

Facilitators' Comments On Assignment Responses: A Challenge For Distance Educators At Domasi College Of Education

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ABSTRACT

In any distance education system, facilitators' comments on assignment responses play a crucial role. This is because the distance learners' face-to-face contact with facilitators is minimal, and therefore academic support is carried out mainly by means of comments on assignment responses.

Domasi College of Education, which offers tertiary education by distance mode faces a lot of challenges in handling distance learners' assignment responses. These challenges could be attributed to many factors.

Assignments from first, second and third year teacher learners were sampled. Most of the comments written by facilitators were not clear, not specific, too brief, demoralizing and misleading. Some assignments had question marks only; others just carried a mark without any comments and in other cases, sentences were just underlined with no explanation.

This paper explains why facilitators do not make constructive comments as is expected in distance education. It also explains how teacher learners can fully benefit from feedback as they study by distance.

INTRODUCTION

In any distance education system, facilitators' comments on assignment responses play a crucial role. This is because the distance learners' face-to-face contact is minimal and therefore academic support is carried out mainly by means of comments on assignment responses.

Domasi College of Education is the only institution in Malawi that is currently training secondary school teachers through both conventional and distance modes. As a dual mode institution, the college faces a lot of challenges in handling distance learners' assignment responses. These challenges could be attributed to many factors.

Marked assignment responses from first, second and third year teacher learners were sampled. Most of the comments written by course facilitators were not clear, not specific, too brief, demoralizing and misleading. Some assignment responses had question marks only, others just carried a mark and in other cases sentences were just underlined with no explanation.

This paper therefore attempts to explain why facilitators do not make constructive comments as is expected in distance education .It also provides suggestions as to how teacher learners can be assisted to benefit fully from feedback as they study by distance.

METHODOLOGY

Data was collected using two instruments, that a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was administered to thirty percent of the teacher learners in first, second, and third cohorts. Thirty percent of the lecturers who happen to be course facilitators were also interviewed. In both cases the teacher learners and lecturers were chosen through random sampling.

Out of the 90 teacher learners that were identified to complete the questionnaire, 81 teacher learners responded. Fifty-six percent of the sample were males and forty-four percent female. The sample represented teacher learners with different subject combinations and the sampling cut across all faculties thus science, humanities and education. The following were the findings.

SURVEY RESULTS

FEEDBACK ON MARKED ASSIGNMENT RESPONSES.

Ninety-three percent of the participants indicated that they receive feedback on marked assignment responses whereas seven percent reported that they do not receive feedback. Asked as to how often they receive feedback on assignment responses, fifty-three percent indicated that they get feedback frequently while forty-seven indicated

that they rarely receive feedback. From the results, it can be concluded that most course facilitators are doing well in administering assignments even though there is a slight weakness on how frequently adequate feedback is given. It is worth pointing out that frequent feedback is important and must be encouraged in distance education because it compensates for the minimal face-to-face interaction.

PRESENCE OF COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENT RESPONSES

When asked whether facilitators write comments on their marked scripts or not, 31% indicated that the marked scripts are accompanied by facilitators comments, 20% indicated no comments and 49% indicated that this is rarely done. This state of affairs is somehow worrisome because the teacher learners may not know areas for improvement. This may result into lack of proper direction in tackling future assignments. In addition, they may end up repeating the same mistakes.

ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE COMMENTS

YES VERY MUCH	21 %
NOT VERY MUCH	63 %
NOT AT ALL	16 %

Similarly, the teacher learners were asked to indicate their ability to understand or follow the comments written by facilitators on their marked scripts. Sixty-eight teacher learners representing 84% of the total sample responded. Only 21% indicated that they understood the comments very much. Sixty-three percent indicated that they understood the comments but not very much and 16% indicated not at all. Although 21% indicated that the comments were clear and constructive, 79% indicated comments that ranged from having been understood to not being understood at all. The teacher learners' responses are a true reflection of some of the comments taken from the sampled marked scripts like:

“what do you mean”?

“you have beaten about the bush”

“did you read your module before answering the question”?

“reread your module and attempt the question once again”

“this is hopeless.”

Looking at these comments critically, it is clear that the teacher learners can hardly make sense out of them. This is because the comments do not expose any weaknesses or strengths of the assignment responses neither do they provide the way forward. Even if, for instance, the teacher learner rereads the module and attempts the question once again, he or she is bound to fail or repeat the same mistakes because the course facilitator has not guided the teacher learner in any way.

USE OF NONVERBAL REMARKS

Besides the verbal comments, it was also noted that the course facilitators use non-verbal remarks when marking distance learners' work. Some of the nonverbal remarks used and in their order of frequency are:

- Question marks
- Underlining
- Side brackets
- Double checkmarks.

ABILITY TO INTERPRET THE NONVERBAL REMARKS

Seventy-six teacher learners representing 93.9% of the total sample responded to the question on the comprehension/understanding of the non-verbal remarks as presented below.

YES AT ALL TIMES	6.6%
YES AT TIMES	38.1%
NOT ALWAYS	35.52%
NOT AT ALL	19.73%

From the results, it may be concluded that majority of the teacher learners have problems in interpreting the nonverbal remarks. What this implies is that the teacher learners do not benefit much from such remarks. It is worth pointing out that nonverbal remarks do not confirm or question, illustrate or explain, refute or approve anything (Koul, 2000). Even though they indicate that the facilitator has read the answer, distance learners cannot interpret anything out of them.

However if the symbols were to be helpful, they should be given a verbal value, which is known, by both the course facilitators and the teacher learners. In this way, the

nonverbal remarks can have a communicative value. But then it cannot be ruled out that sometimes facilitators may use the nonverbal remarks to tone down the effects of writing discouraging comments repeatedly. Sometimes, the facilitator may feel like repeating a comment or more or less similar remarks at several places in the same assignment or page. Instead of wasting time writing such remarks repeatedly, he or she may write the comment once and use one particular symbol, which denotes such a comment at all the places. However, repetitions can be made should the facilitator feel like doing so.

FREQUENCY OF RECEIVING ASSIGNMENTS RESPONSES WITH A GRADE BUT NO REMARKS

ALWAYS	23%
RARELY	72%
NOT AT ALL	5%

The results clearly show that some course facilitators just award grades without any explanation. However the teacher learners should know why they have scored the given grade through comments that course facilitators write. The main aim is to justify the grade given .In this way; a lot of misconceptions are cleared. It should be pointed out that whether the learners have scored good grades or not, remarks should still be written on their assignment responses. The comments may serve several purposes like:

- encouraging the learners to continue working hard
- providing suggestions for improvement
- exposing the learners strong and weak points and many others.

ABILITY TO INTERPRET THE GRADE WITH NO REMARKS

YES	20%
NO	80%

In an attempt to find out whether the teacher learners are able to interpret the grade without any remarks, results overwhelmingly show that the majority of the teacher learners were not able to interpret the grade. In distance education or even in a conventional programme, a grade becomes more meaningful to the learners if it is accompanied by comments or remarks. These comments perform several functions like:

- keeping the distance learners motivated on the courses
- breaking the walls of isolation which the distance learners are surrounded by
- helping the learners improve their learning.

REASONS FOR FAILURE TO WRITE COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENT RESPONSES

From what has been discussed so far, it has been noted that some facilitators do not write comments on the teacher learners assignment responses as is expected of them in distance education. The author was interested to find out from both course facilitators and the teacher learners the reasons behind this failure. Seventy teacher learners representing 86.9% of the total sample responded. The following were the responses presented in order of frequency:

- | | |
|---|------|
| ▪ pressure of work | 70% |
| ▪ too many commitments | 20% |
| ▪ laziness | 4.9% |
| ▪ lack of interest in distance learners' work | 5.8% |

These results show that facilitators fail to write comments in certain cases due to pressure of work and too many commitments. It is worth pointing out that Domasi College of Education is a dual mode institution and the course facilitators being referred to in this paper are the same ones who handle both conventional and distance education programmes. This is a big challenge for them because they are expected to work throughout the year.

Almost all course facilitators interviewed also indicated pressure of work and too many commitments as the major reasons for failure to write comments as is expected. These two factors featured highly quite in agreement with what the teacher learners said. Besides these factors, the course facilitators came up with the following challenges as contributing to their failure to write comments on marked assignment responses:

Poor communication skills

Every course facilitator that was interviewed lamented that most teacher learners fail to express ideas well in English. This, they said puts them off as they are marking .In addition it is impossible for them to comment on each and every mistake or point they

come across since time is already a constraint. But, even though this is the case; the concerned course facilitators could still make comments by highlighting the strong and weak points of the assignment response and suggesting areas for improvement in the global comment should they feel that commenting throughout the assignment is tedious.

Too large numbers

Numbers of learners are too large particularly in humanities and education courses .In education, for example, one cohort has approximately 300 teacher learners and it is not easy for the course facilitators to go through each script and comment on the same. However, there are instances where tutor markers have been identified to assist with marking.

Lack of originality in teacher learners' work

It was indicated that most teacher learners' responses lack originality. Teacher learners just copy ideas from the modules. Resourcefulness, originality and creativity lack in most assignment responses. This point does not seem to have a direct bearing on course facilitators' failure to write comments on the learners' assignment responses. If the reason is that they are easily put off when marking because of lack of originality or creativity, they could still make comments that suggest how the teacher learners could be original, creative and resourceful in their assignment responses. They could also design the assignment in such a way that it requires creative thinking if that is an expectation.

Failure to understand the question being asked

It has been observed that the majority of the teacher learners have problems in comprehending the questions. As a result, they fail to give correct responses. They sometimes copy information from the modules even if it does not agree with the questions being asked. If the teacher learners have given wrong responses to the question asked, it remains the responsibility of the course facilitators to predict such weaknesses and explain the assignment with thoroughly written instructions so that the same mistakes are not repeated in future. Silence may just aggravate the problem rather than expecting learners to "read their minds."

Low incentives

Some of the course facilitators indicated that they are not motivated to take time writing constructive comments because of low payment that accompanies the marking of assignment responses. This issue is an administrative one and can only be sorted out if funds are available.

SUGGESTED FACILITATORS' ROLES IN HANDLING TEACHER LEARNERS' ASSIGNMENT RESPONSES

Despite the numerous challenges course facilitators face, there is still need to help distance learners so that they benefit fully from comments on assignment responses as they study by distance. The following are some suggestions.

- Give clear written instructions on what the question is looking for bearing in mind that the teacher learner, as a distance learner, is in most cases isolated from the course facilitators, institution and fellow teacher learners.
- Explain symbols used when marking assignment responses. In this way, any misconceptions may be cleared.
- Write constructive comments. Such comments offer suggestions as to how the answer could have been improved. They do not negate what the learners have written nor do they approve of it.
- Write comments that will give teacher learners hope to move on. Comments like
 - “this is a hopeless case”
 - “think before you write anything”
 - “are you answering the question?”
 - “this a waste of ink and paper,”cannot help the teacher learners in any way. They are demoralizing and can prevent them from forging ahead. Such comments should be avoided in distance education or even any conventional programme.
- Clearly state writing style in terms of introduction, development and conclusion. If these are well captured, the teacher learners will be less likely to lose direction.

- Clearly explain the marking format, which should be well specified. How many marks, for example, will be awarded in the introduction, development and conclusion? How about discussions of points raised in the assignment responses? Much as this example is applicable mostly to humanities and education courses, science course facilitators can also come up with their own specific format depending on the nature of the question.
- Justify a grade given. The teacher learners should know why they have scored the given grades. Such justification is usually done at the end of an assignment response. Once the course facilitators have offered comments at all the relevant places in the body of an assignment response, a global comment must be written to cover the entire assignment response with reference to various aspects of the answer. Global comments explain grades. Every learner is keen on knowing his or her grades and in most cases the first thing, (s) he looks for in an assignment response is the grade and the reason behind it, whether it is an A or C.If every assignment response is returned with a comment on the grade it bears, there is a greater possibility of improving learner performance.
- Clearly explain strong and weak points of an assignment response. Once this is done, it gives direction to the learners. The language used however should be positive and constructive.
- Take time to read assignment responses and write comments so that the learners are convinced that the facilitators read them. This should be practiced at all times. It encourages the learners that even though they are isolated physically from the facilitators, fellow teacher learners and the institution, the facilitators still care about their performance.
- Put a tick or cross against right or wrong answer. These should be accompanied by comments, which are written along the margins of the assignment response and usually beside the right or wrong point.

SUMMARY

Facilitators' comments in any assignment response play a crucial role. As already pointed out, the distance learners' face to face contact with the facilitators is minimal,

and, therefore teaching is carried out mainly by means of comments on assignment responses. Since the teacher learners are new to the distance mode of education, it is the duty of course facilitators to initiate communication straightaway and this can best be done through their comments. Facilitators' comments are without doubt significant since they are both the content and vehicle of communication, which affects learning.

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