

Feedback on Assignments in Distance Education

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Statement of the Problem

Tutor's feedback on assignments is an important issue in distance education: Cole, Coats and Lentell (1986) highlighted the «student's hopes for helpful tutors' attitudes, for having their work treated with respect», for reading explanations, justifications regarding the attributed grade, and suggestions for improvement; Price (1997) considered that «feedback may facilitate critical thinking, prompt and challenge students, and respond to the affective aspects of learning»; Thorpe (2000) reported a «feeling of deflation» experienced by students receiving no feedback; Ivanic & Rimmershaw (2000) described similar feelings among those receiving only grades without any suggestion of improvement; Van den Boom, Paas, Van Merriënboer and Van Gogh (2004, cited by Brown, 2007) believed that «the quality of a student's reflection is influenced by factors like external feedback». Finally, all these authors revealed that feedback on assignments may nurture several levels of learning support such as affective, cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social levels which matter in distance education according to Deschênes and Lebel (1994), Dionne et al. (1999), Deschênes, Gagné, Bilodeau and Dallaire (2001), Gagné, Deschênes, Bourdages, Bilodeau and Dallaire (2002). Feedback on assignments may also be appropriate to the learner's developmental level and may follow learner-centered psychological principles (American Psychological Association [APA], 1997, 2002). The point is: how can a supportive feedback on assignments be defined and described? We analyze and attempt to work out the question in this paper. Firstly, we provide a definition of a supportive feedback. Secondly, we describe two components of written feedbacks: the style and the type of the provided learning support. We extend Blanchet's work on styles (1985). We give examples of feedbacks we received as a former distance student, and other ones based on the literature. Our purpose is not to prescribe a feedback formula. We describe and analyze what could be a supportive feedback on assignments: the suggested framework may be useful for researches on written feedbacks, whatever the medium used in the communication process, or the type of distance courses involved (self-paced, group-based, Web-based or correspondence courses): online interactivity may be fruitfully used to enhance assignment development and feedback in distance education (Macdonald, 2001) and in Web-based education (Bonk & Dennen, 2003).

Supportive Feedback on Assignments in Distance Education

We define a feedback as supportive each time (a) it supports both the learner (as a person with needs, aspirations, and expectations) and the learning process, (b) it provides the learner with opportunities to reflect on his/her own work regarding at least seven perspectives (affective, cognitive, developmental, metacognitive, motivational, psychomotor, and social), (c) it provides the learner with meaningful opportunities to develop himself/herself and to redirect his/her own development toward his/her personal training goals.

Styles of Feedback on Assignments in Distance Education

When you write to your student, you may choose among different styles: declarative, interrogative (or questioning), or reiterative ones depending on the aim you want to achieve in the learning process. Each style has a function in the feedback communication process. Each time you write a sentence, you have to be aware of the consequences for your student: it's the very difficult part of the feedback

process offered at a distance because you cannot see your student and don't want to hurt or discourage him/her. On the other hand, you desire the student's development regarding the previously established training objectives. So, we would suggest that you may think twice before writing: be aware of what may disrupt the trusting relationship you have been involved in with your student. Let us detail now the following styles.

Declarative style. The style is declarative when you use declarative verbs (e.g. «I think, I consider, I believe, I approve...»). It authorizes the writer to show his/her position to the student about the assignment. Each time you tell the student «Here is how I consider your work», you use a declarative style (Blanchet, 1985). Your position may be the same as the student's one, or not. By putting your point of view under the student's consideration, you guide him/her to exit from his/her own position when different. You may reopen the dialogue if you have been able to previously create a trusting relationship: a dialogue is considered as «positive interactions with value placed on the synergistic nature of the parties involved» (Moore, 1993). Here are two examples:

- «I agree with the arguments you have used in the first part of your work ...».
- «I think that your results may be better explained in the third part of your work because [explanations]...».

Here, the writer makes known his/her position to the student about the rhetoric of the essay. But, he/she might give other explanations to the student: he can use the reiterative style, in order to help the student to deeply reflect on his/her own work and for a better understanding.

Reiterative style. The style is reiterative when you repeat, or reflect, the student's point of view or a student's assignment content (e.g. «In your work, you told that ...; the sentence that you wrote means ...»). It authorizes the writer to take something of the assignment content and to reformulate it in order to reflect on a skill or an attitude, for example. Each time you tell the student «Here is what I take from what you have given to me in your work», you use a reiterative style (Blanchet, 1985). By reformulating, or repeating what seems to be important, you are able to reflect on the learner or the learning process (APA, 1997, 2002). Here are two examples:

- «You have used in the first part of your work three theoretical frameworks which seem very useful for explaining the results you have obtained».
- «You have here adopted a new three-steps strategy».

The writer reflects the student's assignment content in a manner which may be convenient for the student. He/she tries to help the learner linking the existing knowledge (what the learner has written) with new knowledge (what the writer suggests).

Interrogative (questioning) style. The style is interrogative when you use questions directly or indirectly (e.g. «I ask you ... , what is ...?, could you please tell me ...?»). By asking questions, you reopen the dialogue. It authorizes the writer to ask something to the student regarding the assignment. The writer is curious, and wants to know more now, or in the future. Each time you tell the student «Here is what I want to know about the content of your work» (Blanchet, 1985), you use an interrogative style. Here are two examples:

- «In your opinion, what other experiment would be useful regarding your goals?».
- «Could you please correct this mistake in the future?».

Types of Feedback on Assignments in Distance Education

Affective feedback on assignments. Emotions are a part of ourselves. Emotional states are able to influence information processing during learning (Aslmeiner, 2000, 2001). Worrying about the awarded grade may lead to rumination, low performance and failure to go ahead: on the opposite side, positive emotions as curiosity and joy may lead to enhanced attention and better performance (APA, 1997; Fredrickson, 2003). Consequently, we must help learners: an affective feedback recognizes that emotional states are normal parts of ourselves, guides the learner toward his/her own emotional states, helps the learner to go through difficult feelings, reassures the learner for future learning, and avoids cognitive rationalizations. We would suggest that you invite the learner to share with you, or other significant persons, what he/she has experienced. Finally, let us never assume that silent learners feel well or are satisfied. Here are examples (examples created upon Coles et al.' work, 1986:21):

- «I know that you will probably feel sad after receiving your grade: whatever your reaction, take time for understanding errors, thinking and recovering. Also, be sure that I am here for helping you to cope with your reaction if you want to share it; don't hesitate to get in touch with me by calling, e-mailing, writing...».
- «Your work may have been very difficult, time consuming, even exhausting and it may have required difficult emotions. I encourage you to take time for you and eventually family members».

Cognitive feedback on assignments. We define cognitive feedback as more than asserting on the accuracy of the student's work and adding corrective information: however, performance feedback influences student learning (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2008) and that should be done. As stated by a distance learner (Cowan, 1994), «a feedback is really helpful to be sure about I've got right, and what I need to work more». In case of errors, let us help the learner to know the correct answer and give him/her tools for the next trial: learning means correct and incorrect answers. Secondly, we could help distance learners to construct knowledge by supporting them linking new informations with their existing knowledge (APA, 1997; Deschênes et al., 1996). The learner may be invited to develop a new theme; he may also be invited to call back or to write after having read and understood the feedback. Here are three examples:

- «I approve the results of your analysis; it's correct» (performance feedback).
- «You have provided a nice description of all the elements you have taken into account».
- «Could you please think about a new method which may be pertinent for your work in the future?».

Developmental feedback on assignments. According to different authors, distance students need to be «challenged, in the case of the stronger student» (Cole, Coats and Lentell, 1986), to become «able to develop their own way», and «to be able to construct their own learning environment» progressing from different stages of development («fresher, novice, intermediate, expert and graduate») described by Beaty and Morgan (1992). Because adult distance learners come from different backgrounds, schools, communities, and cultures, they are at different stages of development. These developmental differences may be taken into account in creating «optimal learning contexts» (APA, 1997, 2002). Consequently, developmental feedbacks may be a part of these optimal learning contexts. A developmental feedback relates to the student's development regarding the course, the program, and their personal training goals. It is designed to further growth, to improve skills, and is adapted to the learner's development. Here are examples of developmental feedbacks:

- «I think that you have significantly progressed: I also highlight that you would be now able to apply your knowledge on your own in new contexts».

- «Are you now ready for building your next learning path with another assignment?».
- «By comparison with your first homework, you demonstrate here that you are in control ...».

Metacognitive feedback on assignments. In distance education, feedback might also lead students to engage themselves with critical thinking and self-reflecting (APA, 1997, 2002). We consider strategy feedback used in traditional education (Pressley et al., 1990 cited by Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008) as one kind of metacognitive feedback we can promote in distance education. We can also perform a metacognitive feedback on assignments in several ways: documenting new ways to find information, developing alternative methods to be successful, asking students to experiment new methods and tools. Here are two examples:

- «You provided a right answer to the first question because you have used the right strategy» (declarative style, linking a performance to a strategy).
- «Could you think about the successful three-step method you have used here for the next homework?».

Motivational feedback on assignments. A feedback is motivational every time (a) it provides encouragements, (b) it reflects students' self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-competency, (c) it questions the learner's expectancies, interests, values, attitudes or satisfaction (APA, 1997, 2002). Here are several examples:

- «I know you can perform this task».
- «I know you are interested in this theme: you told me at the beginning of the course...!».
- «Are you still interested in this content?».
- «Keep on writing! you seem loving it!».

Social feedback on assignments. Interactions and collaborations with other significant persons participate in the learning process (APA, 1997, 2002). Inside academic distance education settings, there are peers, instructors, librarians, academic advisors, ... and outside, distance learners may also benefit from interacting with family members, significant others and coworkers on the workplace especially for adult learners. Here are several examples of social feedbacks:

- «I think that you may ask for help to a librarian».
- «I can understand your isolation feeling while doing your homework».
- «Will you share with other learners the relevant results you have presented in your homework?».
- «I think it was a good idea to share your work with coworkers».

Conclusion

Crossing the style and the type of the provided feedback leads to a useful framework in research. On another hand, by looking at their own styles and types of feedbacks, tutors, instructors, and professors may also become aware of their own practices and be able to reflect on their professional endeavours in distance education.

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