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Tutors and Their Feedback in Online Tutorials: The Case in a Distance Teaching University

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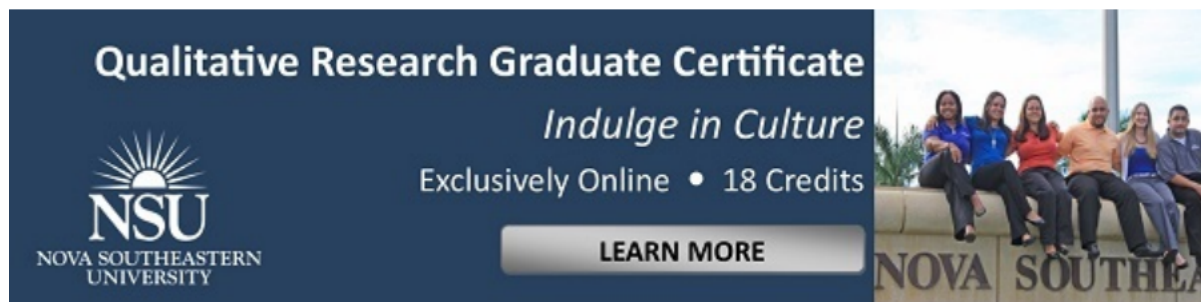


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Abstract

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Keywords

distance learning, online feedback, online tutorial, tutor constraint, qualitative research, content analysis

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Tutors and Their Feedback in Online Tutorials: The Case in a Distance Teaching University

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The purpose of this study was to analyze the extent to which tutors provided feedback in online tutorials at Indonesia Open University (Universitas Terbuka or UT), as well as tutors' constraint in providing that feedback. This qualitative study used both content analysis of 20 online tutorial classes to see tutors' feedback and in-depth interviews with the tutors. The results of the study showed that only some tutors in the online tutorial classes provided feedback on discussions and assignments and that some tutors did not provide any feedback. The analysis of the feedback derived from the types of feedback coined by Alvarez, Espasa, and Guasch (2011), namely, corrective feedback, epistemic feedback, suggestive feedback, and epistemic+suggestive feedback. In the online tutorial classes at UT, some feedback from the tutors corresponded with the types of feedback from Alvarez, Espasa and Guasch. The tutors who provided feedback did so despite constraints such as a lack of time to give feedback to each student. Provision of feedback offered benefits and satisfaction to students, leading them to become more successful in online tutorials.

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Introduction

Distance learning institutions are required to provide learning support services to their students. One of these learning supports is tutorials, the form of which can include face-to-face tutorials, web tutorials, or online tutorials. The function of tutorials is to assist students in better understanding the course materials (Setiani & MacKinnon, 2015). The tutor's roles in these learning supports are very important to providing a meaningful learning experience, as the efforts of the tutors can assist students in understanding and consolidating the information conveyed through the learning material; tutors can also help students with interpreting, organizing, summarizing, analyzing, and critiquing of information, as well as being able to assess and apply it. In online tutorials or online learning, students are required to be more self-disciplined (Allen & Seaman, 2007) and instructors or tutors can, and should be, more engaged with students (Carini et al., 2006) for improved learning outcomes. Tutors are expected to act as instructors and facilitators in the teaching and learning process. One indicator of the tutor's role as a facilitator and instructor is the provision of feedback on discussions and assignments (Garrison et al., 2000).

Feedback has been found to contribute to student satisfaction, motivation, and perceived learning (Wisniewski et al., 2020). Effectively communicated feedback can improve the learning experience. However, the nature of online learning limits the types of feedback that an instructor can provide (Li et al., 2020).

This article aims to analyze the extent to which tutors provided feedback to their students and any constraints that prevented them from fulfilling this obligation. Tutors working at universities that have large, online or distance education students have heavy workloads, are at a significant distance (physically or psychically) from their students or have technological challenges; their abilities to provide meaningful, formative feedback that will assist in learning are often limited (Chaudhary & Dey, 2013; Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011; Kearns, 2012). If educators better understand the constraints tutors face, they will be in a better position to design opportunities for offering formative feedback that effectively assists students learn. The findings of our research can assist those designing online or distance education programs by sharing what tutors reveal hindered or assisted in providing effective feedback.

The following research questions guided this study: (1) To what extent do tutors provide feedback for students in online tutorials? (2) What are the constraints that prevent tutors from providing feedback for their students?

Theoretical Framework: Feedback in Online Learning

The purpose of presenting feedback in learning is to provide reinforcement and comments for improvement and development (Leibold & Schwarz, 2015). According to Hattie & Timperley (2007), clear, effective, and meaningful feedback fosters a learning atmosphere. At the same time, students consistently report that students are dissatisfied with the (lack or poor quality of) feedback they receive in their courses (Boud & Molloy, 2013). In online learning, feedback is important and useful for students because it supports self-regulated learning behaviors (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; William, 2013). Positive feedback can also provide learning motivation for students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Martocchio & Webster, 1992). It is important for instructors to provide feedback during the learning process because students can use this feedback to conceptualize their learning progress and improve their learning (Shute, 2008). Effective feedback acknowledges the active role students can and should play in their learning. As Boud and Molloy (2013, para. 10) write:

As soon as the active role of learners is acknowledged, then conceptions of feedback need to move from the mechanistic to the responsive. That is, the role of learners as constructors of their own understanding needs to be accepted. Feedback then becomes not a control mechanism designed by others to corral the learner, albeit in desirable ways, but a process used by learners to facilitate their own learning.

Feedback can improve the connection between tutors and students in online learning, which can be tenuous due to the lack of face-to-face interaction (Bonnell et al., 2007). Leibold and Schwarz (2015) recommend individual feedback for each student that calls them by their name and comments specifically on their answers.

King et al. (2009) divided students' perceptions of feedback into four categories: retention, confidentiality, sensitivity, and usefulness. The first category, retention, describes the degree to which students remember the specific content of instructor/tutor feedback. The second category, confidentiality, describes the degree of privacy afforded to the provision of feedback between instructors and students (i.e., whether feedback is delivered in front of other students). The third category, sensitivity, describes how students receive and accept corrective feedback.

The last category, utility, describes the extent to which students view feedback as useful (Cole et al., 2017). King et al. (2009) note that their survey of 259 students demonstrates that students value the usefulness of feedback; "the usefulness (utility) of feedback forms a unique

perceptual dimension” for students, and the research results “indicate that feedback utility and retention are positively associated with intellectual flexibility and affect for classroom feedback” (p. 254; that is, the usefulness of the feedback correlates with both a sense of intellectual freedom and flexibility felt by students and, more generally, that students were more likely to respond in emotionally positive ways when they perceived the feedback was useful to them in advancing their learning.

Cole et al. (2017) discovered in a survey of 190 students in online courses that students’ positive emotional response to feedback, finding it helpful, were predictive of high motivation in their studies: “... the emotional state resultant from student appraisals of instructor feedback offers a more direct, predictive influence on a student affect variable like motivation” (p. 257). In this study, the focus was on utility, a category identified by King et al. (2009) in the development of their Instructional Feedback Orientation Scale (IFOS): the degree to which students felt the feedback would be useful in their future endeavors. The research of Cole et al. (2017) used the IFOS instrument.

According to Alvarez et al. (2011) there are four types of feedback in an online learning environment: corrective feedback, epistemic feedback, suggestive feedback, and epistemic plus suggestive feedback. Corrective feedback is specific to the assignment and content requirements. For example, “The instruction asked for x, but x was not entered.” Corrective feedback may include an assessment of the student’s mastery of competencies and guidance to improve future performance. This feedback is one of the main means of communication between instructors and students in online courses. Previous research has shown that instructor feedback is directly related to student motivation in a course (Dennen, 2005; Hosler & Arend, 2012).

Epistemic feedback includes questions for further thought, explanation or clarification. For example, “Tell me more about how this concept relates to the point you made.” Suggestive feedback contains suggestions, extensions, or ideas to improve ideas. For example, “By giving an example of courage after you explain the concept, it will make the meaning of courage clearer.” Epistemic Feedback + Suggestions combines the use of questions for further development and suggestions for improvement.

Issues about effective feedback and its value to students in online settings have become even more relevant as a result of the COVID pandemic, where universities had to switch face-to-face classes to online modes almost overnight. Enrolments for online courses have grown faster than overall enrollments in postsecondary education (Guangul et al., 2020). Rapanta et al. (2020) state:

... finding fixes to conduct classic large-scale assessments (written exams, interviews) online is frustrating. Online evaluation and certification require re-thinking evaluation from scratch (e.g., including continuous evaluation or separating formative and summative evaluations), and in some cases, this also implies fine-tuning the course differently. (p. 928)

The authors repeatedly point to the need for increased interaction between teachers and students, for “continuous,” “authentic,” and formative assessment. Studies have shown that the switch to online learning resulted in lower rates of student satisfaction (Means & Neisler, 2021). Gopal et al. (2021) discovered that prompt and meaningful feedback in online courses was directed correlated with student satisfaction, noting that “feedback is the course content’s real image” (p. 6937). In the face of these challenges in providing meaningful and effective assessment in online courses, where the tutors have very heavy workloads, our study was designed to help us discover the nature of the assessment practices employed by the tutors and what challenges or constraints they face in providing such feedback.

Context of the Study

The first author for this study is a female Indonesian lecturer. She has a master's degree in political science from Universitas Indonesia and a Doctoral Degree in Education from a research university, Simon Fraser University, in Canada. She formulated research goals, administered the research, wrote, reviewed, and prepared the manuscript to be published. She had experience and training in qualitative research by taking various courses at graduate level, including approaches in education research. The second author holds a Doctoral Degree in Education from a research university in Canada, the same university as the first author. He assisted in writing the analysis and preparing the manuscript for publication. The third author holds a Doctoral Degree in Government Studies from Institute of Governance of Home Affairs, in Indonesia. She assisted in conducting research and focused on data collection and data analysis.

We were drawn to this topic because of our experiences as lecturers and tutors at the Government Studies Program at UT. We conducted online tutorials for various courses at the Study Program and grew familiar with the courses' management, observing that even though tutors were expected to and had an obligation to provide feedback for discussions and assignments, many tutors did not. We also observed that some tutors did supply valuable feedback for students' discussions and assignments. When students did not receive feedback in the online tutorial, they felt dissatisfied with the service and were less motivated to participate in online tutorial activities. Such a finding is not surprising: Krause et al. (2009) and other scholars have repeatedly noted low rates of student satisfaction with assessment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design, intended to gather information from tutors about their assessment practices: to what extent they were able to provide feedback and to what degree, and what constraints they perceived that hindered their abilities to provide feedback. The feedback data in this study was gathered from online tutorial activities, such as discussions and assignments, using content analysis. Meanwhile, the data of tutors' constraint were collected from a semi structured individual interview with six online tutorial tutors.

In this distance teaching university, UT's students learn independently with learning support that is provided by UT; printed materials serve as a primary learning source, tutorials as a learning support for students. The activities in the online tutorials utilized in this study were conducted over eight weeks and consisted of materials, discussions, and three tasks that were individually assigned in weeks three, five, and seven. Students were expected to study the materials, actively participate in discussions, and complete assignments. Tutors were also expected to actively participate by giving feedback and marking the discussions and assignments each week. Due to the large number of students who took each course, one course was sometimes divided into several classes. Each class consisted of 50 students, and each tutor managed one to four classes for the eight-week period of online tutorial activities.

Our study was an exploration of assessment practices used by tutors. Assessment practices are an integral part of program design, alongside curriculum development and pedagogical practice; as Wyse et al. (2015) assert: "... although it is possible to separate curriculum from pedagogy and assessment for the purposes of analysis, it is not, in our view, sufficient if the fullest understanding of curriculum is to be attained ..." (p. 4).

As our work is designed with the aim of improving student learning and experience, we adopt constructivist and transformative worldviews in guiding the research design. Creswell and Creswell (2018) point out that researchers' worldviews are often unexamined although they exert significant influence on research design and methodology; they advocate making the researchers' worldviews explicit.

Our constructivist worldview is based on the notions of individuals seeking to make sense of their worlds or contexts, of varied or multiple meanings, of the significance of research participants' views, and the creation of meaning through the social interaction of research subjects with each other or with researchers; there is an acknowledgement of the social construction of knowledge. Also, researchers grounded in this worldview realize, keenly, that they bring their interpretive lenses to research and interactions. This worldview is usually conducive to inductive processes of research.

Our work is also informed by a transformative worldview. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) point out, this worldview argues that research needs to appreciate and intersect with political realities with an agenda of confronting oppression and inequity (Freire, 2020) and speaking to issues such as marginalization, domination, inequity, empowerment, and liberation. Given that our students, and perhaps our research subjects themselves, have come from contexts in which they have experienced these realities, a transformative worldview that seeks the best educational outcomes for them is fitting.

Our worldviews naturally suggest a qualitative research design is justified in our research; such a research design, usually inductive in nature, allows us to honour the tutors' experience by giving tutors voice in sharing their perceptions, experiences, understandings, and possible suggestions. Qualitative research designs are deeply contextual and acknowledge issues of power, race, class, and gender; such designs often acknowledge intersectionality (Cho et al, 2013; Gilborn, 2013).

Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that qualitative research approaches are designed to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to their actions or situations. In our research, we were guided by a constructivist worldview that sought understand and interpret the subjective data from the research subjects, based on the assumption that they would construct the meanings of their experiences through their encounters with us. Interviews were thus employed, representing a phenomenological approach intending to probe for the depth of meaning in the participants' lived experience (Giorgi, 2009); to that end, we employed semi-structured interviews that would allow the individual conducting the research to ask follow-up questions to either probe more deeply or seek clarification, such as asking "How?" or "Why?" questions or simply seeking more information (Adams, 2010).

Sampling and Participants

Universitas Terbuka has over 400,000 students. The Faculty of Law, Social and Political Sciences has a total of approximately 5.000 classes, with each class having an average of 50 students. A purposive sample from 20 classes from 9 study programs at the faculty was taken. The samples consisted of textual feedback by tutors on student discussions and assignments given during the eight weeks of the online tutorial activities provided by the tutors. Meanwhile, the participants were tutors from these programs and classes who were giving written feedback to students in assessing their written submissions. We chose one consenting tutor from the Communication Science Study Program, three consenting tutors from the Government Science Study Program, and two consenting tutors from the Public Administration Study Program. Tutors with higher-than-average feedback activities in the online classes were selected.

Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of cases related to the phenomenon of interest the researchers feel will yield rich data. It is valuable when resources available to the research team are limited (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). We also hoped our findings might be generalizable, using a “Typical Case” strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) but realized there would be limits on generalizability given the unique qualities and circumstances of our research subjects, not to mention the small number of research subjects.

Data Collection

Data was collected from two sources: first, texts from online tutorial activities that consisted of feedback and, second, from interviews with the tutors. We examined texts from eight weeks of online tutorial activities and identified if there was any feedback provided by tutors on students’ discussions and assignments, as well as the extent and kinds of feedback.

In addition, data was derived from an individual interview with six tutors to understand their perspectives and perceived constraints regarding giving feedback. Individual interviews are not only efficient, especially in exploratory research, but serve as a means to probe emotional reactions to issues, also serving to allow a range of responses—it is therefore incumbent on the researcher to create a safe setting where participants will be willing to share differing views and experiences. Questions were kept simple and phrased in ways that would elicit group conversation (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The lead author conducted the interviews and an assistant helped with an audio recording of the session.

Data Analysis

We used both content (top-down, deductive approach) and thematic (bottom-up , inductive) analysis. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) note that both content and thematic analyses are “... widely recognised for being transparent and systematic in terms of research processes” (p. 107). They go on to recommend creativity in the use of the two types of analyses, ensuring the right approach is adopted depending on what the researchers seek to find. In earlier work, Vaismoradi et al. (2013) point to the need to set boundaries when using these approaches. They go on to add that the two approaches are robust enough to be used for conducting an introductory study on a novel phenomenon, for which the quality of its data depends on the amount of energy and time the researcher spends on the process of data gathering and analysis” (p. 403). Neuendorf (2018) argues that the two approaches can be complementary, jointly offering more robust data.

For the analysis of the data, we analyzed and interpreted *the texts of feedback from the tutors* using content analysis. According to Kanuka and Anderson (1998), content analysis is a research methodology that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text and validity in order to determine the categorization of a segment or part of a text. The process of selecting a segment or part of a transcript requires researchers to assign a unit of analysis. Rourke et al. (1999) identified five units of analysis that have been used in computer conferencing research: names proportion unit, sentence unit, paragraph unit, thematic unit, and message unit. In this study, we employed analysis of sentences, paragraphs, using message unit. By using the message unit as the unit of analysis, we generally see the message that emerges from the interaction between students and tutors in the discussion and assignments, to determine the category.

In presenting the findings *from the feedback data*, we have organized them with respect to the kinds of feedback given to students by the tutors, applying the work of Alvarez et al. (2011), who categorized feedback into four categories: corrective, suggestive, epistemic, and epistemic+suggestive. We felt the theoretical work of Alvarez et al. was helpful insofar as their well-established categories covered the various kinds of feedback that could be offered by the tutors.

For *data interviews with tutors*, we analyzed and interpreted the interviews about their perspectives concerning constraints in providing feedback. Here, we used a bottom-up, inductive approach in which we analyzed the data provided for emergent themes; we did not apply an existing theoretical model from which to draw themes. We avoided doing so because we did wish not to limit what might emerge in the tutors' responses by way of analysis; by using a top-down approach, we might miss factors that were significant that we had not considered; we wanted the significant themes to emerge from what the tutors conveyed in the interviews. As we note later in the discussion, this approach paid off as we discovered that time, the dominant variable emerging from the interviews, was shown by prior research to be a significant and a limiting feature in providing personalized, meaningful feedback to students.

In this study, we used an open coding approach (Quartaroli, 2009). We read and re-read interview transcripts line-by-line, letting the codes and themes emerge from the words in the text, as in "constant comparison analysis," as described by Doody et al. (2013)—grouping data into small groups with a code, codes then grouped into categories, and, finally, themes being developed that represent the content of each code grouping. This can also be described as axial coding or focus coding (Quartaroli, 2009). Through this process of reading, coding, and focus coding, we created categories that could be used to responses into particular characterizations or themes and answer the research questions.

Ethical Consideration and Trustworthiness

Permission to conduct this research was given by the UT ethical review process prior to the recruitment phase. Participants were recruited via emails sent to all the tutors involved in these study programs, informing them of the purpose of the research, that participation was entirely voluntary, and that efforts would be made to maintain confidentiality and protection of the data and ensure anonymity. Participants were asked if they agreed to be interviewed and were informed their decisions to take part in this study were entirely voluntary and that their identities were masked by assigning codes to the text and interview documents; they were assured no identifying information, such as their names or any descriptive details, would not be used in any research reports. They were also informed they would have access to any reports before they were published to secure their approval. Those who agreed to participate were fully informed that their participation was consensual and that they could withdraw their consent for any reason at any time during the research process without any kind of penalty, resulting in any data from them being destroyed. They were further informed that their anonymity would be protected, their confidentiality protected, and that the data would be fully secured.

We conducted individual interviews lasting approximately one hour and to assist in verifying the accuracy of the data, findings, and interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The texts were analyzed by the principal investigator and a research assistant; they compared their codings and interpretations of the texts and interviews in the analysis of the data. The lead researcher kept research notes in attempts to keep track of decisions made regarding the interpretation of the participants' data; these efforts were part of the researchers' attempts to establish trustworthiness of the data (Noble & Smith 2015). Also, written accounts of the interviews with all the participants were checked with the participants to confirm whether what was written accurately represented what they felt they said.

Specifically, we returned all the interview data to all participants to get their feedback if they agreed or not with our data, findings, and interpretations. This occurred in one-on-one sessions with each participant where participants were given the chance to read over the transcript and analysis and offer their feedback as to accuracy of recording and interpretation of the data; we acknowledge the subjective nature of interpretations *and* the intersubjective attempts to establish validity of the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). Mindful of an overall aim of the research to improve the educational experience for both students and tutors, we approached this part of data analysis following Motulsky's (2021) recommendation of "reflexive participant collaboration," in which constructivist and transformative worldviews are acknowledged and kept as aims. As Motulsky maintains, checking with participants should be a "purposeful social invitation" that honors participants' realities, works toward not only safety in the research process but transformative outcomes; such an approach requires the research to engage in a reflective process that aligns with and is part of the transformative process.

The principal investigator also kept research notes that included her initial reactions to, interpretations of, and questions about the data. As Burgess (2003) points out, such notes allow one means of comparing the actual data with the inferences made by the researcher. Also, such notes offer opportunities to record decisions made during the research process and to make changes based on consideration of such reflections. The notes concerned considerations of both methodology and data analysis; as well, the lead researcher used the notetaking as an opportunity to reflect on possible biases with respect to possible outcomes given the researcher's desire to 'improve' the assessment process (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Research Findings

From the content analysis, we found that that only 15 of the tutors in the 20 classes of online tutorials that were analyzed provided feedback on discussions and assignments. The types of feedback included corrective responses to discussions and assignments, clarification of discussions and assignments' answers, suggestions for answers, motivation, and reminders about plagiarism. As mentioned above, we were analyzing the data through the categories developed by Alvarez et al. (2011). However, not all tutors provided all of these four types of feedback in their classes. A review of these types of feedback offered by the tutors now follows.

Corrective Feedback

The type of feedback that was most often provided to students was corrective feedback. Feedback from teachers to students can be either positive or negative. Corrective feedback is often negative, pointing out shortcomings or errors and drawing attention to where improvement in the student's work is needed (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). It is common especially in (second or additional) language education (Ellis, 2009). Guasch et al. (2013) define corrective feedback as "comments about the assignment requirements and the adequacy of the content" (p. 326). Ellis points out that corrective feedback can have negative outcomes for the student, who may feel discouraged; however, if the feedback process is dialogically based, learning is seen as occurring *in* the feedback process instead of *as a result of* the interaction.

Corrective feedback was used by tutors to assess competency and to provide guidance for improvement in the future. For instance, one example of the written feedback from Tutor 1 in the samples was as follows:

Looking specifically from the view of public administration, your response has not focused on the system view from the science side of public administration. [You] just put forward the process of events that resulted in changes to the

institutional structure at the center yet fail to mention the institutions that changed their duties and functions.

In this feedback, the tutor thought that the student did not quite answer the assignment's question. One can see here the focus on shortcomings in the student's work: the lack of a system's view ("has not focused" ... "just put forward") and failing to mention the institutions that had made changes ("yet fail to mention"). There is no acknowledgment of anything of a positive, satisfactory nature in the student's work, nor does the tutor offer suggestions for improvement in the work.

In addition, tutors also provided corrective feedback to ensure that the students' responses to the discussions and their assignments met the requirements of the discussions and assignments. Students sometimes were incomplete in answering discussion or assignment questions or else gave inappropriate answers to the questions. In this case, some tutors provided feedback to remind or explain to students that the answers in their discussions or assignments needed to be revised because they were not in accordance or alignment with the questions. As Tutor 2 had written to their student, "Your explanation has not answered the discussion question" without any further elaboration. Again, the feedback simply points to the deficiency in the work and does not offer either any positive commentary or suggestions for improvement.

Corrective feedback was also a means of promoting instructor-student communication in the online courses. Analysis showed that tutors tended to give reminders about plagiarism. Still, some students committed plagiarism when answering discussions or assignments questions. One instance of feedback was as follows, "Please do not cheat or copy-paste. Your opinion was the same as the other students in this class. Maybe [you both] copied from the same source". The feedback points to the error but does not offer any explanation to reinforce *why* plagiarism or copying is problematic, nor does it offer any suggestions or incentives to help the student avoid plagiarizing or copying in future work.

Epistemic Feedback

Epistemic feedback was also provided by tutors. This type of feedback includes questions for further thought, explanation, or clarification. Guasch et al. (2013) define epistemic feedback as "requests for explanations and/or clarifications in a critical way" (p. 326). In a discussion for a Government Studies course, the example of epistemic feedback from Tutor 4 was as follows:

You said often criticisms, suggestions, and complaints from the community were ignored by the local government as well as the central government. What were your suggestions for local and central government in dealing with community complaints? Please bring it up!

In this feedback, the tutor asked the student to give further thoughts and suggestions about how the local government dealt with communities' complaints. Here, the tutor can be seen offering opportunities for additional elaboration and a critical response, building on what the student had previously written; there is a distinct constructivist tone to the feedback ("What were your suggestions?").

In another course, an English Translation Program, another example of epistemic feedback from Tutor 3:

If it was like the corrective sentence you wrote, did the writing of “di Razia” still use spaces or did it have to be spliced? Did you think that writing without spaces or with spaces in the phrase "di razia" had a different meaning or not?

For this feedback, the tutor challenged the students to explain more about his/her answer about the Bahasa Indonesia’s grammar, whether it had a different meaning or not. Again, the tutor provided the student an opportunity to reflect and elaborate on a particular means of expression in writing.

Suggestive Feedback

Another type of feedback that tutors provided to students was suggestive feedback in the form of suggestions, extensions, or ideas for improvement ideas. In this feedback, the tutor provides suggestions for improvements to the discussions or assignments. Guasch et al. (2013) define suggestive feedback as including “advice on how to proceed or progress and invites exploration, expansion, or improvement of an idea” (p. 326). Guasch et al. (2019) elaborate: “This type of feedback, which combines questioning, requesting information and making suggestions, includes both the verification and the elaboration components of feedback demonstrate in their research that epistemic plus suggestive feedback improves learning in online environments” (p. 119). This feedback could also offer suggestions on how students might improve their work, as is seen by the following example from Tutor 7: “Try to read carefully to the text described in the Module related to the system approach”. Here, there is a specific suggestion for improvement. Another example of suggestive feedback from Tutor 6 occurred in the Public Administration course:

It seemed that what you wrote was dominantly written from the mass media. It should be as initial information in the form of analysis and your opinion. Get in the habit of writing more based on the work of your own thoughts.

There are two specific suggestions for improvement (“It should be as ...” “Get in the habit of ...”) where the tutor offers details for improvement.

Epistemic Feedback + Suggestions

The fourth type of feedback provided by tutors for discussions and assignments was epistemic feedback plus suggestions, in which tutors combine the use of questions for further development and suggestions for improvement. Guasch et al. (2013) define this combination as follows:

Epistemic + suggestive feedback is the combination of epistemic feedback and suggestive feedback (e.g., “Do you think that this sentence is convincing enough? You should reread the article and identify the similarities and differences between the theories presented. It can help you to carry out the task in a more adequate way”). (p. 326)

In their 2019 study, Guasch et al. discovered that epistemic and suggestive feedback was most effective in advancing learning in writing assignments. They add “This type of feedback includes advice on how to proceed or progress and invites exploration, expansion or improvement of an idea” (p. 119). Tutor 5 gave the following feedback in response to a student’s discussion response: “What is your explanation of the differences between

constitutional democracy and Pancasila democracy? Continue to study these two concepts, where were the similarities?”

We can see the tutor asking the student to provide more elaboration—and explanation for the differences in the two types of democracy—and a suggestion to deepen the study of these two democratic systems, with a specific query as to the similarities in the two systems. This feedback promotes both elaboration and offers a suggestion for deepening the study and analysis.

Tutors’ Constraints in Providing Feedback

The analysis of online tutorials shows that some tutors provided feedback on almost every discussion and assignment; however, some others did not. This was related to the obstacles to providing feedback that were experienced by the tutors. From the results of the interviews, one of the obstacles felt by tutors was that students sometimes answered discussions and assignments near the end of the deadline for each week. Moreover, there were sometimes internet or network difficulties. Consequently, tutors did not always have enough time to provide adequate feedback. As stated by one of the tutors:

...Sometimes, students' [answers] were piled up at the end ... for example, on Saturday or Sunday. How could I give such adequate responses? It was a bit difficult if there were a lot of responses [from students]. Also, sometimes there were problems with the internet network on my side.

Other tutors gave similar answers. According to them, the most significant perceived obstacle in providing feedback was time. This was related to the number of students per class, around 50, which was considered quite a lot, especially when tutors had several classes at the same time. Large class sizes made it difficult for tutors to provide individualized feedback:

...[the] constraint in [providing feedback] especially was the time, because [there are] too many [students] to serve. [For me] there was no problem with the internet because I could use tethering from my cellphone. Therefore, there were no technical problems. [The problem] was the time.

Another tutor, who agreed that time was an obstacle, also provided a strategy:

There were [obstacles] such as the time and the number of students that were quite challenging to give feedback [one by one]. Therefore, [my] strategy was, not all discussions were given responses. I chose [to give feedback] at the beginning of the discussions and at the end of the discussions.

An additional perceived obstacle, provided by one tutor, was that sometimes students did not respond when the tutor provided feedback, so the tutor felt that the feedback was not appreciated and hence not beneficial for students.

Discussion

To improve comprehension in online learning, learners and tutors must realize that feedback is required in the learning process, it is not just simply a comment that can be seen in isolation; assessment is an integral part of both curriculum and pedagogy (Carless & Boud, 2018). Learners ideally must understand the information in the feedback and then follow up on

that feedback. Tutors are required to construct feedback so that it can be easily understood by learners (Higgins et al., 2001).

In UT's online tutorial activities, of the 20 classes that were analyzed, some tutors provided feedback to students. Generally, feedback was most often provided when clearly necessary, as in corrective responses to discussions and assignments, clarification of discussions and assignments' answers, suggestions for answers, motivation, warning for plagiarism, and so forth. The types of feedback that were provided by the tutors corresponded with the types in online learning described by Alvarez et al. (2011): corrective feedback, epistemic feedback, suggestive feedback, and epistemic+suggestive feedback.

However, not all tutors provided feedback on each student's discussion responses and weekly assignments. This was related to the obstacles felt by the tutors in providing feedback, the most common of which was the lack of time for tutors to respond to every discussion and assignment for each student. Moreover, the number of students in each class was larger than normal, around 50, so it was a challenge for the tutors to provide feedback to all of them. These findings regarding workload and time constraints were in line with the findings of the studies done by Lee (2011), Paris (2022), and Henderson et al. (2019) who found that time as a limited resource and the limitations of providing personalized feedback in large classes were significant challenges for academic staff.

For online tutorials that use text-based communication, it can be time consuming for a tutor to provide feedback for individual students. Poyatos-Matas and Allan (2005) argued that online group feedback could be used to reduce the amount of feedback that tutors need to give. They indicated that for an online class of up to 20, the tutors needed only write one piece of group feedback rather than 20 individual pieces of feedback. Therefore, for online tutorials at UT in which there are 50 or more students in one class, the tutors could classify the student responses and provide only two or three pieces of group feedback.

Giving feedback is important and very useful for students because it creates an opportunity to extend the dialogue with tutors about academic performance and standards (Poyatos-Matas & Allan, 2005). Feedback also increases student confidence and serves as a catalyst for improvement in learning behaviors. As Boud and Molloy (2012) make clear, a design purpose of feedback is to ensure that a "feedback loop" is completed; students need to become active (not passive) participants in the process or need to be given opportunities to do so. There need to be bilateral or multilateral engagements. Providing such opportunities means re-designing curriculum itself to provide these opportunities. As an example, allowing students to revise work based on feedback given initially; another example would be providing opportunities for peer assessment and feedback. This would mean scheduling assignments such that they could be revised and re-submitted without taxing the tutors' time or capacities. Such re-scheduling would likely involve revising entire curricula to build in these multilateral feedback opportunities. Such multilateral engagements follow Ramaprasad's (1983) model of feedback: "Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (p. 4); the point of feedback is to be creating explicit opportunities to alter the gap, not just assume it will be altered by the student in future work.

Offering feedback as a part of assessment cannot be seen in isolation from either curriculum (and its development) and pedagogy; assessment, curriculum, and pedagogy are, or should be, tightly integrated. Changing one part of the system will require changes in the other parts of the system. If feedback is seen as a multilateral dialogue, as something students can offer each to the other, as a sequence of events that can occur over time, if feedback is seen as an ongoing conversation between students and teachers or tutors around learning, then we are required to change not only feedback practices but also, and more importantly, program and curriculum design. There may be a need to re-assess the design and implementation of our

educational programs so that they can provide better learning outcomes for students, part of which will be the result of improved conceptualization and implementation of feedback processes.

The findings of this study should be considered in the view of some limitations. First, our participants and the number of the analyzed classes may not be representative of all online tutorial classes and tutors at UT. There may be differences among online tutorial classes and tutors who are enrolled in different programs and colleges at UT. Generalizability of the findings to other online tutorial classes and tutors is cautioned. Future studies may cover a larger sample of online tutorial classes and tutors at UT, which may provide different perspectives of online tutorial classes and tutors on feedback. Secondly, this study was limited to six online tutors only, other tutors were excluded from this study, so in future studies we could investigate perspectives of more tutors on feedback on online tutorials. Also, other researchers may replicate and extend our study to online tutors from other open universities in other nations.

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