

## Artigo Original

# Feedback as an Integral Part of the Formative Assessment in a Distance Learning Course: Conceptions of the Multidisciplinary Team

*Feedback como Parte Integrante da Avaliação Formativa em um Curso de Pós-graduação a Distância: Concepções da Equipe Multidisciplinar*

*Feedback como Parte Integrante de la Evaluación Formativa en un Curso de Postgrado a Distancia: Concepciones del Equipo Multidisciplinario*

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## Abstract

In face-to-face, on-line or hybrid education, one of the emerging themes today is learning assessment. It is still used to classify students and not to support the learning process to lead students to overcome their difficulties. In this context, this article presents the results of a research that aimed to evaluate the importance of feedback in the formative assessment described in the praxis of the multidisciplinary team of an on-line postgraduate course in a Brazilian public institution. The research presented here was of a descriptive exploratory nature of the survey type and used the documentary analysis. The data collected used as a source questionnaires and interviews with the multidisciplinary team, as well as a documentary survey and evidence obtained in virtual rooms. The data were analyzed according to Bardin's (2011) content analysis proposal based on the theoretical foundation described here.

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In the end, it was found that the multidisciplinary team of the course understands that feedback has an essential role in the formation of students. This was evidenced by the analysis of documentary records and observation of virtual classrooms.

**Keywords:** Formative assessment. Feedback. Distance education. Higher education.

## Resumo

Na educação presencial, on-line ou híbrida, um dos temas emergentes na atualidade é a avaliação da aprendizagem, que ainda é utilizada com a finalidade de classificar alunos e não apoiar o processo de aprendizagem, visando levar os alunos a superar suas dificuldades. É nesse contexto que o artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa que teve por objetivo avaliar a importância do feedback na avaliação formativa descrita na prática da equipe multidisciplinar de um curso de pós-graduação lato sensu ofertado na modalidade a distância em uma instituição pública brasileira. A pesquisa aqui apresentada foi de natureza exploratória descritiva do tipo survey e utilizou também o levantamento documental. Os dados coletados utilizaram como fonte questionários e entrevistas feitas com a equipe multidisciplinar, bem como o levantamento documental e evidências obtidas nas salas virtuais. Estes foram analisados de acordo com a proposta de análise de conteúdos de Bardin (2011) tendo como base a fundamentação teórica aqui descrita. Ao final, verificou-se que, para a equipe multidisciplinar do curso, o feedback tem um papel importante na formação dos alunos e é realizado no curso de acordo com a prática proposta em seu projeto, o que ficou comprovado pela análise dos registros documentais e observação nas salas virtuais.

**Palavras-chave:** Avaliação formativa. Feedback. Educação a distância. Ensino superior.

## Resumen

En la educación en línea o híbrida en el aula, uno de los temas emergentes de hoy es la evaluación del aprendizaje, que todavía se utiliza

con el propósito de clasificar a los estudiantes y no apoyar el proceso de aprendizaje para llevar a los estudiantes a superar sus dificultades. Es en este contexto que el artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación que tuvo como objetivo evaluar la importancia del feedback en la evaluación formativa descrita en la práctica del equipo multidisciplinario de un curso de posgrado ofrecido en educación a distancia en una institución pública brasileña. La investigación presentada aquí fue de naturaleza exploratoria descriptiva del tipo de encuesta y también utilizó el análisis documental. Los datos recopilados se utilizaron como fuente de cuestionarios y entrevistas con el equipo multidisciplinario, así como la encuesta documental y la evidencia obtenida en salas virtuales. Estos fueron analizados de acuerdo con la propuesta de análisis de contenido de Bardin (2011) basada en los fundamentos teóricos descritos aquí. Como resultado final, fue posible verificar que, para el equipo del curso multidisciplinario, la retroalimentación tiene un papel importante en la formación de los estudiantes y se realiza en el curso de acuerdo con la praxis propuesta en su proyecto, que se demostró mediante el análisis de los registros documentales y la observación en las aulas virtuales.

**Palabras clave:** Evaluación formativa. Feedback. Educación a distancia. Enseñanza superior.

## 1. Introduction

The implementation of Distance Education nowadays has posed many challenges to educators who see it as an alternative to serve thousands of students who have this as an alternative to their training, enabling these students to access quality education. One of these challenges concerns how to carry out the assessment of students' learning, ensuring that this stage of the process is a phase that contributes to learning and not a simple observation of what happened, that is, a merely classificatory assessment.

As put by Polak (2009, p. 153), the implementation of distance courses is coexisting “with a new moment, with a new way of thinking and seeing the evaluation, given that the classificatory, monodirectional

and quantitative model no longer satisfies the demands of new teaching and work methodologies”. This leads to the search for a comprehensive assessment that trains citizens capable of learning to learn, build new knowledge and solve problems.

We then have as a proposal to incorporate formative assessment into the teaching-learning process; for Wang (2007), although it is very important in learning environments, the current knowledge on how to incorporate it is still small, and this is probably one of the most important research fields in the future, both for face-to-face, online and hybrid teaching.

So, this article aims to present the results of a research that evaluated the importance of feedback in the formative assessment described in the praxis of the multidisciplinary team of a lato sensu postgraduate course offered in the distance modality in a Brazilian public institution.

## 2. The importance of feedback in formative assessment

According to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, formative assessment, in a contemporary view, places greater emphasis on the processes of pedagogical interaction and communication that are established between the subjects of educational action, in the case of studies carried out by Black and Wiliam (1998; 2009). In these studies, feedback is at its core, an indispensable component of a new vision of educational action by the teacher and the student.

Feedback needs to constitute a dialogue, which is an important element in the development of formative assessment between those who provide it and those who receive it, explicitly promoting self-regulation and a proactive attitude on the part of the student towards it; at the same time, it needs to focus on the learning process (PLANAR; MOYA, 2016).

For Villas Boas, “involvement in the communication process allows students to share information with others about their progress” (2011,

p. 32). In distance courses, this interaction has other outlines, as Peters (2009, p. 60) points out, when he states that in Distance Education (DE) “social interactions, which are, so to speak, the 'vehicles' of communication in teaching and learning, will definitely take on new forms as well. The most important change is, of course, that they will no longer be real but virtual”. For Vilas Boas (2011, p. 32), “there is a decisive difference in computer-mediated communication. There are many more possibilities for virtual communication, many other formats of virtual interaction that can be explored for educational purposes”.

Feedback to students can be defined as actions taken by external agents in order to provide information about someone's performance. “The quality of feedback is an essential point of any formative assessment procedure” (VILLAS BOAS, 2011, p. 27). However, it is not just any information; if it does not make it possible to bridge the gap between the current level and the reference level (outlined objective), the feedback will not become effective (BLACK; WILIAM, 1998; VILLAS BOAS, 2011) and will not fulfill its formative role.

Feedback needs to be an instrument capable of helping to regulate the teaching-learning process, based on the principle that teachers and students can benefit from their information: teachers, to rethink their actions, review their plans, outline strategies that contribute with improving learning; the students, so that they can monitor their performances, identify their weaknesses and their potentialities so that the “aspects associated with success and high quality can be recognized and reinforced, as well as the unsatisfactory aspects can be modified or improved” (VILLAS BOAS, 2006 , p. 82).

There is no single type of feedback, and some may have greater training potential than others. For Fernandes (2009), feedback can be centered on results, on motivation, on the achievement of content learning; associated with the idea of rewarding the effort; or focused on the nature of the tasks and the quality of the responses.

The latter, in its conception, is the most suitable for formative evaluation, because, in his view,

helps students to understand and internalize what is high quality work and which cognitive and / or metacognitive strategies, knowledge, attitudes or skills they need to develop in order to learn, understanding (FERNANDES, 2009, p. 99).

Black and Wiliam (2009) defend a conception similar to that of Fernandes (2009), and in their studies they show that feedback, when focused on the task instead of the individual, can be more effective. The teacher's comments about the tasks performed by the students encourage the overcoming of errors and difficulties, which normally does not happen when only the classification is disclosed. Comments should provide information on the quality of work with guidance on what to do to improve.

In formative assessment, the learning assessment process needs to avoid comparison between students and promote feedback about the task and not about the students' personal characteristics, as this way the students will have the opportunity to improve their learning and, consequently, their performance.

Fernandes (2009) states that it is important to balance the distribution and ways of providing feedback, highlighting that all students deserve to be accompanied, oriented and helped to evolve, without distinction. In addition, it is also good that they have contact with written or oral feedback so that they can receive it individually or collectively. The feedback should not contain ready-made answers, but hypotheses so that the students themselves can identify their mistakes, having the possibility, with this, to correct their flaws and get to the correct answer.

### 3. Feedback on online assessment

Online formative assessment aims at improving, adjusting and controlling the quality of learning by providing assessment standards, assessment methods and timely feedback to students, based on their learning behaviors. The student's progress record serves as a reference for teachers to improve teaching. At the same time, assessment is also a

record of the student's experience in lifelong learning. That is, this method is student-centered and focuses on supporting students so that they can monitor and adjust their learning during the educational process (MING-LI; DAN, 2010).

The feedback provided in distance courses is carried out by tutors and / or teachers and aims to “reorient the exercise on new bases and with a greater possibility of success by the student, who, with rework, has greater conditions of attention and understanding than you are asked for ”(KENSKI, 2010, p. 66). The feedback cited here need not be only what is provided by tutors and teachers, since in distance education there is ease of use, as an evaluation strategy, of peer comments, which is “an excellent activity for the development of critical thinking; students' comments on the work of their colleagues mature the group and awaken them to healthy coexistence and respect for other members of the class ”(KENSKI, 2010, p. 66).

Constant feedback, whether from tutors or between peers, inserts “in this process of great movement of ideas, in which there is a large number of interactions between student / student, student / teacher and student / media, the participant, who becomes an agent building your own knowledge”. In it, “it is not the knowledge that we must evaluate, but the quality of its manifestations” (ROSA; MALTEMPI, 2006, p. 63). Moore and Kearsley (2010, p. 131) state that “there is a close relationship between the propensity of students to continue or give up a course and the time between the presentation of tasks and their return”. Nazir, Davis and Harris (2015) highlight the use of feedback, either by tutors or among peers, as one of several strategies that can be used to retain and involve distance education students.

Formative assessment will be of little help to students if teachers do not have time to provide feedback, which should be given in a timely manner. Black and Wiliam (2009) note that feedback-based messages should tell students what to do, thereby improving learning effectiveness; however, they should not be standardized for everyone, since each student has their own difficulties.

Here it is important to remember that the objective of continuous assessment is student learning; so it cannot be punitive, but formative.

The virtual environments, as differentiated environments, allow students to redo the activities in which they did not reach the expected objectives based on the feedback given by the tutor, who should give a new orientation for carrying out the exercise on new bases and with greater possibility of success and learning. The student-tutor interaction must take place in a climate of respect and harmony, aiming to improve learning efforts (KENSKI, 2010).

## 4. Methodology

This was a survey research that aimed to evaluate the importance of feedback in the formative evaluation described in the praxis of the multidisciplinary team of a *latu sensu* postgraduate course offered in the distance modality in a Brazilian public institution. The data were collected using questionnaires and analyzed based on the Content Analysis recommended by Bardin (2011); this process was chosen because in it the interest is not in the description of the contents, but in what they will be able to teach after being treated.

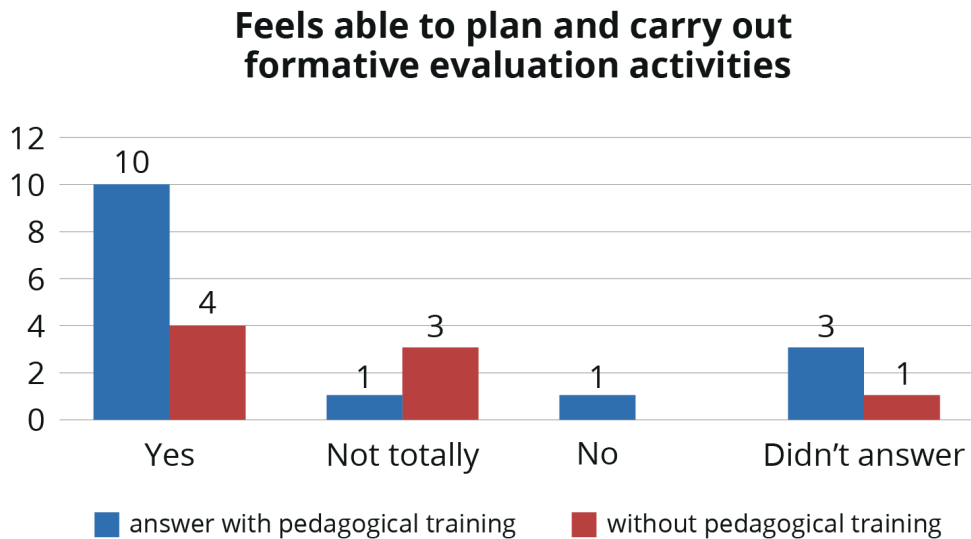
The subjects of this research are members of the multidisciplinary team of a distance postgraduate course offered at a Brazilian public education institution. They are predominantly female and aged between 31 and 50 years old; have been working as educators for more than 10 years, working on-line for more than five years. Of them, 96% have already undergone some type of training to work in online education; within the multidisciplinary team of the course, they worked in more than one function (pedagogue, tutor, teacher, coordinator, etc.) and in more than one subject.

## 5. Team conception on the use of feedback to support formative assessment

We started this analysis by verifying the subjects' familiarity with formative assessment. Of the subjects, 61% feel qualified to plan and carry out training evaluative activities; 18% do not feel fully qualified for this task and only 4% stated that they do not feel able to do so.



Still analyzing the responses of these subjects, in Graph 1 it is possible to verify that the group that has pedagogical training feels more qualified to plan and carry out formative evaluative activities in the course.



**Graph 1:** Familiarity of the multidisciplinary team with formative assessment

Table 1 presents the recording units used to analyze the pedagogical praxis of the feedback in the course and the amount of indication of them. However, only the two registration units with the highest indication will be discussed below.

Categories	Record units	Indications	%
Provides feedback	Returns information about students' failures, difficulties and successes	26	20
	Generates timely returns	26	20
	Guides students on how to overcome their difficulties	25	19
	Promotes peer review of tasks to facilitate student interaction and maturity	8	6
	Provides dialogue between tutor, teacher and students	17	13
	Returns activities with guidance from the teacher or tutor in order to overcome difficulties	7	5
	Returns information regarding student performance to the teacher educator	7	5
	Returns meaningful information	16	12
Total		132	100

**Table 1:** Record units within the subcategory Provides feedback

For Villas Boas (2011), feedback is developed by actions of external agents in order to provide information about someone's performance. It is “through it that teachers communicate their status to students in relation to learning and guidelines that supposedly helped them to overcome any difficulties” (FERNANDES, 2011, p. 66). The concern with feedback on student failures, difficulties and successes is evident in the following records.

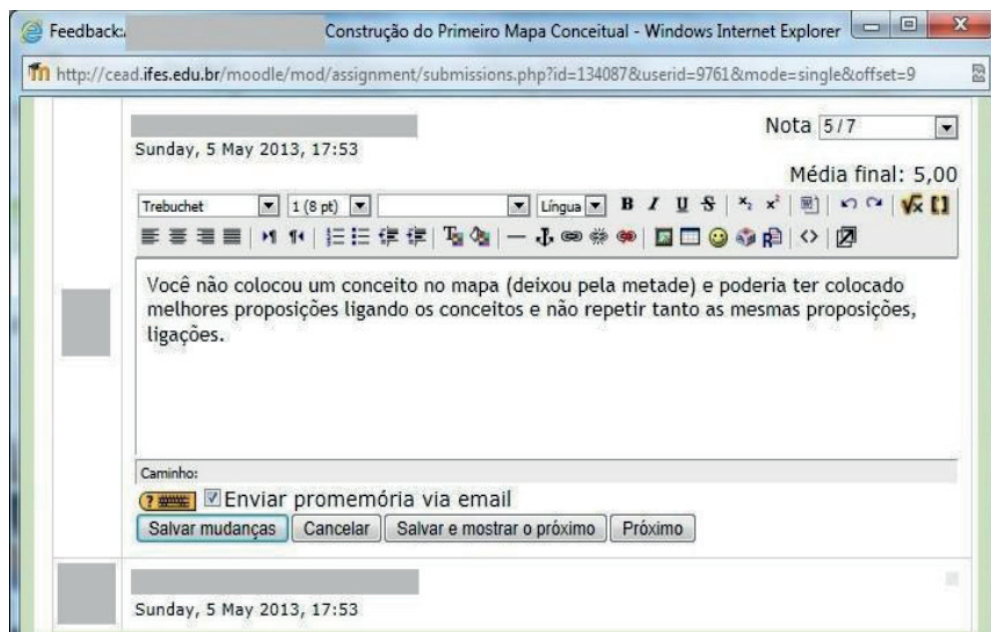
I try to interact with the group and clarify doubts in Moodle, correct activities on time and participate in the chat during office hours. In the face-to-face assessment, I gave feedback to each group and then at the end I reinforced the need to do the activities on time, clarify doubts and talked about the satisfaction in seeing the results of the

work, because we had very well prepared maps (teacher Denise, minutes of the final meeting of the discipline D9).

That I am, the most boring person, because I think he should be informed every week of how he is, if he is excellent it is interesting that the tutor tells him that he is excellent. What we end up doing is the opposite, we just take the foot of the one who is not walking, so I usually ask tutors to give positive feedbacks. I think it's important (teacher Silvia, in an interview).

Feedback is important, first of all, because it feels assisted. In addition, if the feedback is to correct a misunderstanding, this allows the student to reflect on the error. In the case of feedback for praise, this motivates the students (teacher Vitória, in the questionnaire).

The virtual environment also allows these types of feedback to be recorded, so that students can access them at any time and even follow the evolution of their learning. In Figure 1, you can see the feedback screen for an activity in discipline D9.



**Figure 1:** Activity feedback screen available in Moodle  
**Source:** Virtual classroom of the studied course.

Another theme that was evident in the categorization of data was the concern with returning feedback in a timely manner. Black and Wiliam (2009) state that formative assessment will be of little help to students if teachers are not available to provide feedback, which must be given quickly, as it is known “that there is a close relationship between the propensity of students students to continue or give up a course and the time between the presentation of tasks and their return ”(MOORE; KEARSLEY, 2007, p. 131). The following are some records that demonstrate this concern:

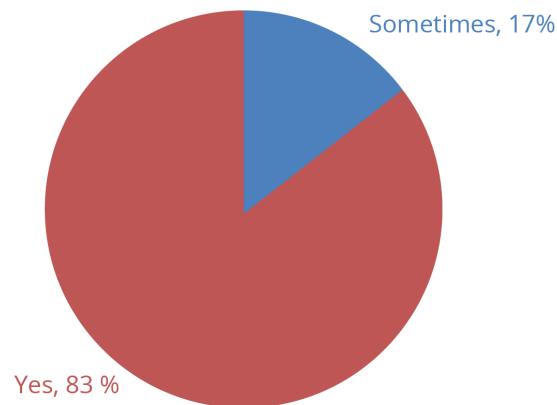
We try to make this period as short as possible, one week at the most for the student to receive and give time, it is important that this feedback is given soon so that the student can, through him, change his path, rethink the way how you are learning; this has existed a lot, there are some activities, including these interdisciplinary ones that happen from the beginning of the discipline to the end (teacher Thiago, in an interview).

I reinforce the importance of daily access to the discipline room. The students post doubts and they already find it very much waiting one day for the answer. When the tutor goes for a few days without accessing Moodle and takes more than 24 hours, then the student becomes discouraged, doubts accumulate, etc. However, most tutors in this discipline have had very good access (teacher Tatiana, in the intermediate meeting of discipline D9).

The tutors and teachers must be available to the students, let's think like that, which is the basics, that is, any doubts that arise must be resolved as soon as possible, not to turn into a snowball (teacher Pedro, in an interview).

Due to the great importance given to feedback, mainly in Distance Education, the perception of the multidisciplinary team of the course is that it is not new to have actions linked to this pillar frequently performed. Of the members of the multidisciplinary team, 83% affirm that actions related to feedback occur in the course and 17% affirm that they occur sometimes (Graph 2).

## Does *feedback*



**Graph 2:** Conducting feedback on activities for students, according to members of the multidisciplinary team

Aspects that could hinder the conduct of formative evaluations in the course were raised with the research subjects; the main points mentioned can be seen in Table 2.

Aspects raised	Indications	%
Rooting of the classificatory evaluation	1	4
Heterogeneity of students	1	4
Teaching method	1	4
Pre-planning	4	17
Quantity of tasks and time to correct them	11	46
Quantitative relationship between tutor x student	6	25
Total	24	100

**Table 2:** Aspects that make formative assessment difficult in the course

The number of students served by a tutor is a real concern; it is an aspect that can hinder the performance of formative assessment tasks,

since to perform them in a coherent and efficient way it is necessary that the feedback is not the same for everyone, considering that each student has his own difficulties (BLACK; WILIAM, 2009) and that the teacher is the one who should guide the student, accompany and support him, involve him with his training process, fostering reflection and self-criticism that will allow him to learn to value, criticize and reflect on his own work, always seeing their student individually; but for that it takes a certain amount of time to dedicate to each one.

## Conclusions

In summary, based on the general perceptions and familiarity that the multidisciplinary team has with formative assessment, it can be said that most of them (61%) feel at ease in relation to planning and carrying out formative assessment activities and that, of this group, 71% have pedagogical training. As for the group's difficulties in relation to carrying out evaluative activities, three points stand out: the number of tasks proposed and the time to correct them (33%), the need to carry out a previous planning (27%) and the number of students to be served by tutor.

In the records associated with the performance of types of feedback for students, it appears that 20% of the indications are linked to actions to return information about failures, difficulties and successes of students; in the same proportion, 20% are actions linked to the return of types of feedback in a timely manner; 19% of them are linked to the orientation of students to overcome their difficulties; actions linked to the dialogue between tutor, teacher and students represent 13%; the return of significant information represents 13%; actions to promote peer review on tasks to facilitate interaction and maturity of students represent 6%; the return of activities with guidance from the teacher or tutor in order to overcome difficulties and the return of information regarding the students' performance to the teacher represent 5% each.

From what has been exposed so far, it is clear that feedback activities occur frequently in the course, but it is still necessary to better prepare team members who do not have pedagogical training to deal with the paradigms associated with formative assessment.

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