

Could the evaluation of written essays affect tutor-student communication in distance learning? Perceptions of Open University postgraduate students

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper, which makes use of the concepts of framing from Bernstein's theory, and habitus from Bourdieu's theory, is the sociological approach to, and analysis of, the perceptions of postgraduate students of the Hellenic Open University, regarding the extent to which the quality of the professors' letters of response, which evaluate their written essays, affect the communication between them. Fifty-one students, who were attended the Module "Open Distance Learning" during the spring semester of the 2012-2013 academic year, took part in the research. The main results of the research showed that with regard to the correction of their written essays by the teacher, the students want: a) communication to take place with the use of the friendly plural form, which reproduces the socially acceptable habitus in Greece for the polite interaction of adults in the educational field; b) the adoption of a friendly and familiar tone of writing in the letters of response, which reveals the tutors' understanding and acceptance of the peculiarities of the students (weak framing of hierarchical rules); and c) the application of strong framing of Instructional Discourse on evaluation where the tutor replies with clarity and in detail to each student, making the evaluation criteria with which his written essay was corrected explicit. Evaluating the written essays in this manner creates the necessary conditions for positive relations between tutor and students (weak framing of Regulative Discourse) which contributes to the promotion of communication between them.

KEYWORDS

Written essays, Open University, habitus, framing, evaluation

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article tente, à partir du concept théorique d' "encadrement" ("framing") de Bernstein et de celui de "habitus" de Bourdieu, une approche sociologique et une analyse des perceptions des étudiants de troisième cycle de l'Université Ouverte Grecque, afin de constater si la qualité des lettres de réponse des professeurs, par lesquelles ces derniers évaluent les essais écrits des étudiants, affecte la communication entre eux. Dans cette recherche, qui a eu lieu dans le semestre de printemps de 2013, ont participé 51 étudiants qui avaient suivi le Module "Open Distance Learning". Les principaux résultats de la recherche ont montré que, dans la communication d'évaluation des essais écrits du professeur avec les étudiants, ceux-ci s'attendent à ce que: a) la communication se fasse en pluriel de sympathie, qui reproduit l'habitus

socialement acceptable en Grèce et qui est considéré comme le type d'interaction adéquat entre adultes dans le domaine de l'éducation; b) soit adopté un style plus conviviale intimé dans les lettres de réponse, indiquant la compréhension et l'acceptation des caractéristiques particulières des étudiants de la part de leur précepteur (encadrement faible des règles hiérarchiques); etc) le précepteur procède à l'application d'un "fort encadrement" du Discours Didactique d'évaluation, dans lequel il répond à chaque étudiant avec clarté et détails en rendant explicites les critères d'évaluation des essais écrits. Il paraît que cette façon d'évaluation des essais écrits crée les conditions de relations positives entre le professeur - précepteur et les étudiants (faible encadrement du Discours Régulateur) en contribuant à promouvoir la communication entre eux.

MOTS CLÉS:

Essais écrits, Open University, habitus, framing, évaluation

INTRODUCTION

Written essays constitute an important element of the university education process since through them are attempted, either autonomously or in combination: a) the aiding of the learning effort of the students, who are called on to act independently in order to approach the scientific bibliography on a specific issue, displaying in written form the results of their study; b) the initiation of the students into the reasoning behind the formation of scientific papers; and c) the evaluation of the students (Cremer & Lea, 2008; Huot, 2002). Relevant scientific research has focused as much on conventional as on open university education, approaching the views and experiences of both students/learners and professors/tutors: on the promotion of the learning process with the evaluation of written assignments, on the effectiveness of the learners' feedback depending on the manner of correction of their written essays which the professors implement, and on general issues concerning the evaluation of students through written assignments (Brown & Glover, 2006; Chanock, 2000; Krause, 2001; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Merrill, 2001; North, 2005; Price et. al., 2011; Weaver, 2006; Whittington, Glover & Harley, 2004).

Written essays constitute a basic and significant element for the realization of distance teaching in the case of the Open Universities (Holmberg, 2002; North, 2005; Race, 1999; Robertson, 2014). Open Universities, such as the Hellenic and the Cypriot, which were constructed based on the model of the British Open University, and which belong to the category of autonomous universities for the provision of distance education (Keegan, 2001; Koustourakis, 2006) are founded on suitably developed teaching material and on the support of the students by the teacher (Christidou, Hatzinikita & Gravani, 2012; Dimopoulos, Koulaidis & Sklaveniti, 2001; Gravani, Hatzinikita & Zarifis, 2012; Koustourakis, Panagiotakopoulos & Vergidis, 2008) with whom they communicate concerning the realization of their written assignments.

In this research paper a sociological approach to and analysis of the perceptions of students of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) regarding the extent to which the quality of writing in the professors' letters of reply, as well as the manner of evaluation of their written essays, influence the communication between them, is attempted.

The paper begins with the theoretical notes, where the concepts of habitus from the theory of Bourdieu, and framing from the theory of Bernstein, are approached. Then follow the chapters Research Questions – Methodology and presentation and discussion of the Results. This research effort is completed with the Conclusions.

THEORETICAL OBSERVATIONS

Individuals communicate and interact in the "fields" within which they move, such as the educational field of an Open University, making suitable use of the habitus they possess (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). Habitus, apart from its role in the case of the individuals who participate in the educational process (students, teachers), is also located in the educational institutions and emerges as a result of their historical cultural course (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Koustourakis & Paizis, 2013). The individuals' habitus is a product of their socialization, initially, in a particular family environment (primary habitus). Then, this form of habitus evolves as a result of the education and training the individuals receive (secondary habitus), as well as due to the experience they gain through the practice of a profession (tertiary habitus) (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). Habitus is to be detected in an individual's behavior and choices, which is shaped through the activation of taste, dispositions and his preferences regarding the choice and use of appropriate language depending on the various social situations (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986, 1990). For example, the use of the plural form in Greece for (written or spoken) communication between teacher and students constitutes evidence of the activation of the socially widespread habitus regarding accepted regulative rules for their relationships in terms of politeness and the demarcation of their roles within the educational field.

Every educational institution, the HOU included, possesses and cultivates, in the form of institutional habitus, a particular educational culture which inevitably influences the conscience and habitus of the teachers and learners who are involved in its educational activities and processes (Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Thomas, 2002). In particular, the institutional habitus of an educational institution can be detected in the dispositions and the interactive communicative relationships which develop between professors and students, as well as in the pedagogical – teaching practices which are chosen for the realization of its educational work (Koustourakis & Paizis, 2013; Thomas, 2002). The manner in which the institutional habitus of an Open University is materialized can be approached and analyzed using the theoretical concepts of Basil Bernstein (Christidou, Gravani & Hatzinikita, 2012; Christidou et. al., 2012; Dimopoulos et. al., 2001; Gravani et. al., 2012; Koustourakis et. al., 2008). More specifically, as Morais (2002, p. 559) argues: *"Bernstein's theory has provided concepts to define learning in social contexts and the interactions that occur in them that may be used to create contexts where children (here in the HOU: students) are active learners"*.

The institutional habitus which the HOU seeks to shape is linked to the promotion of a visible and progressive pedagogy since the teaching choices which are applied are absolutely known to the Greek student, who is located at the center of the educational process (Bernstein, 1990; Koustourakis et. al., 2008). HOU students receive a packet of educational material and a study timetable and are supported in their individual learning effort by one particular professor – advisor, assigned to them by the institution. This takes place through the interaction which develops between tutor – students: a) during the Contact Sessions; b) as a consequence of the correction of the students' written assignments which comprises a formative evaluation process, and c) through the communication of the students with the tutor via telephone or through the use of the Information Communication Technologies (Koustourakis, 2006; Koustourakis et. al., 2008). For the promotion of the HOU's educational work, weight is given to the interaction between teacher – student. However, the quality of the communication between them is influenced by the manner in which the tutor corrects his students' written assignments. This

process can be approached in research through use of the concept of framing from the theory of Bernstein (Bernstein, 1990, 2000, 2004).

Framing focuses on the interactive framework for the materialization of the educational mission and reveals the control relations which develop between teacher and learners. Framing includes Regulative Discourse (RD) and Instructional Discourse (ID) and is illustrated as follows: $F=ID/RD$ since RD is dominant and influences the ID (Bernstein, 2000). In particular, RD is a discourse of social order and refers to the hierarchical relationships which exist in every pedagogical relationship, defining what is considered acceptable behavior or social relationship between tutor and students. In the case of the HOU, the formation of a weak framing of RD between tutors and students is promoted. This is due to the fact that the tutors/professors also shoulders the responsibility of fulfilling the role of Advisor. In other words, they are called on so that with the appropriate tactics they can reduce the hierarchical relationships which stem from their role, and develop communication with their students by supporting them psychologically and providing them with appropriate advice during the course of their learning, with the objective of dealing with the phenomenon of dropouts (Koustourakis et. al., 2008). ID refers to the teaching choices that are adopted during the approach to scientific knowledge by the student and includes the carrying out of evaluation (Bernstein, 2000, 2004). In fact, the evaluation of the students' written assignments by the HOU tutor constitutes an important element of its institutional habitus (Instructional Discourse). More specifically, according to HOU study rules, tutors are required to reply to their students in an analytical manner and within a short period of time, explaining the grade they assigned to their written essays. In other words, the tutors are requested to use personal control, materializing a strong framing of ID on evaluation that makes the evaluation criteria explicit to the acquirers (Bernstein, 1990, 2004; Morais, 2002). In this case since the two discourses of framing (RD, ID) are interrelated in the case of evaluation at the HOU, a weak framing of RD (hierarchical rules) is promoted. This is because the student can understand the way in which his/her essay was graded and he/she is given the opportunity to discuss the manner of his/her evaluation with his/her tutor, possibly casting doubt on the judgment of the latter. In the tutor's letter of reply there may be elements which belong to RD in the cases where reference is made "*to the value of honesty, rules of conduct, cooperation, obedience and the duties of a student*" (Morais, 2002, p. 562). When this happens, a mode of imperative/positional control of the learner is being promoted and the hierarchical relationships become obvious, emphasizing the teacher's power (strong framing at the level of RD). As Morais points out (2002), the strong framing of RD also appears when weak framing at the level of ID is brought into effect in the cases where the tutor, when correcting a student's written essay sends only the grade or some brief comment.

Consequently, the question which arises concerning adult students at an open university is the extent to which the evaluation of their written essays by the tutor, which includes the composition and sending of letters of reply, can create obstacles and influence the communication between them.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS – METHODOLOGY

In this paper the approach to the following research questions will occupy us:

- What are the perceptions of HOU postgraduate students regarding the formation of the Regulative Discourse which concerns the language and the tone of the letters of reply they receive from the tutor during the correction of their written essays?
- To what extent can the manner of correcting the students' written essays by the tutor influence the communication between them?

The research was carried out in the spring of the 2012-2013 academic year, with postgraduate students taking the Module "Open Distance Learning" with the Hellenic Open University. This particular group of students was chosen since, due to the subject matter of their studies, they had the opportunity to become familiar with the institutional habitus of the HOU and the theory behind the realization of good pedagogical practices during the provision of distance learning.

More specifically, at the end of March 2013 a suitably formulated anonymous questionnaire with questions of an open-ended type was distributed to the postgraduate students on the Module Open Distance Learning who participated in the 4th Contact Session which took place in Athens. Through this questionnaire we aimed to give the students the opportunity to express in detail their views: a) on the manner in which they would like the letters of reply through which the evaluation of their written assignments is made, to be composed; and b) on the obstacles they sense when, in their communication with their professors/tutors - advisors they raise issues related to the way in which their written assignments have been corrected by them.

The research questionnaire was sent by email to those students absent from the 4th Contact Session. 51 completed questionnaires were returned. The average age of the students in the sample was 39.1 years old and the majority were women (42 individuals, 82.4%), married (34 individuals, 66.7%, while there were 2 divorcees, 3.9% and 15 unmarried, 29.4%), having a child (30 individuals, 58.8%). Of the students that took part in the research, 34 lived in the region around the capital of Athens and in the Attiki prefecture (66.7%), 9 in the provinces (17.6%) and 8 on remote islands (15.7%). The majority of the sample were teachers (35 individuals, 68.6%, of whom 26 worked in secondary education, 51%, and 9 in primary education, 17.6%), 8 students worked as private sector employees (15.7%), 3 were civil servants (5.9%) and 5 were unemployed (9.8%). In addition, 8 individuals (15.7%) possessed a postgraduate title and the average number of Modules they had followed successfully was 3.5. In other words, the majority of the particular students possessed experience in distance learning since only 4 individuals (7.8%) were studying for the first time with the HOU while 8 individuals (15.7%) had an undergraduate title from the HOU. Moreover, 33 students (64.7%) had followed more than one Module successfully.

For the extraction of valid and reliable conclusions, triangulation was applied (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008). That's why, after receiving the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted, in which six of the students from the sample participated (Mason, 2002; Robson, 2006). The basic question that occupied the researcher's discussion with each of the particular students, was "What are the elements of the letters of reply which you received from the tutors concerning the correction of your written essays and which made you feel that obstacles were being created that made it difficult for you, or discouraged you, from communicating with them?"

The material from the questionnaires, which is made up of responses to open-ended type questions and the recordings of the interviews, was analyzed using the method of qualitative

content analysis (Mason, 2002). In this case, an attempt was made to group similar views expressed by students in the sample.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We will next move on to the presentation and analysis of the qualitative data from the research. In the case of the questionnaires, an attempt was made at quantification of the findings when for the same question there were similar responses from the students.

Language for the writing of the letters of reply

The greater part of the students who participated in the research (29 individuals, 56.9%) prefer the use of the plural form in the letters of reply which concern the correction of their written assignments by the professor. This is because the plural form corresponds to the socially accepted habitus for the realization of official formal communication (Bourdieu, 1984) with terms of politeness between adults in Greece:

“The plural form doesn’t imply distance, but recognition of the individuality and personality of the learner” (Questionnaire – Q3).

“The plural form gives the feeling that the professor considers you equal to him and respects you, observing the proper distance” (Q24).

“I prefer the plural form, not for the maintenance of distance, but because it is suitable for adults” (Q35).

The use of the plural form in the letters of reply reproduces, in addition, the professional habitus for the shaping of interpersonal relationships between teacher – learner, which exist in the conscience of the teachers (Bourdieu, 1990), who make up the majority of the members of the sample:

“I think the plural form is necessary because the roles demand it” (Q21)

“The plural form out of habit, but it also reflects the real relationship of the two sides” (Q33).

The cultivation of friendliness in the content of the letters of reply, which corresponds to the shaping of a good communicative relationship where the learner is recognized as a person with value, constitutes a prerequisite for the students in the sample (8 individuals, 15.7%), who said that they are not concerned with the way in which the tutor addresses them:

“When the tone he uses in his reply is friendly and his comments are encouraging it is not at all important for me whether he uses the plural or singular form when he addresses me” (Q29).

However, a significant portion of the students aged up to 40 years old (12 individuals, 23.5%) said that they prefer the use of the singular form since in this way *“a friendly climate is facilitated since the “loneliness” of distance learning comprises one of the most significant problems”* (Q14). In other words the particular students believe that with the use of the singular form in the letters of reply, a feeling of familiarity with the professor is created:

“So far I have received letters of reply in the plural form. However I would like the singular to be used because I would feel more familiar with my professor, without this meaning that there wasn't the required respect between us” (Q15).

Finally, two men (3.9%), who possessed a postgraduate study title, said that the choice of manner of communication should constitute a matter for negotiation during the Contact Sessions:

“I think that this should be agreed on between the teacher and the learner” (Q1)

Consequently, based on the students' responses, the desire of most (56.9% of the sample) emerges for the use of the plural form in the tutor's letters of reply. This fact reveals the reproduction of dominant social dispositions in Greece, concerning the accepted ways for polite interaction as much between adults as between teachers and students (secondary and tertiary habitus) (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990). Besides, the friendly plural form is desired by the participants in the research, through which a weak framing of Regulative Discourse in the relationships tutor – students should be promoted (Bernstein, 1990, 2000). The same prerequisite emerges in the case of the students who said that the way in which their professor – advisor addressed them in the context of his letters of reply was of no interest to them (15.7% of the sample). From their responses there emerges the desire for the shaping of good interpersonal relationships with their professor, with the latter taking the initiative. However, the students who desire the use of the singular form in the tutor's letters of reply (23.5% of the sample) also seek the shaping of weak framing of RD, which creates a climate of familiarity and favours the realization of communication between teacher – learner (Morais, 2002).

Tone of the writing of letters of reply

From the total of the responses of the students in the sample, it emerges that the tone of the letters of reply, which are sent from the tutor to communicate the results of the evaluation of their written assignments, is very significant and influences the prospects of the communication between them. More specifically, from the responses, the desire emerges for the promotion of a weak framing of RD which corresponds to a reduction of the hierarchical rules which regulate teacher – learner relationships (Bernstein, 1990, 2004). For this reason, the tone of the letters of reply should be:

“Familiar, friendly, warm-hearted in order to establish a meaningful relationship with good communication” (Q2).

In contrast, a didactic tone is not desired, one that uses scientific language and reveals the existence of an imperative/positional mode of RD, as in this way teacher – learner communication is discouraged (Morais, 2002). That is because the student feels that the professor can't appreciate the effort he/she has made and the difficulties he/she has to face as an adult in his/her attempt to meet the demands of distance teaching:

“I don't like a strongly scientific tone because it's like they raise a wall between us indicating what the role of each of us is and how it should remain. Scientificality can be maintained with a friendly tone too, it's enough that things are said in the right way” (Q8).

Indeed, the experience of some students with certain HOU teachers seems to be negative. In these cases there is a divergence from the institutional habitus of the institute (Koustourakis &

Paizis, 2013), which requires the teachers, through their letters of reply, to be mindful of the creation of the prerequisites for the shaping of good communication with their students:

“Not the sterile tone (impersonal, cold) which most professors have. A friendly, familiar, understanding tone” (Q12).

Consequently, from the responses of the students in the research, it emerges that the existence of a strong framing of RD, which emphasizes the features of the professorial role (Morais, 2002) through the use in the letters of reply of a scientific, strictly didactic and non-friendly language is an obstacle to the development of communication with him.

Is the writing of detailed letters of reply which explain the manner of evaluation of written assignments desirable? (F++/F+ of evaluation criteria)

Through the letters of reply which the professor who assesses the students' written essays sends, he/she is carrying out simultaneously a teaching and a communicative work. Based on the institutional habitus of the HOU the professor is obliged to explain to the student the way in which his/her essay was evaluated and teach him/her in order to cover the gaps in his/her knowledge, since the written assignments correspond to the study of a specific part of the syllabus (Koustourakis et. al., 2008). In addition, the teacher, through the comments he/she is obliged to send when he/she corrects the written essays, should help the postgraduate student understand the mechanisms for writing scientific works (F++ of ID on evaluation criteria).

Five of the students in the sample (9.8%) said they preferred to receive brief letters of reply from the teacher. In other words, they desire the shaping of weak framing of evaluation criteria. They were three men who possessed postgraduate titles and appear to understand the techniques for the writing of scientific works, as well as two women with increased professional and family responsibilities. In the latter case, it was requested, to facilitate them, that corrections be made on the text of their essays:

“I want something brief. Details tire me” (Q18).

“To be brief and succinct, to be read quickly and to have meaning” (Q1).

Nevertheless, the majority of the students who participated in the research clearly stated their preference for detailed letters of reply in order to have the necessary feedback from the teacher on their written essays (46 individuals, 90.2%). In this case their desire for the formation, through the letters of reply, of strong framing of evaluation criteria, is very evident:

“Detailed letters of reply are desirable since: 1) they help the student recognize the positive elements of his effort and the correct manner of approach to specific issues, 2) they point out the negative elements of the assignment, the mistakes which are to be avoided in the future, 3) they give the student a picture of how the professor evaluates and what his demands on the students are, during the preparation of the assignments, 4) they inform the student of the demands and specifications of academic assignments in general” (Q43).

Students who live on remote islands and have difficulty participating in the Contact Sessions believe that they are helped a lot by the detailed letters of reply which compare their performance with that of their fellow students:

“I would like them to be detailed and above all comparative in terms of how I did in some part in relation to the rest of the class. Even a comparison in relation to the whole of the Module. That would make the evaluation reliable and not subjective” (Q5).

In addition, the detailed letters of reply which express the existence of strong framing of evaluation criteria influence the formation of weak framing of RD and shape a positive climate in the tutor – students relationships, which promote the development of communication between them:

“I desire detailed responses because in this way the errors are highlighted and generally the interaction with the professor will be helped” (Q14).

Evaluation of the written assignments with the sending of a grade without comments (F—of evaluation criteria)

The responses provided by the students in the sample concerning how they would feel if, instead of comments, they received only the grade for their written assignment were grouped into the following three cases.

Twenty one students (41.2%) claimed that receiving only the grade does not contribute to their feedback, and this fact creates insecurity in them:

“I would feel a gap. I wouldn’t know what was good and what bad. What I should improve, and hence I’d feel insecure” (Q7).

Twenty two students (43.1%) said that if they received from the teacher only the grade, they’d feel annoyance, disappointment, and irritation, and the feeling of isolation which exists in any case for the student who studies at a distance, would grow:

“I would feel irritated because the correction would probably have been cursory. Insecure because I wouldn’t know in which parts I am weak and how to improve them” (Q34).

“Disappointment, because I would feel alone in my endeavor” (Q21).

Consequently, the professor’s sending only the grade without accompanying comments, which forms a practice of weak framing of evaluation criteria, acts at the same time on the level of the hierarchical relationships contributing to the creation of strong framing of Regulative Discourse, which involves obstacles in the communication of the teacher with him/her (Morais, 2002).

“A grade doesn’t represent anything on its own. It doesn’t respect our differences...nor does the professor appreciate our effort in this way. Something like this doesn’t help us, it discourages us” (Q4).

In this case, the professor himself/herself is considered responsible for the creation of obstacles in the communication with his/her students:

“Grading without comments is a bit impersonal. I would not feel that my professor was a person who was trying to help me, but a ‘stranger’ who was trying to judge me based on strict criteria” (Q28).

In fact, eight of the students in the sample (15.7%) claim that receiving a grade without comments reveals that the professor is violating the institutional habitus of the HOU, displaying disinterest in his/her teaching and advisory work.

“I would feel that I’m part of a professor’s difficult but boring job. That perhaps: a) he would prefer to be doing something else, b) he keeps me at a distance, emphasizing to me his position (social – educational), and c) he’s not really interested in his mission” (Q8).

Consequently, based on the above indicative extracts it appears that the teacher’s implementation of a practice of weak framing of evaluation criteria increases the distance between professor – students (strong framing of hierarchical relations) (Bernstein, 1990, 2000). In addition, the students who possess the rules for recognizing the manner of realization of distance teaching (Bernstein, 2000) and understand the institutional habitus of the HOU (Thomas, 2002) form the impression that the teacher is uninterested in the job he/she has taken on. In particular, two female students claimed to have had this kind of negative experience during the course of their studies at the HOU up to that point:

“This has happened lots of times in the context of my studies at the HOU and it really leaves me feeling ‘up in the air’ and in a ‘cloudy’ situation since there was no substantiation of the professor’s opinion” (Q14).

“In a previous thematic unit I didn’t receive a letter of reply but just the grade. That really upset me, mainly because I didn’t understand where I’d made a mistake, in order to correct it” (Q42).

From the analysis of the findings, it emerges that the professor’s choice of sending only the grade without comments during the correction of the written essays violates and distorts the institutional habitus of the HOU. It is a phenomenon which exists to an extent at the HOU and reveals that some collaborating professors reproduce the teaching habitus which they possess from their professional occupation in conventional tertiary education (Koustourakis & Paizis, 2013). In this case the professor chooses to employ a teacher centred theory of teaching (Bernstein, 1990), a fact which contributes to the widening of the gap between tutor and students (strong framing of regulative Discourse). Consequently, when the evaluation criteria for the written essays of adult students at the HOU are implicit, symbolic borders are put in place which obstruct their communication with the teacher. This is because the latter, who is incapable of, or uninterested in putting into effect the realization rules (Bernstein, 2000) for the accepted manner of correction of written assignments within the institution, is responsible for the gap in his/her relationships with the learners growing (strong framing of hierarchical rules) (Morais, 2002).

Brief responses during the correction of the students’ written essays (F- of evaluation criteria)

The students in the sample said that they felt obstacles were raised in their communication with the teacher when the latter sends short letters of reply without explaining in detail the manner in which their written essays were evaluated. More specifically, 21 students (41.2% of the sample) believe that in this way the professor undervalues and downgrades their effort and at the same time discourages them from taking the initiative and communicating with him/her.

“I would feel my professor’s indifference and I would be hesitant about phoning him” (Q15).

“In the case where the professor’s response is brief, that would discourage the student from feeling free to ask for his help, where needed, and it makes him think that the relationship between the two is placed in a strict framework” (Q24).

Then, 25 students (49%) claimed that brief comments do not contribute to their feedback and that the professor is responsible for raising invisible walls in the communication between them:

“I feel that he is keeping me at a distance and I’m not being helped to correct myself” (Q8).

“It increases the pre-existing distance, it creates a gap” (Q19).

In other words, in this way the professorial role is over-emphasized (strong framing of RD):

“Letters of reply without clarifications place the two sides on different levels and impede the communication between them, placing the professor in a role of authority and inaccessible for any dialogue” (Q25).

Finally, 5 students (9.8% of the sample) say that they understand that the sending of brief letters of reply from the teacher reveals that he/she strays from the institutional habitus of the HOU. However, when the professor is analytical and explanatory in the letters of reply he/she sends to his/her students, then:

“the climate for communication between teacher and learner becomes more positive, a more quality relationship is created, a relationship of respect, reliability and trust” (Q4).

Elements of the letters of reply which make difficult, obstruct or discourage teacher – learners communication

From the analysis of the material from the semi-structured interviews, the view that teacher – learners communication is obstructed or prevented when the institutional habitus of the HOU is violated, is confirmed. This happens when a teaching theory that is not centred on the learner is promoted (Bernstein, 2000; Koustourakis et. al., 2008; Morais, 2002) and is observed in the following cases:

- When the teacher is late to reply, violating the time limit of 15 days from receipt of the written essay. In this case, and even if the tutor is quite analytical in his comments, this does not aid the timely feedback of the learner, who, based on the HOU study timetable will need to prepare the next written assignment without having fully understood the errors he/she made in the previous one.

- When the teachers adopts strong framing of RD emphasizing the power they possess in relation to their students:

“A letter of reply from which the authority of the professor, and not his desire to guide and support the student, is apparent, will make communication with him difficult” (Interview – I6).

- When in the letter of reply there aren’t any positive observations on the student’s efforts, but rather a severe tone is adopted and comments on the errors which exist in the written essay are negative, condescending and critical.

“If the tone of the teacher’s letter is pompous, distant, strictly critical, without recognition of positive elements in my assignment the gap which already exists between the critic and the criticized increases” (I2).

- When the professor gives a low grade to the student’s essay without justifying his/her manner of grading or when unclear and general comments are made.

“When I get a low grade for my essay and the reasons which explain this grade are not analysed. When the letter is very brief with the same comments every time it shows that the

professor sends it just because he is obliged to send it and not with the aim of helping me. All these things alienate me” (I5).

From the responses of the students that took part in the semi-structured interviews, it emerges that the elements that obstruct communication with the teachers are linked to their putting into effect hierarchical rules which either directly or indirectly project the power they possess in their relationships with their students (strong framing of RD). However, in this way the institutional habitus of the HOU, which promotes a learner centered teaching method, is violated.

CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of the research material we arrive at the following conclusions:

The dispositions of the adult postgraduate students at the HOU, who took part in the research, are linked to the preference for the use of the friendly plural form in the letters of reply through which the tutors correct their written essays. These dispositions correspond to the habitus of social groups who possess an elaborated orientation in the shaping of their code of social behavior, such as teachers (Bernstein, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984, 1990) who make up the majority of the sample, regarding the manner of polite interaction between adults, and the distinction of the pedagogical roles in the field of the university.

The tone of the writing of the letters of reply should promote a personal mode of communication and teaching between the tutor and his/her students (Morais, 2002), which corresponds to the putting into effect of the institutional habitus of the HOU for the realization of distance teaching during the academic year, which includes the preparation and evaluation of written essays. In this case it is sought to achieve intra-individual changes where: a) the students aim to prove through performance evaluation activities that they understand the scientific knowledge through an individual learning effort and course; and b) postgraduate students acquired competences regarding how to write scientific works. More specifically, the students in the sample want the tone of the letters of reply to be friendly and familiar since they believe that in this way the prerequisites are created for a reduction of their actual and symbolic distances from the teacher (weak framing of RD) and for the development of communication between them.

During the correction of the written essays, the putting into effect of strong framing of evaluation, when the tutors respond in an analytical and explanatory manner making the evaluation criteria explicit, contributes to the formation of good interpersonal relationships between professors – students. In other words, in this case there is the realization of strong framing of Instructional Discourse on evaluation, which intervenes at the same time on the level of the interpersonal relationships teacher – students (with the creation of the preconditions for weak framing of Regulative Discourse) and supports the attempt to develop the communication between them. In contrast, the sending of just the grade or some brief comments to the students concerning the content of their written essays (weak framing of evaluation criteria) creates the impression that the teacher, on his/her own initiative, sets symbolic and actual borders (strong framing of hierarchical rules) which obstruct the communication and increase the gap between tutor and students. This fact seems to discourage students from taking the initiative to discuss things with their professor even when they need to.

Completing this paper it would be interesting to carry out wider ranging research at the HOU, with the participation of teachers and learners, which would approach in depth the relationship between written assignments and distance teaching and learning processes. This is because cases are observed where the practices of some teachers diverge from the institutional habitus of the HOU (Koustourakis & Paizis, 2013; Sklavenitis, 2010). Finally, research which focuses on the issue of written essays could reveal the problems and the possible inadequacies which are created by the same person performing teaching and advisory roles, when at the HOU this person bases a great part of his/her work on the evaluation of the students' written essays.

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