

Public feedback for collective learning

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Introduction

In the United Kingdom's National Student Survey, feedback recurrently receives lower ratings than any other course feature, even though the literature on education highlights the importance of feedback for student learning. To be beneficial, students do need to actively engage with feedback, for which the ability to read, to interpret and to use it is critical.¹ This presumes that a student would know what the standards are, being able to compare their own work with the standards and taking action that leads to the closure of a gap.²

This study introduces a group formative activity that motivates engagement with feedback, by making it *public*. The public attribute gives students the opportunity to learn from each other's feedback. Of specific interest is to compare students' public feedback uptake to the findings in the research on private feedback with focus on timing; students' individual characteristics (gender and nationality); and feedback valence (positive or negative feedback).

The Formative Assessment

The formative activity was completed by a cohort of 78 final year students in an undergraduate multidisciplinary programme in Economics, Politics and International Studies, hosted by a British university.³

The task is a student group presentation of a scientific paper during seminar classes. The groups consisted of two or three students, formed voluntarily. Each group had up to 50 minutes to present and to lead a peer discussion. The presentation is followed by a written feedback document, specifically for the group who presented. The feedback is provided by the course tutor within the same week that the presentation occurred. The tutor emails the feedback to all students and posts the presentation slides on the course website. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual stages of the assessment.

Data and Method

The first data source consists of the count of positive comments and suggestions for improvement (negative comments) listed in the written public feedback⁴. The second is the presentation slides produced by the student groups. A feedback comment is defined as

¹ Sutton (2012).

² Sadler (1989).

³ Ethical approval to carry out this study was provided by the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, at the university where this study took place [Reference number HSSREC 29/20-21].

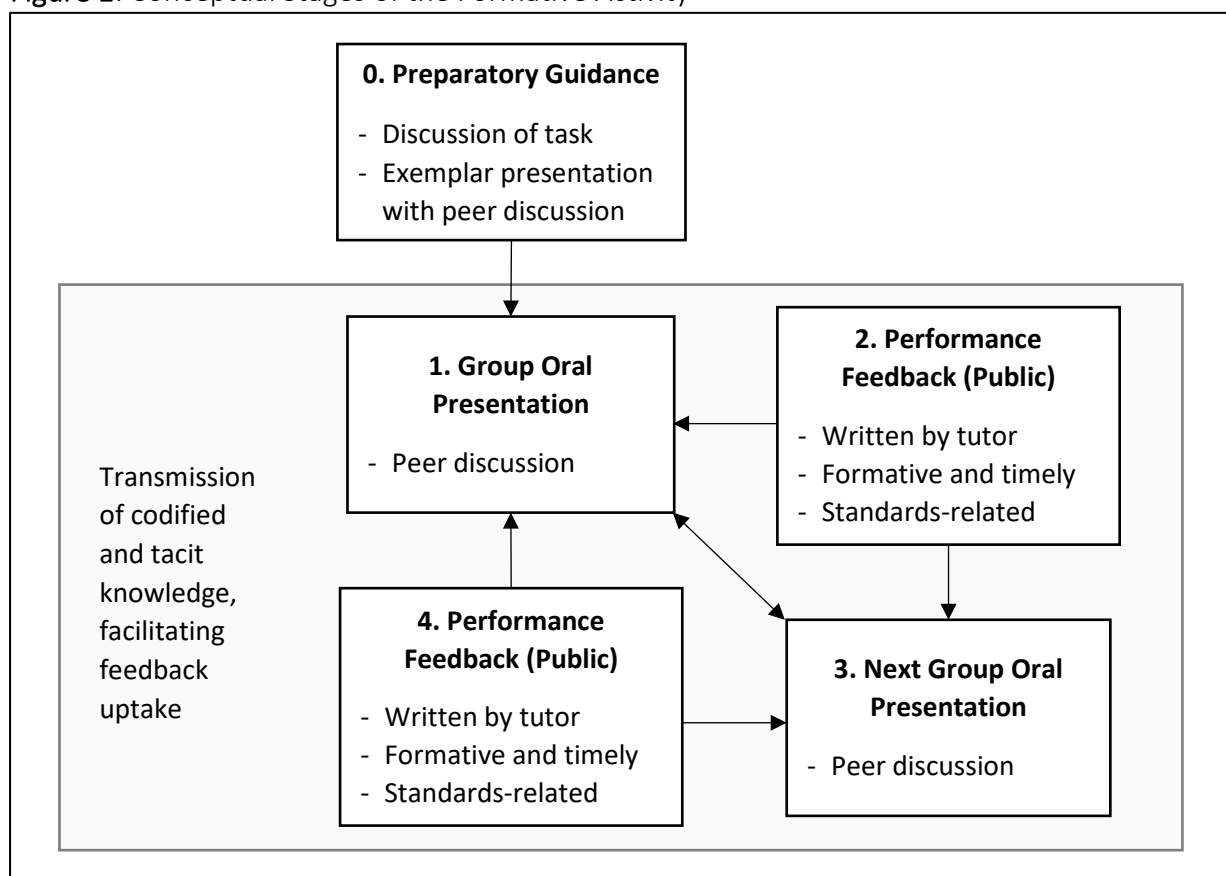
⁴ A comment is a phrase or a sentence with a distinct general meaning, which has the potential to be applied to different contexts.

“uptake” to a given presentation if the comment is manifested in any slide(s) of the presentation following a feedback document that was previously made public to the students. To complement the main dataset, this study uses secondary data from university’s administrative records on student gender and nationality. The quantitative analysis uses t-tests and correlations to compare feedback uptake in terms of timing, gender, and nationality.

Results

Preliminary results suggest that students’ responses to public feedback are consistent with the responses to feedback received in private found in other studies. The feedback uptake ratios (the average number of feedback comments uptake divided by the average number of comments) decrease after 2 weeks of receiving the feedback for all possible elapsed times suggesting that the “ideal” time for students to receive feedback is within two weeks after taking the assessment. The same measure was used to analyse correlations for gender and nationality. The results suggest overseas students do observe feedback provided to their peers more often than their UK/EU counterparts. Moreover, a greater magnitude in the differences is observed if the students are overseas females.

Figure 1: Conceptual Stages of the Formative Activity



Discussion

The literature has put forward different reasons for overseas and female students’ distinctive behaviour. For example, female and overseas students might have more intrinsic motivation than their peers, spend more time studying and more often connect knowledge acquired in

earlier stages of their studies to new knowledge.⁵ Another possible reason is that overseas and female students might have specific preferences for assessment and feedback, which in turn affects their learning strategies and engagement.⁶ The extent to which the findings can be generalised is constrained by the limited scope of this study.

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⁵ Boylan (2002) Niemi et al. (2003) Andrade (2006), and Virtanen and Nevgi (2010).

⁶ Bartram and Bailey (2010), Bevitt (2015), and McCarthy (2015).