**The feedback of written assignments in distance education as a factor for shaping the self-esteem of students**

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# The feedback of written assignments in distance education as a factor for shaping the self-esteem of students

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## Περίληψη

Ένα από τα σημαντικότερα μαθησιακά εργαλεία στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση (εξΑΕ) συνιστά η ανατροφοδότηση την οποία οι διδάσκοντες παρέχουν στις εργασίες των φοιτητών. Ο ερευνητικός σκοπός της εργασίας είναι να εξεταστούν οι αντιλήψεις των μεταπτυχιακών φοιτητών του Ε.Α.Π. ως προς τον βαθμό της συναισθηματικής επιρροής και ως προς τη χρησιμότητα της ανατροφοδότησης που λαμβάνουν από τις γραπτές τους εργασίες, καθώς και ο βαθμός συσχέτισης των αντιλήψεων αυτών με τα επίπεδα της αυτοεκτίμησής τους. Η μεθοδολογική προσέγγιση είναι η ποσοτική μέθοδος και το εργαλείο συλλογής των δεδομένων είναι ένα ερωτηματολόγιο με ερωτήσεις κλειστού τύπου. Το δείγμα αποτελείται από 201 φοιτητές των μεταπτυχιακών προγραμμάτων «Εκπαίδευση Ενηλίκων» και «Επιστήμες της Αγωγής» της Σχολής Ανθρωπιστικών σπουδών του Ε.Α.Π. Από τις αναλύσεις των δεδομένων προκύπτει ότι οι μεταπτυχιακοί φοιτητές επηρεάζονται συναισθηματικά από την παρεχόμενη ανατροφοδότηση και τη θεωρούν χρήσιμη, εφόσον αυτή καλύπτει τις εκπαιδευτικές τους ανάγκες και τους βοηθά στην περαιτέρω βελτίωσή τους.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** Ανατροφοδότηση, γραπτές εργασίες, αυτοεκτίμηση, εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση.

## Abstract

An important learning tool in distance learning education is the feedback that teachers provide to the students' assignments, as it can affect them emotionally and contribute to the further improvement of their learning pathways. The aim of this research is to examine the perceptions of postgraduate students of the Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) about the degree of emotional influence, the usefulness of feedback they receive and the extent to which these perceptions relate to their self-esteem levels. Our research questions related to emotional influence, the usefulness of feedback, the self-esteem of students and their degree of correlation. We use the quantitative method and a questionnaire with closed-type questions as

the tool of collecting data. Our sample consists of 201 postgraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities at the H.O.U. attending the courses of Adult Education and Education Sciences. The data analysis shows that postgraduate students are emotionally affected by the provided feedback and find it useful as long as it meets their educational needs and helps them to further improve themselves.

**Keywords:** Feedback, written assignments, self-esteem, distance education.

## 1. Introduction

Written assignments in distance learning becomes particularly important. The written assignments have the ultimate goal of keeping learners in touch with the subject of learning, while also preparing them for the exams at the end of the academic year. According to the regulation of the H.O.U., (2011a) through the written assignments, students is continuously informed about their progress and their final grade is documented by the comments they receive. So, the information that teachers provide to students' assignments is an important learning tool in distance learning education, as it can emotionally affect students, but also contribute to improving their learning path. That kind of information has a decisive role in effective learning. In fact, quality feedback can improve student performance. Feedback distinguished by quality elements can help the student to get very important skills such as autonomy in learning and self-evaluation. However, many times various problems appear both in the way that feedback provided by the teachers and the way the students receive it. According to the literature review it was found that there is a lot of research on feedback. However, research examining student perceptions of feedback is limited. In fact, no research has been carried out in the Greek area, and in particular in the Middle East, that correlates the levels of self-esteem of postgraduate students with their perceptions of the usefulness and emotional influence of feedback on their written assignments. The aim of this dissertation is to examine the perceptions of postgraduate students at the H.O.U. regarding the degree of emotional influence, as well as the usefulness of the information they receive from their written assignments and the degree of correlation of these perceptions with the levels of their self-esteem.

## 2. Feedback and Self-Esteem-literature review

The kind of information about progress in written assignments that students receive as part of their studies is called feedback. Feedback has a double role: on the one hand it aims to encourage the student and on the other hand

to help him develop and improve his learning. At distance learning, feedback is a motivation force for the student acting and at the same time a connecting link between the course content and the teacher, who this way is present at every moment of the student's learning process (Weaver, 2006, Hounsell, 2003, Rani & Yahya, 2009, Boud, 1995). It is also a dialogic process in which both, teacher and student, participate with the ultimate goal of achieving learning (Black &William, 1998). In fact, because in distance learning student can sometimes feel alone, the provided feedback can affect him emotionally by encouraging or discouraging him. Thus, each student will be able to evaluate his learning situation at each stage and take action autonomously to cover their deficiencies (Κόκκος & Λιοναράκης, 1998).

On the other hand, an important concept with much influence on the development of personality and the way people behave is self-esteem. As man develops, he realizes how sufficient or insufficient may feel about life's various challenges and problems. This feeling of approval or disapproval involves both mental and emotional qualities (Rosenberg, Schooler & Schoenbach, 1989). The degrees of self-esteem (high, average, low) direct our behavior, our expectations, ambitions, orientations and decisions. The concept of self-esteem is often identified with how a person evaluates himself. This term includes elements related to acceptance or rejection, how valuable we feel or how effective and unique we are as personalities. Self-esteem is related to the emotional part of ourselves and concerns the value we give to ourselves in relation to the environment in which we live (Μακρή-Μπότσαρη, 2001). At the same time, self-esteem is determined by the totality of our successes in relation to the expectations we had initially set. That is, each of us has created an ideal self that we hope to achieve. Thus, self-esteem determines the agreement that exists between our true self and the ideal one (Rogers, 1999).

The contribution of feedback to written assignments has been the subject of research and has been shown to be instrumental in learning (Weaver, 2006). Through feedback, the student is informed about the level of his knowledge and at the same time about how much he has improved compared to his previous work (Cowan, 2004). In fact, without feedback in the context of the educational process, the student would not have had the opportunity to be informed about whether he did well or not and the possibilities for further improvement (Πλατσίδου, 2010). At the same time, the feedback also works as a guide that helps the student to take those measures so that his learning process is successful. However, in order for feedback to act as a catalyst for

learning, the educational process should be independent of the grade, as the grade offers nothing to the student if there is no proper feedback behind it (Boud, 1995). In fact, the quality of the information provided through feedback is of crucial importance, since the quality of knowledge and the improvement of the student depend on it. Thus, the student, as he improves in each task, also improves his overall performance (Rani & Yahya, 2009). After all, when the student has a clear picture of his strengths and especially his weaknesses, he can learn and improve faster (Hounsell, 2003).

The role of feedback is multidimensional. In addition to its main role of correcting mistakes and helping us to learn new knowledge, feedback also acts as a bridge between where we are and where we want to be. That is, since this gap between the two states is recognized through feedback, we can more easily be guided and develop knowledge and learning and thus improve performance (Brown, 2007). Moreover, research has shown that when students are given clear feedback and proper guidance, their skills and critical thinking skills improve (Moriarty & Rajapillai, 2009). At the same time, the feedback contributes to the further reflection of the student, so that they can fully understand the meaning of their assignments (Ovando, 1994).

The role of feedback in the direction of self-regulated learning is also decisive. Quality feedback should help the student by showing him how to lead to learning, once his learning needs have been identified. Thus, he will learn to utilize the new information and, based on previous experience and knowledge, he will be able to know the steps to follow in order to successfully cope with the new challenges (Black & William, 1998). The teacher through the feedback comments must enable the student to develop the skill of self-evaluation, i.e. to become able to recognize problems and try to correct them, thus achieving an improvement in his performance (Sadler, 1989). In this way, students will acquire learning autonomy, an element that will bring about positive results in terms of their self-confidence, since the feeling of self-determination will have been strengthened (Burke & Pieterick, 2010). Thus, they will be able to evaluate their learning situation at each stage and take action autonomously to cover their deficiencies. In conclusion, qualitative feedback decisively affects the performance of students, since it is a motivation to reflect and re-evaluate an existing situation, but gradually leading to improvement (Ovando, 1994). Also important are the findings that have been highlighted in research on feedback and students' self-esteem. Research by Hyland (2001) shows that students' self-esteem is affected by feedback while Young (2000) states that

students' levels of self-esteem influence their perceptions of the feedback they receive.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research questions

The main research questions are:

1. To what extent are students emotionally affected by the written feedback they receive from teachers?
2. What are students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of the written feedback?
3. What are the students' self-esteem levels?
4. How do students' perceptions of the emotional impact and usefulness of the feedback relate to their self-esteem levels?

### 3.2. Research Sample and instrument

In this research we use the quantitative method. We collect the data through a questionnaire with closed-ended questions. There is descriptive and inductive analysis and use of S.P.S.S. standardization and coding. The sample includes 201 students who came from the postgraduate study programs of the Faculty of Humanities of H.O.U., Adult Education and Educational Sciences.

### 3.3. The limitations of the research

This research was carried out on postgraduate students of the H.O.U.in departments of Adult Education and Educational Sciences. Although our research sample is considered satisfactory, and despite our efforts to preserve the reliability and validity of each procedure, we are cautious about generalizing the findings, as we cannot claim that they apply to the entire postgraduate students of H.O.U. We would have a more comprehensive picture if we have also examined the teachers' perceptions of the feedback they provide, as the students may give a different interpretation than what the teachers intended.

## 4. Research findings

The results are presented and interpreted in the form of research questions.

## 4.1. Degree of emotional impact of feedback

More than half of graduate students (Strongly Agree 15.9%, Agree 49.8%) agreed that they are emotionally affected by the feedback they receive, while around one in ten (Disagree 10.4%, Strongly Disagree 1.5%) said that it is not affected. This finding also found at the research of Dowden et al. (2013). The 65.7% who agree that they are much more emotionally affected by the feedback provided, 50.7% are women and 15% are men. However, the majority of graduate students (Strongly Agree 56.7%, Agree 32.3%) said that receiving positive feedback helps boost their self-confidence. Also, positive feedback boosts graduate students' self-confidence and encourages them to continue their effort and improve, especially when they are placed at the beginning of the text of the feedback provided. This particular perception is in agreement with the results of Sachdeva's (1996) and Weaver's (2006) research, in which students stated that feedback provided should always start with positive comments, as they are motivation and encouragement for the student to continue. Furthermore, although postgraduate students were found to be stressed by negative comments, however, when they were presented in a positive way, they were emotionally strengthened. At a similar level, the responses of postgraduate students ranged (Strongly Agree 53.2%, Agree 33.8%) regarding the fact that the provided feedback encourages them to continue their efforts in order to improve. It is noteworthy that the vast majority of postgraduate students wish to present negative criticism in a positive way, because this helps them emotionally. The majority of postgraduate students (8 out of 10) stated that the praise comments strengthen them emotionally and act as a motivation to improve. An important result was that nearly 2 in 10 graduate students considered quitting when they received negative feedback (Strongly Agree 4%, Agree 13.8%). At the same time, almost all graduate students agreed that they are encouraged to continue when their effort is recognized through the feedback provided. This finding also found to Sachdeva's research (1996) where, when the student is praised for achieving his goals through feedback, his self-confidence is strengthened and he is encouraged to continue his effort. Something similar is mentioned by Straub (1997), as he mentions that the student should be praised when he presents an original idea. After presenting the descriptive analysis of the data related to the emotional impact of the provided feedback, as it emerged from each question separately, the mean axis score of the entire sample was 46.6

points which means that the graduate students seem to agree with the view that the feedback provided affects them emotionally.

## 4.2. Perceptions of the usefulness of written feedback

About half of graduate students (Strongly Disagree 21.9%, Disagree 30.3%) disagree with the view that the feedback they receive is so brief or insufficient to be useful, while a small portion of students (Strongly Agree 7.5 %, Agree 16.4%) agree with the opinion above. Also, 8 out of 10 graduate students (Strongly Agree 28.4%, Agree 50.2%) said that the feedback provided is useful to them when it is intended to fill their learning gaps as Weaver (2006) concluded in her research. Although the majority (Strongly Disagree 17.9%, Disagree 46.8%) of graduate students stated that the feedback provided to them contains useful suggestions for improvement, some students (Strongly Agree 3.5%, Agree 13.9%) they had an opposite or neutral (17.9%) opinion. Also, approximately 7 out of 10 graduate students (Strongly Agree 22.4%, Agree 46.8%) as already mentioned in the research of Price (1997) reported that the feedback provided helps them learn more about the subject of their subject, while the same proportion (Strongly Agree 26.8%), Agree 47.8%) and their answers varied on whether the feedback motivates them to continue and reflect on what they have learned (Strongly Agree 22.9%, Agree 46.7%). Noteworthy are the results that a large proportion of graduate students (Strongly Agree 26.9%, Agree 56.1%) stated that the feedback comments help them to revise their work based on new approaches, while in the same proportion (Strongly Agree 33.8%, Agree 56.7%) adopt the teacher's suggestions in order to improve their assignments. At the same time, they report that the feedback contributes to the improvement of their academic performance (Absolutely Agree 29.9%, Agree 56.2%) and encourages them in their general educational path (Absolutely Agree 26.9%, Agree 54.7%). Also, Brown's research (2007) mentions the multidimensional role of feedback, as it seems that it acts as a bridge between the situation the student is in and the one, he wants to reach. After presenting the descriptive analysis of the data related to the graduate students' perceptions of whether they consider the feedback provided useful, as they emerged from each question separately, the average axis score from the entire sample was 36.84 points meaning that postgraduate students seem to agree that the feedback provided to them is useful.

## 4.3. Levels of self-esteem

Regarding the level of self-esteem of postgraduate students, when they were asked to give their personal opinion about where they would place themselves, 45.8% said they had a high level of self-esteem, 51.2% average, while just 3% ranked themselves as low.

**Table 1: Statistics**

| Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale Score | | |
|---|---|---|
| N | Valid | 201 |
| | Incomplete | 0 |
| Average | | 22,66 |
| Median | | 23,00 |
| Prevailing Price | | 24 |
| Standard deviation | | 4,626 |
| Range | | 22 |
| Minimum | | 8 |
| Maximum | | 30 |

## 4.4. Correlation of utility with level of Rosenberg self-esteem scale

The result of this correlation showed that when the self-esteem score increases, the utility score also increases. Also, when the utility score decreases, so does the self-esteem score. Hyland's (2001) research also found that students' self-esteem is affected by the feedback provided. In other words, a student with high self-esteem finds feedback very useful, and a student who does not find feedback useful has low self-esteem. This may be due to the fact that persons with high self-esteem have set high goals for their educational career, so they consider the feedback provided to them useful to improve themselves.

## 4.5. Individual statistical analyses

At the same time, we proceeded with an additional check in order to find out the existence of a correlation between the score of the emotional impact of

the feedback and the score of the usefulness of the feedback provided. The result of this correlation showed that those who are more emotionally affected by the feedback they receive also find it more useful. Conversely, those who say they find it less useful are less emotionally affected.

## 5. Final remarks

This research shows that H.O.U. postgraduate students are emotionally affected and consider the feedback provided by their teachers useful. More specifically, the majority of students stated that their self-confidence is boosted when they receive positive and complimentary comments, as well as when negative comments are presented in a positive way. They also reported that when their effort is recognized, they are encouraged to continue. They want the feedback provided to focus on their mistakes and the commentary to justify their rating. The postgraduate students adopt the teachers suggestions, because they recognize in them quality elements. The feedback gives them useful suggestions for improvement, motivation to continue their effort and deepen the subject of their unit. It also contributes to improving their academic performance, because it acts as a guide covering their learning gaps, while helping them to reflect and think more critically. In addition, although no significant correlation was shown between emotional influence and their self-esteem, it was observed that there is a correlation between students' usefulness and self-esteem. Therefore, it appears that postgraduate students are satisfied with the feedback provided, but this does not mean that there cannot be room for improvement. Conducting further research related to the feedback provided would help to gather more information to be used constructively for its improvement. Another interesting suggestion for further research would be to comparatively examine the perceptions of graduate students and the correlation with their self-esteem at the beginning of their studies and then in the final year. Also, a similar research could be carried out among the undergraduate students of the H.O.U. or could also examine teachers' perceptions. Subsequently, a connection of the findings could be made, so that we have a global view.

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**Appendix**

Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains only closed questions with predetermined answer options (nominal scale and Likert scale -4 points and 5 points), as this way we can code the answers, give them numerically and make correlations. Questions use clear language, will also be characterized by clarity and will not contain negations (Creswell, 2016).

A. Demographic information

Please fill in with X one of the options.

I. Gender      Male □ Female □

II. What is your age;

III. Master's Degree Program

Adult Education □ Education Sciences □

IV. How many subject units have you completed to date?

0 □    1 □    2 □    3 □    4 □

B. Self-esteem question

Please fill in with X one of the options.

|  | Low | Midpoint | High |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. How would you rank your self-esteem? |  |  |  |

C. Perceptions of emotional influence from written feedback
Please fill in with X one of the options

|  | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree Nor Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.I am emotionally affected by comments I receive. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2.When I see negative comments, I get nervous. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3.I am encouraged when negative comments are at the beginning. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4.My confidence grows when I get positive feedback. |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5.Feedback |  |  |  |  |  |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| encourages me, to continue my effort and improve. | | | | | |
| 6. My confidence grows when positive comments appear first. | | | | | |
| 7.When the negative criticism is positively presented, it helps me emotionally. | | | | | |
| 8.I perceive the feedback I receive as a personal review. | | | | | |
| 9.When I receive praise, I become emotionally boosted to improve. | | | | | |
| 10I thought I'd give up when I got a negative feedback.. | | | | | |
| 11.When my effort is recognized through the feedback I receive, I am encouraged to continue. | | | | | |
| 12.When feedback is not justified by the score, I am emotionally affected. | | | | | |
| 13.I'm emotionally affected by general comments | | | | | |

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree Nor Disagree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Feedback is short or inadequate, to be useful. | | | | | |
| 2.Feedback is useful when aiming to fill learning gaps. | | | | | |
| 3.Feedback rarely gives me any useful suggestions for improvement. | | | | | |
| 4.Feedback helps me delve deeper into the subject of thematic unity. | | | | | |
| 5.Feedback gives me an incentive to continue | | | | | |
| 6.Feedback helped me ponder about what I've learned. | | | | | |
| 7.Comments help me review my work based on new approaches. | | | | | |
| 8.I'm adopting the teacher's recommendations to improve my work. | | | | | |
| 9.Feedback helps to improve my academic performance. | | | | | |
| 10Feedback encourages me on my educational path. | | | | | |

D. Concepts of the usefulness of written feedback
Please fill in with X one of the options.

E. Rosenberg self-assessment scale (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, RSES, 1965)
Please fill in with X one of the options

| | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Generally, I'm satisfied with myself. | | | | |
| 2.Sometimes I'm not at all good . | | | | |
| 3I think as a person I have some good traits.. | | | | |
| 4I'm able to do things as well as other people.. | | | | |
| 5.I feel like I don't have many things that I could be proud of. | | | | |
| 6.I feeluselesssometimes. | | | | |
| 7.I feel like I'm a person of value, at least as much as the others. | | | | |
| 8.I think I should have more respect for myself | | | | |
| 9.All I can think of is that I'm a loser. | | | | |
| 10.I have a positive attitude to myself. | | | | |