(3) Students' Perceptions & Reactions to Feedback on CA Assignments: A Case Study

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Background

One critique of distance education according to Harris (1987) and Winn (1990) is that DE is a packaged approach to learning underpinned by behaviourist models of learning. They say that in this system there is no opportunity for a personal response by students and that there is no possibility for dialogue in learning. It is in this context that assessment can be of help by addressing both these needs. Students have to produce their own work for which they receive written comments (feedback) from a subject expert.

Studies by Harvey (1992) and Loder (1993) indicate that most students perceive feedback on their learning and progress as being very important and requiring improvement. Several studies have researched varying aspects of feedback. Rickwood (1992) found that one in every five students was not satisfied with the amount of feedback that they had received. Mackenzie (1974) raised the issue of tutor comments being illegible. The "tone" of tutor comments has also been an issue. Orton (1978) and Evans (1984) have discussed the importance of the use of the telephone and audio cassettes to provide feedback. Other researchers have argued for the importance of feedback reaching students as quickly as possible (Freeman 1983; Mullett1983; Rickwood 1992)

Feedback in DE can be a very complex affair. Jarvis (1984) has stated that feedback can be given at three levels –

(a.) grade or mark only. Virtually no other comments.

(b.) grade or mark plus tutor commenting in some detail about what you have submitted.

(c.) In addition to above tutor invites you into a continuing dialogue which may require further two way communication between you and the tutor.

The first level corresponds to the use of marking as a means of assessment. The second level corresponds to marking as a means of communicating knowledge while the third views the process of marking as a means of facilitating students' knowledge. This is the scale which will provide the basis for this study as well.

Research Questions

This study wishes to investigate the following questions in relation to students studying at the Department of Language studies in the Open University of Sri Lanka.

- What are students'experience of feedback? (i.e at which of Jarvis's three levels have students experienced feedback)
- What are their perceptions of feedback (i.e. what are students' views in relation to feedback)
- What are their reactions to feedback? (i.e what do students do as a result of feedback)

The Study

The subjects of this study were students who were enrolled in level 4&5 of the BA in English and English Language Teaching. These students would have on average at least two years experience of studying in the DE mode. A questionnaire was designed and administered to 17 students who were enrolled in levels 4& 5 of the BA in English and English Language Teaching.

Findings

The findings are discussed under each of the major research questions

Experience of feedback

The findings indicate that majority of students (82%) have received feedback at Jarvis's second level (a grade with the tutor commenting in some detail about what they had submitted) while 18% said that in addition to this they had also had further two way communication with the tutor. A majority of students (82%) also indicated that they preferred receiving feedback in the form of a grade with comments while a smaller

number of students (18%) indicated that they would prefer in addition further two way communication with the tutor.

Perceptions of feedback

In relation to how students view the feedback process the findings indicated that 59% of students felt that the tutor's assessment of their assignment matched their own assessment while 35% of students indicated that this was not the case. A small percentage of students (6%) indicated that there was no fixed pattern. Of the 41 % who indicated that their assessment of the assignments did not match that of their tutors 12% indicated that their assessment was consistently lower than that of their tutors and a further 12% indicated that their assessment was consistently higher than that of the tutors. 17% said that there was no pattern generally.

A majority of students (65%) also indicated that the comments helped them to understand why they had they had received that particular grade while 35% said that comments were not helpful in this context. Of these students 17% said that the comments were not helpful because they were vague. Many students (65%) felt that comments were important whatever the grade they received while 29% felt that comment were more important when they received a low grade. 6% felt that comments were important when they received a high grade. In relation to the kind of issues that have been dealt with in feedback 65% felt that comments on the contents of the assignment were the most important while 35% felt that the most important issues that comments should deal with is the organization of the answer. In relation to the question "what helps learning more?" 39 % said that what contributed most to their learning was course material, 56 % said that it was day schools and 5% said that it was doing CA assignments while 00% cited feedback received from assignments.

Reaction to feedback

If students had difficulty in understanding the comment made 59% said that they would ask the tutor for further clarification while 29% said that they would ask a fellow student. 12% said that they would not take any further action regarding the matter. Furthermore

76% of students said that they would like to know how their marks compared with the rest of the class, while 24% said that this was not important for them.94% said that they read the feedback before the next assignment while 6% said they read the feedback before the final examination. In the event of receiving a low grade 71% said that they would work harder, 18% said that they felt discouraged and would work less while 6% said that would not be affected. As a result of getting feedback 59% of students felt that they were challenged to go deeper into issues often while 41% of students felt that they were sometimes challenged to go further into issues.

Implications of findings

- Students do not want feedback limited to a grade and would like feedback given at Level b & c of Jarvis's scale. This has implications for tutor training at the OUSL. It must be ensured that feedback is given at these two levels. Systems must also be set up to monitor the quality of the feedback given to students.
- Since the findings indicate that students' assessment of their own assignments do not match that of their tutor it appears that students are not able to engage in self assessment. Clearer guidelines could therefore be given as to what is expected in relation to particular CA assignements.
- The quality of the comments are also important in the feedback process. Tutor comments would have to be much more focused if feedback is going to be important to the learning process. The tone of the comments will have to be looked in to reduce possible negative effect on learners. Both of these issues have implications for tutor training at the OUSL. Better quality feedback could also reduce students' dependence on day schools as their chief mode of learning. The feedback given should also stimulate students into going deeper into the issues that they have studied.
- This is a very small-scale study so the results may not be generalizable. Future directions of research could be to inter-programme, inter-faculty comparisons of perceptions and reactions to feedback