

Unit 6 : Student activities

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Introduction

Reading on its own will not guarantee learning. In this unit we shall consider how to present activities so students can interact with the text and learn the material better.

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- * give reasons why activities are needed in a text;
- * recognise whether sufficient activities are provided;
- * differentiate between and describe the functions of questions in the text, self-assessment questions and assignments;
- * provide a writer with guidance on choosing and constructing different kinds of exercises;
- * provide a writer with guidance on writing answers to exercises.

This unit considers a variety of ways of presenting activities. As you work through it, keep in mind that a good distance-teaching text will contain numerous activities, so that the student is perpetually stimulated to learn. I doubt whether you can have too many activities in a text, although each activity should, of course, have some purpose. A good text will also aim to re-create something like the atmosphere of the classroom or tutorial, with questions and activities designed to represent a dialogue between teacher and learner. You might ask yourself how far your units resemble a conversation with a teacher.

You should be able to complete the unit in 3 hours and the assignment will take a further 1½-2 hours.

1. How often should activities occur?

Our understanding of the process of learning is incomplete. There is, however, general agreement on a number of points.

First, you cannot force people to learn, you can only make learning more likely. A good teacher will encourage people to learn by checking that points are understood, by stimulating students to remember and recall material and by encouraging them to use what they have just learnt. The teacher usually does these things by asking questions, setting exercises or devising problems.

Second, learning proceeds in small steps. Students must learn a little at a time. They need questions and activities at each new step to encourage them to learn and to help them check on their progress.

Third, learning is only complete when people can apply what they have learnt in a variety of circumstances. A course unit needs to include frequent activities which encourage students to apply what they have learnt.

How frequent should they be? Let us answer this question by examining an example, which shows how students, as they read, are frequently encouraged to think and write. Example 10 is from a correspondence course aiming to help adults in Britain with a low level of formal education to improve their skills in communicating.

EXERCISE 1

Read Example 10 and mark or underline all the points where students must think, write, or do something else.

(10 minutes)

Comment

Thinking: the page starts with a question to pause and think about. The first paragraph as a whole contains several questions which ought to keep us thinking instead of just reading passively.

Wise buying

Can we rely on adverts when making our choices? In our major purchases we'll probably want to make up our minds only after a careful look at other evidence. Adverts have to be looked at critically, and questions asked. Look back to the Denclen ad. (on p. 32). We'd want to know more, wouldn't we, about how many is 'many' in the bottom part. Also, more about the statistics (more than a third . . . how many is this?). How were the statistics collected and by whom? We might give a new soap, pack of sweets or cigarettes a try without great thought. But what about a new washing machine, or cassette recorder?

The big buy – Activity 8

Before choosing an expensive item, what else would you do? (Allow 10 minutes for this.)



I should

- think hard, well in advance, about exactly what I wanted from the product.
- work at my needs and priorities (including expense).
- look *critically* at ads and test them against other evidence (e.g. a *Which* report).
- ask a salesman about guarantees/after-sales service/running costs etc.
- talk to friends with experience of the product.
- read the tests or reports.

In fact, ads are only a small part of the buying. We'd need to consult a variety of written material and several people before deciding on our choice.

Work for your tutor

Now collect together the work you've been doing on this unit and send your tutor the following:

1. All Bran and the Tommy Gun (Activity 1).
2. Sell grandma a gun (Activity 2).
3. Baths and bread (Activity 3).
4. Ads in your own magazine (Activity 4).
5. Building societies (Activity 5).
6. Showers (Activity 6).
7. Cars (Activity 7).

Total time for unit: 2¼ hours.

EXAMPLE 10: From 'Wordpower', National Extension College, Cambridge/Wolsey Hall, Oxford/International Correspondence Schools, UK, 1976, Volume 1, p.46

Writing: the student is supposed to spend ten minutes writing an answer for activity 8.

Other things to do: paragraph 1 contained an instruction to look back at an earlier page. The final part of the page asks students to collect and send off their work, and incidentally tells you that they have completed seven pieces of work for their tutors in 2½ hours.

I am sure you noticed, by the way, how the writer uses examples from the students' environment. You will remember that in Unit 5 we mentioned the need to choose relevant examples.

You cannot sit back and read this page. A feature of a good distance-learning text is constant pressure to keep the student attentive and active. If you receive a draft unit which, at a glance, consists of paragraph after paragraph of prose, it is unlikely to be satisfactory.

Most writers fail to include enough activities in their first drafts. One reason is that they are too bound by convention. An ordinary textbook, designed for class use under a teacher's guidance, assumes that the teacher will ask questions, explain difficulties, set further exercises and so on. A new writer will often think that something like a conventional textbook is what is wanted. Discuss with the writer how a textbook is used in class and compare this with the circumstances of the distant student. She will begin to see that she has to write the teacher's interventions into the units as well.

2. Where should activities be placed?

You can identify points in a text where a teacher might ask a question or set an exercise. The next exercise will help you to do this. Look first at Example 11 on the next page. It is from a unit of a course about child development for parents. This short section is part of a longer discussion about when babies start to learn. I have marked the passage to indicate points where I think the writer could, with only minor amendments or additions, make the text more interactive. Read the passage carefully, then do the exercise.

EXERCISE 2

What suggestions would you make for changing the text at the points marked?

1.

2.

Feeding and Crying

- 1 Asked what were the most noticeable and striking things about the very young baby's behaviour one would find high on everyone's list sucking, crying and nappy filling. The last of these becomes important later in the infant's life, when he begins to be capable of exercising some control over his bladder and bowels, and it will be dealt with at that point. The first two however, crying and feeding, are of very immediate importance during the early months of life.
- 2 Firstly, both appear to be examples of what we have called innate behaviour patterns. The baby is born well able to cry and to suck. Secondly, although some of the parts of the body involved are the same, these are very different behaviours. The baby cannot do both efficiently at the same time. In *crying*, one gets first a few early warning signals. The forehead wrinkles, the jaws lower, the eyes shut tight, the mouth opens, the tongue and nose seem to flatten and the legs start kicking. When the real crying starts, the face remains crinkled up, the breathing pattern is very distinctive, the eyes remain shut, the legs continue to kick alternately and the arms also join in. During *feeding* the jaw is busy, the eyes are more often open (usually gazing straight up at the mother's face). The baby's face is smooth, his posture relaxed and all *general* activity is reduced. The mouth, however, is involved in a quite complicated behaviour. Sucking, swallowing and breathing are all going on, and are co-ordinated into an impressively smooth rhythm.

We can see then, that crying and feeding can't easily occur at the same time. Yet *in another sense* they do 'go together'. *Crying, of course, is very often a sign that the baby now wants a feed.* The feed arrives and the crying stops. The 'bridge' between these two behaviours is the insertion of the nipple or teat into the baby's mouth. The nipple-in-the-mouth is a signal to stop crying and start sucking, and babies do seem to have an innate ability to react to this signal by switching from the one behaviour to the other.

- 3
- 4 Interesting signs of *learning* have been found even here however.* Babies restless and crying for a feed became much quicker with practise at recognising the nipple and switching off their crying movements when it arrived. (He also found that they became better and better at noticing when the nipple had been removed, and switching back to crying again by way of protest.)

* Cohen, 'The crying newborn's accommodation to the nipple. *Child Development*, 1967, March, Vol. 38, No. 1

3.

4.

(10 minutes)

Comment

1. A section starting 'Asked what' is a giveaway. Why doesn't the writer ask the question, to get the students thinking? There are two ways he might do this. He could write the question, 'What are the most noticeable and striking things about a very young baby's behaviour?', and leave a space for the student to write an answer. Or he could give his answer, as it presently stands, straight away. I favour the latter; the question is only intended to start the students thinking, and it will probably succeed.

2. The writer has said that crying and feeding are 'of very immediate importance' and given two reasons. If this point is really important, let's have a question to check that readers have understood it and to help them remember. The question might come at the end of the section.

3. I've underlined the word 'innate' as it appears to be a semi-technical term, and readers might not understand it. I would expect the term to be defined, and there could also be a question which asks people to use the term, to help them learn it.

4. Same point as 2. The general discussion is about when babies start to learn, and here is an example. A question would help readers to appreciate that the example is significant, and help them to remember it.

3. Questions in the text

Writers often ask for advice on the kinds of exercise they should use. It is only possible to give limited guidance; the design of exercises requires imagination as well as knowhow. But you can give some guidelines, and offer plenty of examples. The rest of the unit will help you do this, considering three major styles of questioning: questions in the text, self-assessment questions and assignments.

Questions in the text draw attention to a point. They require no written answer, but indicate to students that they should stop and think for a moment. Here are three examples:

WHY HAVE THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS?

There are several reasons why a Co-operative Society should have a Board of directors. Due to their number, the members cannot all attend to the day to day activities of the society, moreover they are always busy with their personal work. On the other hand the management of the society cannot be entrusted in the hand of the paid staff only with proper control. The Board of directors attend to and control the activities of the society on behalf of the members. Since the directors are fewer in number they are capable of making quick decisions concerning the affairs of the society on behalf of the members. The Board of directors plan the activities, and set guidelines and general principles of operations of the society.

EXAMPLE 12: From 'Society Management', Zambian Co-operative College, Lusaka, Zambia, no date, Lesson 3, p.16

Comment

This is from a correspondence course for officers in co-operatives. The heading of the section is in the form of a question. This alerts the reader to the theme of the section.

Do you know how we *taste*? Well, there are taste buds on the tongue which respond to four basic tastes - sour, salt, bitter and sweet.

When a piece of food is placed on the tongue we register the proportions of these four properties contained in it and this blending gives the food its basic flavour.

Did you know that it is possible to swallow a pint of beer whilst standing on one's head?

Why? Because food and drink doesn't just fall down the oesophagus due to gravity, but is squeezed down by the action of the muscular walls.

EXAMPLE 13: From 'Discover the Living Body', Mauritius College of the Air, Moka, Mauritius, 1982, Study notes programmes 4-6, p.6

Comment

This text, part of a secondary-level Human Biology course, has questions interwoven with explanations and examples. The reader is not expected to write answers. The questions are meant to start him thinking.

4.2 ADAM SMITH: 'REASONER AND MECHANIST'

We have considered what it is about Rousseau's thought which entitles him to be called a 'poet' in Shelley's sense. Shelley does not discuss Adam Smith and so it may seem a rather speculative matter to consider whether Adam Smith was a 'reasoner' or 'mechanist' in Shelley's sense. The point of raising that question, however, is not to make speculations about what Shelley thought but did not write down. It is worth asking whether Adam Smith was a 'reasoner' or 'mechanist' in Shelley's sense because, in the first place, a good way to understand someone's distinctions is to try to make use of them. The interest of Adam Smith is that he had much more favourable views about civilized society than Rousseau and, as you have already seen, Smith by no means objected to the increased dependence which men had on one another as a result of the increased tendency to the division and combination of labour.

I should like you to read at least the first two paragraphs of the extract from Shelley's *The Defence of Poetry* in the Reader (page 211) as well as at least the first five paragraphs of the extract from *The Wealth of Nations* in which Adam Smith writes 'Of the Division of Labour' (Reader, pp. 180 ff.).

EXERCISE

Do you think that Adam Smith is a 'reasoner' or 'mechanist' in Shelley's sense? Why?

Please pause here. Do not read on until you have completed this exercise.

SPECIMEN ANSWER

It seems fairly clear from the second paragraph of the Shelley extract that he regards political economists as 'reasoners' and anyone who favours the use of machinery as a 'mechanist'. Shelley warns the mechanist and political economist lest their speculations tend to 'exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want'. The danger lies in the effects of their speculations on the abridgement and combination of labour. Adam Smith is clearly an enthusiast for both. His emphasis is on the division of labour but the combination of labour is the other side of the same coin. To get more work done by making members of a work force more specialized it is, of course, necessary to have not merely 'a proper division' but, as Smith recognizes, a proper 'combination of their different operations' (Reader, page 181). Smith evidently favours 'the invention of a great number of machines which facilitate and abridge labour' (Reader, page 182) because of its part in increasing the amount of wealth. For this reason Smith seems to be a 'mechanist' in Shelley's sense.

EXAMPLE 14: From 'Key Concepts: An Arts Foundation Course Unit 21', The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, 1978, pp.33-4

Comment

Here the question is set apart from the text. It requires careful thought. You could link this difference to the difference in level; Example 14 is much more advanced than Examples 12 and 13. Notice, however, that even though a specimen answer is given, the exercise only asks the student to think. The question directs your response to reading the extracts mentioned, and makes you develop your ideas, which are then developed further in the specimen answer.

How important are questions of this nature? If they are important, why not make them more formal, and tell students to write an answer? Such questions help hold students' interest and reinforce their understanding, without making too many demands. People can get impatient if they have to stop and write too often.

Such questions also help students to generate their own ideas. They can help them relate their learning to personal experience. A question can ask you to think of examples from your personal experience. In a text for people with limited educational background, this kind of question is very important, as writing may be quite difficult for them. Questions in the text can be used to stimulate discussion as well as thinking.

4. Self-assessment questions

Exercises which require written answers are usually called self-assessment questions (SAQs for short). This is because the student normally checks the answer and thus assesses his own performance. As distant students seldom have access to a tutor, they need frequent questions and answers to keep track of their progress. This shift from teacher assessment to self-assessment is a key feature of distance education. Every writer must learn to construct good SAQs.

Most SAQs will have clear right and wrong answers. This is a requirement which many writers used to lecturing or class teaching find difficult. They cannot easily see different ways of presenting questions and answers. You will need to show them plenty of examples.

EXERCISE 3

Read carefully Example 15 about landmarks in a baby's development. Imagine that the writer has asked you for ideas for an exercise on this material. Write an exercise which will help students remember the important facts.

(30 minutes)

Comment



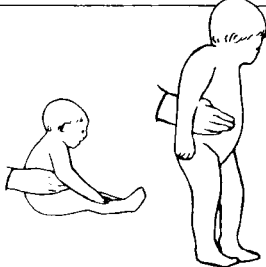
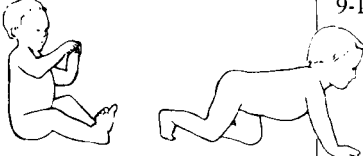

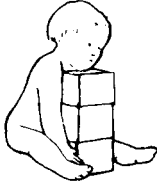

Here are samples of several different kinds of exercises, based on the table above. I have written these to give you some ideas and demonstrate different ways of asking questions, about the same material. In practice, only one of these seven options would be used. The answers are given, but underlined.

A. Question and answer

- a. At what age can a child sit up without support? 9-10 months
- b. Can a child say any words at 6 months? No, just 2-syllable sounds

Three or four more questions must follow, to cover each stage. This kind of exercise can help students to select and remember important points. Questions may also be framed to be more demanding - see the section on multiple-choice questions below.

Table 3.3 Some landmarks of the first two years of life

Posture	Age	At about this stage the infant can:
	birth	suck, breathe, and swallow in a co-ordinated manner. He can grasp and lies with his head on one side when on his back.
	2-3 months	coo and gurgle when happy and is aware of sounds – a step up on just crying. He can follow objects with the eyes but his grabs at toys are still very jerky – smiles at mum and dad.
	6 months	prop himself up a bit but still needs support to sit (probably). He is now twice the weight he was at birth. He can reach and get a toy which he can focus on. He can lift his legs a bit and kick. He makes two syllable sounds when chattering to his parents.
	9-10 months	sit up without support and start to crawl. Perhaps knows one or two words and is using both hands to grasp things.
	1 year	pull himself upright but probably then gets stuck. He's three times his birth weight and much stronger. A few 1 year-olds can walk. He can pick things up with thumb and fore finger, wave, play games like 'pat a cake' and throw toys on the floor. Personally I don't think babies are much fun till they reach this energetically crawling, more responsive stage. You may well disagree.
	1½ years	pile up three bricks to make a tower. He is learning to be more co-ordinated. He knows maybe two dozen words and can turn the pages of a book. He's now what's known as a toddler.
	2 years	can run but usually leans forward to do it. He can bend to pick things up and climb stairs one at a time. Towers are six bricks high and words are beginning to be put together as sentences. He likes stories about himself and is still better at playing by himself rather than other children – he is very possessive.

EXAMPLE 15: From 'Human Biology 'O' level, National Extension College, Cambridge, UK, 1981, Volume 1, p.39

B. Fill in the gaps: forced choice

Here are descriptions of several children. You are given their ages. Put the right age in each description.

baby 6-mth-old 1-yr-old 2-yr-old

'Nurse was exhausted at the end of the clinic. 2-yr-old Jimmy played with the bricks while he was waiting his turn. Mary, a 1-yr-old, kept staggering across the room and knocking over Jimmy's towers of bricks. Jimmy would then run to his mother and try to push the baby Jane off her lap. Jane would cry and add to the constant chattering of 6-mth-old William kicking in his pram.'

C. Fill in the gaps: free choice

We could use the same story, but this time without a given list of ages. Students would have to work these out for themselves.

D. Multiple choice

There is only one correct answer, which the student must select by ticking the box.

1. A six-month-old child usually weighs:

- a. the same as at birth
- b. six times his birth weight
- c. three times his birth weight
- d. twice his birth weight

2. Mary can walk but not run, call the dog by name, and put a hat on her head. Which is she most likely to be?

- a. 9-10 months
- b. 1 year
- c. 1½ years
- d. 2 years

Notice that I have made sure that a different box needs ticking in each case. One difficulty with multiple-choice questions is people can guess the answers and get them right quite often. But you may have noticed that the two questions above are at different levels. The first just requires careful reading of the text to get the answer. The second introduces new information. I have used the fact that a 1½-year-old knows a few words and is fairly co-ordinated (can pile up 3 bricks) to describe Mary's behaviour. The reader must think about the information and transfer it to a new situation. There is still only one correct answer, but the question is more demanding. Multiple-choice questions can be constructed at different levels of difficulty.

E. True-false

Tick the box for a correct statement. Put a cross for a wrong statement.

1. A 6-month-old child can sit without support.
2. A 2-year-old can run.

And so on. Another way of using the same idea is to give pairs of statements, one right and one wrong. Like the multiple-choice format, these questions can be easy or difficult.

F. Putting items in order

Here are some things young children learn to do at different stages. Put them in the order children usually learn them.

sit without support	2
kick	1
run	4
walk	3

This particular exercise is too easy, but the type of exercise can be useful.

G. Matching

The first six exercises are ones I wrote as examples. This last one is what the course author provided.

Now look at this list of further infant activities which are in a jumbled order. Try and guess which stage they refer to in a small girl's development. (Development is similar in both sexes at this stage.)

- a) She enjoys sitting up and watching what goes on. She is beginning to get control over neck muscles.
- b) She is becoming an explorer. This is a time of temper tantrums and jealousy.
- c) Very unhappy if separated from mother – she is just beginning to move around the world on her own.
- d) Aware of family members, and has increasing mobility.
- e) Spends most of her time asleep and stares a lot when awake.
- f) Begins to eat solids and gurgles begin to sound more like words.

- a) This is between 3 and 6 months.
- b) The classic 2 year old.
- c) About one year old.
- d) 6 to 9 months.
- e) A new born baby.
- f) 9 months.

Remember these are averages. Babies have their own proper rates of development which vary from child to child.

If you found this SAQ difficult it is probably because you don't know any small children personally.

The student has to match the descriptions to the age ranges in the explanation. Also notice how the writer has managed to make the exercise quite demanding. Helpful comments are given along with the answers.

These 7 examples show that there is no need for Self-Assessment Questions to be monotonous. They must always, however, be structured so that the student can judge whether his answer is a good one or not.

Now look back at the exercise you wrote and evaluate it. Make any alterations you want. Do you think any of these exercise styles are better than others?

5. More self-assessment questions and their answers

Earlier in this unit I stressed the concept of reinforcement. I suggested that writers should be encouraged to introduce into their units numerous exercises with correct answers given, so that students can check their progress regularly. But the more open-ended kind of SAQ also has important functions. One is to encourage students to think more independently, to develop their own responses and ideas. Another is to help them to relate what they are learning to their personal experience. But with questions of this nature, the students may feel unsure about the quality of their reply. The next exercise examines how we can deal with this difficulty. First, read Example 16, from a British Open University foundation course introducing students to study of the arts and humanities.

EXERCISE 4

Distance education is often criticised for being impersonal. It need not be so, and one way of increasing the relevance of a text to an individual learner is to encourage him or her to consider personal experience. Here, the writer asks students to observe what is around them. I am sure you noticed straight away the striking difference between the length of the question and the length of the specimen answer and discussion. Before you read any further, think carefully about the two questions below.

1. The writer gives his own answer to the question as a specimen answer. How will this help the student?
2. Are there any points in the specimen answer which could not be made from general knowledge?

(10 minutes)

Comment

For questions about personal experience, a suggested answer from someone else's personal experience is useful, as it suggests to the student the kind of things he or she might have written down. No answer at all is unhelpful, and any attempt at a complete list of all the things a student might have mentioned is unlikely to be truly inclusive. A comprehensive list would also remove the point of such an exercise by restoring impersonality.

On the second question, most of us would not be able to put together all this information so coherently, even if we could think of the individual points. The author uses the answer to develop ideas, and the paragraph headed 'Discussion' takes this even further. Answers teach, as well as questions. An answer to an open-ended question has to be long, because it must cover different possibilities.

2.2 INDUSTRIALIZATION AND YOUR OWN ENVIRONMENT

EXERCISE

Look round the room you are in and try to identify the way in which it and the things in it – furniture, books and so on – were made. Then try, very roughly, to date them, using such knowledge as you have to hand.

SPECIMEN ANSWER

I'm writing this in my study at home, and this is what I'd put down:

- 1 The room is in a typical four-roomed working-class house, built about 1900. There are millions like it in England, but most of the materials were probably local, as there was a brick-field and timberyard in the village. The slates probably came from North Wales, the large panes of glass in the windows were a nineteenth-century innovation, the wood for shelves, rafters and planks was sawed by machinery, but apart from these features its design and construction would have changed little in 300 years.
- 2 The furniture is all of wood, probably machine-cut but hand-assembled.
- 3 There are various textiles in the room: curtains, carpets, furniture-coverings and lampshades. Some are cotton or wool, some are nylon or plastic. The first two would only be found in a house like this after the mass-production of textiles began in the late eighteenth century, while the petroleum-derived materials date from after the Second World War.
- 4 Being a study, the room is packed with books and paper. The history of the paper and printing industries goes back to the fifteenth century, but mass-production here dates only from last century.
- 5 Finally there's a number of mass-produced precision goods – clock, typewriter, record player, electric fire, radio, calculator. Except for the first two these require electric power, and the construction of all of them depends on electricity and the technology it has created. This, and the development of sophisticated transport and marketing techniques, enables complex, interchangeable components to be constructed, assembled, and sold at low cost. These are all products of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

DISCUSSION

This exercise shows you, I hope, the value of asking basic questions about everything around you and more specifically about the numerous technical terms that will come up when you study industrialization. Commodities are, after all, actual things that we want to buy. Manufacturing processes are ways in which they are produced. It's important to visualize both, just as it's important to find out how the vocabulary of industrialization developed, and when words that we use today in fact came into use (hence the value of historical dictionaries like the multi-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*). Secondly, it shows that you can't isolate individual inventions from changes in the 'infrastructure' on which they depend. You can't have radios without electricity generation, transmission and storage, just as you can't have slates on your roof without the transport that brings them from North Wales. Finally it reminds us that, even today, the manufacture of some of the products that we use, like houses and furniture, is not totally mechanized. The impact of the machine varies – and varied even more in the past – from industry to industry. The need for skill, moreover, remains. Someone has to service and repair my radio and typewriter.

**EXAMPLE 16: From 'Key Concepts: An Arts Foundation Course Unit 21',
The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK, 1978, pp.8-9**

6. Presenting the answers

I always advise the writer to write the answer immediately after writing the question. This is sound advice for all exercises; sometimes the supposed answer to a question is not as simple as one thinks. I would also advise the writer to give a lengthy answer, to help students who have made a mistake, and to exploit the teaching potential of the answers.

In these units each exercise is followed by a comment. My comments are the answers to the exercises. How do they relate to what you have just read about answers? In some cases, you will find a definite answer to a question, usually with some elaboration. In other cases, my comments are suggestions, to set you thinking. They may contain new information, and link one part of the unit to the next. You might like to compare this way of presenting answers with the more common one of numbered lists of answers in the back of the book. Both are acceptable ways of giving answers. When might each be appropriate?

7. Assignments

You may have noticed that I offer no comments on your assignments. Instead, I suggest that you discuss your work with colleagues.

In most distance teaching, an assignment is marked by a tutor. In your case, you are asked to discuss your assignments with colleagues. The ordinary distant student is more isolated than you and from time to time will need the help of a tutor. Most often, tutorial help will be by correspondence, although some institutions use the telephone for tutorials, and others can arrange face-to-face tutorials.

EXERCISE 5

I would like you now to look quickly through this volume and find all the assignments. What are the main differences between the assignments and the exercises? Jot down one or two points below.

(10 minutes)

Comment

The assignments are more substantial pieces of work than the exercises. They ask you to apply what you have studied in the unit to your own circumstances. Each of you will produce a unique study for your assignments, and a printed model answer would be of limited use to you. At the same time, you will put time and effort into your assignments, and will want some reactions to your work.

In most programmes of study, there are stages where self-assessment is

inadequate. In distance-teaching programmes, these are the stages where tutorial support is provided. The most important function of an assignment is to give students feedback on the kind of work they cannot mark for themselves.

Here are some examples of assignment work, taken at random from courses:

1. An essay of 750 words about problems facing the British National Health Service (introductory social sciences course)
2. Describe how to test a particular food (chosen from a given list) for protein, fat and carbohydrate (human biology course)
3. Conduct an experiment on friction and describe the results (an introductory science course)
4. An essay on important developments in trade in the sixteenth century (economic history course)

You can see from these examples that assignment work often takes the form of essays, and generally requires students to analyse and use information and concepts studied during the unit. Sometimes students are asked to develop an individual project. For work of this nature, a tutor's assessment is necessary.

EXERCISE 6

We have just seen that assignments allow the tutor to assess the quality of the student's work. Can you think of any other functions of tutor-marking in distance education?

(5 minutes)

Comment

First, the tutor can identify and help with any particular difficulties the student is having. A short test, for example, of multiple-choice questions can tell the tutor which concepts need further explanation. The questions will be no different in kind from self-assessment questions. The tutor gets an opportunity to check that the student is making progress, and students learn which are their strong and weak points and get advice from the tutor.

Contact with the tutor also has an entirely non-academic function. It provides the student with some human contact. Regular assignments help students to sustain the motivation to complete their courses.

You will have to advise writers on how to distribute exercises between SAQs and assignments. Writers often have difficulty in perceiving the function of assignments. Some writers will attempt to make materials entirely self-instructional, and forget to consider assignments or include them as an afterthought only. Other writers want to have everything marked by a tutor.

EXERCISE 7

What points would you make to a writer who wanted every student exercise marked by a tutor? Note below any points you can think of.

(10 minutes)

Comment

I would point out that it would be very expensive, as the tutor's time would cost money. It would also be inconvenient to the students who would have a whole series of delays to their studies as they waited for the tutor's reply through the post, or travelled to tutorials, or waited for telephone calls. Finally, it is unnecessary. People are quite capable of managing their own learning providing they are given enough guidance on how to do so. Even small children can mark their own tests. Adults need to become confident independent learners. This last point carries the greatest weight.

Ideally, assignments are distributed so that students complete them every three or four weeks. If communications are good and money plentiful, they can be more frequent. Students are more likely to complete courses if they have regular, frequent feedback from tutors. An assignment should usually include demanding work which requires the tutor's comment and some work to check progress. The British Open University regularly has two kinds of assignment, tutor-marked and computer-marked, the computer monitoring progress while the tutor gives the individualised comments.

Example 17 is an assignment (here called a worksheet) from the secondary-level History course we looked at earlier. It is an example of an assignment added to a course unit as an afterthought. The questions are just like exam questions. Read it carefully and then do Exercise 8.

WORKSHEET B

Answer three of the following questions, if possible within 1½ hours. Label your work clearly by attaching the enclosed Identification Slip, and send it to your tutor.

- (1) What part was played in the 1914-18 war by (a) Russia; (b) Turkey; and (c) Italy ?
- (2) Why were the Central Powers defeated in the 1914-18 war ?
- (3) Describe and explain the main terms given to Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, and show how far they were responsible for the difficulties of the German Republic (1919-1939).
- (4) How did the League of Nations try to secure international peace and cooperation ? What in your opinion were its most successful achievements ?
- (5) What attempts were made between 1905 and 1939 to relieve unemployment ?

EXAMPLE 17: From 'History GCE 'O' level', National Extension College, Cambridge, UK, 1965, Volume 1, p.102

EXERCISE 8

You want the writer to improve this assignment. What suggestions would you make to her? Think about this for a few minutes before reading on.

(5 minutes)

Comment

It could be very difficult to get through to this writer. She obviously thinks in an exam-oriented way (choice of questions, all essays, timed answers) and the assignment certainly is offputting. Most distant students at this early stage in their course would find the requirements too demanding. Their confidence would be sapped. I would ask the writer to replace some essay questions with short-answer questions to cover the facts. There could be one or two questions on the more difficult topics requiring short essays. The suggestions would lead us to a discussion about the function of the tutor. The writer would also need advice on

providing the students with some guidance on how to set about the assignment; there may be no advice on how to write essays elsewhere in the course. The real problem is that the writer does not see the assignment as part of the fabric of the unit. That is clear from the brisk and impersonal way it is presented.

Now look at Example 18. The contrast is striking. The worksheet here is at a lower level, junior secondary. The questions are manageable, and there are spaces to write your answers. The number of marks allocated to each question is given in brackets, so that students can see the weight given to each question. I have reproduced only the first of three pages. The complete assignment has 18 questions, to give the students plenty of practice, and the marks add up to 100.

JC GEOGRAPHY	DEPARTMENT OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION								
<u>WORKSHEET 4</u>									
Name _____	Student no. _____								
	Tutor's mark _____								
Write your answers in the space near each question.									
1. Which planet takes 89 days for one revolution round the sun? _____	(4)								
2. The permanent tilt of the earth's axis and the revolution of the earth in its orbit together cause _____	(4)								
3. When GMT is 3 p.m. the local time of a place is 12.00 noon. What is the longitude of that place? _____	(3)								
4. Are summer months in Mediterranean areas dry or wet? _____	(4)								
5. In which climate do people lead a nomadic life? _____	(4)								
6. Draw a climate graph from the following statistics.									
<u>Durban:</u>									
	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>March</u>	<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug</u>	
<u>°C</u>	24	24	24	22	20	18	17	18	
<u>mm</u>	116	134	152	91	66	46	43	46	
	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>					
<u>°C</u>	19	21	22	23					
<u>mm</u>	70	128	118	132					
									(18)

EXAMPLE 18: From 'Junior Certificate Geography', Department of Non-Formal Education, Gaborone, Botswana, 1980, Workbook 4, p.69

8. Guidance for tutors

There will often be many different tutors acting as assignment markers on a single course. They will need to work to the same standard, judging students' work by similar criteria. The course writer must provide them with guidance. This will normally be in the form of tutors' notes, which should be prepared as the units are written. It is sometimes difficult to persuade the writer to produce such notes. They should include:

- * a statement of the purpose of each assignment question
- * a marking scheme which indicates:
 - (a) the proportion of total marks allocated to each answer
 - (b) for each answer, the criteria used for allocating marks (eg 2 for accuracy, 2 for imagination, and so on)
- * answers or model answers if relevant

These points apply to each assignment. Tutors' notes may also include general guidance on how to tutor by correspondence.

Summary

This unit started with questions about learning, leading to an examination of the texture of a unit. We discussed:

- . short questions in the text
- . self-assessment questions
- . answers
- . assignment questions
- . guidance to tutors

The treatment has been detailed, and the numerous examples should provide an editor with plenty of ideas to present to writers. There are two key points:

- * a distance-teaching text should contain plenty of questions of different kinds
- * the student must get adequate feedback at the right time

The answers in the text, and the amount and nature of tutorial support are just as important as the questions themselves.

ASSIGNMENT E

Work with your sample unit again. Identify all the activities and mark those you feel are particularly interesting or successful. Mark any that you think need rewriting, such as questions with more than one correct answer. Finally, mark any points where you feel activities could be introduced and, if you can, suggest what form the activity might take.

Spend about an hour working on the unit, and then find a colleague and discuss your work. If possible, hold your discussion with a course writer who has experience of writing self-assessment questions.