

Defining quality student feedback in distance learning

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The quality of student feedback is of critical importance in distance learning. Students studying such courses may be geographically far removed from tutors, and limited contact opportunities necessitate a sharp and accurate focus upon aspects of study which link theory, research, clinical practice and written assessment closely together. An understanding of quality feedback begins with an appreciation of the role of distance learning course tutors and the education models which can usefully guide them. Quality also relies upon a close evaluation of support to students as courses are planned, launched and then monitored through course boards or their equivalent.

Keywords: distance learning, support, tutor roles, student feedback, quality assurance

INTRODUCTION

Because of the economic and organizational reforms within the British health care system, nurse education has been challenged to offer increasingly flexible learning opportunities for nurses. The adoption of distance learning, or a combination of campus based and distance learning provision has not primarily come about through an ideological commitment to diversity of educational provision *per se*, but because of the changing face of health care practice, and the demands for an ever more adaptable nursing work force. As colleges of nurse education move into higher education, and faculties seek to secure their market share within nurse education at basic and post-basic levels, institutions have often turned to distance learning as a part of the flexible response.

Good practice

Good practice in open/distance learning, as part of a flexible education response has recently become the focus for an English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and

Health Visiting study (Clarke & James 1994), but in fact, there is already a substantial literature on what characterizes responsible practice within distance learning specifically (see for example Beaty & Morgan 1992, Cowan 1994). Contrary to what some purchasers might expect, and some education managers might also have hoped, good distance learning is neither cheap when compared with campus-based provision (Murphy 1995) nor does it do away with the need to provide a tutorial support (Clark 1994). On the contrary, whilst the nature of tutorial roles changes within distance learning, tutors are central to the success of such courses, facilitating the learning of concepts, arguments and facts within material delivered, as well as prompting reflection upon practice (Kelly & James 1994). Distance learning should therefore be evaluated in several ways, with regard to the production of materials (be these text, CD Rom, television, radio, video or audio cassette), the management of support services and the academic achievements of students.

This paper analyses what may constitute quality within the feedback offered by distance learning tutors to students. It is prompted by an evaluation of course provision that the author has previously played a lead part in, both through journals and the postage of course materials, and by the developing debate on just what tutors should be

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doing to help students engage in critical thinking and reflective practice. The evaluation shared within this paper represents one perspective on quality within student feedback, but nevertheless, hopefully one that will assist colleagues to debate good practice further.

DISTANCE LEARNING TUTOR ROLES

An evaluation of student feedback usefully starts with discussion of just what role the distance learning tutor is perceived to fulfil within the course. This varies by centre and has evolved over time, but several features of the role are commonly acknowledged (Figure 1). For Worth (1994) the role involved negotiating a learning agenda with the student, counselling, assisting with the development of study skills and sometimes acting as a 'generalized other', an individual with whom the student could explore ideas and concepts.

Cowan (1994) emphasized the role as one of support, which itself varied according to the students changing needs and level of confidence. On occasions this would involve providing explanations but equally important, also feedback so that students could judge the strengths and weaknesses of their learning. Tutors were highly valued by the Open University students that Morgan and Morris (1994) interviewed in Wales, with a motivating function well to the fore. The authors found that motivation was prompted by regular and scheduled face-to-face contact, and a clear expectation on the part of tutors that students would discuss their embryonic assignment work.

Learning theorists

Learning theorists offer a further selection of tutor roles, and these are made more challenging when we recognize that students often receive support at a considerable distance, and feedback delayed through the process of using postal or fax communication. Three useful models of tutor roles can be drawn from the work of Daloz (1986), Brookfield (1987) and Egan (1990) respectively (Table 1). What characterizes each of the models is the way tutors focus upon the facilitation of learning by the student, rather than information delivery. The latter function is usually provided through the course materials.

Tutors manage a dialogue with the student that is designed to reinforce success, to prompt inquisitive thought and to challenge when the student's perception of the course subject matter becomes complacent or paradigm bound. In conducting such a dialogue with the student, tutors can have a powerful influence over student morale, motivation and self-worth. Facilitation involves the handling of affective aspects of learning, and a misreading of student confidence, needs or aspirations, could be just as disastrous within this relationship, as in the supervisor-researcher relationship of MPhil or PhD studies.

Tutors have in the past often learnt such skills by trial and error, but the author's experience suggests that an organized programme of distance learning tutor staff development is essential. Examination of the tutor role with students, on 'this' course, in 'this' organization, is important, as are opportunities to explore what it is like to facilitate learning rather than deliver facts. Lee (1978) has pointed out that 'briefing' tutors is too limited an interpretation of such endeavours though. Rather, tutors achieve more when they are themselves supported in coming to terms with a different emphasis of work, and a philosophy of learning that highlights openness and equality. This involves a re-examination of the educational philosophy of the tutors themselves as well as the syllabus, and then the discussion of educational techniques which best suit the diverse needs of students who come to distance learning for a variety of practical reasons.

WRITTEN FEEDBACK FOCUS

That written student feedback, concerning work towards assessment, is at the heart of what students expect from their distance learning tutors has been pointed out by Cole *et al.* (1986). In their study of Open University students it was found that learners hoped to have their work treated with respect, to receive an explanation and justification given for the grade awarded and to receive a clear explanation of how the student could improve. Feedback was expected to have a helpful attitude or tone, and provide appropriate reassurance about abilities, where the work mandated this.

Students sought specific comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the work, and a constructive challenge concerning what could yet be improved was preferred to a slap on the back and 'well done' by the more able students. Whilst these expectations could reasonably be expected to apply to all students, including those on campus-based programmes, they are made more poignant by the limited face-to-face contact that many distance learning students experience (Lentell 1994). Accepting that Cole *et al.*'s (1986) work could constitute a standard for student feedback within distance learning courses, several provisions designed to assure the quality of this aspect of distance learning courses could be helpful. These include:

- A Student's Charter, based upon Cole *et al.*'s 1986 work, issued to all students and tutors with guidance notes on where, when and how this standard of good practice might be invoked.
- The monitoring of written feedback to students by the course director or other appointed monitor. This involves sampling scripts and student feedback forms, in order to advise tutors in writing of the effectiveness (or otherwise) of their feedback. Such monitoring systems are considered vital to course management (Clark 1994).

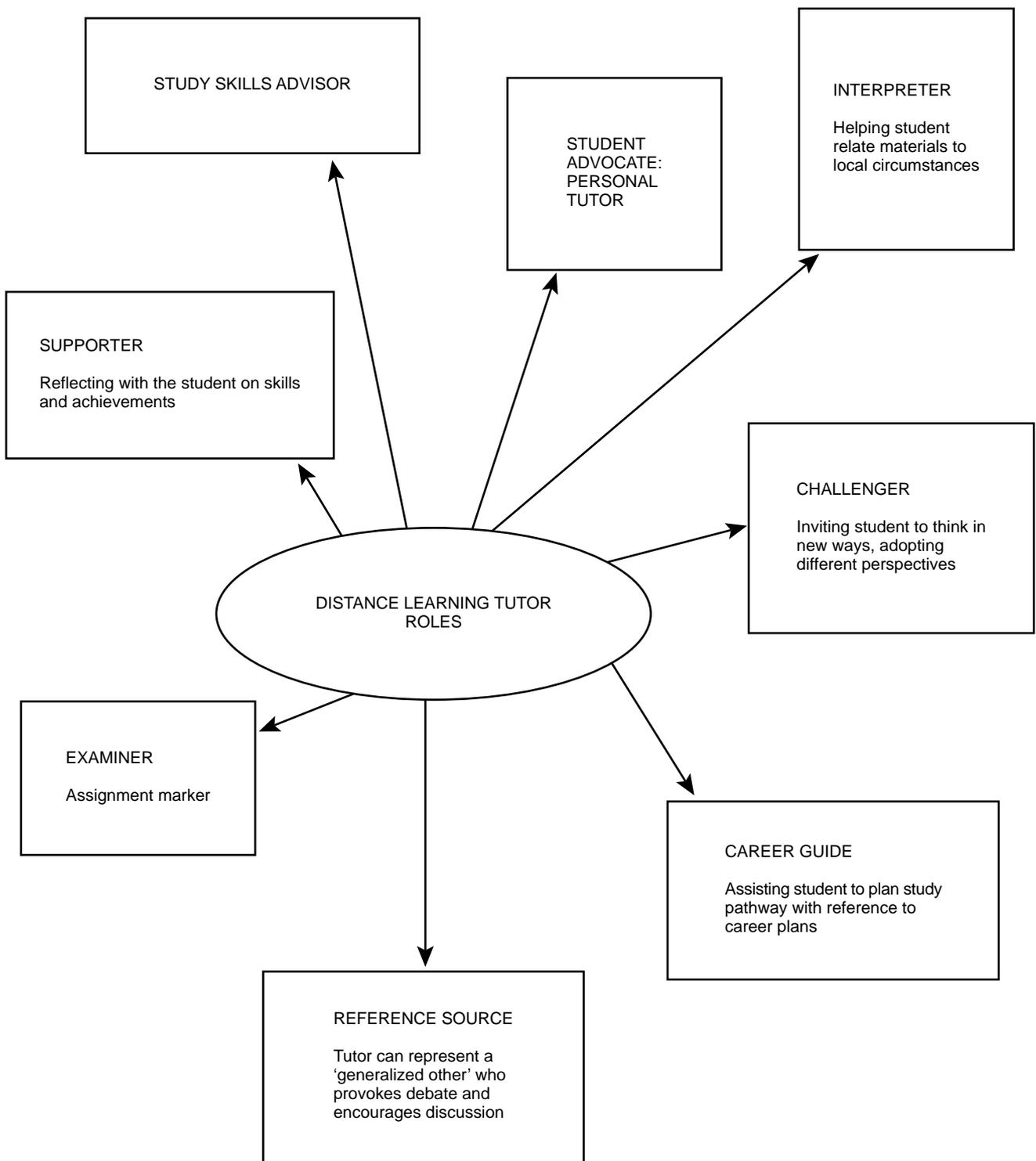


Figure 1 Roles of the distance learning tutor.

- A regular dialogue between course director, tutors, external examiners and student representatives on how feedback could most accurately reflect the particular circumstances of students as they apply course concepts to local practice, and then in turn prepare assignment work. This dialogue was managed by the author through the Course Board (where student representatives sit) and the Tutors Course Conference, where tutors and external examiners compare practice.

Table 1 Three models of tutor role

Brookfield 1987	Daloz 1986	Egan 1990
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Promoting notion that critical thinking is a positive and productive activity. 2 Facilitating critical thinking as a process which continues beyond formal education. 3 Helping students to identify and challenge assumptions—those held by others and self. 4 Helping students to examine the ways in which clinical and other contexts affect knowledge and decisions. 5 Prompting students to explore alternative perspectives, decisions, courses of action. 6 Encouraging students to maintain a reflective scepticism. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 There are three strategies available to help guide adults. 2 Working to support learners, providing an environment where trust is possible, and tutor acts as an advocate. Includes active listening, providing structure through clear expectations, specific assignments and realisable tasks. Tutor uses self-disclosure to deepen the relationship. 3 Challenging the learner by creating a gap between what the learner knows and what they might yet know. Tutor invites students to close the gap by settling tasks, engaging in discussion that offers alternative perspectives to students' own. 4 Assisting students to develop a vision of what could be different, how they could be in the future. This could involve modelling behaviour and attitudes, or offering a map that sets learning in context. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Helping is designed to enable students to manage problem situations, develop unused resources and opportunities. 2 Helping is client-orientated; the agenda remains strongly that of the students. 3 Involves assisting students to make a transition from a present scenario, towards a preferred scenario, through an agreed strategy which can be termed 'getting there'. 4 In present scenario help students identify their knowledge deficits, needs, problems, confusions concerning practice, theory, research, etc. 5 In the preferred scenario help them set goals, objectives, agendas based upon their new understanding of the problem or need. 6 'Getting there' involves the tutor in helping the students to choose and then evaluate the strategies they are using to achieve their preferred scenario.

PRACTICAL ISSUES IN MAINTAINING FEEDBACK QUALITY

The ways in which learning is often envisaged within distance learning systems suggest a number of practical issues that must be at the centre of monitoring for quality within student feedback (Table 2). These reflect the current professional concern to develop nurses as critical thinkers (e.g. Brookfield 1987, Jones & Brown 1991, Hunter & Lops 1994), both with regard to theory/research (Meleis & Price 1988, Adams 1988) and the use of experience (Atkins & Murphy 1993, Paul & Heaslip 1995, Wong *et al.* 1995).

Characteristically, distance learning assignments invite students to take concepts and theoretical issues discussed within the course material (usually broad ranging to accommodate students in different professional settings) and to apply these to local clinical contexts. The assignment then challenges the student to reflect/adjust/evaluate the care through one of several types of questions (e.g. critical incidents, care episodes, care or case studies, reflective logs, etc.).

Tutors frequently operate within assignment guidelines, and sometimes within marking guidelines that have been designed to address performance within the cognitive, rather than the reflective or affective domains of pro-

fessional education. They may be torn between competing edicts, to both accommodate the need for academic rigour and clarity (which is accentuated by the move into the higher education field), to reflect accurately the goals of reflective learning implicit or explicit within the assignment guidelines or module learning outcomes, and to follow precepts of good feedback practice associated with one or other model of the distance learning tutor role.

Accommodating such demands is extremely difficult unless consideration is given to: (a) what balance of traditional academic skills (e.g. accurate referencing, research analysis) and clinical reflection skills (e.g. exploration of cause and effect issues in practice) the assignment is meant to assess; and (b) how this should be represented to tutors in marking guidance. Wong and colleagues (1995) have recently begun to identify a range of critical thinking skills, associated with reflection (Table 3) which may assist with the development of more reflexive and sensitive assessment criteria. These have been based upon the arguments concerning adult learning made by Mezirow (1991) and could be used in distance learning, to complement the critical thinking demands associated with theoretical or research debate.

Whatever emphases of assessment are chosen, distance learning circumstances suggest that both tutors and

Table 2 Distance learning parameters affecting tutor roles and student feedback

- 1 Distance learning materials prepared as concepts or themes for local application and reflection. This because of educational philosophy of the course, and practical necessity (students study course in many different contexts and concept-led provision is cost-effective and educationally effective).
- 2 Tutors invited to facilitate review of course materials in context of student's local practice. Tutors prompt comparison of ideas between students within group, and prompt questions (e.g. how do these concepts fit within my area of practice?). Prompts may be delivered at a physical distance, so there is a delay between question and answer, idea and counter-idea.
- 3 Assignments designed to assess comprehension, analysis, application and synthesis of concepts, through reflective formats. These include critical incident analysis, case studies, reflective logs and value clarification exercises.
- 4 Tutors challenged to facilitate several different, but interrelated aspects of learning as a result.
 - a. Academic skills associated with use of theory and research.
 - b. Academic skills associated with the presentation of arguments.
 - c. Process critical thinking skills which extend beyond the assessment.
 - d. Reflective writing skills drawing upon experience and observation and presenting same with clarity.

Table 3 Critical thinking skills associated with reflection (after Wong *et al.* 1995)

- 1 Students attend to their feelings, perceptions, values and attitudes within their writing/discussion.
- 2 They explore the process of change regarding attitudes, values and perceptions, noting how this relates to the changing base of knowledge.
- 3 Ideas are modified to suit new settings, new situations.
- 4 Experience is revisited inquisitively, and situations are seen as amenable to analysis. The world is not taken as a 'given' or for granted.
- 5 Students able to frame problems/needs in context of situation, and to examine their role in the same dispassionately.
- 6 Students also willing to explore courageous interpretations of events and to suppose alternative courses of action.
- 7 Students were able to meld theoretical/research and experience references together in order to arrive at conclusions.

students will need a crystal clear explanation of which assessment criteria are being used when, and how then in turn, this affects the formative guidance and feedback that the tutor should offer.

Assuring quality

Having clarified the range and purpose of assessment within distance learning courses, it is also important to

review once again, just what this will mean for tutors and their role. A variety of assessments may seem attractive, but as with many other aspects of distance learning, a considerable amount of preparation has to be completed 'up front'. There are only limited opportunities to adjust assessment when tutors and students are geographically dispersed, and where part-time tutors are possibly drawn from other institutes where assessment takes a different format. Accommodation has to be made for the full range of student circumstances, including those that are studying abroad, and probably operating with different cultural circumstances, and differently arranged health care services, whilst maintaining high standards.

Quality in these terms is represented by an assessment system that offers equal access to assignments or examinations, and which has leeway within the system to allow the student to present the nuances of local practice, so that assessment and feedback operate on a 'level playing field'. This may be accommodated by permitting students abroad, or in unusual clinical circumstances, to present appendices to their work which do not count against word allowances and which outline the central features of local systems of care and cultural norms. It is also enhanced by the recruitment of suitably qualified tutors who can operate as near as possible to the student's location.

OBSERVATIONS FROM FEEDBACK MONITORING

Once the assessment system has been thoroughly thought through, and tutors assisted to understand the part that this plays in their role as facilitators of learning, there is a prospect of effective feedback monitoring being instigated. Experience, however, suggests that some of the above remarks are a counsel of excellence, and that in reality, feedback monitoring is in fact required to fulfil three functions:

- To assure students that their tutors are prompted to provide the fullest and most helpful feedback.
- To assist tutors to re-define their tutorial role, by emphasizing the formative advice that they offer students.
- To engage tutors in a developing dialogue about what equals quality within a distance learning programme. This usually involves setting up opportunities for tutors to compare good practice and to explore their frustrations and confusions associated with a complex, but fulfilling role.

Several realities present themselves. The first of these relates to what purpose, carefully selected commentary on tutor's work is meant to fulfil? Whilst monitors are advocates of students, and guardians of the standards of the university or college, they are also preceptors of tutors who

may have varying amounts of experience in distance learning. Commentary then must have many of the same positive qualities as the tutor's own feedback to students and this frequently takes skill, time and experience.

Good feedback

That which has been considered 'good' student feedback within past monitoring reports by this author has broadly accorded with the criteria used by Cole *et al.* (1986). This has often been interpreted through the following.

The volume of feedback

Whilst more doesn't always equal better, there is an understandable disappointment for students who receive minimalist comments such as 'aspect covered', 'criteria met', or even 'see above' where the tutor has used one feedback proforma box to address two distinctly separate areas. However hard pressed for time the tutor is, written feedback in distance learning is cherished by students and sometimes used (where constructive) to decide who are the best tutors.

The tone of feedback

Stopping to add up the number of short, critical or cryptic comments, on a form or text, quickly registers the tone of feedback. Clearly, where work is poor, false praise cannot be mandated, but the choice of words remains important when students may have limited opportunities to understand the tutor's sense of humour, their personal preferences regarding script layout or the tutor notions that a blunt comment represents a lively 'challenge to change' rather than a damning indictment of the student's intellect. In principle, negative comments become positive comments, when shortfalls are balanced with suggestions for enhanced answers or approaches in the future.

The specificity of feedback

Students have an unerring ability to spot the feedback of a tutor who has not read their work carefully enough. This is not simply that the tutor refers to deficits that are not there (for instance a reference that is covered), but that the comments have a vague character to them. For instance, sweeping remarks about the 'general structure of the piece', or the 'broad academic feel of the essay' may summate earlier specific points quite fairly, but used alone they could also say to the student: (a) I've not read your work because I became rapidly bored/confused/tired; and (b) that feedback doesn't matter to me very much as I've given you a pass and that's what counts.

'Good feedback' has been characterized by that which makes careful cross reference between text and feedback proforma points, and which highlights how a student's point either did or didn't enable them to develop the argument that they introduced within their introduction.

The fit of the feedback (to award or grade made)

This has been an important challenge to tutors within distance learning systems because some may have limited experience of marking, particularly at honours degree level, and because coming from many different locations and nursing specialties they are not an homogeneous group with immediate access to distance learning tutor colleagues with whom they can compare notes. Course monitors in these circumstances have a very privileged insight into marking across the country and may seek to establish a clear standard of feedback fit which reflects the assessment in hand and the students' need for parity of marking approach within the course. Feedback that explains the award through reference to the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work need not be apologetic or defensive.

DEFINING QUALITY FEEDBACK

So what may we conclude about quality feedback in distance learning, nurse education? We can suggest that quality feedback starts a long way back, within the infrastructure of distance learning courses, as planners evolve ideas about the purpose of the course, the role of tutors, and the assessment system. It draws upon the fact that feedback fulfils both formative and summative functions, and that it is delivered both through the written word (powerful because it remains on record, for student and for institution), and through informal, verbal commentary.

Good quality feedback contributes to the tutor's role as a facilitator of critical thinking, prompting and challenging the student by turn, as the course unfolds and students move from a position where the nursing world is about inalienable facts to one where knowledge is often acknowledged to be contextual and open to debate. Good quality feedback may be recognized where learners go on to report that they have greater confidence in their ability to argue a case, and understand their own perspectives on professional issues. Students who are comfortable living within the uncertainty surrounding the nature of professional knowledge, but who are able to articulate a coherent and rational plan of care, may in part have benefitted from a tutor who has provided feedback that responds to the affective aspects of learning.

Good quality feedback is nurtured within a system that uses monitoring to provide constructive feedback on what is written to students. Where possible, this extends to the monitor sitting in on occasional study group sessions, so that feedback can be discussed as a study issue. However, whilst monitoring is a healthy indicator that feedback is recognized as important, we cannot be complacent. Tutors can and do provide incomplete feedback, sometimes because of tiredness or confusion concerning their role, and the sampling of feedback is likely to pick up only a percentage of such shortfalls.

For these reasons, open and continuing dialogue between course monitors, tutors, examiners and students may be the final and most effective quality criteria of a distance learning course. Through such discussion, monitors are reminded of their limitations too, and good feedback practice is shared with the widest possible audience.

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