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TECHNOLOGY -KUMASI – GHANA.**

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CHALLENGES AND EFFECTS OF PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO IMPROVE LEARNING
IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY OF
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY -KUMASI – GHANA.

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ABSTRACT

Feedback system in all learning institutions have been found to be beneficial to the institution concerned, teachers/ lecturers as well as students. This is because they help each of the groups concerned to make the necessary adjustments or modifications for the welfare of the institution in question and the students who have enrolled for the various program in that particular institution. This paper presents a report on how students reading their program by the distance learning mode are given feedback by their facilitators and how useful the feedback is to them. Again, an attempt

has been made to address some of the challenges the feedback has both on the students and the institution as a whole as well as examine the effects of the feedback on the students. Primary and secondary data were used to elicit information from a sample of (N=100) being Institute of Distance Learning (IDL) Students of KNUST. Primary data were elicited through interviews whilst secondary data were secured from publications and journals relating to feedback systems. These data were analyzed and conclusion drawn. The findings of the study revealed that majority of lecturers/facilitators are not able to give feedback to students at the time that the students would have wished to receive and make good use of it. Finally, probable recommendations and conclusion are made to enable IDL share the concerns with the facilitators they employ to assist them make a conscious effort to provide feedback to students on time.

Key Words: feedback, assignment, facilitators, feedback systems, challenges, effect

Introduction

From time immemorial, students have been anxious about their grades in class quizzes, tests, assignments, and end of term/semester examination. Some students are in the habit of even finding out about their results some few days after writing a class quiz or test and few after writing terminal examination. The reasons for such actions or behaviour are obvious. Where the student is confident that whatever he handed in is good, he would want to confirm by finding out from the lecturer and setting his mind free from writing the test/examination again for a better grade. Similarly, students who may not have prepared well for the test/examination would want to find out about their performance to enable them know their stand.

Feedback is seen as one of the most vital concepts in the learning environment. Generally, all facilitators would like to provide each student with a detailed, personal feedback on all assignments, tests/quizzes or examinations. However, facilitators are unable to provide any in-depth feedback on regular basis. Feedback may either be summative or formative. Summative feedback assists students to tell how well or otherwise they have performed in a particular class, course or programme at the end of a particular year. Formative feedback tells us what we are doing right now and what we need to improve before the endpoint is reached (Indiana State University, 2005). As most students often expect instant responses to questions, discussions, quizzes and examinations, the idea of students having to wait for several weeks or months for the feedback is not appreciated by any student.

LITERATURE

Most Distance Learning Instructors are supposed to perform the role of a facilitator. Where the institution has its material well prepared ahead of time, there is no need for any facilitator to work on any course material. On the other hand, if there are no course materials, the institute could employ the services of some experts in that particular programme to work on the needed course materials and get them printed for the programmes concerned. The facilitator acts as an instructor, guide, and resource provider. He may also serve as a source of moving from a solitary teacher to a member of learning team, moving from total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the students as a fellow learner... (Berge, 2003). It could therefore be argued that in any distance learning programme, the learning process must be designed to among other things, encourage and challenge learners to construct their own meaning and create new knowledge (Gibson, 1998). As learners are encouraged by their facilitators and try to create their own strategy for studies, they

would be in a better position to organize themselves adequately for any class exercise, quiz or examination. Spiraa, (1998) commenting on students' feedback argues that according to research, learning takes place more rapidly when students receive immediate and continual feedback. The ability of the lecturer/facilitator to sit up and set achievable targets that would enhance his capability of accomplishing the task in good time creates the impression that there is the need for the lecturer/facilitator to sit up and set achievable targets that would enhance his capability of accomplishing the task in good time. Where the lecturer/facilitator wants to respond in the time frame that meets the students' expectations, the workload is supposedly increased for him.

In distance learning, it so happens that the facilitators cannot really rely on the same interaction that exists between the teacher/lecturer in the traditional classroom. This calls for the elimination of most of the visual cues which instructors rely on in order to adjust their instructional methodologies (Smaldino, 2003). In an environment where distance learning takes place, most of the facilitators are deprived of the importance of glancing quickly around the classroom to ascertain whether students are really paying attention. Neither do they have enough time after the class to engage in so much conversation after each session to find out if students really understand the course material that they are using for their programme. It is interesting to note that feedback has been identified as one of the vital tools for effective distance learning facilitation. This is because distance learning students are regarded as being far apart from the traditional classroom atmosphere and other facilities in the institution, which are prevalent in the traditional system. Distance learning students easily become discouraged when they find out that the feedback, they are expecting at a particular time, is not forthcoming. It could be argued that it is critical to provide students with prompt feedback, but for distance learners, this feedback is important (Spitzer,2001).

It is worth noting that the type of feedback in the facilitator giving a feedback in the distance environment is more of a one-to-one affair unless it has to do with examination results which need to be released on the school's notice board.

Types of Feedback in the Educational Environment

Feedback in the educational environment could be said to be acknowledgement feedback, information feedback, immediate feedback, delayed feedback, and corrective feedback.

Acknowledgement Feedback

This type of feedback assures the students that some event has taken place. To cite as an example, the distant learner submits an assignment or project by way of sending e-mail and the lecturer/facilitator sends a message that enables the student to know that the assignment was sent and received successfully. It could be argued that in distance learning face-to-face sessions, acknowledgement feedback is often neglected because it requires purposeful effort on the part of the lecturer/facilitator (Graham et al, 2002). It is therefore worth noting that in any distance learning environment, lecturers/facilitators must endeavour to relay immediate acknowledgement feedback whenever they receive any assignment via e-mail. This is mainly due to the fact that the students lack the assurance of having personally handed in the assignment or project (Arctemeier et al, 2003)

Informational Feedback

Informational feedback is the type of feedback that can be evaluated or get the student well informed about his performance. Graham et al (2002) contend that responding to students'

questions and posting assignment grades or comments could be cited as examples of the informational type of feedback.

Immediate Feedback

Bogen et al, (2001) describe this type of feedback as the various types of feedback that become immediately accessible to the student as he engages in the learning process. To cite as an example, class quizzes or examinations could be organized for the students. When the quizzes or examinations are marked, it will then be the facilitator's duty to provide learners with correct answers together with explanations as to why the answers are right or wrong.

Delayed Feedback

In the case of the delayed feedback, the learner writes a quiz/examination and the quiz/examination is submitted and the lecturer/facilitator gives the learner the correct answers later. Studies conducted by Ogivile, (2003) on what effects immediate and delayed feedback have on learners revealed that learners who receive immediate feedback after an assignment has been submitted are likely to gain a slightly higher grade than those who receive feedback delayed a few days. This presupposes that immediate feedback is more effective than delayed feedback.

Corrective Feedback

Corrective Feedback could be described as any comments or suggestions, which the lecturer/facilitator gives to a learner either verbally or in writing on any assignments, quizzes and

examinations. Additionally, it informs the student by way of the lecturer/ facilitator providing the specific suggestions as to how to improve the answer or which resources would be needed to enable the learner get the right answer. More often than not, when the student receives this type of feedback, there is a tendency for him to gain a better understanding of the course material. To this end, it could be argued that lecturer/facilitator feedback should supply the learner with information about his performance and also provide him with self-assessment (Looms, 1997). To this end, Deans, (1998) asserts that factors such as the amount and nature of feedback received from the instructor of a distance learning course play a part in the eventual success of the student. It could therefore be argued that students should be given useful and corrective feedback whenever they start reading any course of their choice.

According to Willis, (2002) suggestions for improving feedback may include the following:

- Making detailed comments on written assignments that refer to additional sources for supplementary information
- Returning assignments without delay
- Taking note of students who do not participate during the first session and contacting them individually and
- Integrating a variety of delivery systems for interaction and feedback, including one-one conference calls, e-mail and computer conferencing.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of the study were to find out:

1. How students reading their programmes by the distance learning mode are given feedback by their facilitators
2. How useful the feedback is to them.
3. The challenges the feedback has on the students and the institution.
4. The effects of the feedback on the students.

METHODOLOGY

A total of one hundred students were selected at random from KNUST distance learning students being offered Commonwealth of Learning Executive Masters in Business/ Public Administration, Computer Engineering, and Building Technology Programmes at the undergraduate level. Interviews were used to solicit the views of the students on the issue of feedback systems in the KNUST with particular reference to the Institute of Distance learning students.

Interviews were conducted over a period of two and a half months. The interviewers first enlightened the participants on the purpose of the interview. The informed consent of the participants was also sought. Again, the right atmosphere was established and this made the participants feel secure to talk freely. The manner in which the responses were going to be recorded was discussed as suggested by Tuckman (1972). The interviews were not transcribed since the researchers did not want to lose so much data from the original encounter with the participants Cohen et al (2001:281)

A ten-item questionnaire was designed to serve as the questions for the interview. Each participant was interviewed as the researchers wanted to listen to find out the participant's own perceptions

about the feedback systems in IDL. The unstructured type of interview was employed as it gave the researchers freedom to modify the sequence of question, change the wordings and explain it to them. Kerlinger (1986) affirms that with this type of interview, though the research purposes govern the questions asked, their content, sequence and wording are entirely in the hands of the interviewer.

Both open and closed questions were employed. The fixed alternative questions allowed the participants to choose from two or more alternatives. These were set to assist researchers achieve greater uniformity of measurement and therefore greater reliability of making the participants answer in such a way as to fit the response category (Cohen et al. 2001). Similarly, the open ended questions gave the interviewee the freedom to express himself without many restrictions on either the content or message of the interviewee's reply.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Background of Participants

Item 1: Gender

Out of a total population of 100 students, 70% were males and 30% females. This gives an indication that only few females enrol for science-bias programmes.

Item 2: The course materials are explanatory and aid my learning.

To this question, 85% answered in the affirmative whilst 10% said some aspects of the course materials could not be readily understood whenever they tried to study it on their own. The remaining 5% could not take any stand and so they said the course materials were neither fully explanatory nor did the materials wholly aided their learning.

Item 3: Do you discuss your assignments before writing it out?

To this question, all the interviewees responded positively. This implies that the discussion of the assignments helps all the students to be clear of what they are supposed to do in order to present a good and well-written assignment. Learners who do not seem to understand the assignment would also feel free to ask further questions from their colleagues.

Item 4 Do you submit your assignment on time?

To this question, 90% said they submit their assignment on time. The remaining 10% said they did occasionally submit it late and it was due to illness or forgetfulness to submit it on the due date. They however lamented that after submitting the assignment; they did not receive any feedback and do not receive their marks.

Item 5. Do you tell lecturers/facilitators you want a feedback?

Almost all the interviewees (90%) said they do give feedback whilst the remaining 10% said they occasionally do receive feedback. This presupposes that though feedback may delay, they do receive feedback at a point in time,

Item 6: Do you write quizzes?

All interviewees responded in the affirmative.

Item 7: How often do you write quizzes?

To this question, 55% of the interviewees said they do write quizzes twice a semester whilst the remaining 45% commented that they usually write one quiz depending on the course they are reading.

Item 8: Do you receive your marked assignment?

Incidentally, all the interviewees responded that they do not receive their marked assignments. They lamented that this has been one of their challenges and they did not actually know the measures to take in order to curtail the situation.

Item 9: If you receive a positive feedback, what would you do?

Half of the interviewees representing 50% said they would work harder to maintain their standard and also it would motivate them to work harder. It would also assist them to know which modules they need to devote more attention to in order to excel.

Item 10: If you receive a negative feedback, what would you do?

Almost all the interviewees (90%) commented that even if they received negative feedback on their quizzes, assignments or examinations, it would encourage them to work harder by way of asking for additional information or clarification from the lecturer/facilitator on those modules or courses concerned. Again, it would assist them to know which areas of their modules need to be given more attention.

Table 1. Analysis of Interview Results

S/N	Issue	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Undecided (%)	Total (%)
2	The course materials are explanatory and aid my learning	85	10	5	100
3	I discuss assignment before writing them out	100	0	0	100
4	I submit assignment on time	90	10	0	100
5	I tell lecturers/ facilitators I want feedback	90	10	0	100
6	I write quiz	100	0	0	100
7	I receive marked assignment	0	100	0	100

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made by this paper to look at students' feedback system with emphasis on the type of feedback that lectures/facilitators give to students after they have written an assignment, quiz or an examination. It is apparent that majority of the lecturers/facilitators are not able to give the necessary feedback at a time that students would have preferred.

The idea of seeking feedback is very important be it on the part of the lecturer/facilitator or student. This is because as a lecturer/facilitator, it helps to improve on one's teaching style, preparation of lecture notes and writing of course materials for use by the students. Similarly, on the part of students, feedback would help them to identify their weaknesses in some particular areas of their study.

It could be argued that it would be in the interest of the lecturer/facilitator to devise modern ways of giving feedback in addition to the traditional method in order to facilitate promptness in giving feedback to the students. Where the students have access to the computer, the lecturer/facilitator could decide to inform students that he would send their feedback via internet. The lecturer/facilitator should however bear in mind that before he relays this information to the students, he should have a list of e-mail addresses of all the students.

Again where the grades will not be used as part of their continuous assessment, the lecturer/facilitator may decide to put students in groups and allow them to answer some given questions within a limited time frame. The lecturer/ facilitator should have worked on the answers for the questions that each group would be tackling so that as soon as the allotted time is up, students could

share their responses with the class and the lecturer/facilitator would give them the final correct answers. Students would like to see their marked scripts and after that lecturers/facilitators could take them back to the archives.

Additionally, instead of the lecturer/facilitators giving students a total summary of their performance, students would be happy to see their results in the different subjects and the grades obtained. Feedback given should be as regular and punctual as it used to be. It would be in the right direction if lecturers/facilitators make comments or suggestions on marked assignments before they are given to students. It could be argued that lecturers/facilitators should be able to discuss questions for the assignment/quizzes after marking scripts or after assignments have been submitted. For students to excel, coursework should be given to them at the beginning of the semester to enable students have enough time to read and do more research. There should be a free flow of information from the students to the lecturers /facilitators and from the students to the institution concerned and vice-versa.

Finally, it is envisaged that improvement on how to give feedback to students would be addressed; the recommendation made would be examined critically and given the best of consideration by the lecturer/facilitators of all programmes being organised by the Institute of Distance Learning and other distance learning institutions in the developing countries.

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