

Treatment Given To Assignment-Responses at the Correspondence Institutes: A Study of Students' Reactions

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This paper together with the one that precedes this and the one that follows constitute the trio on student concerns presented in this issue. Each of these articles focuses on specific issues. This one in particular studies students' reactions to tutor-responses. The study does not tell us anything significantly new; earlier studies on similar lines brought out findings which match considerably with the ones presented here. What then is the purpose of such a presentation?

Correspondence/distance education has a standing of more than three decades in our country. It is not only reasonable but also desirable that from time to time we revisit the issues that concern us intimately; handling of assignment-responses is certainly a concern that we need to look into time and again. Even if the findings may not be significantly different from the earlier ones, each new study presenting similar findings should remind us that we have not taken note of the earlier warnings, that correctives have not been brought in and that professionalism in the area under investigation is still a thing of the future. If a particular sub-system of the DE system remains neglected for long, the failure will not be that of the system or the sub-system but the men behind it.

This presentation is a timely reminder — shall we heed it!

1. INTRODUCTION

The initial non-contiguous two-way communication channel, through postal correspondence, is usually activated by the submission of written assignment by DE students to their tutors/counsellors. Tutors' reactions in the form of learner's response, specific comments and suggestions for improvement build the didactic dialogue so essential in the process of learning. This is what Anand (1979), quoting Lembcke (1966), calls the 'Method of Instructive Correspondence' in distance education (DE), when a dialogue between the tutor and student starts on the subject studied.

While much has been said and written about the functions and importance of tutor-marked assignments in DE, and how they should be evaluated and commented on by the tutors (Holmberg 1985 and Keegan 1989), there is yet little research in India to reveal as to how the assignment-responses submitted by students for evaluation are dealt with at their supporting institution. Obviously, a study in this regard must focus on compulsory submission of assignment-responses.

The studies conducted by Biswal (1979), Sahoo (1985), Mouley (1986), and Kumar et al (1986) indicate that students who received the evaluated assignment-responses **in time** appreciated their compulsory submission; they found the tutor comments useful, to some extent, for their studies. But equally strongly, students have been reported (i) not to appreciate compulsory submission of assignments (Pillai & Mohan 1983), (ii) to be non-serious in responding to the assignments (Dutt 1976, and Khan 1982), and (iii) to complain about the limitations of questions asked in the assignments (Sahoo 1985, and Balasubramaniam 1986). With regard to the evaluation of assignment-responses and tutors' comments

on them, it has been found that students did not appreciate the procedure followed for evaluating the assignment-responses (Kumar et al, 1986) as they felt that institutions did not make serious efforts to clarify students' doubts and that more detailed comments on their responses were necessary.

The researches reviewed above reveal that submission of assignments is appreciated by students only when they are **received back properly commented on and in time**. But, at the same time, it is also clear that students do not appreciate the evaluation procedures as no serious efforts are made to clarify doubts through constructive comments on the assignment-responses. In fact, the studies do not answer questions of more vital importance to the understanding of how exactly the assignment-responses submitted by the students are being treated, and the significance of assignments in the process of distance study.

It is in this context that the present study was undertaken to specifically seek answers to the following questions:

- How exactly are the assignments submitted by students for evaluation treated at their supporting institution?
- What are students' reactions to the evaluated assignment-responses returned to them by their institutions?
- What contribution does the submission of assignment-responses make in the process of distance study?
- Are the students satisfied with the quality of assignments given to them?
- What improvements would the students suggest in the assignment system as a whole?

2. METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Mailed survey method was adopted to conduct the study.

Population

The survey population included "all the students studying in the Institutes/Directorates of Correspondence Courses, including those recently renamed as Departments of Distance Education, in India, as they existed during the period May to September 1991".

Sample

Of the 28 institutions, that came within the purview of the definition of population, 14, i.e., 50%, were selected randomly; ensuring the selection of at least one institution each from north, south, east, west and central regions of India. From each of the 14 selected institutions 200 students were chosen randomly to be included in the sample. In this way 2800 (14x200) students constituted the sample for this study.

Questionnaire

The question numbers 28 to 35 of the 60 item 'Students Feedback Questionnaire', developed by Rathore (1991) for the project work submitted to National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA), New Delhi, served as the questionnaire for collecting the data to meet the objectives of this study. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of the 'Total Design Method' suggested by Dillman (1987). The 8 questions which provided data for this study were standardised to a great extent; but depending upon the nature of information required, free response questions were also included — particularly the question asking for suggestions for improvement in the system was a free response question. Assuming that the same elements may be found in different institutions, the nomographic approach was adopted to structure the response categories of the standardised questions.

Response Rate

The 'Students Feedback Questionnaire' was posted to the 2800 students selected in the sample along with a request letter and a postage paid envelope for its return. A reminder was sent after 30 days to all those who did not respond in the first instance. As a result, 1368 returns were obtained. Of these 1200 returns were found usable. Thus a response rate of 42.8% was achieved. For a mailed questionnaire the achieved response rate was considered quite satisfactory. However, it may be noted that the number of respondents varied from question to question — in certain cases the question was not applicable, in others the question was just ignored.

3. FINDINGS

The tabulation and analysis of students' responses to the posed questions is reported as follows — separately for each objective of the study.

Treatment Given to Assignment-responses

In order to study the treatment being given to assignments submitted by the students for evaluation at their institution, the students were asked to describe the way their institutions

responded to the assignment-responses submitted by them for evaluation. In response to this structured question 1078 responses were received. The frequencies and percentages of the responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 : Treatment given to the submitted assignments

Q: In which of the given ways does your Institution respond to the assignments submitted by you ?	f	%
1. they are checked and returned	329	30.51
2. checked, marks given and returned	273	25.32
3. checked, model solutions/answers sent	91	8.44
4. checked, tutors give general comments	182	16.88
5. checked, mistakes pointed out and tutors give personal suggestions to remove these mistakes and suggest materials for further reading	203	18.83

It is evident from Table 1 that 30.51% of the students received only checked assignments, and 25.32% of them in addition also got marks. Thus, in the case of exactly 55.83% of the students neither comments nor model solutions were given in response to the assignments submitted by them. Only 8.44% of the students got model solutions/answers in response to their assignments. Besides, general checking, tutors wrote comments in the case of 16.88% of the students; and in the case of 18.83%, they also gave personal suggestions to correct mistakes and suggest materials for further reading. Putting the last two together the finding is that comments of one or the other type were given on assignment-responses only in the case of 35.71% of the students.

Students' Reactions

The reactions of those 35.71% who received some sort of comments on their assignment-responses were sought on a 7 point structured item. The analysis of the students' responses is presented in table 2.

Table 2 : Students' Reactions to Comments Received

Q. If the tutors, besides checking, also send their comments upon the assignment-responses, then:	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
1. Are you satisfied with these comments?	240	66.11	123	33.88
2. Are they personally written pointing out your individual mistakes?	190	52.34	173	47.65
3. Are the comments too general to make any sense for your improvement ?	210	57.85	153	42.14
4. Are they comprehensive enough to let you understand your weaknesses ?	189	52.06	174	47.93
5. Do they motivate you and help you in bettering your learning?	195	53.71	168	46.28
6. Do they motivate you to consult further reading materials/ journals/reference books?	210	57.85	153	42.14
7. Are the comments just written as a formality and do not prove to be of any use to you?	112	29.24	271	70.75

The responses of students, in whose case tutors besides checking their assignment-responses also gave comments on them, reveal that (i) 66.11% of the students were satisfied with the tutor's comments while 33.88% were not; (ii) in the case of 52.34% of the students the comments were personally written pointing out their mistakes but they were not so for 46.65%; (iii) in the opinion of 57.85% of the students the comments written were too general to assist in improvement, but this was not the case for 42.14%; (iv) in the opinion of 52.06% of the students, however, the comments were comprehensive enough to give them understanding of their weaknesses, but such was not the opinion of 47.93%; (v) the comments motivated and provided help in bettering the learning of 53.71% of the students, but in the case of 46.28% they did not do so; (vi) the comments motivated 57.85% of the students to consult further reading materials/journals/reference books, etc., but they did not motivate 42.14%; and finally (vii) only in the opinion of 29.24% of the students the comments were written just as a formality and did not prove to be of any use to them, but 70.75% did not agree with this opinion.

Although from these data it appears that the comments did serve their purpose, as more than 65% of the students were satisfied, perceiving them to be of some use to them, and more than 50% viewed them positively; but these figures are, however, not altogether reliable. There are two reasons for this: (i) assignment-responses were corrected and commented upon only in the case of about 36% of the students (see Table 1) of the total population; and (ii) out of these 36%, about 30% were not satisfied and perceived the comments having been written just as a formality and were of no use to them. In addition, around 42% to 47% do not view the comments received by them positively.

As regards the value of model solutions/answers sent along with the corrected assignment-responses, the obtained data is presented in table 3 and is quite surprising.

Table 3 : Students' Reactions to Model Solutions

Q. If model solutions/answers are sent along with the checked assignment-responses, do they help in :-	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
1. the process of your learning	64	71.11	26	28.88
2. removing your doubts and mistakes	69	76.66	21	23.33
3. motivating you to do better	70	77.77	20	22.22
4. preparing you for examinations	73	81.11	17	18.88

Unexpectedly, the model solutions were perceived to help the process of learning by 71.11% of the students; they helped 76.66% in removing their doubts and mistakes; they motivated 77.77% to do better; and helped 81.11% in their preparation for final examinations. Obviously, the students of correspondence institutes favour model solutions to tutor comments on their assignment-responses.

Contribution of Assignments

In addition to the above questions, that were put only to those students whose institutions either commented on their assignments or sent model solutions, two general questions were addressed to all the students in the sample. The purpose of these questions was to get an overall picture of the contribution of assignments towards their learning. The responses received are presented in table 4.

Table 4 : Contribution of Assignments

Q. Does the submission of assignment-responses help you	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
1. in the process of learning?*	944	92.91	72	7.08
2. in your preparation for examinations?***	69	76.66	21	23.33

* No. of responding students = 1016

** No. of responding students = 1019

The responses of students pertaining to the contribution of assignments in Table 4 reveal that 92.91% of the students in general considered that submission of assignment-responses helped in the process of learning, and 90.20% of them thought that the submission of assignment-responses helped them in their preparation for examinations. These are highly encouraging findings which imply that the assignment system should be strengthened, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Satisfaction with the Quality of Assignments

The last two questions were asked to study students' satisfaction with the quality of assignments and the work that they were required to do to respond to them. An analysis of students' responses presented in Table 5 reveals that 72.03% of the total sample were satisfied with the quality of questions asked in the assignments, while 70.26% were satisfied with the quantity of work that they were expected to do to respond to the assignments.

Table 5 : Satisfaction with the Quality of Assignments

Q. Are you satisfied with	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
1. the quality of questions asked in the assignments?*	724	72.03	281	27.96
2. the quality of work that you expected to do to respond them	716	70.26	303	29.73

* No. of responding students = 1005

** No. of responding students = 1019

Students' Suggestions and Expectations

Finally, the students were asked, through an open question, to give suggestions to improve the quality and suitability of the entire assignment system. The students gave a variety of suggestions that reflect their expectations from the system of assignments. These have been abstracted into six expectations, which are listed below in order of their frequency:

1. After checking/marking/commenting upon, the assignment-responses should be returned to the students in time, as soon as possible, within 10 to 15 days, so as to enable them to know their weaknesses/mistakes, remove their doubts and help them improve their performance and learning.
2. The assignments should be examination oriented, i.e., they must prepare the students for the examinations by asking questions that are important from the viewpoint of the final examinations.
3. As far as possible, short and pin-pointed objective type questions should be asked and their answers also be provided, so that the students could immediately verify them. If this is done then they would not have to wait unnecessarily for the tutor's corrections — particularly when the tutors do not comment on the assignment-responses.
4. Simple examples, illustrations and specific suggestions should be given by the tutors in good handwriting and simple language. It is very frustrating when one is unable to read what the tutor has written.
5. You have done good work; you should not have done this or that; your answer is not up to the mark; you are expected to do more, etc. are useless comments. Students would like to know specifically what is good or bad in their work, what they should have written specifically instead of what they have actually written, and so on. Only if the tutors have the desire and wisdom to give such comments should the submission of assignment-responses be insisted on, otherwise it should be made voluntary.
6. The number of assignments should be increased and their submission be made compulsory, provided they are properly evaluated, commented upon and returned within a short duration of time, i.e. in about 10 to 20 days.

The above expectations of students clearly reflect their desire to receive constructive comments on their assignment responses, well in time, i.e., a short turn-around time. Moreover, the students are not against compulsory submission of assignment responses provided they receive timely and proper feedback. The students are, in general, concerned with their preparation for the final examinations. If assignments are designed to contribute to this preparation well, they should be doubly welcome.

4. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of this study indicate that about 56% students neither get model solutions nor are their assignment-responses commented upon by tutors. This means that the non-contiguous two-way communication potential that tutor-marked assignments offer in distance education, is not being exploited in a good majority of cases in the Indian system of correspondence education. How the doubts and academic problems of these students are being resolved is not exactly known. In this context, a national level study by Rathore (1991) reveals that correspondence institutes in India rely more on face-to-face tutoring during personal contact

programmes than on tutoring through written correspondence initiated by the students using the means of assignments. This points to the dilution of the very concept of distance education. The students who joined distance study for its flexibility and the advantage that they would not be required to attend classes at places other than their residence are unnecessarily taxed when forced to come for contact programmes.

It is unfortunate that this study is unable to answer the question as to why the assignment-responses of about 56% students are not commented upon by their institutions. May be the submission of assignments is a formal condition to get a clearance to sit in the final examination. The study by Rathore (1991) confirms this assumption, as he found that submission of assignments is a compulsory condition for determining eligibility for sitting in the final examination in many Correspondence Institutions in India. Thus these institutions are making only a partial, half-hearted use of assignments in DE. The use of assignments in tutoring distance students serves a much higher purpose than simply using them to assess learner performance or check his/her eligibility to sit for final examinations.

In fact, it is the tutoring through a variety of media that differentiates distance study from private study, it is not just a ritual of asking the students to submit a few assignment responses to give them a green chit to sit in the final examinations. It needs to be emphasized that the correspondence institutes asking the students to submit assignment responses should immediately adopt ways and means to make optimum use of the tutoring potential of this tool. Moreover, the students should be encouraged to raise doubts that remain even after having received the tutor's comments; so that, what Anand (1979) calls, the instructional correspondence, initiating an academic dialogue a distinguishing feature of distance education starts between the tutors and students on the topic in question.

The finding that more than 90% students believe that assignments help them in the process of learning and their preparation for examinations substantiates the above suggestions. It implies that the assignments should form a compulsory part of the distance education system, and that they should be properly evaluated and constructive instructional comments be provided to the students on points that they have failed to grasp and present at the desired level of performance.

Finally, the students' expectations of the nature of the comments from their tutors clearly reveal the low/poor quality of comments written on their assignment-responses. It appears that most tutor-comments are casual in nature, as they do not make concrete suggestions to students on how to improve or further their learning. The suggestion that emerges here is that tutors should give constructive suggestions, which should be concrete, pointing to exact mistakes rather than just saying that one's performance was not upto the mark. The comments should inform the students exactly about what they are specifically required to do and which material they should refer to. If the presentation is not

up to the mark, then they need to know exactly what is wrong and not just that their style of presentation was not up to the mark, or that they should try to improve it, and so on. Such

comments do not lead the student anywhere. Received twice or thrice, such comments simply frustrate the student, instead of doing any good to him.

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