A Culture of Feedback

CLI Fellowship Report

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Project Goal

Feedback has always played a central role in education at DPAS (ESSB). Generic feedback, peer-feedback and expert feedback are used to give students the opportunity to practice their new acquired skills, make mistakes, learn from these mistakes, and improve their future work. In the past, our students had multiple moments each course where they received expert feedback from the trainer and had the opportunity to discuss their own work with fellow students. However, our program lacked systematic instruction on how to give proper feedback, what do you do with the feedback that you receive, what role do teachers and peers fulfill in this process, etc. In other words: there was plenty of opportunity for feedback but little rationale behind this part of our education was shared with students.

In this context students always seemed to have a strong preference for expert feedback provided by the teacher (or 'trainer'). With an increased student population over the past few years, the trainer's feedback was increasingly relied on. This ensured that students became more dependent on the trainer and tended to value other sources of feedback, like their peers or themselves, as less. At the same time this demand for more expert feedback rapidly increased the workload and -pressure of teaching staff. Therefore, this CLI Fellowship focusses on promoting a culture in which various forms of feedback are important depending on the situation. We[1] want our education to be an environment where it is normalized that peer-feedback and going into dialogue with your peers are important ways of improving your work and thus developing yourself as a student.

The main goals of this Fellowship are **1)** increasing the self-reliance of students when it comes to feedback, and **2)** reducing the workload of trainers. To achieve this, the following objectives were formulated at the start of the project:

- Make students more aware of their own role, and that of their peers, in the learning process;
- Provide students with sufficient tools to provide good peer feedback;
- Provide students with sufficient tools to receive good peer feedback;
- Decrease student dependence on expert feedback (i.e. decrease the demand for more individual feedback);
- Reduce the workload of trainers;
- Make trainers more aware of their role in the learning process of students (what students can and cannot expect from the trainer); and
- Build documentation, instruction, practice, etc. for the optimal integration and implementation of peer feedback in skills education.

Context and Timeline

This Fellowship took place in our first bachelor year at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS) at Erasmus School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. Within DPAS

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[1] I want to thank Johan van Strien and Janneke de Jong for their time and help during this project, and a big thanks to the trainers who contributed during the data collection phase!

we have three study programs: Public Administration, Sociology, and Management of International Social Challenges (an international program). Our first year has eight consecutive blocks where students, each block, take both a theoretical course and a skills course. This project focusses on the skills education in the first year, except for block 1.4 SPSS[2].

Table 1: Context of this Fellowship

Courses	1.1 Introduction Academic Skills 1.2 Academic Writing 1.3 Research Design 1.5 Literature Review 1.6 Interviewing 1.7 Argumentative Writing 1.8 Presentation
Students	Public Administration (N=180) Management of International Social Challenges (N=220) Sociology (N=120) Pre-master Public Administration[3] (N=118) Pre-master Sociology[4] (N=57)
Teachers	Tutors/trainers (N=40)

During the year we implemented various feedback opportunities in each skills course: generic feedback (GF), peer-feedback (PF), and expert of individual feedback (IF). Besides these feedback moments we also incorporated exercises focused on metacognitive feedback (MF) competencies. In these MF exercises students were asked, for instance, to think about the way they use feedback or discuss what feedback emotionally does to them. In order to prepare students for giving and receiving feedback they also received several instructional documents in the beginning of the year.

Instructional documents were also offered to our trainers who teach the workgroups of the skills courses. Trainers also participated in a MicroLab organized by Risbo: 'How to provide effective written feedback to your students'.

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[2] 1.4 SPSS is part of the 1.4 Quantitative Methods course.
[3] PM P.A. students partake in 1.3 Research Design and 1.5 Literature Review
[4] PM Sociology students partake in 1.1 Introduction Academic Skills, 1.2 Academic Writing, and 1.3 Research Design.

For data collection we made use of surveys for students and for trainers. We had four moments in time where we measured their feedback perception. The statements we used for these surveys can be found in the appendix of this report.

To get a better understanding of what actually went on in the workgroups and to give more depth to the surveys we asked eight trainers, with educational experience varying from 0 to 3 years, to keep a logbook on their feedback experiences for the first three blocks. After those blocks, we held interviews with six of those trainers to further research their logbook entries. The format for the logbook can also be found in the appendix of this report.

An image showing the timeline of this project, including all activities mentioned above, can be found in the appendix of this report.

Results

Students

Results from the surveys conducted were all very positive (figure 1). Students all saw the added value of (peer)feedback for their studies. On each statement they scored extremely high (4 out of 5 or higher) with the exception of the following statements:

- I know how to review someone's work and provide feedback (3.78)
- I feel confident about my peer-feedback/review skills (3.57)

Although still quite high, this shows that students lack the confidence in their own abilities and/or know-how to give proper feedback.

A look at the different study programs does not show any big differences between students (figure 2).

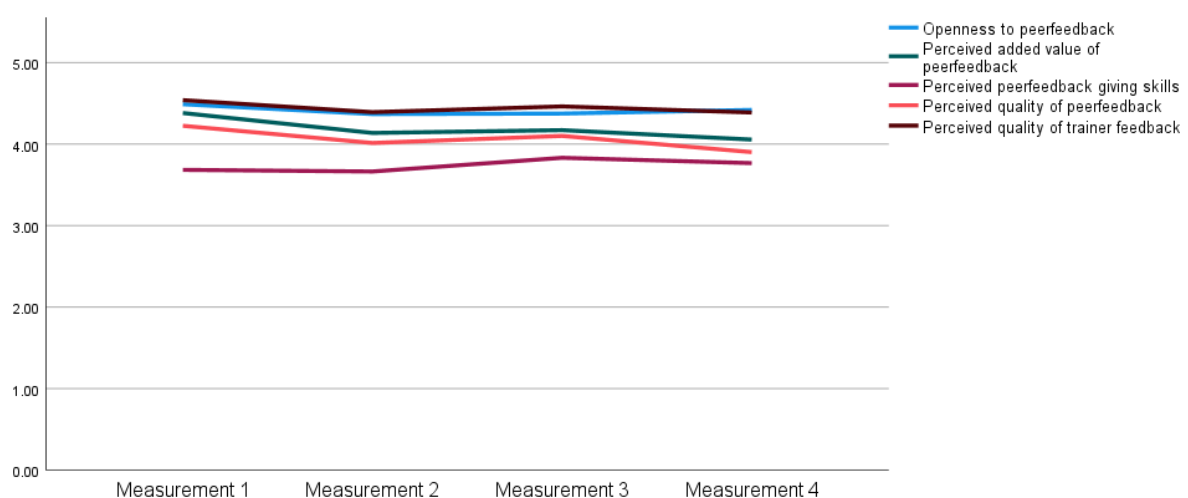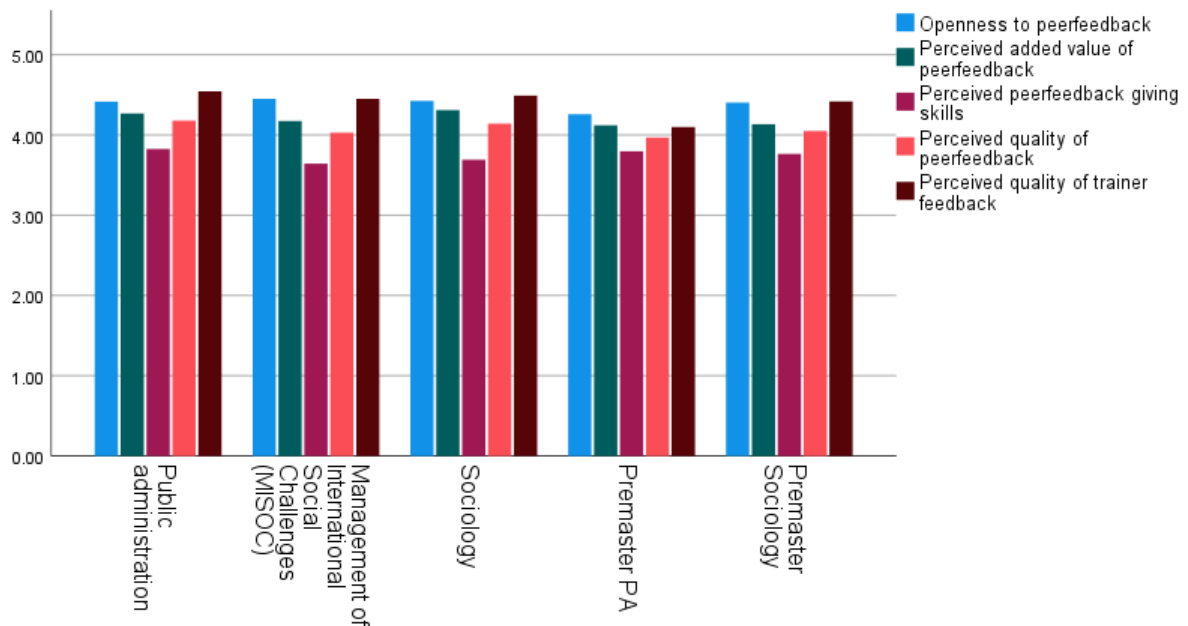*Figure 1: Results of student surveys (total)*

Figure 2: Results of student surveys differentiated to study program

Trainers

Surveys were also conducted among the trainers. And, like the students, these scores were also very high for all statements (3.8 out of 5) with the exception of the following statement:

- I find it easy to give good feedback within the specified time (2.40)[5]

More interesting were the results from the logbooks kept by and interviews conducted with trainers. These showed that although students see the added value of (peer)feedback in their education, there is one thing that they seemed to struggle with: the social aspect of feedback.

For students being critical at someone else can feel uncomfortable for different reasons, for example: they are new to university, they do not know their classmates yet, they do not want to "shame other students" for making mistakes (being critical has a negative connotation), or they do not feel comfortable speaking out in front of an entire classroom.

Literature on feedback is often quite ideological in nature, that is, a model or approach is suggested and, when applied, it is assumed that the feedback process is going well. The practice, however, is more unruly. Many different aspects influence the way feedback is viewed and understanding of the process is shown.

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[5] Interviews with trainers showed that the time they have for giving feedback during these courses is sometimes heavily influenced by other tasks they have (different courses they teach that are very time consuming), and, same as students, they need to learn feedback skills themselves, especially when they are new.

Lessons learned

Before this Fellowship started, as mentioned before, feedback already played an important role in our skills education. However, a systematic approach incorporating it in our education and providing students and trainers with proper instructions, a clear division of responsibilities, and sufficient tools on how to give and receive feedback was lacking. After adding extra exercises and instructions in our program and monitoring these changes for a year, making use of surveys, logbooks and interviews, the following lessons can be learned:

General lessons

- Despite changes in courses, skills, group composition and trainers every five weeks students really appreciate the added value of (peer-)feedback. Students are positive from the start all the way to the end of the academic year.
- Feedback exercises during a course must not be matter of 'ticking boxes'. Instead, feedback is an integral and purposeful part of education design and student development, and benefits deeper learning. This means that…:
    - there must be constant attention to the 'theory behind feedback', not just once in the beginning of the year, but throughout the year and in multiple ways (reading, listening, thinking);
    - students need plenty of opportunities to give and receive feedback;
    - reflection on the purpose of feedback exercises and other metacognitive exercises regarding feedback can really benefit students understanding of why feedback is important, and the various ways you can deal with it; and
    - a clear division of roles and responsibilities among students and trainers helps in making students more aware of their own role and at the same time reducing the workload for trainers.

Student lessons

- Besides being a 'technical' process (exercises, instructions, rubrics, etc.), feedback is also a very social process.
- Students need time to grow on multiple levels.
    - They need time to grow in feedback skills: How do I phrase this? What is important and what can wait? How can I make improvements?
    - They need time to grow in the group. At the beginning of the year, when group compositions switch every couple of weeks, students need time to get to know each other. Every couple of weeks you see new faces, potential new friends, and fellow students who you will most likely see on a regular for the upcoming three years (minimum). So, besides learning new skills, students are also actively reshaping their identity and determining their social position within the group.
    - They need time to grow into a university setting. Changing from a high school, HBO, or sometimes even from a different country into the Erasmus University Rotterdam takes some settling-down-time. Many new impressions, ways of working, and finding your way around university require some time.

- Feeling 'safe' or 'feeling' comfortable in the classroom is an important factor for being critical at others. Therefore, an environment where students can ask questions, dare to ask for assistance when they are insecure about something, and where dialogue with peers and teachers is normal, is an important requirement for a fruitful culture of feedback.
- 'Being critical' sometimes has a negative connotation among students where in practice this actually helps them in developing their skills and academic identity. Being critical is not a personal matter between students but a professional way of helping each other out and improving student work.
- One-on-one peer-feedback is easier for student than plenary exercises. Similar to the fear of asking a question during a lecture where 300 people are present ('What if I say something stupid?') students are more comfortable being critical in small groups.

Trainer lessons

- Trainers have to 'paint the feedback-picture'. They must be able to support students in the process of becoming self-reliant when it comes to feedback. 'You rather have expert feedback because you feel like peer-feedback isn't helpful? Well, why don't you read the factsheet on peer-feedback and deeper learning again and we can discuss the pros and cons of various types of feedback sources. And if the peer-feedback isn't helpful, what can you do to make sure you'll get more out of it the next time?' In other words: trainers are the 'guardians of the (feedback) process', especially in bachelor 1.
- Trainers are 'role models' when it comes to giving feedback. They are the first examples for students to actually see what proper feedback should look like. So, as a trainer, make sure that your own expert feedback on student work resembles what you want them to produce in peer-feedback exercises.
- Trainers, just like students, need instruction, training, and discussion on what feedback is, what purpose it has in our education, how to give good feedback, what role they have. And, also similar to students, they too need constant attention; one training in the beginning of the year most likely is not enough; provide multiple opportunities for them to practice and to discuss feedback with their own peers (other teachers).

Last but not least…

We can create the preconditions for a culture of feedback to develop, but in the end, students have to do the work!

As teachers we are easily inclined to feel very responsible for the progress of our students, help them out a lot and grant their demands (which is not a bad thing!), but instead of doing the work for them, it is more sustainable to give them the tools to become self-reliant and explain the rationale behind that.

Limitations

Of course, this project also has it limitations. Due to all sorts of circumstances, mostly caused by corona, the last academic year has been quite messy: switches between offline, online and hybrid education, mid-block changes in trainers due to dropout, and loads of illness among

students and teaching staff. These circumstances were not benefiting the continuation of our education. It is hard to determine whether the outcomes would have been different if we had a 'normal' on-campus academic year.

Second, it is hard to make a comparison of the effect of this Fellowship over the years. One of the (unforeseen) reasons is mentioned above, but this year we also had 18 new tutors who had to get used to our way of working. Besides that, both students and trainers experience changing workloads from parallel courses they attend or teach. And last, every year, I, as a course coordinator, make changes in the course design in order to improve the course.

Third, 99 out of a 100 peer-feedback exercises we do in our skills program are *in class*. This way students can immediately go into dialogue, ask questions to clarify things they do not understand, or ask questions when in need of assistance. The downfall of this is that is hard to assess the quality of the feedback students give to each other. Therefore, in the future, I would like to add online peer-feedback exercises to the program in order to determine whether students actually follow the feedback guidelines we provide them.

Fourth, no qualitative data was collected among students. Students completed a survey (four times), answered an open-ended question, and were supervised by trainers, but doing a couple of focus groups might provide more insights into their experiences with feedback.

Finally, the exercises and build up of this project is 'tailored' to the DPAS skills program. It is possible that a copy-paste scenario of this project in a different context might give different results. My advice to those who want to use any of the materials belonging to this Fellowship is to see whether everything is applicable to your own program, and make adjustments where necessary.

Appendix I – Student survey statements

1. I am willing to review someone's assignment and provide feedback
2. I find it useful to receive peer-feedback on my assignment
3. I find it useful to provide peer-feedback on my peer's assignment
4. Peer-feedback is useful because it helps me to improve my work
5. Reviewing other's work is useful because it helps me to reflect on my own work
6. I know how to review someone's work and provide feedback
7. I feel confident about my peer-feedback/review skills
8. Receiving peer-feedbac is valuable for my learning process
9. Providing peer-feedback is valuable for my learning process
10. I am interested in the perspectives of others on my work
11. The received feedback by my peers helped me to see strong points in my assignment(s)
12. The received feedback by my peers helped me to see weak points in my assignment(s)
13. The received feedback by my peers helped me to see how I could improve my assignment(s)
14. The received feedback by my trainer(s) helped me to see strong points in my assignment(s)
15. The received feedback by my trainer(s) helped me to see weak points in my assignment(s)
16. The received feedback by my trainer(s) helped me to see how I could improve my assignment(s)

After the logbooks of and interviews with trainers, the following statements were added to the fourth moment in time we conducted the survey with students:
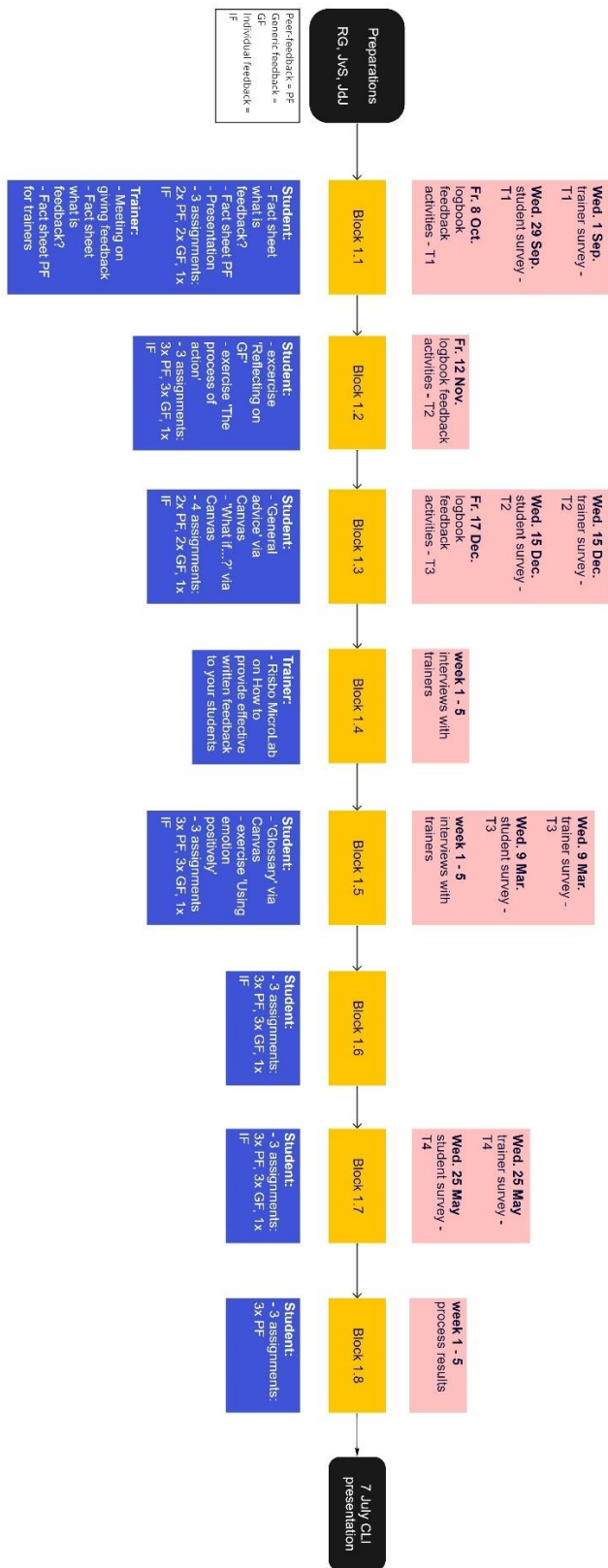
17. Now that the academic year is coming to an end, it is easier for me to indicate which parts of an assignment I need help with.
18. Now that the academic year is coming to an end, I find it easier to enter into a dialogue about feedback with my fellow students.
19. Now that the academic year is coming to an end, I find it easier to enter into a dialogue about feedback with my trainer(s).
20. Now that I've been working with my fellow students for almost a year, it's easier for me to ask them questions when I don't understand something.
21. Now that I've been working with my fellow students for almost a year, it's easier for me to identify and discuss their points for improvement.
22. Due to the feedback I have received this year, I see a clear (positive) development in the quality of my work
23. During a course I am less afraid of making mistakes, because I know that feedback gives me the opportunity to make improvements.
24. In a one-on-one conversation with my fellow students, I find it easy to give them feedback.
25. I find it easy to discuss feedback in plenary (in Dutch: klassikaal) about someone else's work.
26. I dare to ask my fellow students to explain their feedback if I find it insufficiently helpful.

27. I feel more confident about my own work when I see other people making the same mistakes.

1. I know what students can and cannot expect from me when it comes to giving feedback
2. I am confident that I can explain to students what they can and cannot expect from me when it comes to giving feedback
3. I can easily see when an assignment is insufficient, sufficient, good, or very good
4. When giving feedback, I can clearly distinguish between main and side issues
5. I have sufficient expertise to assess student work
6. When giving feedback, I find it easy to concisely describe the strengths and weaknesses of an assignment
7. I find it easy to give generic (plenary) feedback that gives insight into what students need to do to improve their work
8. I find it easy to give individual feedback that gives insight into what students need to do improve their work
9. I find it easy to give good feedback within the specified time

Appendix III – Timeline

Preparations RG, JvS, JdJ

Peer feedback = PF
Generic feedback = GF
Individual feedback = IF

Block 1.1
- Wed. 1 Sep. trainer survey - T1
- Wed. 29 Sep. student survey - T1
- Fr. 8 Oct. logbook feedback activities - T1

Student:
- Fact sheet What is feedback?
- Fact sheet PF
- Presentation
- 3 assignments: 2x PF, 2x GF, 1x IF

Trainer:
- Meeting on giving feedback
- Fact sheet what is feedback?
- Fact sheet PF for trainers

Block 1.2
- Fr. 12 Nov. logbook feedback activities - T2

Student:
- excercise 'Reflecting on GF'
- exercise 'The process of action'
- 3 assignments: 3x PF, 3x GF, 1x IF

Block 1.3
- Wed. 15 Dec. trainer survey - T2
- Wed. 15 Dec. student survey - T2
- Fr. 17 Dec. logbook feedback activities - T3

Student:
- 'General advice' via Canvas
- 'What if...?' via Canvas
- 4 assignments: 2x PF, 2x GF, 1x IF

Block 1.4
- week 1 - 5 interviews with trainers

Trainer:
- Risbo MicroLab on How to provide effective written feedback to your students

Block 1.5
- week 1 - 5 interviews with trainers
- Wed. 9 Mar. trainer survey - T3
- Wed. 9 Mar. student survey - T3

Student:
- 'Glossary' via Canvas
- exercise 'Using emotion positively'
- 3 assignments: 3x PF, 3x GF, 1x IF

Block 1.6

Student:
- 3 assignments: 3x PF, 3x GF, 1x IF

Block 1.7
- Wed. 25 May trainer survey - T4
- Wed. 25 May student survey - T4

Student:
- 3 assignments: 3x PF, 3x GF, 1x IF

Block 1.8
- week 1 - 5 process results

Student:
- 3 assignments: 3x PF

7 July CLI presentation

TEACHER EXPERIENCES WITH FEEDBACK DURING PRACTICUM EDUCATION 2021 – 2022 DPAS – LOGBOOK

Name:

Block & course:

Instructions*: In this logbook you keep track of your experiences with feedback during our practicum education. The focus will be on feedback activities and how you felt prior, during or after these activities. Please write down the date for every logbook entry. Don't overthink or analyze your personal progress over a longer period of time, but instead focus on the moment of the activity itself.*

Possible entries*: individual feedback on assignments, generic feedback, peer feedback among students, calibration. Any other topic concerning feedback; feel free to be creative.*

Please name the document: [logbook – trainer name – course]

Logbook entries below [date – activity – experience]:

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