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Improving the Efficiency and Quality of Feedback for Tutor-marked Assignments

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the quality types of feedback provided by tutors in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) platform. The key focus of the paper is to understand pedagogical elements in the current tutor-learner feedback practices in an open and distance learning institution. Weaknesses and gaps in the current practices were identified through the types of feedback given by the tutors to the learners in the ODL environment. Data were gathered from a total of 980 tutor marked assignments (TMAs). Feedback provided in the TMAs comprised justifications for the grades in the marked assessments and motivational elements in the feedback. These were also analysed in terms of frequency, consistency, clarity of language, and length of feedback. The tutor feedback in this data set were organised into four categories. Category 1: Excellent and thorough feedback with added value information. Category 2: Average feedback with fair comments and supportive information. Category 3: Poor feedback with little suggestions for improvements. Category 4: No feedback/comments. The findings revealed a high degree of variability in the quality of the feedback provided among tutors. While majority of the tutors are in Category 2 and Category 3, the others varied in the wide spectrum of belonging in Category 1 and Category 4. This has significant repercussions on the effectiveness of the tutors’ learning support and ultimately the learners’ overall learning performance outcomes. Therefore this paper suggests interventionary steps to improve the quality of feedback among the tutors. This includes setting practical expectations for high quality learner support to help reduce the frequency of Category 3 and 4 feedback more towards Category 1.

Keywords: Open Distance Learning (ODL), Tutor marked assignments (TMAs), supportive assignment feedback, and quality.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Adult learning has rapidly changed with advances in digitalisation technologies and new pedagogical practices. Open and distance learning (ODL) is quickly emerging as a popular mode to learn since information and communications technology has made teaching and learning more accessible. In an ODL environment, learners comprise mainly working adults who require a flexible programme that accommodates personal and professional constraints. These learners also come from various contexts and backgrounds, and with different needs and preferences. Therefore, the need to provide a more customised support in their learning is as important as for the traditional cohorts of students. The primary focus of this on-going research is to understand current student feedback practices in Wawasan Open University (WOU). The objective is to identify weaknesses and gaps in the current practices with the view to improve the online feedback mechanism, and subsequently enhance teaching and learning.

Brush et al. (1993:39) conclude, “support systems for distance instruction would need to aid in the delivery of the content of the training, to provide a mechanism for interaction between instructors and students, to offer options for feedback about assignment and projects, and to give the program staff
alternatives for evaluating the training and maintaining quality control over activities” [1]. Therefore to ensure successful distance learning, a tutoring team with adequate online tutorial skills has to be employed in order to navigate and capitalise on the virtual learning environments. McPherson et al. (2003) emphasise that, online tutoring and leadership has been widely considered as a crucial factor in the success of computer-mediated collaborative learning activities [2]. Peters adds that, “in order to understand the meaning of virtual learning it must be noted that the learning process itself is never virtual, but always quite real” (Peters, 2001: 157.) [3]. Ideally, feedback should function as an important tool for ODL students to aid them in assessing whether their learning is on track, rectify any problems and to improve their learning skills through the feedback received from their assignments.

Feedback is Crucial

The concept of feedback does not only mean to give response to a student regarding a specific task completion; feedback also a means giving support, through validation, encouragement and motivation to the students in the learning process. Pramela (2006), states that feedback also creates a social climate for learning where the online learner does not feel isolated [4]. Pellone (1991), argues that students should not only be told whether they have given the right answer (through feedback), but also be encouraged for correct responses (positive reinforcement), or prompted when they need more information when thinking about correct answers (cuing) [5]. Hence, feedback should consist of stimulating or corrective information about tasks students are performing (Mory, 2003) [6].

Daniel (2011), notes that ODL is structured to develop more independent thinking than the traditional classroom setting [7]. This does not apply in the Malaysian context. This is because the transition from traditional learning to eLearning is difficult for Malaysian learners who developed a habit of rote learning from a spoon-fed culture in the local primary and high schools. Other than that, adult learners are also burdened with the task of time management to balance between studying, work and handling family commitments and responsibilities. This increases their need for high quality feedback to help ensure success in the learning journey towards independent thinking and self-directed learning.

Feedback is crucial for these learners and particularly in the virtual learning environment since face-to-face meetings between the learners and the course instructors are very limited. The quality of the feedback types poses some implications on the learners’ overall performance in the course. It is not only as a response to learners’ learning process, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation during the teaching and learning. Feedback is also an important part of the on-going instructor-learner relationship as it helps the learner see the role of the instructor and indicates the extent to which the instructor is prepared to provide individual support. This will contribute to the rise of the learners’ confidence and motivation to graduate from the ODL degree programme and it lowers the student attrition rate of the university.

Types of Feedback

Dempsey, Driscoll, and Swindell (1993), in their study categorised corrective feedback into five types [8]. These types are based on complexity, or the amount of information and what kind of information is contained in the feedback (Mory, 1996) [6]. These five types include (1) no feedback given, (2) simple verification or knowledge of results (KR), (3) knowledge of correct response (KCR), (4) elaborated feedback, and (5) try-again feedback (Pyke and Sherlock, 2010). From the five types, this study will also use the model proposed by Hattie and Timperley (2007) that distinguishes four levels: (1) feedback about the task, (2) feedback about the processing of the task, (3) feedback about self-regulation, and (4) feedback about the student as a person [9].

Brockhart (2008) [10], states that the level at which the feedback is focused influences its effectiveness. Feedback about the qualities of the work and feedback about the process or strategies used to do the work are most helpful. Feedback that draws students’ attention to their self-regulation strategies or their abilities as learners can be effective if students hear it in a way that makes them
realise they will get the results they want if they expend effort and attention. Personal comments do not draw students' attention to their learning. The five types of feedback with the four levels of feedback model will be utilised in the analysis of the data to identify the categories of quality feedback given by the tutors to the students in the selected WOU courses.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted in WOU to represent the ODL concept of learning. As a premier ODL University in Malaysia, WOU is a private and not-for-profit institution and was chosen for its successful model of delivering open distance education that covers key components in ensuring quality learning through the comprehensive course materials and its learner support system, assessment, open entry admission system, flexible progression pathways, multiple exit points and external peer review. ODL is a concept of independent learning that involves educational training and instruction in which a student does not need to always be physically ‘there’ attending the classes. For an ODL student to learn, the process involves receiving content and information virtually transmitted on the Internet via email and the Learning Management System (LMS) postings, over texts and telephone calls, through teleconferencing and Skype video calls and finally also by the traditional print/multimedia materials. Data for this study was gathered from WOU's server for data collection.

METHODOLOGY

This study used both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. Access was granted to the researchers to investigate the online feedback types provided by tutors to the learners in their TMAs in WOU during the July 2014 semester and the January 2015 semester where the selected courses were offered. The data were gathered from online feedback provided in the marked TMAs of nine selected courses offered at WOU over a period of one semester. Every semester, WOU students must submit online two assignments (TMA 1 and TMA 2) in essay form. Both TMA 1 and TMA 2 add up to 50 per cent of the overall marks to complete each course. The students complete the course in WOU using a blended learning approach where five tutorial sessions are held for students in a semester. Each tutorial session lasts two hours.

After the TMAs are submitted, tutors are given approximately two weeks to mark the assignments. It has to be noted that the total TMAs each tutor needs to complete marking varies from 5 to 35 pieces subjected to the class size individually. This means that for example, a tutorial class in the university's Kuala Lumpur regional centre may contain 35 students whereas at the same time another tutorial class in the university's Kuching regional centre may only contain 5 students. Therefore, the tutors’ TMA marking workload varies between regional centres and tutors depending on student enrolment in the course. After TMA 1 assignments are marked, students were given the appropriate time frame to read the feedback given and were allowed to ask for more feedback and explanation from their tutors before the next face-to-face tutorial class and submitting TMA 2.

Sample

The random sample technique was adapted to select the five marked scripts (TMAs) per tutor in per course across regions in the five centres. These scripts were analysed qualitatively. Data on feedback by tutors were collected from 83 tutors who taught the 9 courses and from 490 students enrolled in the nine selected courses who have submitted their TMA 1 and TMA 2 assignments. A total of 980 sample scripts were collected. It has to be noted that some of the tutors taught double classes in the course. Level 100 courses with high enrolment offered across all the faculties in WOU were selected for content analysis. They included MPU (compulsory courses prescribed by the Ministry of Higher Education), English proficiency and introductory courses in the various disciplines. The level of difficulty was the main criterion in choosing the courses examined. The Level 100 courses selected were those which provide essential introductory information, skills and first time student interactions.
The exception was the School of Education, Languages and Communication, where a Level 200 course was picked.

1. The nine selected courses are:

1) WUC 131/03 Learning Skills for University Studies
2) WUC 106/05 Communication Skills for the Workplace
3) WUC 117/03 Introduction to Computing and Internet
4) MPU 3113/03 Ethnic Relations
5) MPU 3223/03 Decision Making Skills
6) LSP 101/05 Introduction to Psychology
7) BBM 103/05 Principles & Practice of Management
8) EED205/05 Introduction to Pedagogy
9) TEE 101/05 Engineering Mathematics I

The quality of feedback provided in the assignments marked by the tutors of these courses was analysed. The content analysis involved assignments marked by all the tutors. It included aspects such as justifications for the grades in the marked assessments, motivational elements in the feedback, frequency, consistency, clarity of language and length of feedback. Based on the analysis of the content, the quality of feedback provided is classified into four categories:

a) Category 1: Excellent and thorough feedback with added value information.

b) Category 2: Average feedback with fair comments and supported information.

c) Category 3: Poor feedback with little suggestions for improvements.

d) Category 4: No feedback/comments.

Procedure

The identified group of tutors and students were notified to participate as research respondents. Two sets of questionnaires were designed; one set for the tutors and the other set for the students and all sent out via email to seek their perspectives on the feedback provided in the marked assignments. The tutors’ response to the questionnaires was only 59 per cent or 49 tutors responded because many of the total 83 tutors no longer work with WOU or not re-appointed with an inactive status. The rest did not respond and follow ups with email reminders and phone calls were also ignored. Then, 98 per cent of the students did not respond in completing the questionnaires via email. Therefore, a total of 42 sessions of focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 253 students, 52 per cent from the total of 490 students took part in all centres in the January 2016 semester. This is because many of the students were not active during the semester with a deferment status and many have dropped out from the university.

After analysing their responses in the questionnaires, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the selected tutors. As for the students, they were rounded up in a focus group, 42 sessions were conducted because the response to the questionnaire via email was unpopular. Purposeful sampling, specifically criterion sampling was used to identify tutors and students for the face-to-face interviews and the focus group sessions. For tutors, a representative sample from each of four categories identified after content analysis was selected for the interviews. Also only tutors of the selected courses with an active status from in all of respective regional centres were interviewed individually. Tutors with an active status are those who are still working for WOU and were teaching classes during the interview sessions were selected (January to May 2016). For students, a representative sample was selected from based on their grades in the assignments – A, B, C, D, and F. The samples were from all regional centres.
PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed a high degree of variability in the quality of the feedback provided among tutors. The analysis of the raw data on the quality of the feedback types given in the students’ TMA 1 and TMA 2 yielded the results in which the majority of the tutors are grouped in Category 2: Average feedback with fair comments and supported information and Category 3: Poor feedback with little suggestions for improvements. While majority of the tutors are in category 2 and category 3, the others varied in the wide spectrum of belonging in Category 1: Excellent and thorough feedback with added value information and Category 4: No feedback/comments. This has significant repercussion on the effectiveness of the tutors’ teaching support and ultimately the learners’ overall learning performance outcomes.

Feedback given in Category 2 includes the two types of feedback; (3) knowledge of correct response (KCR) and (4) elaborated feedback at the levels of (1) feedback about the task (such as feedback about whether answers were right or wrong or directions to get more information), and (2) feedback about processing the task (such as feedback about strategies used or strategies that could be used). Feedback given in Category 3 includes the two types of feedback; (2) simple verification or knowledge of results (KR) and (3) KCR at the level of (1) feedback about the task. Feedback given in Category 1 includes three types of feedback; (3) knowledge of correct response (KCR), (4) elaborated feedback, and (5) try-again feedback at the levels of (1) feedback about the task, (2) feedback about the processing of the task, (3) feedback about self-regulation (such as feedback about student self-evaluation or self-confidence). Feedback given in Category 4 includes the two types of feedback; (1) no feedback and (2) KR at the level of (1) feedback about the task.

In Category 1 and 2, it was found that when giving feedback, the tutors adopted a sympathetic approach by displaying an understanding of the difficulties and needs of adult students in the ODL environment. In Category 3 and 4, the tutors’ concentration was in the task completion of marking and grading the TMAs quickly rather than making the effort to provide high quality feedback to the students. It was found that the tutors who gave Category 1 and 2 quality feedbacks came from the background of working full time as teachers or they are retired teachers. The tutors who gave Category 3 and 4 quality feedbacks, majority are those from a business/accounting, and IT background.

All the tutors recruited by WOU are on a part-time basis and these tutors were experienced instructors from the traditional face-to-face teaching environment and/or have working experiences in the subject matter that they were teaching with the qualification of a Master Degree. It was found that prior to be recruited by WOU, 63 per cent of the tutors have no exposure to online distance learning. The tutors were given generic training on the online assignment system (OAS), moderating the LMS and a full introduction to ODL practices and other online activities and 79 per cent of them understood the rationale and importance of giving feedback as explained during the training. 98 per cent of the tutors stated that their feedback given in TMA 1 was effective for their students to improve future assignments and 90 per cent saw improvement in the subsequent students’ assignments (TMA 2) in the semester.

These numbers correlates with the findings of the analysis of the quality feedback given in the collected TMAs and also the student focus group sessions confirmed that when Category 1 and 2 quality feedbacks were given in TMA 1, they were motivated to do better and majority did improve in their subsequent TMA 2. The students expressed that feedback of this nature will allow them to feel less threatened in the virtual platform and feel less isolated with the impression that their tutors care about their learning progress.

Majority of the tutors (86 per cent) stated that their students did not disagree strongly with their feedback given in the marked assignments. When requested for more feedback on certain aspect of the assignments, 47 per cent of the tutors were able to provide more feedback. However 53 per cent
of the tutors where not able to provide more feedback due to two reasons; one is the tutors stated that the feedback given were adequate and the second reason is the tutors stated that the students need to refer to the course materials and have the initiatives to read and research and not be spoon fed.

However the students stated that even when tutors were asked during the face-to-face class, their tutors were not responsive. Instead these students were asked to refer to their course materials. This created the assumption by the students that the tutors are shaking off responsibilities to teach, support and assist. From the analysis of the student focus group sessions regarding why they accept the Category 3 and 4 quality feedbacks and also why they did not ask for more feedback and explanation, and the three themes that cut through as the major concerns are as follow:

Themes

1. Afraid of repercussions such as offending the tutors by asking for more feedback or explanation because they are afraid they will be penalised in the next assignments. The students stated that the influence of their past experiences and local culture in primary and high school of respecting to fearing the teachers (tutors) stopped them from asking for more feedback and explanation.

2. Lack of response from tutors when students asked for further explanation on the feedback given. The students stated that they were frustrated as many of their tutors did not respond to their request for more feedback and explanation. These students explained that they tried calling and texting. However they seldom post on the LMS because of privacy concerns.

3. Students wanted to only concentrate on the next assignment. Students stated that there were no initiatives taken to ask for more feedback and they accept the feedback given even if they disagree or needed a more detailed explanation from the tutor. Students also stated that they are too busy with work and family commitments and only wanted to concentrate to complete the next assignment.

The tutors who provided Category 3 and 4 quality feedbacks stated that time is the major factor in preventing them to give higher quality feedbacks because of their full-time work and family commitments and the sheer volume of assignments they would need to mark during the semester depending on the class size. The tutors also stated that the nature of the course and the assignment questions prevented them to give higher quality feedback. The findings of this study are useful for providing a guide for the tutors to understand and reflect on their personal teaching style in adapting to the ODL teaching environment and also be conscious of the effects, importance and meaning of providing quality feedback given in the TMAs to the ODL students.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The research findings will be used to facilitate in planning inputs for tutor training on TMAs and add to the consistency (reliability) among tutors when marking the assignments. It will help in providing outcomes information for decision making in evaluating the existing online system of tutor-student interactions in the tutor marked assignments. More informed decision could be made in regards to innovate and upgrade the quality of the response and feedback from tutors and to gage the practical expectations of the students in distance learning support.

The study is useful to the policy-makers in ensuring students’ satisfaction with the institute and as base for an action plan to standardise the minimum requirements of feedback provided by tutors. The study hopes to make recommendations on ways to promote the culture of providing effective feedback to learners and enhance the e-learning practice at Wawasan Open University and in Malaysia in general.
REFERENCES


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Dr Ooi Chia-Yi
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*This paper examines the quality types of feedback provided by tutors in an Open Distance Learning (ODL) platform (Wawasan Open University)

*The key focus is to understand pedagogical elements in the current tutor-learner feedback practices.

*Feedback is an important tool for ODL students.
The concept of feedback does not only mean to give response to a student regarding a specific task completion; Feedback also a means giving support, through validation, encouragement and motivation to the students in the learning process.
*Types of Feedback*

*Five (5) types:*

1. No feedback given
2. Knowledge of results (KR)
3. Knowledge of correct response (KCR)
4. Elaborated feedback
5. Try-again feedback
Data on feedback by tutors were collected from 83 tutors (9 courses) and from 490 students who have submitted their TMA 1 and TMA 2 assignments.

A total of 980 sample scripts were collected.

Level 100 courses with high enrolment offered across all the faculties in WOU were selected for content analysis.
Quality of Feedback

Based on the analysis of the content, the quality of feedback provided is classified into four categories:

a) Category 1: Excellent and thorough feedback with added value information.

b) Category 2: Average feedback with fair comments and supported information.

c) Category 3: Poor feedback with little suggestions for improvements.

d) Category 4: No feedback/comments.
*Findings*

* Majority of the tutors are grouped in Category 2: Average feedback with fair comments and supported information and Category 3: Poor feedback with little suggestions for improvements.

* The others varied in the wide spectrum of belonging in Category 1: Excellent and thorough feedback with added value information and Category 4: No feedback/comments.
High Quality Feedback

* Students’ work improved in the subsequent assignment (TMA2) when given Category 1 and 2 feedback in TMA 1.
* Students feel less threatened
* Students likes the feeling that their tutor cares
Category 3 and 4 Feedback accepted because students are:

1. Afraid of repercussions
2. Lack of response from tutors when students asked for further explanation
3. Students wanted to only concentrate on the next assignment.
Tutors’ Explanation

- Time is a major factor
- Other commitments
- Volume of TMAs to mark
- No spoon-feeding
- Teaching style and adaptation to ODL
The findings will be used to:

1. Facilitate in planning inputs for tutor training
2. Provide outcomes information for decision making
3. Ensure students’ satisfaction
Thank you