Pedagogy in Distance Education: Is evaluative judgement an effective pedagogical tool for students in distance education?

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Abstract

Distance education has expanded dramatically over the years and has become a needed component in the higher education landscape especially in this COVID-19 era. Students in distance education need the ability to make decisions about the quality of work and others. The argument advanced in this article is that evaluative judgement should be used as a pedagogical tool by students in distance education so that they develop the capacity to improve their reflective practices. Qualitative methodology was employed in this study. Learning facilitators from the Zimbabwe Open University were purposefully sampled to generate data through semi-structured interviews. The major findings of the study were that evaluative judgement is a very effective tool which enables students to see whether what they are doing is right or wrong. It is used in assignment writing, term paper presentations, research project writing, group discussions, peer assessment, teaching practice attachment and during examination writing. It improves the depth and breadth of understanding matter and also improves the quality of interaction between the student and the content. The study recommends that tutorial handbooks should be provided at orientation on the importance of evaluative judgement to students in order to improve the quality of their work.

1. Background

Zimbabwe is one of the countries that introduced Open and Distance Learning through an Act of Parliament in 1999 (Zimbabwe Open University Act, 1999). In this study, the students pursuing distance education are from the context of the Open and Distance Learning in the Zimbabwe Open University where they are given online materials and hard copy modules. Students get exposure to the face-to-face tutorials during weekend schools. A substantial number of students enrolled with the Zimbabwe Open University to pursue various graduate and post graduate programmes (Zimbabwe Open University Strategic Plan 2005-2009). The notion that distance education is second best is based on misguided epistemology and utopia since reality is that the best is what comes out of the student and not the teacher on measurable standards. This point reflects also the lack of clear civic education knowledge on the part of those who hold such notions vis-à-vis the concept of distance education. Civic Education is a very important scholarly domain which has the potential to provide skills, knowledge and dispositions required for the masses to appreciate various aspects of human endeavours not limited to distance education (Muleya, Simui, Mundende, Kakana, Mwewa and Namangala, 2019).

However, the success story is that most of the distance education products are employed in high profile jobs like ministers, members of parliament, deans of faculties, nurses, school leaders, directors in companies, among others. The question that comes into mind is how the students learn and succeed with their education without face-to-face interaction with Learning facilitators all the time. Distance education is also full-time face to face interaction with learning materials anytime and anywhere (Chikoko and Chiome, 2013) but the key point is that students need to employ evaluative judgement during their studies. Evaluative judgement is essential for 21st century learning for developing capabilities among students (Boud, Ajjawi, Dawson and Tai, 2018). Students in

distance education should thus come up with distinguishing characteristics and a level of excellence through evaluative judgement.

The capability of evaluative judgement or being able to judge the quality of one's own work and others' work, is necessary not just in a student's current course but for learning throughout life (Boud and Soler, 2016). Evaluative judgement encapsulates the ongoing interactions between the individual, their fellow students or practitioners, and standards of performance required for effective and reflective practice (Tai et al., 2018). The development of evaluative judgement is an academic discipline which has a profound effect on self evaluation by students in higher education. Distance education students consider evaluative judgement as a critical component for their success in studies. Self evaluation is a critical tool which they have to employ in order to succeed in the courses they undertake. The absence of a Learning facilitator in front of students does not mean that distance education students lack capacity to learn. What is fundamental is to develop evaluative judgement as a pedagogical tool that one can implement in order to survive in studies. Sadler (2013, p. 8) observed that "quality is something I do not know how to define, but I recognise it when I see it". This kind of inability to articulate what quality is implies the need to improve the capability of students to evaluate and judge themselves. Keegan (1986) in his book, 'The Foundations of Distance Education' synthesized several definitions of distance education and developed a list of six "defining elements." These are considered as the basic characteristics of any established distance education programme.

The first element is that of a physical separation of the teacher and the learner, distinguishing it markedly from traditional, lecture-based instruction. Teaching at a distance is characterised by the separation of the teacher and learner and of the learner from the learning group, with the interpersonal face-to-face communication of conventional education being replaced by an apersonal mode of communication mediated by technology (Keegan, 1986, p. 8). Evaluative judgement becomes critical for the distance education student to ensure that what one would present to the teacher is of standard. The second was the influence of an educational organisation. Distance education differs from home study of a private nature in which in "home study" one chooses to learn without the guidance of an educational institution. The use of technical media was the third defining element of distance education. Media carry the instructional content as well as unite teacher and learner. The fourth element in Keegan's list was the provision for two-way communication between teacher and learner, ideally with the potential for student-initiated contact. Occasional meetings, face-to-face, was the fifth characteristic, although this was optional or even non-existent in many established programs. The final element in Keegan's definition has been debated as optional by many researchers. This is the "industrialization" of education -- a concept based on the administrative and management aspects of teaching and learning at a distance (Kegan, 1986, p.7- 8).

Statement of the problem
Most students fear to join distance education taking it as a rocky-road to attain higher education qualifications. They only think of the usual route of enrolling in convectional universities thinking that face-to-face is the best pedagogical method. Students fail to realise that self-evaluation is an effective tool which should be employed by every student so that they meet the requisite standards in higher education. There is very little research that has been done in Zimbabwe on whether evaluative judgement is an effective tool in distance education. To that end, the present study seeks to establish instances where students in distance education can employ evaluative judgement. The problem can be stated as follows: Is evaluative judgement an effective pedagogical tool for students in distance education?

Purpose of the study
How effective is evaluative judgement a pedagogical tool for students in distance education?

Research objectives
i.   To find out how teaching pedagogies enhance evaluative judgement among students in distance education
ii. To establish the experiences that are critical to develop evaluative judgement among students in distance education
iii. To find out the extent to which evaluative judgement is effective among students in distance education

Theoretical framework
This study is undergirded by theoretical frameworks that revolve around evaluative judgement. The origin of evaluative judgement can be traced back to Sadler's (1989) ideas of 'evaluative knowledge' (p. 135) or 'evaluative expertise' (p. 138) which students must develop to become progressively independent of their Learning faciliators. Evaluative judgement is understood as:

> "…the ability to critically assess a performance in relation to a predefined but not necessarily explicit standard, which entails a complex process of reflection. It has an internal application, in the form of self-evaluation, and an external application, in making decisions about the quality of others' work" (Tai *et al*, 2016: 661).

Therefore, in its origins, evaluative judgement was developed as a theory that considered the need for students to possess evaluative knowledge and expertise is the capacity to make decisions about the quality of work of self and others. The focus of evaluative judgement is not just inwards on one's work but also outwards to others' performance, about the two in comparison to each other, and standards, which is reflective judgement thinking (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

In the higher education arena, evaluative judgement has been taken as a higher-level cognitive ability required for life-long learning (Cowan, 2010). Evaluative judgement acknowledges the complexity of contextual standards and performance, supports the development of learning trajectories and mastery, and is therefore aimed at future capacities and lifelong learning (Sadler, 2010; Nicol, 2014; Boud & Molloy, 2013).

Sadler proposed that students needed to understand criteria in relation to the standards required for making quality judgements, before being able to appreciate feedback about their performance. Students then also require the ability to engage in activity to close the gap between their performance and the standards that expected to be achieved. The overall goal was to make students to develop and rely on their own evaluative judgements so that they can become independent students and eventually effective learners and practitioners (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). As a pedagogical practice, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) interpreted Sadler's ideas around evaluative knowledge to mean that students 'must already possess some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher' (p. 204). Through making repeated judgements about the quality of students' work, teachers come to implicitly understand the necessary standards of competence. These understandings of quality and striving to attain them are necessary precursors by students in order to reach the expected standard of expertise. Independent thinking is a precursor to effective learning, and this is the thesis in distance education which forms the base for evaluative judgement.

2. Literature Review

The distance in distance education does not mean separation of the mind from the content that is being learnt. Students are active participants and the masters of the learning processes. UNESCO as cited in Burns (2011, p. 9) defines distance education as "an educational process and system in which all or a significant proportion of the teaching is carried out by someone, or something removed in space and time from the learner". With distance education, students study at the time and place of their choice (home, work or learning centre) and without face-to-face contact with a teacher. Distance education is thus a generic, all-inclusive term used to refer to the physical separation of teachers and learners. Keegan (1995, p. 7) states that distance education and training, which in most cases are institution based, results from the technological separation of teacher and learner and frees the students from the necessity of travelling to "a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained". Regardless of the distance students are from the Learning facilitators, their evaluative expertise is considered as the fulcrum for effective learning.

In a research survey conducted by Chou (2001), it was found out that students who interacted through the Web CT and other computer media communication systems, student discussions were very effective. The activities were found to enhance interpersonal relationships and increased opportunities for students to share information and build knowledge while collaborating with others. These results show that the use of evaluative judgement enhances learner centredness and promotes active learning.

Sadler (1989, p. 191) described students' evaluative expertise as "the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production". To that end, pedagogic practices that develop students' evaluative expertise to assess their own writing are critical (Hawe and Dixon, 2014), particularly in distance education. Evaluative judgement in higher education is thus fundamental in assessing the work of self and others (Tai et al., 2018).

Developing students' evaluative expertise has been related to assessment as a transparent process that promotes student learning (Johnson, 2014). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2018, n, p,) transparency can be taken to mean 'free from pretence or deceit', 'easily detected or seen through', and 'readily understood'. Students in distance education should not deceive themselves where they see that work is below standard, has not been understood or has not been done properly. They should not pretend to have done justice to understanding the matter but should be convinced that they can tackle it without difficulty.

It is important to develop students' domains for self-monitoring as part of improving their knowledge expertise. Student dependence on the lecturer should not be the primary source of feedback. An empirical study was conducted from 2005-2016 to illustrate key ideas for embedding evaluative judgement into practice and found out that it required an inquiry mindset for students in order to develop self-evaluative expertise. Students needed such dispositions to develop evaluative expertise (Wyatt-Smith and Adie, 2021). Distance education students need such exposure since they do not depend on lecturers to sharpen their knowledge base.

Literature points to evaluative thinking as a tool that provides for systematically gathering and interpreting evidence on students' progress that is used to provide information on loops for refinement of work that has been learnt. The essence of evaluative thinking is that it is a means of viewing an ongoing process of questioning, reflecting, learning, and modifying on matter that has been learnt by students (Bennett and Jessani, 2011). Students are given the chance to resolve creative tension between their current and desired level of performance. It contributes to new learning by providing evidence to chronicle, map and monitor the progress, successes,

failures, and roadblocks in the learning process. It is learning for change.

Evaluative judgement in distance education is one of the few sustainable means to equip students around the globe with the skills and resources to confront the challenges of ignorance, poverty, war, and environmental degradation (Anderson, 2008). Evaluative judgement is perhaps the most powerful means of seeing beyond the ordinary eye that is made available to students through reflective practice. Thus, evaluative judgement contributes to the elimination of student suffering by making as freely available as possible the knowledge that students want to gain (Anderson, 2008).

3. Research Methodology

This study was embedded in the qualitative paradigm. There was need to enter into the world of distance education students of the Zimbabwe Open University in order to get their lived experiences as regards how they value evaluative judgement. These ideas were echoed by Patton (1980) who advises that for effective data generation in qualitative research:

> Enter into the world. Observe and wonder; experience and reflect. To understand a world you must become part of that world while at the same time remaining separate, a part of and apart from. Go then, and return to tell me what you see and hear, what you learn, and what you come to understand (Patton, 1980:121).

In the same vein, Maykut and Marehouse (1994) argue that in qualitative research, a human being can be an instrument of inquiry and thus explore idiosyncrasies and find patterns of behaviour.

Sample(s)
The study employed purposeful sampling to get participants. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the research (Patton, 1990). In this case, part-time Learning facilitators from the Zimbabwe Open University were purposefully sampled and participated in semi-structured interviews that sought to establish how students in distance education can make use of evaluative judgement in their studies. Pseudo names were given to each of the Learning facilitators.

Data Generation
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with part time lecturers who had come for a weekend school in the faculty of education. The researcher requested the part time Learning facilitators to participate in the semi-structured interviews. In this study a semi structured interview schedule was used because it had the advantage of being reasonably objective, "while still; permitting a

more thorough opinion and remain appropriate for studies in education (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Best and Kahn, 1993; Borg and Gall, 1989). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 349) the interview is used "to gather descriptive data in the subjects' words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world."

4. Findings and Discussion

The major findings of the study were that evaluative judgement is a very effective tool which enables students to see whether what they are doing is right or wrong. It improves the depth and breadth of understanding matter and also improves the quality of interaction between the student and the content. Several themes that emerged are presented and discussed below. They were given following the pseudo names that had been used to code data generated by the participants. Participants were coded as: Banana; Livelihood, Serena, Toyota, Riverside, Johns and Crembone.

Assignment writing
The issue of assignment writing ranked high in developing evaluative judgement. Learning facilitator Crembone had the following to say:

> During assignment writing, students need to think deeply and criticize themselves on the work they would have done. They need to broaden and deepen the lens through which they present their assignments. One must be a connoisseur in the work they do, students need really to know the matter and become highly perceptive in the domains. The students need to make critical observations and see details on the work they do. They need to develop high levels of criticism to take note of details in different ways. That is typical of evaluative judgement.

Developing skills of seeing subtle details and understanding why the details matter and the effect they have is very critical. Criticism is taken as an art of saying useful things about complex and subtle objects and events that others less sophisticated or sophisticated in different ways can see and understand what they did not see and understood before (Eisner, 1998, p. 3).

Term paper presentations
The issue of term paper presentation is of importance for students in distance education and it is a fundamental pedagogical tool which can be employed to make evaluative judgement. The following is a narration that was given by Riverside.

> Students might enjoy using evaluative judgement while they are assessing their peers. There are sessions where term papers are presented even virtually by students doing postgraduate studies. Students are privileged to assess their peers in terms of knowledge of curriculum content and mastery skills. In a class of twenty students, each

one is given a chance to make a presentation and then after that presentation, the whole class engages in a discussion where they raise concerns from the presentation. This is where the peers become the lens to your presentation. It is important not hide any issues that one observes when assessing peers. This helps the peers being assessed to realise pitfalls they might be having in the topic they are presenting. It is not easy for a colleague to say the truth about the challenges their colleague is facing but that is the paradox of peer assessment. The assessed peer will then apply this understanding of feedback to improve work, acquire and develop requisite knowledge and skills.

The above findings concur with previous research results. It was found out that students might sometimes reject their roles as peer assessors. They might resist becoming involved in practices that require them to self-assess or provide feedback to peers (Harris et al., 2018). Students may have knowledge of what is deemed effective practice, but not be confident in their enactment of such practice. They may have knowledge, and have confidence, but not believe that assessment processes are effective. Most importantly, based on their poor experiences and their context, they may consider that some assessment processes should not be part of their role as students and in interacting with their peers (Looney et al., 2018).

Research project writing

Students in distance education engage in research project writing in order to complete their programmes. This is a basic requirement for every student at undergraduate and post graduate level. Learning facilitator Banana raised the issue of project writing as influential in developing evaluative judgement among students. The following were the concerns raised:

Project writing demands a lot of interaction not only between the student and the supervisor but within the student's constructs. The two have to agree on the topic of title of the project before going any further. The student then develops a research proposal along the agreed lines. Chapter by chapter, the student writes and sends it to the supervisor for assessment and feedback. it is the responsibility of the student to ensure that what they send to the supervisor for marking is quality matter. This is the best place for evaluative judgement. Students need to critique their work basing on the critical guide posts and see the fitness of the work. Relevant theoretical and methodological frameworks have to be employed and this requires deep thinking.

The issue of interaction within the constructs of the student is being raised clearly. Distance education is not influenced by geographical separation of the student and the tutor but by the level of interaction among the key constructs within the student. It is the transactional distance between the student and the content that matters and not that between the student and the tutor. It is argued that the transactional distance construct between the student and the supervisor is a critical component of the development of the community of practice needed for learning to occur (Kang and Gyorke, 2008).

Group discussions

Participants grappled with notions of group discussions as being critical in developing evaluative judgement among students in distance education. Learning facilitator Livelihood had this to say:

A small group is allocated a topic to prepare and then present to the whole class. Each group must consider issues seriously ensuring that what they will bring to the class in quality material. In the group, each individual makes a contribution on the subject matter. Each group will then present to the class what they searched. Discussions are then held making an analysis of group by group. The class talks through to look at the standards and say whether the matter has fitness for purpose. This brings justice to the topic given. The detailed dialogue becomes a key variable in improving the quality of work.

Group discussions are proving to be an effective tool for evaluative judgement. Involving students in dialogic feedback conversations and encouraging feedback from multiple sources like self, peers, among others, can support development of quality in learning (Van daer Klei et al., 2017; Adie et al., 2018).

Self-assessment and peer assessment during teaching practice attachment

Self-evaluation and the evaluation of others were issues that were raised as crucial during teaching practice moments. Zimbabwe Open University sends its students from the faculty of education to schools where they learn the practice of teaching. During this time, students are learning how to teach and prepare lessons on their own and then engage in teaching. Learning facilitator Serena raised the following issues:

It is always the norm that students get experience during teaching practice of how to teach. During that time, there is a lot of self-evaluation that is needed in terms of preparation of records, planning, preparing learning media, delivering lessons, evaluating records, interacting with their learners, marking and giving their learners feedback, among others. They are really in control of their teaching experience and they require a lot of self-introspection. To do these activities diligently, students need to engage seriously in self-evaluation. At the same time, schools carry out demonstration lessons where one teacher is tasked to show case how to employ a teaching method in teaching a certain concept. After the demonstration lesson, all the teachers critique the processes that would have taken place. This is when the evaluation of the other teachers is done.

It is argued that students in distance education have more control over their studies and have more opportunities at

their disposal for reflection; they tend to be more organised and become self-starters who can accomplish their work without close supervision (Picciano, 2017; Wang, Pi and Hu, 2019).

Individual day to day study

The issue of individual day to day study was raised as an important tool that develops evaluative judgment for students in distance education. Learning facilitator Toyota raised the following sentiments:

> Students in distance education are not isolated. That kind of separation is an effective pedagogical tool to develop their mastery of concepts and learn to rely upon themselves. This is the crux of matter that helps them to develop independence. Separation builds their reflective skills, to judge and broaden their windows of self-evaluation. Students have the opportunity to explore the depth and complexity of the matter they are studying. Individual study brings about cognitive activation, a pedagogical practice which encourages students to engage in constructive and reflective higher education thinking. This develops and elaborated content related knowledge base in students.

The above findings seem to highlight that while society might think that students in distance education are isolated, it is a blessing for the students to engage in a practice that helps them to master concepts and actually grasp the content that is needed to function as a higher education product. Huber & Helm (2020) argue that students should learn self-evaluative skills especially during the Covid-19 era where they are separated from teachers. In the same vein, Kuleva (2020) notes that students need to be experts in self evaluation especially in the Covid-19 era so that learning becomes effective.

Examination writing

Examination period is of crucial importance for students. It is the time when they need to display all the knowledge and skills they would have gained during study. Learning facilitator Johns raised the issue of the need to scrutinize and analyse questions closely before attempting to answer. When writing examinations, students need skills of analysing questions and taking note of the differences in requirements. It is not just about regurgitating content and placing it on the examination script. Students need to think deeply before answering to ensure that what they are writing is of relevance and meets the standard for that level. Evaluative judgement is needed for that to happen. They need to develop the ability to make fine-grained discrimination among complex questions. This makes them answer the questions in a different way from those who lack such skills.

Distance education should not mean underdevelopment of the knowledge, competences and skills but should mean the opening of the mind to see what most people cannot see before being exposed to such experiences and setting oneself apart from ordinary thinking patterns. The above findings are in line with Eisner (1975) who argues that evaluative judgement is gained through description,

interpretation, evaluation and "thematics" (identifying dominant features or pervasive qualities) in a question and in the answers they would have given.

5. Conclusions

The study concludes that evaluative judgement is a very effective tool which enables students to see whether what they are doing is right or wrong. It is used in assignment writing, term paper presentations, individual study, research project writing, group discussions, peer assessment, teaching practice attachment and during examination writing. Evaluative judgement improves the depth and breadth of understanding matter and improves the quality of interaction between the student and the content.

Recommendations

i. The study recommends that tutors in distance education should sensitise their students on the value of evaluative judgement through conduction workshops so that they improve the practices and standards of work produced by their students.

ii. Distance education universities should come up with orientation handbooks on how students can make use of evaluative judgement in order to improve the quality of their work.

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