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**STUDENTS' REACTION STRATEGIES
TO FEEDBACK COMMENTS
IN WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS**

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined University students' reaction strategies to lecturer comments in written assignments. Seventy-five students responded to a questionnaire and interview schedules. Data which was analysed quantitatively and qualitatively revealed that students took feedback comments seriously and at most fault finding and sketchy comments were not only highly in sensitive and stressful but brought loss of self-esteem. The majority of the students were not only interested in the mark but appreciated lecturers who gave analytic and holistic comments rather than surface-level comments. Whilst most lecturers seemed to be consistent in what they looked for when marking, discrepancies were also revealed and this created unreliability and inconsistencies in the scoring procedures and comments given. The problem of subjectivity in marking was not confined to any particular subject area. Although a number of students found lecturers to discuss comments with them, a few were sceptical about such discussions for fear of victimisation. The study recommends that lecturer feedback should be both informative and motivational because a mark with no explanation is not helpful to students. Efforts should also be made to standardise essay marking systems so as to reduce variability and minimise student anxiety levels.

Background to the study:

Lecturers and teachers all over the world spend hours marking students' homework and assignments, identifying errors and writing comments with the hope of trying to improve students' learning. Research evidence which shows that learning is facilitated by feedback is well documented. For example, early research by Page¹ cited in Gage and Berlinger (1992); Elawar and Corno² showed that students can be motivated by various kinds of feedback practices but sometimes teachers forget how important comments are to students. Kreizmann³ argued that whilst the writing and marking of assignments should be a multi-draft process with continual teacher-learner interaction evidence shows that at most this exercise is relegated to a right or wrong marking ritual. Teachers don't seem to realise that students in general are highly sensitive about the quality and quantity of marking reflected in their essays or projects. Kreizmann³ reiterated the fact that where students never receive anything but criticism and fault finding comments they tend to develop a crippling anxiety about writing and whenever possible would attempt to evade writing altogether. On the other hand when criticism is used sparingly students tend to accept and react favourably.

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Research by Moore⁴ showed that students who received teacher's comments on their quiz papers showed greater improvement on the next quiz than did students whose papers were only graded with no teachers' comments. Whilst research on feedback has mainly concerned itself with why and how teachers should respond to students' written work for effective learning, critics have raised questions as to whether students take time to read the given feedback, and whether feedback makes any difference in the quality of students' written work. Franselm⁵ studied homework assignments of students and found that at most students did not read the teachers' comments or read them but did not implement the suggestions to correct the errors for reasons best known to themselves.

A number of students in Franselm's study revealed that their primary interest was in the grade and not the teacher's comments. Some of the weak students were said to have confessed that they did not bother to read the comments because the teacher never wrote anything positive about their work. Follow up studies by Semke and Page⁶ in Gage and Berlinger (1992) with college students revealed that corrections did not significantly increase student's writing skills.

Franselm⁵ argued that part of the problem to students' failure to respond to feedback meaningfully seems to stem from the nature of feedback itself. In her studies she found that some teachers failed to incorporate insight in their feedback approaches thereby failing to assist the students beyond the level of cosmetic adjustments. In a survey of the feedback styles of fifteen teachers, not only did Franselm find an emphasis on form rather than meaning, but also a number of weaknesses in the nature of the feedback itself. For instance, the teachers both misread the students' responses or answers and consequently gave misguided feedback or recommendations that were unclear or imprecise. Evidence showed that in such instances students' response strategies to feedback were depressing in that students rarely read through the teachers' comments or read them but did not give any thoughtful attention to the suggestions. It is upon this background that this study examines the reaction strategies to feedback given in written assignments among university students.

1. E.B. Page (1958) in N.L. Gage and D.C. Berliner (1992) *Educational Psychology* Boston, Houghton Miffling.
2. M.C. Flawar and L. Corno (1985) 'A Factorial experiment' on Cognitive Processes to Learning' *American Psychologist* 15, 201 - 202.
3. Kreizmann, P. Conceptions of Educational Achievement. *Educational Research* (1990) 19 (3) 2 -7
4. S. Moore (1991) *Teaching and Learning* (London, Longman).
5. S. Franselm *Cognitive Processes in student writing*. London, Longman. (1994).
6. D. Semke and E.D. Page (1985) in N.L. Gage and D.C. Berliner "Educational Psychology". Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

Objectives of the case study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. examine the nature of feedback students get from lecturers in various written assignments.
2. find out the strategies students use to react to lecturer feedback.
3. assess students' views on whether lecturer feedback helps them improve their writing skills.
4. analyse the interpretations students give to the various forms of feedback.

METHODOLOGY:

The sample comprised seventy-five post graduate students enrolled for the Two-Year Bachelor of Arts with Education Degree Programme at Africa University. There were forty-four male and thirty-one female students. The duration of the degree programme was four semesters or two years. At the time of study the students were in the first semester of their first year. Prior to this degree programme all the subjects except a few were qualified secondary school teachers who had done either a Two and Three Year Diploma in Education Course in Secondary Teachers' Colleges. At College the students had majored in two school subjects including Education which was compulsory. Four of the students in the sample were college lecturers. Emphasis in the Degree Programme was to upgrade content in the students' respective two subject majors and Education. The subject options on offer at the time of the study were English, Geography, Music, History and Religious Studies. Education was compulsory for all students.

INSTRUMENTS:

At the time of the study the students had written two major assignments in their respective content subject areas and education. Therefore, the subjects were asked to refer to any one written essay assignment to which they had received feedback from their lecturer. A questionnaire was used as the main data collection instrument. The fifteen item questionnaire comprised both semi-structured and open-ended items. The semi-structured items sought to find out the type of feedback students had received, whether or not they had attended to the comments, whether they understood the comments and how they rated themselves as learners in the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The open-ended items required students to explain in detail how they had attended to the different types of comments, whether the comments were helpful and how they interpreted or made

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meaning out of the comments. Of importance, the subjects were asked to detail the strategies they used to react to lecturer feedback. Interviews were also conducted to follow up on some of the issues the subjects had raised in the open-ended questionnaire items.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

In order to maximise on questionnaire returns the subjects were assembled in a lecture hall and questionnaires were distributed to each subject by the researcher. Instructions were given and subjects were advised not to discuss with their colleagues. The average time taken by the subjects to complete the questionnaire was 30 to 35 minutes. After completion the researcher collected the instruments. Although the researcher had intended to use all the ninety-nine subjects enrolled in this course programme seventy-five subjects actually responded to the questionnaire representing a seventy-five percent response rate. The researcher then selected ten subjects purposively, five male and five female subjects, and conducted interviews as a follow up to some of the issues raised.

RESULTS:

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse and discuss the data based on the themes that emerged from the responses.

TABLE 1: ESSAY CHOICE BY SUBJECT AREA: N = 75

SUBJECT	NO. OF ESSAY	PERCENTAGE
Education	4	54.7
History	12	6
English	10	13.3
Geography	5	6.6
Religious Studies	4	5.3
Music	2	2.6

Table 1 shows students' essay choices on which their feedback comments were based. The majority of the students chose Education essays followed by History, English, Geography, Religious Studies and Music.

AMOUNT OF COMMENTS READ AND REASONS GIVEN:

All the students said they read all the feedback comments given. The major reason given by all students for reading the comments was that they wanted to understand the errors they had made so that they would not repeat them. However, other students had additional reasons. 13.3 percent (10) said that they wanted to know the lecturer's style of marking and expectations. 10.6 percent (8) wanted to know

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why they had got a low mark. 2.6 percent (2) read the comments but felt that some of the comments did not seem to make much sense.

TABLE II: FREQUENCY OF COMMENTS GIVEN THOUGHTFUL ATTENTION: N = 75.

	NO OF RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
All of them	47	62.7
Most of them	19	25.6
Some of them	9	12
Few of them	0	0
None of them	0	0

Analysis of results in Table II shows that the majority of the students gave thoughtful attention to all and most of the comments respectively. Explanations given for attending to the comments were captured in the following excerpts:

“I found most of the comments helpful, informative and relevant.”

“Most comments were objective and encouraged me to improve.”

“Although I did not agree with some of the comments most of the comments were an eye opener to some of the writing skills I took for granted.”

The students who only read some of the comments had this to say:

“Some of the comments were not informative to some extent the comments were not true of what I had written.”

“The essay question asked for an argument and my own opinion, but the lecturer seemed to have a biased view. It’s not fair.”

“It seemed the lecturer was contradicting himself in his comments.”

“Too much emphasis was placed on grammar, spelling and punctuation and not on content or ideas given.”

The students were asked to describe in detail the comments made by the lecturer and the following were sampled:

“Acknowledge sources of your ideas.”

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“Work reflects limited knowledge and understanding of the question.”

“Check your spellings and grammar.”

“You are ignorant of the question.”

“Expression, grammar - weak.”

“Link your ideas.”

“Use academic language avoid slang e.g. kids.”

“Paraphrase don't plagiarise.”

“What?” “So?” “Why?”

“What do you mean?”

“Sp” “Gr” “Expr”

“Word formation”

With regard to the usefulness of the feedback given the majority of the students appreciated the openness of the lecturers and their attempt to guide them in developing academic writing skills and coherent arguments. The students reiterated that although they had written a number of assignments before when they were in College, their academic writing skills had deteriorated due to lack of practice. Also the level and standard of work expected at University was found to be more challenging because it called for independent and reflective thinking rather than depending mostly on factual knowledge or regurgitation of ideas.

Those who were very critical of the feedback comments they had received had various viewpoints to defend their position. For instance, 21.3 percent (16) said that some lecturers gave conflicting comments regarding length of assignments, presentation and style and referencing techniques. 2.7 percent (2) argued that some of the comments were too general and in some cases too brief such that the students were left thirsting for more guidance. 9.3 percent (7) stressed that some of the comments were more of personal views than academic.

21.3 percent (16) argued that they could not read some of the comments as the handwriting was very small and illegible. Because of the illegibility of the comments these students could not understand some of the comments.

On whether the comments tallied with the mark given 52 percent (39) of the students expressed their reservations. Whilst they accepted the mark and comments given these students felt that the marking of essays was highly subjective. The students argued that right from the beginning they did not have access to the criteria or guide that the lecturer would use for marking. For example, the students did not know for sure marks that were allocated to the

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various phases of the essay such as Introduction, the Main Body and Conclusion. 2.7 percent (2) said that they were penalised for typographical errors and grammar but the overall comments were silent on the relevance of ideas. In worse situations the students argued that the comments did not relate to the question at all. Similar sentiments were echoed by the majority of the interviewed students who argued that at times they wondered whether the lecturer had read their papers at all. The following sentiments revealed the students' gloomy sentiments:

"All I got were 'right' tick marks and a low mark of 56%"

"I got a mark of 62% and a comment which read "A good answer" but my friend got 75% and a comment which read "Well tried"

"How do you reconcile these two comments? Where is the objectivity? Is it a problem of semantics on the part of the lecturer?"

The students reiterated that some lecturers were generally mean with marks while others tended to be overgenerous to the extent that the whole exercise became a mockery. One student angrily charged:

"Some lecturers think that their effectiveness is measured by being hard on students, you really wonder how they were recruited"

The students stressed that some lecturers paid little attention to positive comments but put greater emphasis on negative comments.

TABLE III: FREQUENCY IN PERCENTAGE OF WHAT THE COMMENTS DEALT WITH N = 75.

TYPE OF COMMENTS	A LOT	SOME	LITTLE	NONE
Mechanics (Spelling, punct)	24.7	20.7	37.3	17.3
Graammar	34.7	12.3	30.0	12.3
Vocabulary	16.3	14.7	38.3	30.7
Organisation	34.7	22.7	17.3	25.3
Content	34.7	30.7	17.3	14.7

Analysis of results in Table III shows that a large percentage of comments dealt with grammar, organisation and content. Greater attention was also paid to punctuation and spelling errors followed by vocabulary. This shows that whilst lecturers would want the students to show knowledge of ideas they are equally concerned about how ideas are expressed. Lecturers in various subject areas seemed to be consistent in their identification of students' essay writing weaknesses.

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On whether they did not understand any of the comments given the majority of the students 90.7 (68) percent understood most of the comments. The remaining 9.3 (7) percent complained about the illegibility of the lecturer's handwriting, use of short hand, question marks and arrows. Examples of such comments were given as:

“What?”

“No!”

“So?”

“Really?”

“You are not serious”

“???”

In their view the students argued that such comments when they are not accompanied by further explanation left the student to guess what the lecturer meant. The worst situation reported was when a lecturer just gave a mark without showing any evidence of having read the script.

STRATEGIES USED TO REACT TO COMMENTS

Detailing the strategies they had used to respond to the feedback comments 59 percent (44) of the students said that they made a mental note of the comments and incorporated the suggestions in the next assignments. Further, they referred to literature on essay writing skills, a strategy which improved their work remarkably. 26.6 percent (20) said they felt satisfied because the lecturers were thorough and objective in their marking. In addition to making a mental note of the comments they promised themselves to do better. 9.3 percent (7) considered the comments in the other essays but compared the comments with those given by other lecturers in the same subject to check whether there was some consistency in the type of errors identified and comments given. 2.6 percent (2) said they reread the comments in order to internalise the comments given. Whilst they tried to understand the comments they also tried to figure out why they had got such a low mark and depressing comments. One student said she refused to accept what she saw at the initial glance of the mark 45% because she thought she was academically strong, had put a lot of effort and sleepless nights in the assignment and did not deserve such a low mark.

Another student said she felt humiliated, depressed and stupid. In her own words she said,

“I was shocked, felt heavy inside and ignored the assignment and the comments for two days because of this dismal performance of 40%. I avoided my lecturer whenever possible because each time I met him I felt embarrassed.”

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Although the student later accepted the comments after discussing her work with her lecturer she never thought that with nine years teaching experience in English she would fail in that subject. Since it was her first assignment at University each time she wrote any other assignment she became very nervous and depressed until the assignment was returned. She said that she only regained her confidence when her work improved in addition to the motivation and support she got from colleagues.

On whether they discussed the comments with their respective lecturers as a strategy to understand the feedback, the majority of the students did not find any need for that but said they appreciated a lecturer who would discuss the general comments in class. 5.3(4) percent said they did not attempt to discuss the comments with their lecturers for fear of victimization especially, "when you do not agree with the lecturer's viewpoint or show him or her that they did not read the script or was not impartial." One student reiterated that although she had wanted to discuss with the lecturer, the lecturer was always out of his office or claimed to be busy each time she tried to make an appointment. 4 (3) percent of the students said they had discussed the problem amicably and rewrote the English assignments.

As to whether they worried about comments written in "red" ink most/of the students said they did not worry as long as the colour pen was different from the one they would have used. They worried more about legibility and helpfulness of the comments.

**TABLE IV: STUDENTS' RATING OF THEMSELVES AS LEARNERS:
N=75**

	NO OF RESPONSES	PERCENTAGE
Excellent	21	28
Good	47	62.7
Fair	6	8.0
Weak	1	1.3

The majority of the students in Table IV rated themselves as good and excellent learners respectively. A few rated themselves as fair and one as weak. This shows that in general this group of students had a positive self image and self-esteem of themselves as learners.

TABLE V: STUDENTS' RATING OF THEMSELVES IN VARIOUS SKILLS: N = 75

SKILL	EXCELLENT	GOOD	FAIR	WEAK
Writing	(24) 32	(44) 58.7	(5) 6.6	(2) 2.6
Reading	(16) 21.3	(55) 73.3	5.3	0
Listening	(24) 32	(43) 57.3	(8) 10.7	0
Speaking	(13) 17.3	(48) 64	(11) 14.7	(3) 4

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Analysis of findings in Table V shows that a large majority of the students rated themselves as good in the four skills. A reasonable percentage rated themselves as excellent. 2.6 percent (2) and 4 percent (3) of the students rated themselves as weak in writing and speaking skills respectively. In my opinion this reflects their openness and genuine assessment of themselves as learners in an attempt to seek relevant help. Further analysis shows a high correlation of students' perceptions of themselves as learners and their ratings in the four skills.

DISCUSSION:

This study revealed very stimulating results about the nature of feedback students get and their reaction strategies to such comments. Contrary to Franselmu's findings all students in this study read all of the feedback comments they got although the reasons for doing so varied. While feedback was found to be a motivating practice students in general were highly sensitive to the comments they got to the extent that in some instances it became psychologically stressful. These findings reinforce earlier results by Page¹ and Kreizmann⁵ that feedback comments if not viewed as a multi-draft process can cripple student efforts and impede learning.

Whilst lecturer feedback was found to be varied in style, content and depth it is the meaning and interpretation that students make of that which determines the quality of the essay writing process. It is generally agreed that although the effort required to read an essay and write meaningful comments is substantial lecturers should always realise the effect of feedback on student effort, attitude, self-image or whatever it is that promotes learning.

Results in this study have shown that some comments focused more on the surface level features of students essays than on meaning and relevance of ideas. It is therefore, recommended that while form is important, lecturers should adopt both holistic and analytic

approaches to essay marking because of the inherent subjectivity on marking essays and its openness to interpretation. Using the holistic approach a lecturer would read and evaluate a few essays to see if they are comparable in quality after which sample essays are chosen from various mark and quality ranges to serve as models. In analytic marking an essay model is constructed and points are allocated to various elements of the essay for example, organisation or internal consistency. Although some view the analytic approach as time consuming it shows the expected level of performance while the holistic approach classifies the expected information.

Bias and meanness in scoring as revealed in this study seem to strengthen the argument that some lecturers are more effective in writing encouraging comments than others just as much as some are mean with marks than others. While results have shown some degree of consistency among lecturers in checking errors, elements of inconsistencies were also noted. For instance, neatness, spelling,

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punctuation and communication effectiveness were valued to different degrees by different lecturers. To achieve greater objectivity in marking it is recommended that students write their names on the back of their essays or use registration numbers to conceal their identities. Another strategy which could increase fairness is to have another lecturer who is familiar with the essay topic to mark the papers without referring to the initial mark. This strategy would provide useful insights into one's marking practices. In conclusion, this study has to some extent shown that students' reactions to lecturer feedback comments can be a powerful tool of penetrating the student's minds and emotions in a way otherwise impossible.



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