Assignment Feedback a Sine Qua Non for Effective Teaching and Learning: Students' and Lecturers' Concerns on Essay Assessment Feedback Comments in ODL

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Abstract: Feedback plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning situation. In ODL students write assignments as part of their formative assessment. Comments help students to identify their shortcomings and thus apply improvement. Admittedly, ODL students benefit from these comments which constitute part of tutoring. Cognisant of the pivotal role of assessment feedback in ODL and that, some students fail to respond to feedback comments accordingly, it became paramount for empirical evidence on the concerns of lectures and students which lead to that scenario. A qualitative research approach underpinned by an interpretative paradigm was employed in this study to explore the concerns of students and lectures on feedback practices in an ODL institution in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was employed to select students and lecturers who participated in this study until data reached a saturation point. Documents which included student's assignment were interrogated on the comments made by lecturers. Transcribed data from individual interviews and focus groups was thematically analysed. It emerged from the study that students were more interested in marks at the expense of comments, some students received their assignments after the examination and comments were no longer meaningful, some comments were characterised by high academic language which made it difficult for the students to comprehend and some students did not collect their marked work. It also emerged that some lectures failed to write meaningful comments and some did not comment at all. Furthermore some comments were fraught of spelling and grammatical mistakes, and some comments lacked synchronisation with marks. Poor hand writing also emerged as an issue .The study recommends timely feedback of assignment marking, staff development of lecturers on writing of comments that effectively communicate areas of concern. It is also recommended that lecturers write legibly so that students are not discouraged from reading comments.
Keywords: Assessment, Open and Distance Learning, Feedback, Assignments.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback plays a pivotal role in the teaching and learning situation. In ODL students write assignments as part of their formative assessments. Providing written feedback comments on students' assignment is seen as a key feature of the feedback process in ODL [1]. Written comments form the cornerstone of tutorial systems in ODL [2]. Ramsden [3] contends that the ability to make helpful comments on students' work represents characteristic of good teaching. Comments help students to identify and apply improvement through permanent feedback [4]. Admittedly ODL students benefit from comments which constitute part of tutoring. When students enter high education the type of feedback they receive plays an important part in their learning futures [2]. Feedback thus forms the basis for further instruction to enhance learning [5]. According to [6] formative assessment and feedback improves the standard of learning. If feedback is formative, getting a range of feedback can enhance a student's reflection on

a task and encourage them to think more deeply about the quality of their work. Feedback enables the gap between the actual level of learning and the desired goal to be bridged [7]. Feedback also facilitates students' development as independent learners who are able to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their learning [8].Thus effective feedback provides the foundations for learner autonomy and a frame work for high achievement [7]. Students need to have some evaluative skills as their tutors in order to close any gaps in performance [9]. Feedback helps to:

- clarify what good performance is;
- help students to learn how to self-assess ,direct their own learning and support the learning of others;
- provide students opportunities to act on feedback;
- provides high quality information to students about their learning ,
- encourage motivational beliefs and self-esteem[1]

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
Concerns on assessment feedback comments

Feedback is an important part of the learning circle, but researches indicate that lectures and students incur frustrations with regards to the feedback process. Students complain that feedback is unclear, unhelpful and sometimes provided late for it to be any use or relevance [10]. Hartley and Chesworth [11] opine that students often experience problems interpreting the academic language underpinning assessment. Further researches indicate that, comments on student tasks are frequently written with language that makes sense to the lecture but is not accessible to the students [10] and the comments do not make sense to them [12]. Lecturers use more academic style which is more difficult for students to interpret. Such comments include:-

- deepen analysis of key issues,
- sharpen critiques,
- identify and develop implications and
- link theory with practice [13].

Merry and Osmond [14] concur and suggest that, the language of feedback enables students to achieve goals to a greater extent than they would without tutors. Feedback comments can however, be misunderstood due to illegible handwriting or language. According to Shute, [15] formative specific feedback should be provided timely and specific feedback about student's responses to a particular task [16] or simply ignored [4]. Feedback for learning needs to be correctly understood and acted upon [17]. However some teachers added comments on their students written work that did not really help them identify what they had achieved and what the steps in their learning should be [6].

Other researches indicate that lecturers spend considerable time on constructing feedback comments on assignments not collected by students and when they are, students do not seem to act on feedback [1]. Sadler [9] echoes that ideal rapid feedback is hard to achieve with large groups of students, however, students benefit more from prompt feedback. Students may not read the comments because marks are awarded concurrently with comments; students are likely to overlook the accompanying feedback [6]. It is a waste of time to give a student both score and descriptive feedback ....students generally look at the grades and take little notice of comments if provided [18]. Some students threw away the feedback if they disliked the Grade while others seemed concerned only with the final result and did not collect their marked work [19]. Burke and Pieterick [17] argue that not all commenting is useful, and effective for promoting learning. According to Hattie and Timperly [20], some comments may be damaging. Comments need not to be coached in dismissive or bitingly terms which will leave the students feeling hurt or angry rather than receptive. Further observations are that feedback may focus on mechanical aspects of the submission rather than concentrating on the core of the work [12].

Cognisant of the fact that assessment feedback comments play a fundamental role in ODL tutoring and that there are some concerns inherent to feedback comments in ODL, it became imperative to carry out this study.

Statement of the problem

A plethora of studies have indicated that the indispensible role of feedback in formative evaluation is to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Written comments in students' assignments constitute an aspect of tutoring in ODL. Cognisant of the fact that lecturers and students communicate through written comments in the teaching and learning situation among other ODL strategies. There is need to provide empirical evidence on the concerns of lectures and students on the provision of essay feedback comments in ODL in order to facilitate effective learning. Addressing the concerns would enhance effective feedback practices in ODL.

Research Objectives
- To examine the nature of comments feedback in ODL.
- To explore concerns of lectures and students on assignment comments feedback.
- To proffer solutions on the advanced concerns.

Research Questions
- What is the nature of comments made by lecturers in student assignments?
- What are the concerns of lecturers on assignment feedback comments?
- What are the concerns of students on assignment feedback comments?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology following a phenomenological approach was used in exploring the concerns of lecturers and students on assignment comments feedback in ODL. The purpose of the study was to explore lecturers and students experiences of feedback comments based on thick descriptions of their attitudes, feelings and the essence of their feelings. This approach was selected because it endeavours to catch a holistic perspective as well as to capture the depth of understanding of participants [21]. Purposive sampling was employed to select students and lecturers who participated in individual in-depth interviews and focus groups of this study until data reached a saturation point. Documents which included student's assignment were interrogated on comments made by lecturers to triangulate data from individual interviews and focus groups. Transcribed data from individual interviews and focus groups was thematically analysed.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The overall goal of the study was to establish the concerns of lectures and students on assessment feedback in ODL and make recommendations to improve the nature and quality of assessment comments' feedback. General observations from focus groups and individual interviews indicated that while assignment comments were critical in formative assessment, lecturers and students were discontented on the nature, and processes of assignment feedback. Lecturers and students raised concerns which included; work overload of lecturers, failure by students to collect marked assignments, failure by students to stick to deadlines and failure by students to act on the suggestions given by lecturers. Students' comments included the following;

- Failure by lecturers to make comments
- Use of highly academic language
- Receiving assignments after examinations
- Receiving discouraging comments
- Comments which do not match the awarded marks
- Lecturers poor hand writing

Lecturers Concerns and Students' Concerns

Work overload

The study illuminated that part time lecturers were overloaded with work and this tended to compromise commenting of students' assignments. The study indicated that while some lecturers were committed at their work places, they still needed to augment their incomes through participation in the marking exercise. The work overload resulted in some lecturers not making comprehensive comments while some did not comment at all. To buttress the highlighted observations, the following comments were made in some perused assignments;

'You missed the topic.'
'Very little effort was put in your work.'
'You really needed to study.'
'Fair.'

As evidenced by the highlighted comments, some lecturers tended to make skeletal comments which do not contribute to meaningful learning. Furthermore of the 60 interrogated assignment documents 15%, had no comments at all and the marks scored ranged from 68-83.

When asked why they (lecturers) make brief comments or sometimes failed to comment, the lecturers intimated that;

'We do not comment due to pressure of work because some students do not meet deadlines.'
'Sometimes we do not receive marking guides on time and time allocated for marking assignments will be minimal and yet we will be expected to mark heaps and heaps of assignments.'
'I am a fulltime lecturer and the pressure of teaching and writing for publication gives me a lot of pressure.'

The raised comments tend to suggest that in the marking of assignments lecturers were sometimes overwhelmed and this compromised on the quality of feedback comments. According to Walk [11], marking is a complex balancing act and taking time to make extensive comments.

Failure by students to collect assignments

The majority of the programme coordinators lamented that some students did not collect their marked assignments. As a result, such students would not read some informative comments that were made by lecturers. A visit to the assignment office confirmed the view, when heaps and heaps of uncollected assignments from all programmes were found. Apparently, this tended to suggest that commenting in some students' assignments was not a fruitful venture since some students failed to benefit from the formative assessment. Asked why some students did not collect their assignments the following were some of the answers proffered by students;

'Distances from my place to the Regional Campus are too long for me to frequent this place.
'I came once and I was told that assignments were not yet marked.'
'I wrote the examination and I am no longer interested in the comments or the mark. I have already passed my examinations.'

Students' failure to act on feedback

It also emerged from the study that some lecturers made comments and students seemed not to take into account the informative feedback. Interviews with lectures and students revealed that some students did not act on feedback because they would not have collected assignments, students could not comprehend the feedback comments, students had bad attitudes and some lecturers hand writing was not legible. The above reasons were advanced as leading the students' failure to act on feedback. One student from a focus group commented, "*Surely sometimes one wonders what the lecturers is saying. Ah these big words, I received the following comment, 'Be robust in your analysis''*". Another student also commented, "*Some lecturers give us meaningless and discouraging comments*" The following comments were said to be meaningless and de- motivating

'Be serious. You have shown an I don't care attitude which will cost your course.'
'You really needed to study.'
'Very little effort was put in this work.'
'Question one was satisfactorily answered, however question two was unfairly treated.'

'Shallow.'

Many similar comments were made by lecturers, and were also found in the perused assignment documents. With the recurrence of similar feedback comments it would appear some lecturers took a perfunctory approach to commenting while some indicated a lack of requisite competencies to make meaningful comments. Ackerman and Gross [22], argue that negative feedback can discourage a student, engender anger and not produce the desired results from students. At the same time some high-performing students, being satisfied with their grades, appear to have little interest in receiving further feedback [23].

Lack of synchronization of comments and marks in students' assignments

Students in the focus group revealed that some of the comments made by the lectures did not tally with the marks awarded. To this extent this tended to discourage students from considering the feedback comments seriously. The interviewed students lamented;

'A good discussion, important points raised and discussed, 60%.'
'You really needed to study. You are not answering the question, 54%'
'More points required, 74%'
'Understand the question before answering, 49%.'
'A good exposition -64%'
'Good attempt. You need to do wide research, 63%.'

Many such comments were inherent in the perused documents. Apparently, students receiving such comments may be confused as whether the lecturer is serious or the comments worth taking. Thus the comments made as indicated above tend to create dissonance and internal conflict to students.

CONCLUSIONS

The study was set to find out the concerns of teachers and students in assignment feedback comments in ODL. This was done with the understanding that assignments feedback comments play a critical role in the teaching and learning situation. The study indicated that lectures and students had an array of impediments in terms of delivery of assignment feedback comments. These impediments include lecturer work overload; failure by students to collect assignments and students' failure to act on feedback. Student failed to act on feedback because they would have collected assignments late due to travelling distances and late marking of assignments. Furthermore more some students did not act on feed back because of the disparaging comments and highly academic language used by lecturers. It also concluded that lecturers lacked competences to efficiently articulate feedback comments while others exhibited unethical practice in

the marking process. Poor hand writing also discouraged students from reading feedback comments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made in light of the findings highlighted in the study:

- Lecturers need to make comments that consider the level of the learners to enhance effective communication between the lecturers and the students.
- The University needs to staff develop lecturers on the marking of assignments and making feedback comments to enhance meaningful feedback comments.
- Lecturers need to be mandated to make assignment feedback comments.
- University need to introduce online marking of assignments for all students to ease on travelling distances to collect assignment as well as lecturers bad handwriting.
- Students need to be encouraged to share comments to enhance learning.
- Lectures need to make comments that are in harmony with marks.

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