

Tutor's Comments and Feedback: Value in the Training of Adult Educators at a Distance

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ABSTRACT The changes taking place in the socio-economic and political environment in Africa have made education a right for all citizens – young, old, disabled and even the incarcerated. The high demand for teachers however makes it impossible for the conventional mode of teacher training to produce enough teachers for all categories of learners. To address the problem of the teacher shortage in Africa, open and distance learning institutions have expanded enrolment for teacher training. The department of Adult Education and Training at University of South Africa for example, employs qualified tutors to provide adult educator- trainees with academic support. This is done through the provision of feedback in the form of comments on the educator- trainees' written assignments. The dialogue through copious comments from tutors is meant to reduce the physical separation between students and lecturers. The tutor's comments or feedback on written assignments forms a decisive site for the academic dialogue between the tutor and the distance educator- trainee. This paper employed the quasi-experimental design to explore and report the extent to which different forms of comments on written assignments communicate, motivate, guide and support adult educators who are being trained at a distance to become teachers of adult learning programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the most important means for advancement in the knowledge-based economy of the contemporary world. Rodney (2009) affirms that education is crucial in any type of society for the preservation of the lives of its members and the maintenance of the social structure. It promotes social, economic and political changes to society. The socio-economic and political transformation taking place on the African continent necessitates the need to make education a right and accessible to all citizens. It is generally believed that the continent's socio-economic and political problems can be adequately addressed when most of its citizens, if not all, are educated. In recent times democratization has made education a right in most African countries and as a direct consequence more schools are opened in most of the countries. Building more schools to accommodate all prospective learners means the demand for teachers will also increase. The need to train more teachers for all levels of education (basic, intermediate etc) has therefore become crucial in Africa because teachers form the vehicle for the provision and dissemination of relevant knowledge, skills and values for development.

In South Africa at the time of political freedom in 1994 there were 15 million adults who could neither read nor write (City Press 1995) and as a result of lack of basic education could not enjoy or participate meaningfully in the freedom they had fought for and won. The need to transform education to accommodate all categories of learners [adults, men, women, children, the disabled and the incarcerated] thus became crucial. Quan-Baffour and Arko-Achenfuor (2014) affirm that the education environment in particular has since the democratic dispensation experienced tremendous transformation. Higher education institutions, particularly universities, are the key agents for this agenda for change and transformation because they provide spaces where its leaders are skilled and its ideas are formed (Joubert and Martins 2013).

In an effort to address this problem the University of South Africa established the department of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) in 1995 to train adult educators to teach basic education to adults (i.e. literacy, numeracy, health and income generating skills). It is important to note that adult teaching methods are significantly different from those implemented in children's learning contexts. Therefore teachers who are trained to teach children are not necessarily appropriate to teach adult learners

which is why as part of the general demand for teachers adult educators need to be trained and equipped with the relevant knowledge, skills and methods of teaching adults for basic education programmes. Yates (2007) affirms that during this century we would need our teachers to become more skilled than before. They will need to become knowledge facilitators, information managers and above all, to know how to celebrate and build on and extend individual difference. Thus the quest for advancement in the 21st century has increased the demand for education (relevant knowledge and skills) but despite this increased interest in education Africa in general has a serious shortage of teachers.

In South Africa in particular recent media reports indicate that there are more than 25000 teaching vacancies in the public schools alone. The problem of teacher shortage might have been compounded by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, natural attrition, retirement and change of career. One way to address this problem is for Open Distance Learning institutions such as the University of South Africa and others to apply distance teacher training strategies to augment the conventional face- to- face training of teachers. This is partly informed by the fact that as a developing country with a 'horrible' past, education and training is the surest vehicle to address the socio-economic problems such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime and vulnerability. This high demand for more qualified teachers for both schools and adult learning centres in South Africa and other parts of the continent cannot be met through the conventional mode of training. To address the problem of teacher shortage the University of South Africa (UNISA), as an ODL institution, has expanded enrolment for teacher education programmes while most conventional universities have embarked on a dual mode of training teachers. Yates (2007) is of the view that if more diverse and integrated systems are to evolve, teacher training programmes will also need to broaden. This shift in the philosophy and form of teacher education will necessarily be part of a wider shift in the role, function and organizational configuration of the school and teacher training college (Yates 2007).

As an important feature of distance education context students enrolled for teacher education courses are separated in time and space from their lecturers either permanently or for most

of the duration of their studies. Geduld (2013) appropriately describes open distance learning (ODL) as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging time, geographical, economic, social and communication distances between student and institution, students and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. It involves the design and development of learning experiences using various technologies and student-support strategies to effect interaction among lecturers and students. In line with ODL practice of reducing the distance between lecturers and students the department of Adult Education and Training (ABET), at UNISA, employs qualified tutors to provide students with academic support. The department contracts tutors nation-wide to render subject related and study skills support to students who are being trained as educators of adult learners. McKay and Makhanya (2008) affirm that the ABET department undertook large-scale training of adult educators to develop a more professional cadre with relevant qualifications to teach literacy and other life skills to adults.

This paper has so far made it clear that UNISA makes provision for the services of part-time tutors and markers to offer students with academic support (i.e. face to face interaction and provision of comments on learning tasks) but very little research has been conducted on the value of tutor comments; something which some practitioners might perceive as an important aspect of distance teaching. As Nkambou (2000) intimates there is a need to investigate the type of feedback pedagogical agents should consider when empathy does not promote desirable affective states for learning. A research of this nature could bring out the value of feedback [through tutor's comments] as a unique learner support strategy to bridge the distance between lecturers and students. This strategy which might be neglected or seem less important to some ODL practitioners is very important because it is what discerns open distance learning from a purely correspondence system. For this reason the present study employed a quasi-experimental design to investigate the impact of the tutor's feedback in the form of comments on both academic and professional development of a group of people who are being trained by the department of Adult Basic Education and Training at UNISA to become teachers for adult education programmes. The study re-

ports the results of an empirical investigation on the extent to which different forms of comments on written assignments communicate, motivate guide and support teacher trainees at a distance to improve their knowledge and skills for teaching.

Aims of the Study

- The aim of this study is two-fold. It is to:
- ♦ assess the value of detailed marking comments/feedback on the academic and professional performance of educator- trainees for adult learning programmes and
 - ♦ make text-based ODL practitioners aware of the value of tutor's comments in the context of distance teaching and learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the constructivist theory of learning of which Jean Piaget, Kant and Vygotsky are among its chief proponents (Slavin 2012). The theory is based on the premise that students or learners should construct knowledge in their own minds, when information is made available to them. The theory postulates that teachers should provide students with ladders that lead to higher understanding, yet the students themselves must climb these ladders (Slavin 2012). Following in the lead of the constructivist stance this researcher argues that in a teaching and learning situation the teacher should guide, support and lead but not to 'spoon feed' the student. Constructivism recognises the limits of human knowledge; the belief that all knowledge is necessarily a product of our own cognitive acts. We construct our understanding through our experiences and the character of our experience is influenced profoundly by our cognitive lenses (Confrey 1990). The theory acknowledges the fact that human beings' picture of the world is not static because their conceptions and perceptions are subject to change. By co-ordinating a variety of constructions from sensory inputs to meditative reflections, humans adapt and adjust to these changes and initiate new ones.

In line with the above fact it is further contended here that students being trained to become adult educators at a distance must be supported and guided to discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their

own. The kind of support appropriate to the context of open distance learning could be the feedback or comments and suggestions the tutor or lecturer provides the student on the latter's written assignment. The Constructivists reject the assumption that in teaching the teacher can simply pass on knowledge or information to students and expect that understanding can occur. By just providing students with information teachers may assume that their students have understood when they act and respond in ways that seem compatible with the teacher's understanding. But if a student merely repeats what the teacher or the text book has said, this is of course no indication of a conceptual fit (Von Glaserfeld 1995). To the constructivists, learning is much more than memory hence the argument that for students to really understand and be able to apply knowledge they must be engaged in active tasks or be guided to solve problems. It is through the engagement of students in tasks that they can construct knowledge and meaning in their own minds and discover things for themselves.

In the context of open distance learning the students might be given some written task related to the content of a particular module. They would complete and send in the assignments for assessment. The markers or tutors do not only award grades when they assess students' written assignments but teach through the marking the most appropriate ways by which students can provide meaningful answers, ideas and information relevant to the specific task assigned to them. Through questions the tutor writes as part of feedback or comments in the margins of the students' work s/he gives them opportunities to discover and apply relevant ideas to solve problems themselves. The tutor's actions here do not only affirm the constructive process of knowledge acquisition but more importantly emphasise the fact that human beings are able to be aware of those constructions and to modify them through their conscious reflections on that constructive process. Supporting this view point Slavin (2012) argues that teachers can give students ladders that lead to higher understanding, yet the students themselves must climb these ladders. In Pata and Sara Puu's (2003) view learners can be assisted to build new knowledge structures with the help of the tutor who models the desired learning strategy or task and then gradually shifts responsibility to the

students; by the advanced peers who help the less sophisticated students in the learning process; or by the instructional materials that support the learners. They (students) should be scaffolded to build their mental representations in two dimensions- firstly, by recognising the 'objects' and 'events' categories with their causal relationships and secondly by distinguishing the 'objects' properties before and after the events (Pata and Sara Puu 2003).

The tutors' academic support strategy which serves as a scaffolding could provide collaborative learning interactions through which students are empowered to express their emerging knowledge in a persistent way to make knowledge part of the shared context. The constructivist theory supports student-centred teaching where the tutor becomes the '*guide on the side*' instead of the '*sage on the stage*', helping students to discover their own meaning instead of lecturing and controlling all activities (Weinberger and McCombs 2001; Windschitl 2009). Since the tutor or marker in ODL environment cannot simply provide students with knowledge s/he must guide them to understand and apply knowledge to solve problems. It is through engagement with problems that students can discover information and make it their own. Teaching is a process of dealing with students' conceptions and changing them into scientific ones i.e. problem solving. Problem solving is also the socially mediated process where the learners' mental models about the representations of the world are changed by new experiences, participating in learning activities (Pata and Sara Puu 2003).

The distance teaching context places a further challenge into the mix, making effective instruction in general, including feedback on written tasks, even more critical than in the contact-teaching institution. In the context of text-based distance education the best strategy for tutors and lecturers to interact with students is through feedback or comments on written assignments. The positive comments, which include leading questions, prompts and suggestions by the tutor can guide the distance students to reflect on their work, think out, discover and reshape or reconstruct better answers. In such a discovery learning environment students must be encouraged to learn largely on their own through active involvement in learning tasks which may enable them discover things for themselves. As

part of their training *the would-be* adult educators are taught both content knowledge and methods of teaching adults. Most of the learning activities consist of the application of theory to practice. Chen and Howard (2010) affirm that deep and effective learning is best promoted by situating learning in purposeful and engaging activity. In Slavin's (2012) view discovery learning arouses students' curiosity and motivates them to continue to work until they find answers. The trainee adult educators learn independent problem-solving and critical thinking skills as they analyse and manipulate information. This could lead to better understanding of complex concepts and the content of the chosen modules. Thus the academic support comprising written comments, leading questions and suggestions can provide students with the way forward to solve problems. This is in line with constructivist stance that lecturers, tutors and teachers must not spoon feed students; instead they should provide support or a ladder for the student to climb to the top. For example leading questions posed by the tutor/marker as comments can prompt, motivate, guide, support and assist students to think out and construct meaningful answers to questions posed to them. We learn by doing and as Vygotsky (2006) affirms successful problem solvers talk themselves through difficult problems. Lecturers and tutors in distance education should therefore engage students in complex tasks, support and guide them through the tasks in the same way an electrician would help an apprentice rewire a house. Confrey (1990), intimates that a significant improvement in student learning depends on a fundamental shift from teacher to student responsibility for, and control over learning. For this reason tutors/markers have the responsibility to empower students through the various comments to enable the latter to become independent learners.

Teaching through marking should therefore encourage and support the development in students the relevant skills for effective and powerful construction and reconstruction of their own experiences. In Bruner's (1996) words 'we teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject but rather to get a student to think—for himself, to consider matters as a historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process, not a product' (Bruner 1996).

The Necessity for Academic Support for ABET Educator-Trainees through Tutor Comments

There is a marked difference between correspondence and distance education systems of learning. While under the correspondence system students are registered for courses and sent study materials and assignments with no interaction and guidance or academic support from course presenters in a distance learning the delivery system is well planned and there is always some interaction between lecturers and students. The University of South Africa is an ODL institution but its ABET department provides as much student support as possible through limited face to face interactions and marking to teach.

The concept of student support is very broad; it covers as wide a spectrum of activities as possible, from the organising and management of student support through to direct interaction with students as tutors, advisors, mentors and other roles (Simpson 2000). Harry, John and Keegan (1993) point out that as part of academic support institutions or lecturers in ODL can frequently offer students the opportunity to visit study centres for tutorial and counselling, to meet fellow students, and to use facilities unavailable to them at home. In this paper however student support is deliberately limited to comments and feedback tutors/lecturers provide on students' learning tasks. This specific student support is offered through copious comments and suggestions on students' written assignments. In pursuing its commitment to student support the department from 1995 opened tutorial centres throughout South Africa and contracted tutors to render subject-related and study skills to majority of its students, particularly those who live in rural and disadvantaged communities with career and family responsibilities to boot. The limited face to face interaction improves the level of communication between lecturers and students and most importantly enables the trainee-educators to cope with open distance learning. By 2003 the department (ABET) had recruited and trained a "cadre" of 187 (102 females and 85 males) dedicated part-time tutors and 33 tutor co-ordinators throughout South Africa who offered academic support to educator trainees in ABET programmes (McKay and Makhanya 2008).

The major aspect of the part-time tutors' academic support task is to mark and comment on students' written assignments and to ensure quality marking to teach, the department continuously provides them with workshops in facilitation skills and the appropriate methods of marking distance students' assignments. The part time tutors are also encouraged to do further courses in ABET programmes. It is envisaged this measure could make tutors more skilled and knowledgeable in module content, distance teaching, marking, tutoring and student support in general. This is because high-quality teachers are essential to improving the teaching and learning (Chen and Howard 2010). Surely, teaching practices and instructional decisions can influence the quality of students' academic performance and their motivation, effect and attitudes toward school and academic pursuits. Students with positive attitudes towards academic and professional work are more likely to be found in a learning environment that have high level of involvement, teacher support and use of innovative teaching strategies.

The unique challenges which most ABET educator-trainees face ranging from lack of resources for learning, isolation, loneliness to family and career obligations justifies academic support the department has put in place. Without academic support the challenges mentioned here could be potential reasons for high dropout among students (Quan-Baffour 2005). The academic support by the department is imperative because it enables the educator-trainees to overcome some of the challenges that could become a 'recipe' for student attrition. It is for this reason, – supporting students for retention on study programmes and for them to achieve their money worth – that the Department of ABET organises and manages a unique tutorial system in all rural areas of the country. Affirming the essence of student support Simpson (2000) writes: Clearly, studying through ODL is often a very isolating experience: students are isolated from other students, their tutors, the institution and sometimes their own family and friends. Such isolation must inhibit, if not prevent entirely, any possibility of dialogue in their studies. Can we claim to be offering any kind of education if we do not offer our students the opportunity for dialogue at the same time? Moreover, is it possible to offer dialogue only through course materials? If overcoming isolation is important for

us, then this can only realistically take place through the process of student support. Simpson's remark above affirms the need to provide students with constructive guidance on learning tasks in the form of copious comments and suggestions.

A recent study by Yeh, Yang and Wong (2010) found out that in making correct revisions to their written tasks students needed to assess incoming information, interpret and organize textual information, engage in thinking what they know, monitor their own meaning construction process and take remedial actions to reach comprehension. This indicates that the activities directed at supporting students or providing 'customer care' go beyond the production and delivery of course materials that help students progress in their studies.

The emphasis here however, is on the engagement of students in an academic dialogue which takes the form of positive comments, guidance and suggestions on students' written assignments. This academic dialogue may not only provide students in open distance learning environment with ladders for higher achievement but most importantly could break the problem of isolation. The comments provided by markers on students' written assignment could direct, guide and support them in their search for solutions to learning tasks assigned by tutors and lecturers. It is assumed that the guidance provided through the comments could assist students to engage in inquiry activities such as applying what they read from the modules, identifying links and connections among ideas and seeking evidence to resolve uncertainty and categorise valid relationship. In the context of print-based open distance learning the main essence of *marking* is to teach, assess, support and offer students direction in their studies. Thus the part time tutors at the ABET department teach through marking. In view of the unique challenges that students face (that is isolation, loneliness and lack of resources) positive copious written comments on assignments serve as decisive place of academic dialogue between them and tutors. It is here that actual support and teaching take place in the context of open distance learning. This teaching phase has the power to break the isolation syndrome thereby moving away from a correspondence course to open distance learning.

The department regards its part-time tutors the foot soldiers and main pillars for the train-

ing of adult educators. The educator-trainees are central to the enhancement of communities which is why the department directs its training at literacy volunteers, community workers, nurses and trade unionists to equip them with the relevant skills to become effective ABET practitioners. In view of the physical separation from lecturers the tutor/marker's copious written comments on students' assignments are a decisive site of dialogue between the two. *Marking to teach* or teaching through marking has therefore become a crucial aspect of the training of basic education educators at UNISA. Thus the delivery of adult education at UNISA is contingent on, inter alia, the availability of well trained adult practitioners who should play a pivotal role in addressing critical economic, political and social problems specific to learners across a variety of contexts and societal situations (McKay and Makhanya 2008).

Adding to this debate Spencer (2009) intimates that commentary on content and organisation of assignment means that the feedback becomes the voice of the lecturer engaged in the meaning-making process. Here the student is encouraged, by questioning, to return to the 'chaos', i.e. the thinking stage of composition. The questioning and suggestions from the tutor usually written in a language understood by students studying through a second or sometimes a third language are meant to assist the educator-trainees to reflect on their work and reconstruct more appropriate and acceptable answers to the problem or task assigned to them. The tutor's comments are text-specific and represent the engagement and questioning of genuine readership (Spencer 2009). This researcher, who has been ABET tutor for over two decades, strongly contends that the critical involvement of the student in reconstruction and improvement of ideas should be encouraged by tutors through marking. The main goal of the tutor's feedback on written assignments should therefore develop and foster in students the character of spontaneous desire to learn. To realise this goal self-regulated learning [SRL] is essential (Shih Chen and Kao 2010).

Guiding students to learn through tutor's feedback is adopted from Bruner's (1996) scaffolding theory which provides learners with support to gradually build their own learning patterns. Rapoo (2012) asserts that the use of scaffolded tasks within a guided learning situa-

tion facilitates dividing the task into smaller steps, reduces cognitive load and enables us to situate learning in a real context. Through this approach, *marking to teach*, students are provided with support, guidance and information to assist them to learn. In marking to teach the feedback on students' assignment assists them to assess their progress. It is a form of scaffolding which provides support, guidance and leads students to become competent and confident in learning on their own to achieve specific learning outcomes. As the student teacher becomes more competent in learning and acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills the tutor reduces the support i.e. the scaffolding until is gradually removed. Shih; Chen and Kao (2010) affirm that the success of the scaffolding depends on the precise evaluation of the learning outcomes such that the learning scaffolding can be removed properly. A reliable evaluation system should, however, be provided to enable students determine or track their progress (Shih et al. 2010).

In sum, intelligent tutoring is meant to provide useful academic support services for assisting, guiding, helping and tracking the student during problem solving situations (Nkambou 2010). Its main goal is to actively provide guidance to the student in problem solving. Therefore the relevant feedback from the marker/tutor should be founded on a thorough understanding and diagnosis of student responses. After all the value of tutoring is to narrow, even to eliminate the gap between high and low students and for the tutor to consider the learners' affective responses during learning episodes is a key issue for more effective tutoring dialogue (Nkambou 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed the empirical research method where *experimental and control* groups were formed and used in the investigation. A group of 60 students studying the second level Module ABT201-E (Adult Teaching and Learning) were randomly selected from some rural communities in South Africa for the study. In selecting the participants the researcher listed all the names of 120 students from the specific countryside communities on a sheet of paper. He then chose all the uneven numbers which added to a total of 60 names. All the 60 names of the students selected to participate in

the research had common characteristics. For an example, they were all second level students registered for the same module, lived and studied in areas without resources such as libraries or living nearer to tutorial centres. They all travelled and attended 4 hours per month face-to-face tutorial classes which took place within 60-80 kilometres from their homes.

At the beginning of February 2013 the 60 students were given the following written assignment to do and submit their work for assessment by the end of March 2013:

- ♦ Describe what is meant by 'learner centred' assessment (5)
- ♦ Discuss why you think 'learner centred' assessment is important in the context of adult teaching and learning (10)
- ♦ Say how 'learner-centred' assessment relates to Outcomes-Based Education (5)
- ♦ Why is the recognition of prior learning (RPL) necessary in South Africa (5)

The topic - *Assessment* - which is a chapter in the Module (*Adult Teaching and Learning*) was thoroughly discussed in two tutorial sessions before the assignment was given to the students. When the students submitted their assignments the researcher divided the 60 assignments into two - A [experimental] and B [control] groups respectively before marking them.

The assignments from the experimental group [A] were given copious comments, feedback and suggestions which could assist students to improve their work but those from the control group [B] did not receive any academic support in the form of comments, feedback, guidance and suggestions. The researcher just read through the assignments of the control group members and awarded impression marks based on the student's performance.

The comments on the individual assignments for the experimental group members which served as academic support included the following:

- ♦ Start all your written assignments with an introduction (an overview)
- ♦ You have done well for submitting this assignment but you did not include an introduction, a discussion and a conclusion
- ♦ Explain what is meant by the term *learner centred*.
- ♦ Your introduction should provide your readers with an overview to the discussion.
- ♦ Try to avoid plagiarism; do not copy word for word the information from the Module.

- ♦ When you use information or words from a source which is not yours acknowledge it [avoid plagiarism]
- ♦ Try to give examples from your experience to enrich your discussion.
- ♦ Your conclusion should tie the loose ends of the discussion.
- ♦ Do not just reproduce information from the module; engage in a critical discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assessment and Results of Assignment

The written assignment for the 60 students were marked over 50 with an average score of 25. The details are indicated on Table 1. After assessing and awarding marks all the 60 assignments were posted back to students.

Table 1: Results of assignment 1 for the 60 students before the unequal treatment

Score	No
10-15	20
16-20	18
21-25	10
26-30	7
31-35	5
36-40	0
41-45	0
46-50	0
Total	60

Table 1 shows the scores of the 60 students in the first written assignment. In this assignment none of the students scored above 35 out of 50. The highest scores (5 students) were between 31 and 35. The lowest scores (20 students) were between 10-15 marks with 18 students scoring between 16-20 out of 50. This analysis is an indication that most open distance learning students, although might be intelligent, cannot give off their best in the absence of academic support or guidance through comments and feedback.

The Post-test Results

Two months after the first test (during the month of May) the researcher gave a similar assignment to both groups (*Experimental and Control groups*) to write. The post-test assignment was given to tutors whose tutorial classes were attended by the two groups. The experi-

mental and control groups did not attend tutorials at the same centres. They did not know each other and therefore there was no possibility for exchange of information. The second assignment with a duration of 70 minutes was written on the same day at the various tutorial centres. At the end of the task the tutors collected all the written assignments and sent them to the researcher for assessment. The post-test assignment comprised the following items:

- ♦ Explain the term *assessment* [5]
- ♦ Describe the following 2 concepts:- *teacher centred and learner- centred* assessment and point out their differences [10]
- ♦ Define the term *Recognition of Prior Learning* [5]
- ♦ What purpose does *Recognition of Prior Learning* serve in South African assessment context?[5]

The researcher marked assignment 2 for both groups and compared their marks. Table 2 provides the details of the achievements of the two groups.

Table 2: Results of second assignment for experimental and control groups after the unequal treatment of subjects

<i>Experimental group</i>		<i>Control group</i>	
Score	No	Score	No
10-15	0	10-15	12
16-20	0	16-20	10
21-25	1	21-25	6
26-30	3	26-30	1
31-35	9	31-35	1
36-40	8	36-40	0
41-45	4	41-45	0
46-50	5	46-50	0
Total	30	Total	30

Analysis and Discussion of Post-Test Assignment Results

As indicated on Table 2 the scores of assignment 2 for the two groups-*experimental and control*- provide a completely different picture. The pass rate is higher for the *experimental-group* in assignment 2 than the *control group*. For example while in the experimental group only 1 student scored an average mark between 21-25, six [6] of the students in the control group obtained that mark. This finding validates the fact that creating an emotional supportive environment is crucial (Omingo 2013) for improvement in students' academic achievement.

The information on Table 2 further shows that in the experimental group 3 students scored between 26 -30 and 21 obtained 31-45. There are 5 students whose scores were outstanding; they obtained above 45 out of 50. It is clear from the information indicated on table 2 that whereas all the 30 students in the experimental group passed assignment 2 with higher scores of between 25-46 out of 50 only 8 students of their counterparts from the control group passed with average scores of between 25-35. The higher and lower marks obtained by the experimental and control groups respectively can be attributed to the lack of unequal treatment for the two groups. Thus it is clear that learning by doing; learning through feedback and making sense are the processes that underpin successful learning (Omingo 2013).

One thing that comes out clearly from the comparison made between the two set of scores is that teaching through marking [i.e. provision of copious comments, feedback, suggestions and guidance on written assignments] has positive impact on the academic performance of distance students. The copious comments, guidance and feedback support students to do better than their counterparts who do not receive any written comments on their written assignments. Killen (2013) affirms that lecturers assess students to provide them with feedback and also to devise ways and means of improving teaching and learning. One way of improving learning is to provide comments, suggestions and guidance on students' completed learning tasks (Killen 2013).

CONCLUSION

This paper is the report of an investigation into the value of tutor comments as student support mechanism in the training of educators at a distance for adult education programmes. The researcher employed the empirical research method where two groups of educator trainees (*experimental and control*) were subjected to some unequal treatment for two months. At the end of the experiment the two groups were tested and their scores compared. It was noted that the group that received academic support from the tutor did better in the second test. This result has validated the assumption that the tutors' comments, indeed, have value on the academic and professional training of adult educators at a

distance. Based on the outcome of the investigation the paper concludes that since tutor comments have positive impact on students' academic performance it is imperative for institutions offering teacher education programmes at a distance to adopt this important academic support strategy for the achievement of study goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are informed by the findings from the empirical study; that:

- ♦ Text-based ODL practitioners should provide copious comments on students' written assignments because the essence of *marking is to teach*.
- ♦ All academic departments should employ and train tutors to provide academic support to their students in order to break the isolation syndrome and increase students' retention and academic performance.
- ♦ Institutions offering dual mode of delivery must provide academic support in the form of customer care for their students who enrol for courses through distance.

LIMITATION(S) OF THE STUDY

The investigation was limited to a small group of (60) ABET educator-trainees at a distance. The findings may therefore not be applicable to all students in text-based ODL context. For the findings to apply to all the ABET educator-trainees it should involve a larger sample size of ODL students who are enrolled for the same programme.

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