

PROVIDING FEEDBACK ON STUDENT WORK IN DISTANCE EDUCATION IN TURKEY: Practices and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

In distance education, providing feedback on student work has a key role in facilitating learning and teacher- student dialogue. This article examines the distance learning context and providing feedback in this great but challenging system. It draws on the experiences of 200 distance learners enrolled in different programs in the Open Education Faculty at Anadolu University in Turkey.

Its purpose is to find out whether distance students are provided any feedback by their faculty, whether they think that feedback provision is beneficial in distance learning process, and lastly whether they would like their faculty to provide them with some feedback. The survey is based on a questionnaire including three questions to which distance learners can respond briefly as yes or no and, if desired, they can expand their ideas with their own sentences.

The results of the study suggest that distance learners are , on the whole, provided no feedback. Of 200 DL, 180 % of them regard feedback provision as a beneficial part of their distance learning process and want to have some feedback mechanisms in their faculty, yet 20% of the learners think just the opposite by saying that it is not something beneficial and they do not need it.

In the conclusion part, considering the high proportion in demand of feedback provision, certain feedback mechanisms will be introduced to make the distance learning process more appealing, encouraging, and fruitful for distance learners.

Keywords: Distance education, feedback, feedback in distance education, feedback mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

Distance education provides a great number of students who cannot or do not want to make use of classroom teaching with an opportunity to have a university degree in many countries all over the world. More than 100.000 of students have demanded and appeared in these large systems of distance education per year (Keegan, 1996). Relevant to these very large systems of distance education, 'Open Education Faculty' at Anadolu University is the number one in Turkey, established in 1982, and is continuing its distance education with increasing demand for higher education (Alkan, 1987). It has been supplying education in many subjects through printed materials, television programs and academic counseling (Demiray, 1990).

With the developing technology, a web page (eogrenme.anadolu.edu.tr) has been provided for the distance learners through which some e- learning opportunities, such as e-book, e-exam, e-counseling, e-exercises, e-television, and so on are satisfactorily included (aöf. anadolu. 2009). However, when administering a questionnaire to the distance learners in Open Educational Faculty, a deficiency in that perfect circulation has been found out, which is the lack of providing feedback that the students need to internalize their progress on the way of distance education.

In distance education, providing feedback on student work has a key role in facilitating learning and teacher- student dialogue.

This article examines the distance learning context and providing feedback in this great but challenging system. It draws on the experiences of 200 distance learners enrolled in different programs in the Open Education Faculty at Anadolu University in Turkey. Its purpose is to find out whether distance students are provided any feedback by their faculty, whether they think that feedback provision is beneficial in distance learning process, and lastly whether they would like their faculty to provide them with some feedback. The survey is based on a questionnaire including three questions to which distance learners can respond briefly as yes or no and, if desired, they can expand their ideas with their own sentences. The results of the study suggest that distance learners are, on the whole, provided no feedback. Of 200 DL, 180 % of them regard feedback provision as a beneficial part of their distance learning process and want to have some feedback mechanisms in their faculty, yet 20% of the learners think just the opposite by saying that it is not something beneficial and they do not need it. In the conclusion part, considering the high proportion in demand of feedback provision, certain feedback mechanisms will be introduced to make the distance learning process more appealing, encouraging, and fruitful for distance learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance Learning Context

To comprehend some of the factors that may have a bearing upon providing feedback on student work in distance learning context, Keegan (1990, p.44) points out five main elements of distance education: the separation of teacher and the learner; the influence of an educational organization; the use of technical media (usually print) to unite the teacher and learner and to carry educational content; the provision of two-way communication so that the student can benefit from or even initiate dialogue; and the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes. In this respect, distance learning as an educational approach can be defined as the integration of technology, connectivity, curricular content, and human resources (Wilson, 2002). The most striking point here is that distance education is any type of education in which learners and instructors are separated from one another by physical distance (Whalstrom, 2003) or time.

In this distance learning process, it is not to be disregarded that the DL needs more chances to seek explanation, help and interact, all of which, in turn enable them to assess their performance in their learning environment (White, 1994). On the other hand, White (1995, 1997) suggests, in subsequent studies, that distance learners are able to turn these apparently adverse aspects of their learning environment to their advantage by making better use of metacognitive strategies like self management, advance organization and revision.

Furthermore, Powell (2001, p.147-150) points out that identifying and self- correcting at least some of their faults is one of the key metacognitive skills that students must develop in distance learning. However, students' ability to correct certain faults by themselves can be questioned if they are not first alerted to them. Thus, such feedback needs to engage both the teacher and the student in the learning process. This aspect of providing feedback is particularly crucial in DL, given its potential for fostering reflection and learner autonomy. (Hyland, 2001). Indeed, marking the student's work can facilitate learning by stimulating tutor- student dialogue (Jarvis, 1978).

Feedback In Distance Education

Providing feedback is identified as one of the most prominent principles for good practice in teaching, which prompts the idea that feedback, especially positive one, has a positive effect on learners in terms of their attitude and achievement (Chickering and Gamson, 1987).

In fact, providing feedback to students is very significant in all class formats but it can be a bit more challenging in distance learning context than in the virtual classroom in that the teacher in distance education often feels frustrated due to the ongoing multiple e-mails and phone tags with students. When considering the assignments, it can be rather difficult to decide upon the best way, the alternatives of which will be expounded in following parts, to provide individual comments to students and send their written work back with meaningful feedback. Feedback provision to a distance learning student is particularly important because correcting and commenting on student's work provides the student with a great opportunity allowing her/him to build a relationship with the teacher as the student has fewer chances to ask for clarification on assignments. In this sense, a great variety of methods can be used for providing feedback to DE learners, which can change depending on student preferences, the design of the distance learning curriculum and the mechanism available for deliverance in the current situation. However, among these varying methods, only two main types of feedback and some strategies involved in those types can be mentioned for implementing in distance learning courses. Of these two fundamental types, the former is information feedback, which is informational and evaluative in nature and often given in response to a student question or as an assignment grade and comments. Here are some strategies that are practically usable for informative feedback:

- Put a plan in place for grading and returning assignments in a timely manner.
- Set a schedule for responding to discussions on some discussion boards that the DL students are constantly using.
- List grading criteria for the course and for individual assignments.
- Arrange office hours or live class discussions.
- Use the PDF scanner to return assignments with the teacher's written comments.
- Use Microsoft Word or Adobe Acrobat to insert electronic comments into assignments that the teacher sends back to the students.
- Develop some tests and quizzes and post them on the web page of DE faculty/university.
- Structure assignments so that students can provide feedback to each other.

The latter of the types is acknowledgment feedback, where the DL students are confirmed and assured that some event has taken place. The strategies listed below can easily be transferred to the distance learning setting:

- Set a response policy and state it in the syllabus.
- Take note of students who fail to participate in (exams, seminars, programs, etc.) and notify them about that drop off privately.
- Set aside time to let students know their assignments have been received.
- Use special assignment submission programs.

When it comes to feedback provision at Open Education Faculty at Anadolu University in Turkey, it can be noted that mostly information type of feedback and some of the strategies within the framework of that type are being used currently quite relevant to the assessment system of the faculty, which is mostly based on two examinations, one 30 point mid-term and one 70 point final exam.

If the distance learners of the faculty get 50 points from their examinations, they are accepted as successful students and pass the course; otherwise, they fail on having a grade below 50 points and this informative feedback is announced throughout two feedback mechanisms, which are the DL students' private mail account and the posting services of the country.

The results, being evaluated according to definite grading criteria, are delivered in a punctual manner. During that assessment process, the DL students are not supposed to submit any papers, assignments or projects so the faculty does not need to provide the students with corrective feedback. The system shows us that especially the information feedback and its related strategies are being satisfactorily made use of whilst acknowledgment feedback is not necessarily used in the distance learning context of Open Education Faculty in Turkey. In the following section, the ideas of distance learners on feedback provision at the faculty will be presented and explained in detail.

METHOD

This study was based on a survey of distance learners who are believed to have relevant experience with being provided feedback on their work at 'Open Education Faculty', Anadolu University in Turkey.

Subject

The subjects in this study were 200 students from many different departments (accounting, business, economics, public administration, public relations, and so on) at Open Education Faculty of Anadolu University in Turkey. All of the students were distance learners and never had face-to-face lessons. The distance students' ages ranged from 18- to 24- years –old with an average of 21. They were all from different classes, ranging from 1 to 4 and from different cities like Ankara, Antalya, Afyon, which shows that they do not live in the city, Eskisehir, where the university is located. While 154 of the students were registered only at the Open Education Faculty, 46 of them were enrolled in some other universities in Turkey and North Cyprus and at the same time they were distance students in different departments of the faculty, which indicates that they want to have two higher education diploma in a short time span.

Research Questions

The study aims to find out answers to the research questions as follows:

1. Are you provided any feedback by your Open Education Faculty?
2. Do you think that feedback provision is beneficial in distance education?
3. Do you want your faculty to provide you with some feedback?

Instrument

The researcher prepared a questionnaire as an instrument for this survey study. The questionnaire consisted of three yes/ no types of questions in relation to whether distance learners at Open Education Faculty of Anadolu University in Turkey are provided any feedback by their faculty, whether they think that feedback provision is beneficial in distance education, and lastly whether they want their faculty to provide them with some feedback. Also, some blank spaces were supplied to the students so that they can state their further ideas freely. The instrument was designed in Turkish because the DE students English proficiency level was not high enough to comprehend and answer the questions.

Data Collection Procedure

After selecting the data collection instrument, the researcher sent this instrument to many students in different cities of Turkey via e-mailing and requested them to answer the questions and express their ideas. Also the researcher wanted the distance learners to write the e-mail addresses of some other friends whom they had at the same faculty so that the researcher could reach as many distance learners as possible. 200 randomly selected subject were administered this questionnaire in 2008-2009 academic year. The researcher told the participants to complete the survey sincerely because their responses would be used for research purposes only and would remain confidential. The participants responded to the survey anonymously but they wrote their departments, and the data collected were analyzed by using descriptive statistics.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and to answer each research question (see below). The frequency and percentage of responses were computed to find answers to the research questions #1, #2, and #3 and also some expressions were quoted so as to reveal the ideas of DE learners overtly. Table: 1 shows the whole picture of student responses regarding questions 1-3 (the yes- no questions). Since students' expressions cannot be similarly quantified, the common themes were identified through a qualitative analysis.

Table: 1
Student responses regarding questions 1-3

| | YES | | NO | |
|----|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Q1 | 20 | 10% | 180 | 90% |
| Q2 | 150 | 75% | 50 | 25% |
| Q3 | 148 | 74% | 52 | 26% |

Are you provided any feedback by your Open Education Faculty?

Most respondents (90%) shared the same idea that they are not provided any feedback on their work or exam. The underlying reason for this, it can be stated that they do not submit regular assignments to their faculty with the exception of some departments, one of which is English Language Teaching Department. This program of the faculty consists of two sessions, two years face-to-face education and two years distance education. During the distance learning process, the students say that they submit reports about their practicum course, which includes lesson plans and teaching activities but they do not receive any feedback on their work. This engages only a few students; however, the majority of the students are not required to submit any projects, term papers, or reports and accordingly they are not provided feedback.

On the other hand, 20% of the distance learners expressed that they are provided feedback which is the information of their grades that they get from mid-term and final examinations.

They are provided that feedback through the internet and postal services and also the students emphasize that they can learn further information about the subject areas asked in the exams through tele-conferencing provided by the faculty but still do they say that it can be better to have more interactive support from the faculty. To illustrate the results, the following remarks made by students are striking:

'I want to research more on my area and prepare some papers, then get some comments from professionals.' (Business, 1st year)

'If I know my faults and how I can correct them, I am sure I will get higher marks.' (Accounting, 1st year)

'I submit reports to my faculty about my teaching and observation in the class but I do not know whether there is a problem or not. Can someone help me?' (ELT, 4th year)

'I learn my grades after the exams and that is enough for me. I do not need more.' (Public administration, 2nd year)

Do you think that feedback provision is beneficial in distance education?

The results show that 75% of the respondents stress that feedback provision can be beneficial for their learning process. They express that they will feel more connected to their faculty and feel more comfortable if they are provided feedback.

Also, they think that they can make a better understanding of the content they have mastered and what areas they are weak in, which will help them to focus their attention on the weakest areas. Lastly, they agree on the idea that they will feel more positive about the learning process since someone is really interested in their progress.

At this juncture, Hyland (2001) detected the distance learners' attitudes towards feedback provision and found that some learners do not feel confident enough to correct their faults on their own and view that correction task as a teacher's responsibility, and they consider that if the teacher highlights their faults or questions in their minds, that will let them make more active use of the feedback and extend their independent learning activities.

On the other hand, distance learners' perceptions of the benefits of feedback provision vary assumably due to different personalities, abilities and sociocultural backgrounds of the participants. 25% of the distance students pose that feedback from tutors can hinder their independency and their ability of self- correcting. Moreover, they consider that if the teacher provides negative feedback by an insulting manner, they can be demotivated and lose their enthusiasm and control. Some quotations from the students can reveal their perceptions better, which are presented below:

'It is quite beneficial because feedback can make us feel like we are in the campus.' (Business, 1st year)

'For better improvement, feedback is very beneficial.' (Business, 2nd year)

'It can be useful for my future teaching career to get some feedback from more experienced lecturers.' (ELT, 3rd year)

'It can be a challenging process for me to produce some work and then get feedback and recorrect or develop it. It is not for me.' (Public administration, 2nd year)

Do you want your faculty to provide you with some feedback ?

Majority of the participants (74%) has the idea that they need feedback on their works. Especially, after the examinations , they cannot understand some questions that they answered wrongly and cannot find the necessary explanations from the books, in which case they need some qualitative feedback to their questions provided by the faculty staff via the internet or telephone. Furthermore, they suggest that some seminars or conferences, on-line or virtual, can be organized so that they can come together to discuss about everything they wonder with their friends and teachers. Another comment is that for regular feedback, some tutors can be assigned in some cities so that the distance learners can get in touch, in reciprocal mode, with the tutors and may get more motivated or encouraged for further study.

However, the 26% of the DL students stated that they never need further support in terms of lessons, which reveals that they are good at managing their distance learning process or they are afraid of not having enough time, energy, or money to benefit from the advantages of feedback provision. When comparing results of question #2 and #3, it can be put forward that the students have the same views about the benefits of feedback and the need for feedback. Only 1% deviation is calculated, which displays 2 participants think that feedback provision is beneficial but not necessary for them. To exemplify the case, some quotations can be supplied as follows:

'I would like to prepare some projects and see how much I can do that.'
(Public relations, 2nd year)

'It can be motivating for us to attend some seminars and learn about new trends in our field. In these seminars, we can have the opportunity to interact with experienced professors in our university.' (Public administration, 1st year)

'If I can realize my faults, I will try to overcome them, but unfortunately no.'
(Accounting, 2nd year)

'If there are some teachers from the university in my city, I can visit them whenever I have a problem with my lessons.' (Public relations, 1st year)

'I am not expected to get regular feedback from the faculty. It is good for me because I don 't have much time.' (Business, 1st year)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDING FEEDBACK IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education is an advantage for all people who do not have suitable social, economic and cultural conditions but who want to have a higher education diploma.

In this context, providing feedback can stimulate the distance learning process, which is validated by the ideas of a great number of distance students. There are three main factors clear from this body of research, which are that the distance learners are provided only grade information feedback but not more, that the majority of the distance learners share the idea that feedback provision is a beneficial aspect in distance education and that almost all of them need feedback on their work.

In the light of their demand for feedback provision, some feedback mechanisms are explained in detail with their pros and cons below :

Feedback through written correspondence

Written correspondence is one of the ways utilized to provide feedback to the students in distance education system. This mechanism functions in three forms, which are illustrated below one by one:

Feedback through tutor-marked assignments

In this form, the distance learners are expected to complete a written task in certain periods and send it for evaluation by the tutors and the tutors are expected not only to evaluate their works and point out their mistake but also to provide them with sufficient comments and suggestions which can help learners improve their work and change their perspective in right way of the content they are learning. After evaluation, the papers can be resent to the students by postal services, e-mailing or handling directly to the student in student centers or the faculty. The key consideration here is to calculate the turn-around time efficiently. At that point, the tutor marked assignments constitute an outstanding form of providing feedback to students in distance education.

Feedback through computer marked assignments

CMAs are machine evaluated type of feedback provision, which includes both some pros and cons. The main advantage of this type is that the turn-around time is shorter, which is desired by the students and the deliverance of the assignments is cost-effective.

On the other side, the feedback provided by the computer may not be as well-qualified as the distance learners have expected since the comments are generated by the computers. Another drawback is that the internet and the computers may not be available or accessible everywhere the distance learners are living. In brief, it can be stated that this form of feedback is much more desirable as an outcome of technology era.

Personal correspondence

Personal correspondence, otherwise named as 'instructive correspondence', refers to the process which starts when the students receive the assignment corrected or commented by the tutor and it takes place in case the learners need more clarifications on the points made by the tutor.

This two-way communication between the student and the teacher either ends when the tutor sends the requested clarification or goes with another loop with the students' another seek for further explanation if the student's mind is still full of doubts and questions. On the other hand, this may be an unbearable duration in case the distance learners exaggerate the PC process. However, it must be remembered that the reports they receive can be positively contributing to their learning at a distance.

Feedback during face-to-face sessions

In the philosophy of distance education, learner autonomy is of great importance, so face-to-face sessions are generally considered as a blockage in their autonomy but in some different philosophic orientations of distance education, this mechanism is regarded very useful and utilized in three main forms, which are explained below one by one:

Feedback during individual contact with faculty staff

Feedback supplied through individual contact with faculty staff is immediate and not expected to be judgmental, which means that it is perceived by the students as explanatory. Since the feedback is direct to the learner, it can be clear and concise but still can there be a confusion in the student's mind due to two main reasons which are that DL students, in general, want to get straight-forward replies to their questions just enough to pass the course or learn the problematic point in the question. And, however, the teacher may want, normally, to go into the depth of the concept in order to have a good teaching impression in the minds of the teachers. Such a way of receiving feedback can be rather challenging for distance learners, having personal and social responsibilities' besides learning at a distance. That problem is possible to be handled by making these contacts optional but not obligatory in the distance learning process.

Feedback during voluntary contacts at the study centers

In study centers, distance learners are able to have an access to the material and technological support. Also, they can have tutorial help from subject tutors and mentors. In open universities or faculties, visiting study centers for mentioned facilities are to be left to the preference of the student, which is a voluntarily continuing process.

This feedback mechanism is immediate and regular as long as the student desires and needs since the interaction between the student and the teacher is face-to-face. On condition that the study centers are easy to access for all DE learners, living all parts of the country, that type of feedback provision can be useful and demanding as it sounds cost and time effective.

Feedback during group seminars

Group seminars can be organized by open universities or faculties from time to time for their distance learners to provide them with not only an opportunity to contact with the faculty staff personally but also to create an opportunity to share and discuss their ideas on academic concerns.

Hence, group seminars serve as a platform for distance learners to get feedback from their relevant faculty staff. If the participation is satisfactory enough, the feedback provided in these events can increase the face-to-face interaction and facilitate the learning.

Feedback through non-contiguous interaction on electronic media

Electronic media plays a very pivotal role in mediating non- contiguous interaction between the distance learners and the teachers. The great demand for mediated communication in distance education highlights the need to understand the impact that new technologies have had on distance education delivery methods (Garrison, 1985).

Three commonly used electronic media to provide feedback on student work in distance learning process are as follows:

Feedback on Telephone

Communication on the phone is the most readily available medium of two way interaction in distance education today, which gives the student a chance to ask a question to the teacher or answer a question asked by the teacher. Feedback on the phone is immediate, potent and insistent and its regularity is in the hand of the students. The clarity and conciseness of the feedback can be negotiated by the student when needed. With the exception of the telephone that the teacher will possibly encounter, the advantages outweigh its limitations.

Feedback through tele-conferencing

One-way video or two-way tele conferencing has been used as a component of providing feedback in distance education to enable the students to continue a diploma in higher education by making them participate in discussion groups and question-answer sessions with tutors in the field of their department.

The studies done by Sahoo (1994) and Sinha et al (1994) reveals that this mode of feedback provision is very helpful in distance education; however, some participants reported such problems as inadequate time allocation for question- answer sessions and high cost of telecommunication.

Feedback through the Internet

The internet is an up-to-date tool for providing feedback in DE, through which the learners can not only e- mail their queries but also use some other facilities which their faculty offers online for the students. In some cases, the faculty can provide the distance learners with a facility to join online seminars and discussions on their courses, which is particularly important in distance education as it offers the students a possibility to put forward their views for discussion and an opportunity to benefit from commentaries and viewpoints of the peers and academic staff. Although this mechanism can be blocked due to some technical problems, it is still practical, cost-effective, and preferable.

In line with the results of analyzed data collected from the distance learners of 'Open Education Faculty' at Anadolu University in Turkey concerning feedback provision on student work, the following recommendations can be proposed:

- The distance learners of Open Education Faculty should be required to submit some projects or assignments. This submission may not be evaluated for passing grade but can be a pre-requisite for sitting for the final exam.
- OEF staff should comment and correct the papers and then send their feedback to the students through posting or e-mailing.

- Student centers should be opened and a few tutors should be assigned there to support the learners at a distance.
- Contact classes should be programmed that the DE learners can optionally attend and ask for help.
- The number of the faculty staff should be increased by considering the great number of the students.
- Each tutor should be responsible for a certain group of students and provide them with feedback on their learning progress.
- Technological feedback mechanisms should be put into action to reach all distance learners.
- Technological support should be supplied to the less developed parts of the country.
- From time to time, seminars and conferences should be organized for only distance learners where they can get peer or tutorial feedback.
- OUP should negotiate with international distance education institutions in order to share their systems of providing feedback.

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