the various types of feedback that can be given in an open distance situation. Most of the time, these tutors are more used to the teacher-learner dialogue that features in classroom teaching and may not be able to translate that knowledge into written forms commonly used in open distance learning(ODL) situations. Hence to be able to offer credible feedback that is both formative and summative we need to study the perceptions of both tutors and students and then work towards adopting approaches that will provide maximum feedback to help learners learn effectively.

Before we can do this we need to clarify the term *feedback*. For the purpose of this discussion we will use *feedback* as a generic term that covers three broad areas as described by Sole and Truman (2000): the *correction* of faults in students' work; the *specific feedback* or guidance provided on particular faults, problems and their correction; and *commentaries* which are general advice designed to help learners improve their ability to handle assignments. They may deal with faults, but at a more general level, focus on actions a student needs to take to eliminate certain broad categories of fault, suggest follow-up or remedial work, sources of information, learning strategies that allow students to gauge their own progress and set further learning goals and so on. For feedback to be successful, students would need to further reflect on and interact with the given advice, thus taking an active role by becoming autonomous in their own learning

THE WAWASAN OPEN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

Wawasan Open University (WOU) is Malaysia's first not for profit open university. So far about 6000 students have walked through many of our courses. We have students from all over Malaysia and the typical ODL one is in the 21-55 age range. They are working people, many married, hold jobs and even raise children. They shoulder educational responsibilities together with various other roles in life such as spouse, employee, parent and community member.

The writers of our course materials have produced materials for ODL learning based on the premise that distance learning is a guided didactic conversation that 'involves the student emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems'(Holmberg,1983). These materials which are specially written or adapted from other open universities play a core role in all courses offered at WOU and ODL institutions in general because they are the teaching voice that form the link between the teacher and the learner. In a nutshell, we can say that the functions of a teacher in a more conventional setting

are carried out by these materials.

This is the reason why particular attention is paid to the design of print materials to make them easy to follow and attractive to work with. If audio-visual materials are being used, they are carefully researched, designed and produced so that together these materials work as an integrated whole and provide effective feedback.

At WOU, each activity or sequence of activities that are provided in the course materials are introduced by an 'organiser' that explains the rationale for the activity or activities. The purpose behind this is to help students understand why they are asked to participate in the activities and how they fit into the entire structure. This can enable students to become more aware of the learning process so that they can set their own personal goals and begin to learn how to monitor their own progress. Generally at WOU, we remember that any attempts at pedagogic intervention must take place via the materials and tutor feedback. That is the reason why all the courses contain sections on learning strategies and study skills, activities that test learning as it is covered section by section, some self-tests at the end of a unit and practical guidance in the development of specific skills related to the content area.

The course curriculum is created by the course development team who list key learning points for each section of the course material. Long term and short term language learning objectives are also determined. Numerous opportunities are given for students to engage in self-assessment. At the end of each unit (each course module consists of five units) suggested and models answers are provided for students to check their work. All the courses include opportunities for students to evaluate themselves in terms of their academic progress against a checklist of key learning points. The course writers also include teaching students about reflection and how students can go about doing so. Course guides are also incorporated to give advice on how to reflect on the course materials and any feedback received from the assessment of formative evaluation Each section includes summaries that contain the key learning points which are used to explicitly to prompt reflection on both the learning process and the language activities. To further enhance self-learning, course writers also use explicit explanations and activities which enable students to gain confidence and experience.

Where pedagogic dialogue and interaction is concerned, it can be said that all our course materials foster interaction. The materials are written in a style of a teacher speaking personally to the learner and leading him/her by hand through the course material. The materials also encourage interaction with the resources provided and create the learning environment by engaging the student in a variety of tasks and activities.

The course materials include a course module consisting of 5 units, a textbook or workbook and sometimes audio/video CDs. A course guide is also provided for each course. The course materials are closely structured and integrated so that the students know what they are expected to do and when. Additional resources are placed on our Learning Management System which every student has access to. This LMS or better known as *WawasanLearn* is moderated by the tutors and the respective course coordinators. Quizzes and case studies with automated responses (for immediate feedback) on specified topics are also uploaded. Certain courses in business and technology include assignments integrated with tasks such as interviews that provide topical feedback from the broader community. Ten credit courses, that are spread out into two semesters provide opportunities that allow multiple feedback opportunities. Tutorials that provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction are held for two hours every month for the duration of the course. However, it must be noted that attendance at tutorials is not compulsory.

ASSESMENT METHODS

Two methods of assessment are used at WOU: the Continuous Assessment and the Final Exam. Students are required to complete three Tutor Marked Assignments per semester. These are formative in nature. Questions for Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) are given at the beginning of the semester on the *WawasanLearn*. They reflect parts of the course syllabus that students should have covered by certain points in the semester and are closely linked to learning outcomes. The questions usually use Blooms' Taxonomy as a basis for covering the various questioning types. Samples of previous 'good' and 'poor' assignments are also uploaded. The TMAs are submitted to the tutor for marking Most of it is done online and feedback is given on a regular basis (once every month for the first three months of the semester). This is important for helping students maintain pace and schedule.

As for the feedback component, detailed feedback is given in order to help students understand and correct their mistakes, analyse and address more serious errors. Tutor feedback is given on the assignment *per say* and a detailed commentary on the work submitted is also attached. Tutors are asked to refer students to the general assessment criteria and explain why they have received a certain grade. Tutor feedback can vary according to individual tutoring styles and the tutor's perception of the students' needs. Sometimes, feedback can be misinterpreted or there is a danger of a mismatch between what the students want and need, and what the tutor provides. This is the reason why tutors at WOU are provided with training and other forms of support like sample feedback that styles that are effective. The course coordinator usually includes this in the marking scheme so that tutors can gain help in giving students appropriate feedback.That is the reason why the marking scheme needs to be very comprehensive.

To further check on feedback provided, the course coordinator for that particular course selects at least three TMAs from each tutorial group and monitors the marking and feedback given. The course coordinator provides feedback to both tutors and students after each TMA is marked, on the overall performance of the students and areas of strength and weakness. This feedback is written using a positive and encouraging tone that highlights the strengths first and then the weaknesses. The basis for this can be found in Graham et al (2000) who discussed two types of feedback: *acknowledgement* (providing recognition) and *information* (providing factual information). A further study by Oehikers and Gibson (2001) showed that students appreciated emotional support from faculty as well as help with problem solving. Social interaction on the LMS (*WawasanLearn*) which is personalised, by using student names, building a sense of community (which includes greetings for festivals and information on community events) is also vital. The online forum needs to be a safe, fair and respectful place for learning and feedback. Given below are some examples of postings made on the LMS that can be considered friendly and help to build rapport while disseminating information.

Tutor A

Hello everyone. You have all been a bit quiet the past few weeks. No one has come on the LMS except to say thank you for the slides. I guess, you guys are busy with your TMA 2 then. So, how is your assignment? I believe you have also accessed your TMA1 grades by now. Whatever your results, do put in more effort and do even better for your TMA 2. It is comparatively easier than your TMA 1. If you have any doubts or questions, do put them up in the LMS so that all your course mates can give their views or opinions. Do not put up your assignment here and ask your friends' feedback. That would not be fair to yourself and also the others. But, you can ask questions related to your assignment. Next, don't forget to read up on 'paraphrasing' from Chapter 8 of your textbook. We will be discussing this during TMA 3. I've also attached some notes in my announcement under 'Tutorial 2 SLIDES'. Do go through them too. Keep your spirits up.

Tutor B

Once again, THANKS for answering my question about the special conditions when abortions are allowed. YES! You are right about those special conditions. However, your question whether you need to mention those conditions in the TMA1 depends on your stand and the structure/ organisation of your essay / text.

If you had attended the first Tutorial, you may remember that one approach is that you may structure your TMA 1 in such a way that you make your stand clear in the thesis statement and support your stand with relevant main points, reasons or evidences to support your stand in the subsequent paragraphs. Thus, you are only focusing on one side of the argument as if you are a debater in EITHER the proponent OR opponent team. If you propose to legalise abortion then state ALL the pros ONLY. On the other hand, if you oppose legalising it then state all the cons ONLY.

EXTRA NOTE: Whatever is your approach in creating the structure of your text, always begin the body paragraphs with topic sentences that state the main point of each paragraph. After the topic sentence is stated, then support the topic sentence with supporting details such as examples, reasons, facts, statistics, analogies, experts' views, illustrations and evidences. These will strengthen your topic sentence in each paragraph which will ultimately support your stand which you have made in the thesis statement AND repeated/summarised in the CONCLUSION.

Hope you are clear with my explanations. Otherwise ask further as you are most welcome to do so.

CORRECTION FOR THE OPEN DISTANCE LEARNER

To enable students to take the right action to remedy their faults is a very vital element in ODL. It is, therefore, pertinent to distinguish between different types of faults to help the learner rectify them. James(1998) has identified several categories into which faults can be sub-divided:

☐ *slips* are faults that the learner can detect and self correct;

☐ *mistakes* are faults that can only be corrected by learners if they are pointed out to them(either in general terms or in the forms of hints about their location and/or their nature; and

☐ *errors* are faults that can only be self-corrected once they have been pointed out to learners and the latter have undertaken further learning.

ODL learners need to build within the capacity to identify and self-correct as this is one of the key metacognitive skills that they need to develop (Powell, 2001). James (1998) uses a classification of faults that can be used to foster the development of self-correction strategies by learners. Each approach and the extent of 'remediation' implicit in it are given as follows:

☐ feedback(informing learners that there is a fault and leaving them to discover and repair it themselves);

☐ correction(providing treatment or information that helps learners to revise or correct a specific instance of a fault without necessarily aiming to prevent the same fault from recurring later);

☐ remediation(providing learners with information that enables them to revise or reject the wrong rule they were operating, thereby inducing them to revise their mental representation of the rule and avoid recurrences of this type of fault.

As we can see in James' (1998) scheme the three levels given above also portray the degree of tutor intervention required. At WOU we use these three levels and examples of these kinds of feedback, taken from an English Language lower level course are given below:

Specific feedback

I <u>shout</u> to call for my <u>husband help</u>.

Correction

My maid <u>becomes hysteria</u> suddenly after she finished her dinner. became hysterical

Remediation

REFERENCES

All the information is through internet information**.**

This statement is unacceptable as REFERENCES in any academic essays at university level! You need to state which websites you got the information from and cite them. To know how to cite correctly, please refer to page 108 of your student handbook.

So far we have looked at faults and their corrections and the schedule identified by James (1998) that provides the feedback for this. Fault correction is only one part of the assessment process. Tutors also need to give more general advice or *commentaries*. While *specific feedback, correction* and *remediation* focus mainly on what the learner has done wrong, in

commentaries the view is wider. It shows the medium or long term action a learner needs to take to close the gap between actual and desired performance. Therefore it is vital that *commentaries* are discursive and are carefully tailored to individual student needs and the context. To sum up the difference, *correction*, *remediation* and *specific feedback* (to a lesser extent) are tutor centred but *commentaries* put the onus on the learners. As we can see, there are multiple functions of feedback and we need to use them wisely to foster reflection and learner autonomy

Given in the next page are two extracts from commentaries appended to learners. The examples are taken from the Communication Skills for the Workplace course assignments.

Commentary A

A good success story with good organisation & presentation of main ideas. However, it can be improved further with better editing and reducing the number of grammatical and vocabulary errors. Please refer to the assignment for areas that you need to work on. A better choice of key words such as 'market share' to replace 'business range' will improve readability and understanding. Remember that English sentences normally should have VERBS in the CORRECT tenses otherwise the sentences cannot stand or exist as English sentences. Also improve your use of articles such as 'a, an & the'. Overall, a good and well-written essay. Well done!

Commentary B

Firstly, you should try to understand the requirements of the TMA and do the required things to do well in your TMA. If you are not clear then, please seek further clarifications from me or through the WawasanLearn forums. I am always available to guide and assist you..

Secondly, try to re-write, re-phrase or modify the text downloaded from websites as you have to adapt and change to suit the requirements of the TMA. You are expected to produce a handout and NOT an essay or article. You have to be very selective on which text is suitable. The text that you had provided in your TMA is suitable for teachers, doctors or students but not relevant to colleagues in the same team who will be going on a business trip to Xian, China. So, you have to choose practical tips on dress code, behaviour and communication with Chinese business people in China in order to have a successful business trip there.

It must be remembered that that while feedback is important, equally important are the reactions of learners to each of them: the way the view their faults, how they understand their tutor's interventions and how they act on them. This is what we call dialogue based feedback. Besides giving students guidance on how to revise their work, tutors need to establish a kind of rapport with the students by mediating between the written text and the learner. As discussed much earlier, this includes an individualized approach on the part of the tutor. Besides showing the need for remedial action, the tutor needs to use non-threatening language, praise and encouragement.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have looked at what feedback is and how the designers and writers of open distance learning materials have incorporated this into the course materials at WOU. We have also discussed the various types of feedback that are given on TMAs. The 'tutor learner dialogue' is important and the collaboration and social interaction achieved can be effective catalysts for learning. Moreover, meeting individual needs in specific contexts need to be taken into account for meaningful and fruitful dialogue. Tutors play a key role in helping students adapt to the ODL mechanism of feedback which may be varied from the traditional ones they are used to. The feedback given also needs to be clearly defined and there needs to be a distinction between the roles it can play; whether to correct errors, suggest repair strategies or provide commentaries. Newer models of feedback need to be developed to address the specific needs of ODL as opposed to the traditional models of feedback used for face-to-face teaching. These models need to place students as the focal point and recognise that feedback can only be effective if the students play a very active role by reflecting on the comments that foster learner autonomy and are responsive to the feedback given by their tutors and course coordinators.

REFERENCES

Bailey, K. M. (1998). Learning *about Language Assessment: Dilemmas, Decisions and Directions*. Cambridge,MA: Heinle and Heinle

Chamot, A.U. and O'Malley.J. (1994). Language learner and learning strategies. In N.C. Ellis (ed) *Implicit and Explicit Learning of Languages*, London: Academic Press Limited: 371-392.

Corder ,S. P. (1967) The significance of learners' errors. *IRAL* 5(4), 161-70

Corder, S. P. (1971) Describing the language learner's language: interdisciplinary approaches to language. *Reports and Papers 6*. London:CILT.

Derrick, M.G. (2001). Persistence and the adult autonomous learner. In H.B Long and Associates (Eds.), *Twenty –First Century Advances in Self-Directed Learning*. Schaumburg, IL: Motorola University Press.

Garrison, D.R. (1989). *Understanding distance education: A Framework for the future*. London: Routledge.

Graham, C., Cagitay, K., Craner, J., Lim., & Duffy, T.(2000) *Teaching in a web based distance environment*. Available: http://crit.indiana.edu/publications/crit00-13.pdf

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon (First published 1979, Strasbourg: Council of Europe).

Holmberg, B. (1983). Guided didactic conversation in distance education. In D. Sewart, D.Keegan and B.Holberg (eds) *Distance Education: International Perspectives,* New York: Croom Helm: 114-122.

Hurd, S, T. Beaven and A.Ortega. (2001). Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: Issues and dilemmas for course writers, *System 29* (39): 341-355.

James, C. (1998). *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis*. Harlow:Addison Wesley Longman

Keegan, D (1990). *Foundations of distance education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Little, D. (2003). Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning, viewed 6 February 2004, from *The guide to good practice for learning and teaching in language, linguistics and area studies*

<http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/goodpractice.aspx?resouceid=1409>

Little, D. (1999). Developing learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom: Social-interactive view of learning and three fundamental pedagogical principles, *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 38:77-88.

Moore, M.G. Kearnsley, P. (1996). Distance Education: A system view. Belmont, CA: Wadworth Publishing Company.

Oehikers, R., & Gibson, C. (2001). Learner support experienced by RNs in a collaborative distance RN to BSN program. *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing, 32(9), 266-273*

Powell, B. (2001)Understanding errors and mistakes. In L.Arthur and S. Hurd(eds) *Supporting Lifelong Learning: Theoretical and Practical Approaches*. London: CILT/The Open University.

Pajares, F. (1996). Self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings, *Review of Educational Research*, 66(4): 543-578.

Ponton, M. K. and Cair, P. B (2000). Understanding and promoting autonomy in self-directed learning. Current Research in Social Psychology (On-line), Available*:* http://www.uiowa.edu/~grppo

Railton, D. and Watson, P. (2005). Teaching autonomy: 'reading groups' and the development of autonomous learning practices, *Active learning in higher education,* 6 (3): 182-193.

Ros I Sole, C. and Truman, M. (2000) What does it take to agree on a mark? Approaches to the correction of linguistic inaccuracy in supported distance learning programmes in languages. In M. Fay and D. Ferney(eds) *Current Trends on Modern Languages Provision for Non-Specialist Linguists* (pp.151-66).London: CILT/APU.

Sinclair, B. (2000). Learner autonomy: The next phase? In B. Sinclair, I. McGruth and T. Lamb 9eds) *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions,* Harlow: Pearson Education Limited: 4-14.

S.R.B Davis (1997). *Learner Autonomy Profiles of Adult Learner in Asynchronous Learning Environments Versus the Traditional Classroom Setting.* Unpublished thesis, George Washington University.

Stevens, D., & Levi, A. (2005) *Introduction to rubrics, an assessment tool to save grading time, convey effective feedback, and promote student learning*. Sterling,VA: Stylus Publishing.

Vella, J. 92002) *Learning to listen, learning to teach: The power of dialogue in educating adults* (Rev.ed). San Franscisco: Jossey-Bass

White, C. (1999). *Autonomy and strategy use in distance foreign language learning. System* 23 (2): 207-21.

Walvoord, B. E., & Anderson, V. J. (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass