

Improving Formative Assessment for Quality assurance in Open & Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Assignment writing is an important component of distance learning curriculum and needs meticulous care and attention on the part of the tutor as well as the student. The process of delivery, mailing, marking, monitoring and questions of assignment writing are confronted with various problems that need to be addressed. This study investigates the problems during formative assessment at higher education level in distance learning system. A 14 item survey questionnaire was administered among 20 twenty students of M.A/M.ED of Allama Iqbal Open University Pakistan. The component of assignment writing was the focal area whose problems were identified and analyzed thorough open ended questionnaire. An extensive qualitative analysis of each item was made which showed that the respondents are not satisfied with the quality of assignment marking on behalf of the tutors and the mailing system through which assignments are sent and received. The findings indicated that assignment writing was useful in examination but study guides and allied material are insufficient for this purpose. There felt a need to better delivery and communication system, improve study guides and allied material, and enhance facility of tutors to the nearest place.

Keywords: Formative assessment, Assignment writing, Tutorial guidance, Distance learning.

INTRODUCTION

Learning through distance mode is different from that of traditional learning mode where students and teachers physically interact with and there is physical infrastructure for teaching and learning. Distance learning involves assignments, tutorials, workshops and modern technology that is, computer, internet, videoconferencing etc for learners who are at distance from their tutors or teachers. Distance education is flexible. Traditionally educated individuals can also continue their education through this system whereby the student and learner are at a distance from one another. They share their activities through either correspondence, face-to face contact or through the use of various instructional media.

Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special method of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements (Moore & Kearsley 1996, p.2).

There are several components of distance education and each has its own challenges and problems. One of the components is assignment writing. Assignment writing is considered to be vital and compulsory part of distance education. They are supposed to enhance the learning of the distance learners. They develop a communication and correspondence link between the tutor and the learner. In distance education, tutors assess the assignments during a semester as a part of formative assessment.

Black and Wiliam (1998b) define assessment broadly to include all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning. Under this definition, assessment encompasses teacher observation, classroom discussion, and analysis of student work, including homework and tests. Assessments become formative when the information is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs.

Assessment of learning competencies is concerned with the degree to which a teacher demonstrates characteristics, abilities, skills and attitudes that are considered essential for effective instruction.

Marking of Assignments by tutors is a part of formative assessment in distance learning system of Allama Iqbal Open University Pakistan. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) is the first Open University in Asia. AIOU is a unique institution in Pakistan because of its philosophy, system, approach, functions and overall structure. The University with its main campus at Islamabad and huge network of regional centers spread all over the country is serving its clientele all over Pakistan and in the Middle East. AIOU is a Distance Education institution, which provides multi disciplinary education from basic to doctoral level programs. The difference between the traditional formal system of education and open distance system of education essentially lies in terms of teaching methodology and for reaching out to the people in the four corners of the country at their doorsteps. The university employs non-formal method of correspondence, radio and television broadcasts, special textbooks and reading materials prepared on self-learning basis, part-time teachers (tutors) engaged nearest to the student's residences. As distance learners have different background in term of socio-economic status, academic strength and culture, their problems are also different from formal learning. Contrary to formal learning, distance learners face the problems of mailing, monitoring and marking. They undergo many tensions and anxious feelings during assignment writing and its assessment. According to (Moore & Kearsley 1996) the problems related to distance education are: Lack of time, Difficulties in concentration, Family commitments, Organization of time and planning, Low levels of motivation, Study skills, Resources, Anxiety and Isolation. Similarly, the distant learners manifest particular attitudes towards each and every aspect of assignment writing. A glimpse of such tensions and attitudes has been shown in this paper.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Distance Education has become an emerging method of teaching and learning through media and communication. It is widely being used to bridge the instructional gap for distance learners. The physical remoteness in distance education has brought about many problems and deficiencies which can be overcome by sufficient sources.

Smith (2001) states that

Many students drop Distance Education courses because of the same reason they enrolled in them, busy lifestyles. It is, therefore, important for institutions to provide students with resources that will help them decide if Distance Education courses are right for them.

Use of modern information technology and communication are hallmarks of distance education which are used for better course delivery and maximizing the face to face guidance and counseling. According to Ashby (2002), the most common mode of delivery for providing distance education is the Internet, and the majority of distance education students are enrolled in subjects related to education, humanities and business.

However, it is usually seen that the Distance Teachers and tutors have very little sympathy with the learners. They don't understand the degree of difficulties that distance learners may have in pursuing the distance course. But these difficulties can be overcome by using the technology. Hence, by the use of technology in today's distance learning environment, its success depends on many different variables.

Being heterogeneous group of learners, distance learning approaches should be characterized by the learner becoming central to the process of learning though, there have been numerous debates on what student centered learning entails, but essentially, the distance learners takes the responsibility for his or her own learning and the distance teachers becomes a resource, a facilitator in the process. During teaching-learning process in distance learning, the learners undergo various tensions, especially with reference to assessment. Assignment writing is supposed to be a part of formative assessment in ODL. The diagnostic use of assessment

which provides feedback to teachers and students over the course of instruction is called formative assessment. It stands in contrast to summative assessment, which generally takes place after a period of instruction and requires making a judgment about the learning that has occurred (e.g., by grading or scoring a test or paper).

Black and Wiliam (1998a) conducted an extensive research review of 250 journal articles and book chapters winnowed from a much larger pool to determine whether formative assessment raises academic standards in the classroom. They concluded that efforts to strengthen formative assessment produce significant learning gains as measured by comparing the average improvements in the test scores of the students involved in the innovation with the range of scores found for typical groups of students on the same tests. Feedback given as part of formative assessment helps learners become aware of any gaps that exist between their desired goal and their current knowledge, understanding, or skill and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the goal (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989).

Some strategies that educators can use to collect formative data from their distant students include:

- Post cards - provide each student with prestamped and preaddressed postcards. On a weekly basis, have students use the postcards to share their concerns or respond to questions during the last three to five minutes of class.
- Electronic mail - Can be a very effective way for instructors and students to communicate. Another plus, while the instructor is eliciting information about classroom learning, students become familiar with the use of electronic mail, a valuable skill.
- Telephone - Call students often. Ask them open ended questions (e.g., "What snags did you run into on the second writing assignment?") to let students voice their concerns. Follow with probes (e.g., "Then, will you need more information sources?"). Set phone-in office hours but be sure to welcome calls at other times. (Angelo, T. & Cross, P,1993).

Qualitative method was used to assess the problems of distance learning and attitude of the learners. Assignment writing a compulsory component of distance learning was assessed qualitatively in various studies. There are various types of assignments and learners have specific attitude towards questions and problems of the assignment writing. Assignments are an important vehicle for students in obtaining feedback from and establishing a dialogue with their teachers (World Bank, 2006). The National Workshop on Academic counseling in Distance Education organized by Dr.B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Andhra Pradesh, India, in collaboration with the commonwealth of learning suggested the following action for making students assignments as an effective instrument for distance teaching-learning, particularly keeping Indian Open Universities in mind:

- i. Every distance teaching university must necessarily have a component of assignments because only through assignment, the distance learners can progress in their studies. Assessment of assignments must count for final score courses.
- ii. Economic factors should not be the criteria to neglect the assignments component.
- iii. Delay in the preparation and dispatch of assignments to students should be avoided. As far as possible they should be sent to students along with the first dispatch of the course materials.
- iv. Assignments should be accompanied by tutor guides or notes to guide tutors on the ways and methods of assessment of assignments.
- v. Monitoring on assignment evaluation is essential. In British Open University full time senior counsellors at Regional Centers and in IGNOU full time academic staff undertake monitor work. These models can be adopted by state open universities in India with necessary modifications.
- vi. Coordinators of study centre should insist on the evaluators on the need to observe time schedules for returning evaluated assignments.
- vii. Scope for appeal to the students against the marks and grades given by teachers must be provided.
- viii. Manuals for evaluators should be available. (World Bank.2006)

Students of distance education often feel frustration in their study because there is no one at hand to consult. The students also face the problems of self-discipline, course delivery, negative attitude and guidance from the tutors in their studies. Literature shows that learners develop their specific attitude towards each component of education. They show their feelings and emotions to approve or disapprove some aspect of an education system. Hannula (2002) attempts to identify four aspects of attitude which could help in the prospect of defining what is being referred to when this term is used: Emotions aroused in a situation, emotions associated with a stimulus, expected consequences and Relationship of a situation to personal values. All these four aspects are involves in some form or the other when the term attitude is used in the literature. Attitude is a learned tendency on the part of individual to react positively or negatively to some objects, situations, concepts, or another person. Attitude is a learned behavior to respond in a consistently to a given object. Students' attitude to specific subject depends on the surrounding environment given to them.

RESEARCH METHOD

The nature of the study is descriptive and researchers conducted survey to collect data. Instrument was as open-ended questionnaire and therefore, qualitative analysis was made to interpret the data.

Research questions:

- Is assignment writing a problem for M.A/M.Ed students at AIOU?
- Does assignment writing help in final exams at AIOU?
- What is attitude of learners towards assignment writing at AIOU?

Research Participants

The following table shows the research participants of the study region-wise:

Region/Area	Participants
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Islamabad	08
Mirpur	04
Rawalpindi	04
Skardu	04
Total	20

Students of M.A education/M.ED semester Spring 2008 of Allama Iqbal Open University constitute the population of the study. 20 students from the given regions were selected randomly and an open ended questionnaire was administered when the students from different regions came to Allama Iqbal Open University to attend workshop on their academic courses.

DATA ANALYSIS

Attitude towards Tutors:

The respondents gave their comprehensive views on open-ended questionnaire that showed their interest and concern on this topic. The qualitative analysis of each item showed that the students did not have high opinion in getting remarks/comments about their assignments from their tutors as they did not get remarks from their tutors about the strengths and weaknesses of their assignments that shows the indifference and slackness of tutors towards assignment component. One of the respondents named shaista said,

“There are no comments and remarks on her assignment from the tutor”.

The data showed that respondents got no remarks from tutors and only two respondents said that they got remarks that were negative in their opinion. It shows that negative remarks on the part of the tutors discouraged the students while giving no remarks was disappointment for the students.

Expectation and Satisfaction about Assignment Marking:

The respondents expected good marks in their assignments from the tutor but they seemed to be of the opinion that the tutors only counted the pages of the assignments and marked tick without reading a single paragraph. Their responses about expectations from tutors in assignment marking indicated that the tutors should have marked carefully and highlighted the flaws and deficiencies in their assignments. It shows that the students are not satisfied with the marking of assignments in terms of their expectations from the tutors and they think that the tutors should be more responsible and careful in marking assignments.

One respondent “Rabia” was of the opinion, “Assignments are sent back without reading and proper marking.”

This problem might be there due to the lack of proper monitoring of the tutors and also that the tutors do not think it important to read the reproduced material of the study guide and the allied material on the part of the students. Apart from the expectations from tutors about assignments, the students were not unanimous on their marked assignments. More than half of the respondents think that their assignments are not carefully marked and tutors do not bother to read their assignments. Another respondent Amjad Ali said,

“I am not satisfied with my marked assignments because they seem to be just counted but not marked well.”

Data show that the students do not feel comfortable with careless marking on the part of the tutors and they think that tutors only count pages and mark their assignment blindly to make money. Other half are of the opinion that their assignments are rightly marked and they are satisfied with the marking of their tutors. It shows that the majority of the tutors show carelessness and lack of professional expertise in marking assignments that in turn causes discouragement and lack of motivation among the students. This act of tutors also brings about low profile of the institution in the eyes of the learners.

Usefulness and Effectiveness of Assignment Component:

When asked about the usefulness of assignment writing in distance learning, the data showed that all respondents agreed that assignment writing is of greater importance in distance learning. A majority of the respondents said it useful because it benefits them in examination and studying books. It results that they might be afraid of or even they face failure in examination if assignment writing is excluded in distance learning because without assignment writing they might not be habitual of reading and writing and finally got failed in final examination. Therefore, assignment writing is said to be very useful in distance learning.

A variety of responses were collected on the question of what steps could be taken to enhance the effectiveness of assignment component in distance learning. The respondents were not comfortable with current status of assignment component as presently it has many deficiencies, particularly in the areas of communication, marking, monitoring, content material and nature of the questions set for the assignments. Data indicated that material in the study guides and the allied books is not sufficient to answer the questions set for the assignments and therefore be enhance for effective learning of distant learners.

Naeem said, “We face lack of communication.”

Perhaps the reason is that the students could not find relevant material in the study guides and the allied material. Data also showed that creative questions could enhance effectiveness of distance learning. Another portion of the data was in favor of better the communication process for effective distance learning because defective communication between the students and the tutors proves a big hurdle for effective learning in distance education.

To assess the quality of questions for assignment in term of effective learning, the respondents were asked whether questions for assignment lead towards effective learning, the respondents were in favor of questions. They were of the opinion that questions give insight to solve problems of examination. They agreed that the questions were useful and even lead to effective learning if the concerned tutors explained the relevant material. As

Safdar replied, “Assignment questions prove effective, especially to succeed in the final examination. They also attempt to develop creative thinking among the students.”

The responses showed that the questions made the students read each and every page of the books and clarify their concepts that lead towards effective learning. Only one response showed that some of the questions required only one paragraph to answer and for this they had to make stories to lengthen the answer to satisfy the tutor. This aspect is not ignorable because the argument seems very solid and sometimes the students indeed had to make stories with irrelevant material to make the answer lengthy.

However, the overall strength of the respondents supported the usefulness and effectiveness of the questions set for assignments.

Mailing and Retrieving:

Assignment writing might even be more beneficial and interesting if the postal system is good and satisfactory as data showed that all the respondents were not satisfied with the mailing of assignments by post. In this way, some might get frustrated and might not be able to study properly. The respondents were anxious on the question of mailing assignments by post and were of the opinion that it was in dire need of improvement and should be monitored properly and regularly by the university administration.

Getting assignments back is one of the major problems that learners face in distance education. Data shows that it indeed causes anxiety and tension among distant learners when they do not get their assignments back after due date. Seventeen respondents opined that they get their assignments back late after much delay and three said that they even do not get their assignments back at all. The reasons might be defective communication process, tutors' indifferent attitude, postal charges, weak coordination among tutors, students and the administration, and even sometimes students' casual behavior towards their assignments.

Commitment towards Assignment Writing:

This problem in distance education causes another problem among some students who get discouraged and do not do their assignments whole-heartedly but they only do it as a formality. As data shows that most of the students write their assignments whole-heartedly but they do not get proper feedback from tutors and thus in future they only do it just to complete the formality. The students were of the opinion that they do their assignments eagerly because in this way they get themselves prepared for examination and gain knowledge while studying the books. The responses are favorable in doing the assignments provided that there is proper marking and monitoring.

Study Guide/ Allied Material and Other Sources:

As far as the study guides and allied material are concerned, they also pose a problem in terms of relevance and precision. The respondents were not satisfied with the utility and sufficiency of the study guides and the allied material. According to the data, study guides and the allied material do not provide the sufficient and relevant information on assignment questions. However, small number of respondents opined that the material is relevant but not sufficient to full extent. They responded that even in some courses material is sufficient but in some courses that is not sufficient and relevant. Many students have to purchase sub-standard books due to this problem as students from far flung areas do not have access to libraries and modern means of information and technology in distance learning. Therefore, sometimes they have to depend on ghost writers. Another respondent, Farrukh was of the opinion,

“I am not satisfied with the existing material in the study guides. The study guides and allied material are not sufficient for solving assignment questions. Sometimes we have to depend on other sources, may be sub-standard but available in the market. Furthermore, sometimes material in study guides seems irrelevant with reference to assignment questions.”

It shows that sometime students use other sources than the study guide and the allied material. Data showed that a large number of respondents use books other than study guides

and allied material for assignment writing and almost less than half use internet and computer for writing assignments.

Examination:

Most of the respondents are of the opinion that assignments are helpful in examination. They said that they studied books to write assignments and write assignments to get through the examination successfully. To a large extent, they were satisfied with assignment writing for examination point of view and they agreed that the questions set in the assignments help them in examination because they had already attempted those questions in assignments; therefore, they feel it very important and useful to write assignments to study books and pass the examination.

Assignment writing as compulsory component:

Keeping in view the usefulness of assignments writing, almost all the respondents called assignment writing compulsory in distance learning. They were entirely in favor of having assignments because in their opinion, this compulsory component would at least make the students study books to answer the questions. One of the respondents wrote that if assignment writing had not been compulsory, some of the students would not open their books throughout the semester and when the semester ends, they sit down to search for their books. Thus it shows that assignments are of paramount significance in distance learning in which learner is required to do most of the study tasks himself.

Assessment:

One important aspect in distance learning is the assessment of students' assignments and subsequently assessment of their papers in the final examination. While commenting on the item that there is any mismatch of assessment of assignments and the final examination, the respondents were not unanimous over yes or not and if yes how there is any. Half of the respondents argued that there was mismatch of assessment of assignments and the final examination. They were of the opinion that the mismatch found as in assignments tutors marked leniently while in final examination, examiners gave tough assessment of the papers. According to a respondent named Azra, "We get good marks in assignments but cannot do

well in the final exams because perhaps examiners assess the final papers more carefully than the assignments.”

In others words, students get good marks in assignments but in examination they do not get as good as in the assignments. Some of the participants explained the mismatch of assessment in the way that weight (percentage) of marks for the assignments and the final examination was not equal. Assignments are given thirty percent weight while the examination takes seventy percent weight that shows a clear mismatch between the assessment of assignments and the final examination. Half of the respondents said that there was no mismatch of assessment. They did not have much to support their view as most of the respondents only ticked the option “No” and did not further explain how. Their responses show that they were not much clear about the present mode of assessment and they think that the assignments and the examinations are in the same boat and are assessed equally.

FINDINGS

Students undergo various tensions and develop a particular attitude towards their tutors during formative assessment procedure. They do not have favorable attitude towards their tutors due to tutor’s lack of interest and care in their work. They are not satisfied with the marking standard of the tutors and careless marking causes tension and anxiety among them. Assignment writing is considered to be very useful component in distance learning and its effectiveness can be increased with better system of mailing, marking, monitoring and communication. Questions for assignment writing are useful and help in preparing the examination. Students are not comfortable with present mailing system and getting assignments back creates anxious attitude among them due to carelessness of the tutors. The students are in favor of writing assignments with commitment and whole-heartedly but careless marking leads them to just complete formality of assignment writing in future. Study-guides and allied material do not provide sufficient material to satisfy the students and they depend on other sub-standard material. Students use additional books for assignment writing and a small number also uses computer and internet for this purpose. Assignments help in preparing and getting through the examination. Students consider assignment writing

as compulsory component in distance education. Students were not unanimous on assessment mismatch of assignments and the final examination.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Assignment writing in distance education posed many problems for the distance learners who need special guidance to accomplish their academic tasks. While writing their assignments, distance learners stated a variety of tensions and problems that they face in mailing, marking, retrieving assignments back, study-guides and allied material, assessment, examination and manifested particular attitude towards tutors and showed anxious feeling towards different aspects of this compulsory component of distance learning. The students show high level of anxiety in marking, mailing and material of the assignment component and show low level of satisfaction in areas of assignments questions and assessment of the questions. However, element of effective learning from assignment writing cannot be ignored. From this study many related areas need to be addressed for improvement of assignment writing. Future studies might include objective assessment of assignment writing, instructional design for learners and tutor-pupil relationship to improve assignment writing component.

Several recommendations were made which included the following:

- Tutors should mark the assignments by studying carefully and manifest responsible attitude towards students assignment work.
- Marking standard of assignment might be improved.
- Mailing, Monitoring and Communication might be bettered.
- Students may be encouraged in their assignment writing to do it whole-heartedly.
- Study-Guides and Allied material might be relevant and more sufficient.
- Mismatch of assignment assessment and final examination may be removed.
- Correspondence/Communication link between tutor and the learner may be enhanced.

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