An Insight into
The Definitions of Distance Learning and
The Significance of Tutor Comments in Distance Learning
Pauline Manjengwa
Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract
Firstly, this article examines various definitions of Distance Learning with the aim of enabling scholars to have a wider perspective of the concept. While the most basic definition relates to education that takes place when the teacher and students are separated by physical distance, developments in this area now encompass distance learning with technology (electronic, print, voice and data). Technology in this respect is viewed as the bridge used to mediate the gap between the tutor and the student. Secondly, the article also puts emphasis on the types of comments on marked assignments, that can either help the learner to work hard or destroy the learner's interest to learn. Appropriate, positive and constructive comments in marked assignments promote effective communication between the tutor and the learner. Most importantly, prompt assignment return with constructive feedback and counselling, is a possible decisive element for study success and goal achievement, for Distance Learners. More suggestions on enhancing the tutor – student interaction are discussed.

Introduction
The article discusses the various definitions and explanations of the term Distance Learning in the framework of major developments and innovations in this field. Because of the many formats of distance education in place, scholars find it appropriate to use the term Open and Distance Learning (ODL). A critical aspect of distance learning is the need to mitigate the distance between the learner and the tutor by bridging the gap. A number of strategies such as telecommunication and appropriate tutor comments could be used to bridge the distance between the tutor and the learner. This article will propose the need for mediating the gap between the learner and the tutor through well calculated meaningful tutor comments that do not offend the learner but encourage him/her to succeed.

What is Distance Education?
The term distance education is used to cover various forms of study at all levels where students are not in direct physical contact with their tutors. The term ‘distance education’ acquired its universal acceptance in 1982 when the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE), which is a UNESCO affiliated organisation, changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE).

According to Willis (1993), distance education is an instructional delivery strategy often described by such phrases as:
- Distance Education
- Tele-work
- Tele-learning
- Outreach and
- Tele-teaching

Willis (1993) suggests that, at its most basic level, distance education takes place when the tutor and the students are separated by physical distance. Technology in the form of (electronic, print and voice) is used to bridge the instructional gap.

However, the most commonly used term according to Holmberg (1986) that has existed for about a hundred years, is correspondence education.

Correspondence Education
Holmberg (1986) suggests that, correspondence education is taken to denote teaching in writing by means of self instructional texts combined
with communication in writing. This is, correspondence between tutors and students. In correspondence education media other than the print media became common and grew in importance hence the correspondence education was felt by many to be too narrow.

In America, Canada and Australia the term Home Study was used in place of correspondence education. While the term emphasises the home as the place of study, a student may not necessarily study there at all. This term, home study is therefore, inadequate to explain the meaning of this mode of teaching. Developments in distance education include Open Learning as a more comprehensive terminology.

**What is meant by Open Learning?**
The term, Open Learning, has come to be used as a generic descriptor for a whole family of nontraditional learning methodologies. These include, ‘Student Centred Learning’, ‘Resource-Based Learning’ and ‘Flexible Learning’. (Lewis and Spencer (1986).

**School of the Air or School Broadcasts**
School of the Air and School Broadcasts were common terms used in Mauritius, England and many parts of the Commonwealth including Kenya. The terms were found to be restrictive to air programmes that could be accessed through the radio and television.

**Independent studies**
Independent study was yet another popular term used in America and Europe. The essence of this term was that the student studied alone without any assistance from anybody. The questions that are most frequently asked in relation to independent studies are:

- What is the study independent of?
- How independent is the student from the teacher who in fact marks his/her work and makes informative comments?
- How independent is the student from other students?

**Distance teaching or Distance learning**
Both terms are too confining. **Distance Teaching** is too teacher centred and **Distance Learning** is too student based. The term **Distance Education** appears to be the most appropriate for students who are learning at a distance; who are physically separated in space and time, from their tutors.

The adjective ‘Open’ is commonly used together with Distance Learning. Various distance teaching organisations have adopted practices corresponding to and names containing the adjective ‘open.’ For example;

- The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)
- Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)
- The Open University (in Milton Keynes) UK (OU)

Deval (1986) argues that, as Distance Education refers mainly to the mode of delivery, Open Learning refers to structural changes, which make an institution open; open with respect to choice of place for studying; time; freedom of selecting content of learning and mode of learning among other things.

Some Distance Learning Institutions vary in their degree of openness in terms of

(i) Entry qualifications
(ii) Age entry into a course
(iii) Selection of courses and
(iv) Consideration of one's past experience.

These institutions include the term “Open” together with the term Distance Learning. Such institutions prefer to be called “Open and Distance Learning” Institutions (ODL).

**What is the Purpose of Distance Education**
The purpose of distance education is to provide;
- Opportunities for learning, to students in scattered communities covering sparsely populated, large geographical areas such as those found in Australia, Canada, Zimbabwe and North America;
- Training of teachers or personnel from other sectors who are already working and cannot go on study leave;
- Educational opportunities for students who qualify but cannot be absorbed by conventional institutions;
- Learning opportunities for adults who have been deprived of education.
- The acceleration of manpower development;
- An increase in the output of educational systems;
A cost effective programme for large numbers of students;
The opportunity of having education brought to one’s door step;
Learner autonomy.

How do Distance Education Learners learn?
We have looked at various explanations and definitions of Distance Education. Let us now go on to find out how students learn, through Distance Education.
Distance Learners acquire their learning through various teaching/learning modes.
In the following discussion, we shall examine the role of various types of tutors’ comments and their significance in the teaching and learning of distance learners.

Tutor comments and their impact on Distance Learners
Distance Learners, as mentioned earlier on, acquire their learning through various modes of instruction.
Distance Learning experts such as Koul et al (1995), talk of various types of tutor comments and their impact in the teaching/learning of Distance Learners. They suggest that, some of the types of comments include the following;
• Harmful comments
• Hollow comments
• Misleading comments
• Null comments
• Negative comments
• Positive comments
• Constructive comments
• Personal comments and
• Global comments

Harmful Comments
What are harmful comments? These are comments which “harm” the learner’s ego, thereby causing him/her to lose interest and in some cases to drop out of the programme altogether. Since the learner is far removed from the tutor in distance, he/she is unable to get immediate and direct feedback or response from the tutor, with regard to the tutor’s ‘rude’ remarks, hence he/she is forced to take the comments at face value.

It is pertinent that tutors bear in mind that some learners are more sensitive to harmful comments than other ‘thicker-skinned’ learners. Sensitive learners may possibly develop real feelings of resentment towards the tutor, and will be unwilling to listen to criticism. The situation may degenerate to the point where the learner and tutor can exchange abrasive comments, which do not help the learner to progress. It would then be hard to re-establish an open channel of communication with the student. The following are examples of Harmful comments which some learners possibly get subjected to, when they receive marked assignments from their tutors.
• Terrible language! Think before you write.
• Waffling won’t get you anywhere. Stop meandering.
• Don’t use jawbreakers if you don’t understand what they mean.
• Oh my word! What are you talking about?
• Very shallow information. Survey and scrutinise the assignment topic before you work on it.

Hollow Comments
These comments are really nothing more than words. While they may read like sentences, they are unhelpful. For example, the tutor can say “Read the answer again and strike out all the unnecessary details.” without being specific about the details that are unnecessary. In this instance, the tutor would be well-advised to cite the unnecessary information, and to justify his/her comments. The following are typical examples of hollow comments;
• Re-read the answer again and strike out all the unnecessary details.
• Redo the assignment.
• It appears you have vocabulary challenges which should be a cause of great concern to you.
• Your answer is a regurgitation of the unit content.

Harmful as well as Hollow Comments
There are some comments which have the characteristics of both harmful and hollow comments. These are rude comments with no direction at all. The learner will not possibly benefit from the comments because he or she does not know how to get to the correct answer. An example of such comments includes the following:
• “You have not understood the question at all.”
• “For goodness sake, does this belong here?”
Misleading comments
These are comments which make the distance learner lose track of the correct track. For example, a tutor may present the student with the following comments:

- Re-read the lesson and understand it thoroughly well.
- Redo the assignment.

Comments of this nature do not help the learner in any way. The tutor does not point out or indicate where the distance learner went wrong.

Null comments
Null comments are wordless. They are usually in the form of symbols. The comments are presented in the marked assignment, in the form of a tick as shown in (A) or crossing out the student’s work as shown in (B) and in some cases by underlining a word, a phrase or even a sentence, as shown in (C)

Sample A
Because of the large classes in the public schools, each teacher had two kindergarten classes each day; thus, the work of parents fell by the wayside. A conflict developed between the kindergarten and first grade teachers as to what children should be learning in kindergarten and what children of kindergarten age really needed.

This conflict is still prevalent in some nursery schools today. Some nursery schools teach children to read, write and recite the letters of the alphabet, whereas these aspects are supposed to be introduced in formal schools by qualified Early Education teachers. Worse still, some parents prefer to take their children to pre-schools which teach reading and writing and the recitation of the alphabet. However this conflict is still unresolved.

Sample B
The kindergarten also used America to attempt to the new social problems which developed with the great influx of immigrants.

Churches, settlement houses, and philanthropic organizations established kindergartens in order to disease, crime and vice. The kindergarten teachers taught the children in the morning and worked with parents in the afternoon.

Gradually, some kindergartens in empty schoolrooms in public schools. After was successful in having kindergartens adopted in the St. Louis public schools in school

Sample C
The kindergarten to attempt to the new social problems which developed with the great influx of immigrants.

Churches, settlement houses, and philanthropic organizations establish kindergartens in order to disease, crime and vice. The kindergarten teachers taught the children in the morning and worked with parents in the morning.

Gradually, some kindergartens in empty schoolrooms in public schools. After was successful in having kindergartens adopted in the St. Louis public schools in school

Negative comments
What are negative comments? Negative comments are explanations from the tutor who will have marked an assignment script of a student. They are the guidelines which help the student to identify his mistakes. They also equip the learner with a good perception of the topic. The tutor will explain to the learner where he or she will have gone wrong and even make suggestions that will help the learner to correct his/her work. Negative comments will possibly help the learner to absorb correct concepts. The wording of the comments should be clear to the learner. Below are examples of negative comments, which a student may come across, when he/she gets marked assignment responses back from the tutor.

- Incorrect facts! You have written out of topic.
- Survey, scrutinise and understand the assigned question before you set out to answer it. Let’s discuss response number six on the phone. You can phone me on this Saturday at any time between 8:00am and 6:00pm. My cell phone number is…
- You have not fully answered the question. Although you knew what you were talking about, your answer is too brief and incomplete. For further information, Read Golby et al 1975 chapters 1 and 2.
- You have failed to suggest at least two ways of combating malaria. I suggest you visit your nearest clinic and discuss the question with any one of the nurses.

The distance learner in most cases is far removed from the distance tutor, geographically. Negative comments facilitate effective communication between the learner and the tutor. The learner submits a written assignment to the tutor. The tutor in turn marks he student’s assignment and includes corrective comments.
These corrective comments are what we have discussed as negative comments. From the foregoing, it goes without saying, that Negative comments play an important role in the learning process of the distance learner.

Positive comments
Positive comments as the name implies, are positive tutor comments, that support and validate the views and facts included in the learner’s response to the assignment. In the previous section, we discussed the importance of negative comments. There is a tendency among tutors, to concentrate on highlighting the negatives in the assignment, at the expense of the positives. Positive comments are critical in affirming the learner’s effort and in giving direction to the learner.

Examples of positive comments are as follows;
• Well done! You have carefully supported your arguments with relevant examples.
• Good! Your arguments are sound and are reflective of wide reading.

Whilst negative comments are helpful to the learner, tutors are urged not to overlook the importance of positive comments. In relevant circumstances, the learner needs to know that he/she has excelled in his/her marked work. Positive comments encourage the distance learner to work hard in order to maintain a high standard of work.

Constructive comments
Constructive comments give the learner the guidance which he or she will use to correct his own work. The following are examples of constructive comments:
• Instead of dwelling on the negative aspects on the use of anti-malaria drugs, you could have included positive aspects as well.
• You could have backed up your facts with the aid of suitable diagrams… Secondly, you should have touched on all the four aspects, outlined in the question, instead of focusing on two aspects only.
• Please try out in your classroom lessons, the suggested methods for teaching reading to children. Prepare relevant teaching aids for use in the reading lessons. Bring the teaching aids to the next tutorial session for discussion with other students.
• You have overlooked the need to define the term reading in the context of your particular discussion.
• You started well at the beginning, but you lost track in the last two paragraphs.

You should have defined the topic first, in order to establish your stance right from the beginning of your discussion.

Constructive comments help the student to correct his/her marked assignment.

Global comments
What are Global comments? These are overall comments which give a total picture of the performance of the student, in the whole assignment response. Global comments are summed up by a grade such as A, B or C or a mark in the form of percentages such as 40 %, 68% or 80% etc.

Some tutors prefer to write them on a separate piece of paper. Other tutors prefer to write them on the space left out at the end of the assignment response of the learner. In order for the learner to benefit from Global comments, it is pertinent that the tutor explains the grades. For example, he/she may want to provide a scale which states that:

A=89% to 100% Excellent Work
B= 70% to 89% Very Good
C= 50% to 69% Good
D=35% to 49% Disappointing, You can do better than this! See me after the forthcoming tutorial session.
E = 34% and below. Do not lose hope. Let’s discuss. Phone me on either Tuesday or Thursday at any time during working hours. My cell phone number is….

Personal comments
Personal comments if well worded, are meant to break ‘the isolation of the distance learner.’ Race (1995) goes on to say that, phrases such as, “Good point!” warm distance learners’ hearts’. They speak louder than tick marks.

Furthermore, Race argues that ‘Personal comments give the learner, purposeful feedback.’ This is a vital component in the teaching learning process in distance learning.

The following are examples of Personal comments suggested by Race (1995):
• Good point!
• I agree
• Indeed
• I hadn’t thought of this one
• A good example
• Spot on
While it is not easy to incorporate humor in tutor comments, personal comments, if carefully worded can make the ‘isolated distance learner’, have something to smile about, whilst learning at the same time.

Significance of Tutor comments
Tutor comments play an important role in the teaching-learning process of the learner. First and foremost, the comments must be purposeful, accurate and should tally with the awarded marks or grades. For example, the tutor should not write the comment ‘Well Done’, when the student has scored 30% or ‘You can do better than this’ when he awards the student an ‘A’. On the other hand, Distance Learning tutors are urged to ensure that the comments they make, and the grades/marks they award, do not reflect that the tutor is either too lenient or too hard on the learner.

Conclusion
Scholars need to have a broader perspective of distance education, hence one definition is not adequate to explain what distance learning is really about. Continuous developments in this area bring in new dimensions. It is therefore pertinent to appraise the dimensions in the light of new practices in distance education. Of major importance are the strategies put in place to mediate the space between the learner and the tutor. Communication modalities that promote a dialogical relationship between the learner and tutor, should be put in place. Also, various types of tutor comments and their significance to the distance learner are critical in promoting learner/tutor interaction. Effective learning for distance learners, can be achieved through effective communication between the tutor and the learner. Effective communication is enhanced by a good rapport between the learner and the tutor. The tutor can achieve this by writing appropriate comments which do not harm the learner’s ego.

References
Deval (1986). The preliminary years, Open School, India.
Victoria: Deakin University Distance Education Unit
Holmberg, B. (1989). Tutorial Frequency in Distance Education Hagen: Fern Universitate