Enhancing Quality Learning in East African Higher Education: Towards a Common Understanding of Formative Feedback

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Abstract

The quest for enhancing quality learning in higher education across East Africa necessitates a cohesive understanding of what formative feedback is and how it can be used to promote student learning. This study explores how formative feedback is understood as it relates to improving student learning outcomes within the East African higher education context. By synthesizing existing policies and conducting qualitative analyses of current practices, the research identifies key challenges and opportunities for having a common understanding of formative feedback. Findings reveal a widespread misunderstanding of formative feedback, with many perceiving it as equivalent to course evaluations, continuous summative assessments, and student ranking based on grades. The study highlights a lack of consensus among government officials, higher education administrators, faculty, and students regarding the definition and implementation of formative feedback. This research suggests the need for a comprehensive qualitative study to examine how formative feedback is defined and perceived across East Africa. Such an investigation could catalyze robust discussions among key stakeholders, leading to the development of shared definitions and sustainable formative feedback systems, ultimately enhancing educational outcomes in the region.

Keywords: *Formative feedback, faculty perspectives, student perspectives, higher education, East Africa*

Introduction

In higher education, formative feedback is a crucial strategy for improving student learning and growth(Ajjawi et al., 2022; Gálvez-López, 2023; Gedye, 2010; McCarthy, 2017; Nicol, 2007; Shute, 2008; Ziegenfuss & Furse, 2021). Formative feedback, which has its roots in formative assessment principles, is the comprehensive and helpful information about a person's understanding and performance that comes from a variety of sources, including parents, instructors, peers, textbooks, personal reflection, and experience learning. Insights into certain areas of a student's comprehension are provided by this feedback, which Hattie and Timperley (2007) claim acts as a crucial mechanism (p. 81). Formative feedback has far-reaching effects that go far beyond simple correction; it encourages self-regulation, a deeper connection with the material, and an attitude of long-life learning. Students can identify their areas of strength and growth as well as acquire critical thinking and problem-solving abilities through prompt and constructive feedback, which are vital in higher education and beyond. In this literature review, the invaluable benefits of formative feedback are discussed.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the principles of Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), to explore and enhance the understanding and implementation of formative feedback in East African higher education. Transformative Learning Theory, developed by Jack Mezirow, emphasizes the process by which individuals critically examine their assumptions and beliefs, leading to profound changes in their perspectives and practices. By applying this theory, the study aims to encourage educators, administrators, and policymakers to reflect on their current perceptions and practices regarding formative feedback. This reflective process is essential for recognizing and addressing the misconceptions that hinder effective feedback practices. Transformative learning facilitates a shift from traditional, summative approaches to a more nuanced understanding of formative feedback as a tool for continuous learning and improvement, ultimately promoting deeper student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

Critical Pedagogy, as articulated by Paulo Freire (Mezirow, 2000)provides a complementary lens for this study by emphasizing the role of education in challenging and transforming oppressive structures and practices. In the context of East African higher education, Critical Pedagogy encourages stakeholders to critically analyze the existing educational policies and practices that contribute to the misinterpretation and ineffective use of formative feedback. This perspective advocates for an inclusive and participatory approach, where the voices of all stakeholders—students, educators, administrators, and policymakers—are valued and integrated into the dialogue. By fostering a collaborative environment, Critical Pedagogy aims to empower individuals to co-create a shared understanding of formative feedback, develop equitable assessment practices, and build sustainable systems that support transformative learning. Through this dual framework, the study aspires to catalyze meaningful change in the educational landscape of East Africa, enhancing the quality of learning and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Literature Review

Formative feedback is defined as information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify their thinking or behavior to improve learning. Effective formative feedback helps students understand their learning goals, the gap between their current performance and the desired outcomes, and strategies to bridge this gap (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Other scholars emphasize that formative feedback should be timely, specific, and actionable to be effective. In higher education, formative feedback is critical for fostering student engagement, promoting self-regulation, and enhancing academic achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Nicol, 2007).

Research indicates that the concept of formative feedback is often misunderstood in East African higher education (Bahati et al., 2016; Mauki et al., 2020; Ogange et al., 2018). Many educators and institutions conflate formative feedback with summative assessments or view it as a tool for ranking and grading students rather than a mechanism for learning improvement (Carles, 2011; Moss & Brookhart, 2019) This misunderstanding is partly due to inadequate policy guidance and a lack of professional development for educators on effective feedback practices (Clark, 2011). Additionally, cultural factors and traditional pedagogical approaches in East Africa may influence perceptions of feedback, leading to resistance or superficial implementation (Bahati et al., 2016).

Despite these challenges, there are significant opportunities to improve formative feedback practices in East African higher education. Integrating technology can facilitate timely and

personalized feedback, making it more accessible and effective (Ugwuanyi et al., 2022; Wilkie & Liefeith, 2020). Collaborative learning environments, where peer feedback is encouraged, can also enhance understanding and utilization of formative feedback (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Furthermore, professional development programs for educators can help build capacity and foster a shared understanding of effective feedback practices (Al-Bashir et al., 2016; Guskey, 2002; Ugwuanyi et al., 2022).

Donella Meadows' (1999) concept of leverage points presents a valuable framework for understanding and addressing the challenges of creating a sustainable formative feedback system in higher education in East Africa. As a renowned environmental scientist and systems analyst, Meadows introduced the idea that within complex systems, certain points of intervention possess a greater potential to bring about significant and lasting change, while others may have limited impact. In the pursuit of a transformative formative feedback system, it becomes crucial to identify and strategically address these critical leverage points. Meadows categorizes the leverage points into twelve distinct levels, ranging from the least impactful to the most transformative. At the lowest level are the constants, parameters, and numerical values, where making adjustments may result in localized effects but not substantial system-wide changes. Buffers, which act as elements to absorb disturbances, fall under the next level. Adjusting buffer capacities can impact the system's stability and resilience but remains somewhat constrained in scope.

Further up the hierarchy, according to Meadows (1999) are the leverage points related to stocks and flows. By adjusting the rates of inflow and outflow, significant shifts can be induced, creating dynamic equilibriums within the system. Changing the structure of the system, either physical or organizational, is another powerful leverage point. Such alterations introduce new feedback loops and influence the overall system behavior. Introducing delays or adjusting timing within the system is another leverage point that can lead to oscillations or amplifications of effects. Feedback loops, which can be reinforcing or balancing, are crucial intervention areas. Reinforcing positive feedback loops can lead to exponential growth or collapse while balancing negative feedback loops can promote stability. Information flows, governing the nature and flow of information, greatly influence decision-making and problem-solving processes within the system. Modifying rules, regulations, and incentives is a leverage point that can induce significant changes in behavior and outcomes. Encouraging self-organization within the system can lead to emergent patterns and new behaviors. The objectives and goals of the system, as a leverage point, can redirect its behavior and priorities in significant ways. Transforming underlying paradigms and beliefs is another powerful intervention area, influencing the system's behavior and trajectory. Finally, transcending paradigms represents the most impactful leverage point, envisioning entirely new systems and structures.

Considering the implications of Meadows' leverage points (1999) for creating a sustainable formative feedback system in East African higher education, targeted interventions are required. Focusing on higher-level leverage points, such as feedback loops, information flows, rules and incentives, and goals, is essential for achieving transformative change. By doing so, educational institutions can foster a culture of continuous improvement and enhance the quality of their assessment practices. Thus, the application of Meadows' concept of leverage points offers a promising approach to address the challenges of creating a sustainable formative feedback system in higher education in East Africa. By understanding and strategically intervening at critical leverage points, stakeholders can drive positive and lasting change in the educational landscape, ultimately advancing the quality and effectiveness of formative feedback in the region. This study explored where the critical leverage points are in the Kenyan

higher education assessment system and suggested how to use them for positive change, that could lead to improved teaching and learning in higher learning institutions throughout Kenya.

Student satisfaction and the overall academic experience are intimately related to effective student feedback, which is a major concern in higher education. Technology-enabled feedback models have become increasingly popular as potential remedies for the issues that have previously made it difficult to provide formative task participants with high-quality feedback. These technological advancements have the power to transcend national, regional, and local boundaries and transform the landscape of formative feedback. The use of technology-enabled feedback mechanisms is becoming more widespread on a global scale. Notably, live synchronized video feedback has gained popularity. This method combines real-time, synchronous tutor audio feedback with digital video recordings of student performance in assessment tasks. This strategy was investigated in a 2022 study by Wilkie and Liefeith, who provided close to 300 examples of technologically assisted feedback on formative assessments in an undergraduate Physical Education and Sports Coaching module. Group interviews' thematic analysis demonstrated its ability to deliver engrossing feedback, have a beneficial influence on technology use, and promote reflective practice (Wilkie & Liefeith, 2020). This cutting-edge feedback technique provided high-quality, frequent, efficient, and long-lasting feedback, thereby increasing students' perceptions of their growth as learners and reflective practitioners and their experiences with formative assessments.

A review conducted by Morris, Perry, and Wardle (2021) stressed the value of feedback in education. It did, however, show that there was little support for effective feedback techniques in higher education. The study discovered conflicting data in support of different feedback strategies, such as praising, grading, and technology-based feedback. Although the data demonstrated the potential of low-stakes quizzing and the advantages of peer and tutor feedback, implementation factors impacted the findings. This evaluation emphasized the need for additional studies on feedback techniques in higher education that are informed by evidence (Morris et al., 2021). The complexity of Instructors' feedback activities within Learning Management Systems (LMSs) was examined in a study by Grönlund, Samuelsson, and Samuelsson (2023). The Swedish upper secondary social studies curriculum was the main focus of this study. The research found conflicts between the activity system's grading documentation in the LMS and conventional teaching methods, as well as conflicts between feedback matrices, school policies, and Instructors' formative ideals (Yan et al., 2021), provided insights into the interplay between formative assessment strategies and growth mindset, which influences reading achievement. Their study involved both Western and Eastern samples and found that formative assessment strategies were weakly related to a growth mindset in the East but not in the West. Conversely, a growth mindset positively affected reading achievement in the West but not in the East. The research highlighted cross-cultural variability in the impacts of different formative assessment strategies on reading achievement, with instructional adjustments emerging as a strong predictor.

Misconceptions About Formative Feedback

As seen earlier, formative feedback is a crucial component of the learning process, designed to help students improve their performance by providing actionable insights into their progress. However, there are several common misconceptions about what constitutes effective formative feedback (Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Addressing these misconceptions is essential to ensure that feedback fulfills its intended purpose of enhancing student learning.

Misconception 1: Graded Work as Feedback

A prevalent misconception is the belief that simply returning graded work to students serves as effective feedback. While knowing the results of their efforts is a form of feedback, it is often insufficient for fostering genuine understanding and improvement. First, when students receive graded work, their attention tends to gravitate toward the scores rather than the feedback itself. This focus on grades can undermine the learning process, as students may prioritize achieving high marks over understanding the material and improving their skills. The score becomes the end goal, rather than the learning journey. Second, feedback provided solely at the end of a unit or after an assessment offers no immediate opportunity for students to apply it. This type of feedback is retrospective, looking back at what has already been completed, and does not help students in their ongoing learning process (Moss & Brookhart, 2019). Effective formative feedback should be timely, allowing students to use the insights gained to make improvements while the learning is still relevant and ongoing. Third, grades alone do not provide specific guidance on how to improve. Effective feedback should highlight specific areas of strength and weakness and offer concrete suggestions for how students can enhance their performance in future tasks (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Misconception 2: Detailed Correction Equals Effective Feedback

Another common misconception is that detailed corrections, such as marking all spelling and grammar errors, constitute effective feedback. While correcting errors can be part of the feedback process, it is not sufficient on its own. First, effective feedback goes beyond merely supplying the correct answers or pointing out mistakes. It should help students understand why they made certain errors and how they can avoid them in the future. This approach fosters deeper learning and helps students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Second, instead of just correcting mistakes, effective feedback should guide how students can improve their learning strategies. For instance, rather than simply correcting grammatical errors, feedback could include suggestions on how to structure sentences more effectively or how to better organize their ideas in writing. Third, effective feedback should acknowledge what students are doing well, thus reinforcing positive behaviors and efforts. It should also suggest specific strategies for the next steps in their learning. For example, if a student struggles with constructing a thesis statement, feedback could offer examples of strong thesis statements and exercises to practice this. In this case, rubrics play a substantial role in supporting student learning (Olson & Krysiak, 2021).

According to Moss and Brookhart (2019), to address these misconceptions, instructors need to adopt a more holistic approach to formative feedback that focuses on guiding students through their learning process rather than simply evaluating their performance. First, instructors should provide feedback regularly throughout the learning process, not just at the end of units or assessments. This allows students to make adjustments and improvements while they are still engaged with the material. Second, instructors should ensure that feedback includes specific, actionable insights that students can use to improve their performance. This involves identifying both strengths and areas for improvement and providing clear, practical advice on how to address these areas. Third, instructors should encourage students to reflect on the feedback they receive and to think critically about how they can apply it to their work. This reflection helps students internalize the feedback and use it to develop their skills. Fourth, instructors should foster a growth mindset by emphasizing effort and improvement over innate ability. This approach helps students see feedback as a valuable tool for growth rather than as a judgment of their abilities. Finally, while it is important to correct errors, balance this with guidance on how to avoid similar mistakes in the future. Focus on developing students'

understanding and skills rather than just pointing out what they did wrong. Understanding and addressing misconceptions about formative feedback is crucial for enhancing its effectiveness in the learning process. Feedback should be timely, specific, and focused on guiding students to improve their understanding and skills. By moving beyond grades and detailed corrections, educators can provide feedback that truly supports student learning and fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a combination of semi-structured interviews with faculty members and focus group discussions with final-year undergraduate students. This approach was chosen to facilitate in-depth exploration and understanding of the diverse perspectives and experiences surrounding formative feedback within the region. By engaging both faculty members and students, the study aimed to capture a comprehensive understanding from multiple vantage points of what formative feedback is and how it is used to enhance the quality of student learning. The study selected three higher education institutions – one each in Burundi, Rwanda, and Kenya – and was deliberate, aiming to encompass a breadth of perspectives while also acknowledging the unique cultural and contextual factors within each country. This geographical diversity allowed for the exploration of how feedback practices may vary across different institutional contexts, thereby enriching the depth and breadth of the study's findings.

A purposive sampling approach was employed to select participants, ensuring that individuals with relevant experiences and insights on formative feedback in higher education. Faculty members were chosen based on their involvement in teaching and assessment practices, while final-year undergraduate students were selected to provide a reflective perspective on their cumulative educational experiences. This sampling strategy aimed to capture diverse viewpoints and experiences, enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a flexible and systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This method allowed for the exploration of key themes and patterns emerging from the interviews and focus group discussions, facilitating the organization and interpretation of the data. By systematically coding and categorizing the data, the study was able to uncover insights into the complex dynamics surrounding formative feedback within East African higher education.

Findings

The findings revealed that government agencies, such as the ministries of education, higher education commissions and councils, and ad hoc committees on curriculum improvement, all serve as policymakers to set the course of action related to assessment in general and formative feedback in specific. Indeed the data show a strong connection between these governing bodies and what actually takes place in the classrooms.

The relationship between government agencies such as the Ministry of Education and the national commissions or councils for higher education and institutions of higher learning impacts the understanding and utilization of formative feedback by instructors. It could be said that the commissions do not seem to lead the way for administrators and faculty in higher education institutions to develop a clear understanding of what formative feedback is and how to use it. Institutions function within a larger regulatory framework that is established by government agencies such as the Ministry of Education and national commissions or councils for higher education. They are not independent entities. The complex relationship that exists between government agencies and higher learning institutions has a significant impact on how

formative feedback approaches are understood and used. These bodies mandate and formulate rules that become part of the institutional ethos, influencing not just how formative feedback methods are understood but also how they are implemented in academic settings.

The fact that university commissions do not seem to promote the effective use of formative assessment is supported by documents from the commissions. For example, no policy statement could be found from the Higher Education Council in Burundi. While the policy in Kenya calls for the use of "self-learning materials" to assist students, including "self-assessment questions…[and] situations and feedback to self-assessment questions" (Commission for University Education, 2014, p. 83), there is no clear explanation of what formative feedback is, and no directive to use it. The document does expound on assessments, but all of them are summative (p. 90). The most recent document from Kenya's government related to improving education seems to use the term "formative assessment" to mean continuous summative assessments and never refers to feedback given to students for them to improve their learning (Munavu, 2023, pp. 26–30). While the CUE in Kenya plans to implement the same model of Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) it uses for primary through secondary education to higher education, there seems to be a narrow use of the term formative assessment in its 2018 national curriculum policy (Ministry of Education, 2018). For example, all uses of the term formative assessment seem to refer to continuous summative assessments for students to guide instructors and administrators on how to improve the curriculum. However, there is no statement or reference to formative assessment as direct feedback to individual learners so that they can correct and improve their learning.

Interestingly, in Rwanda, a statement about formative feedback can be found published as long as 17 years ago. While the policy encourages a number of assessment methods, the first one provided speaks clearly about what formative feedback is: "Formative assessment is designed to help learners learn more effectively through giving them feedback on their performance indicating how it can be improved" (Higher Education Council, 2007, p. 6). However, the Rwandan policy statement does not expound further, nor does it give suggestions for how to implement formative assessment,

The fact that the commissions do not seem to promote formative feedback for higher education is also supported by the words of the participants in this study. Concerns arise regarding the absence of comprehensive government policies to regulate student learning, leading to weak institutional systems and insufficient support for formative feedback. Participants decried the weak systems and inadequate efforts by these institutions to support student learning. This was exemplified by a participant from one of the institutions of higher learning in Burundi who said, "… the government has no policies in place to help regulate student learning in institutions that would probably improve. You know we have a weak system" (Participant 3, lines 1315-1316). A Burundian participant revealed that they would embrace policies that would promote quality learning like that of hiring qualified instructors. For example, one of the participants noted that "…we need a transparent policy. And by this I mean, I'm now talking about how Instructors are hired and these lecturers should be hired based on merit… We need that one so that we have qualified lecturers (Participant 3, lines 1330-1335). So, while the faculty pointed to the need for what he called "qualified lecturers," and decried the use of nepotism, he did not seem to connect "qualified lecturers" with the ability to use formative feedback for students to improve learning.

When a dean at a Kenyan public institution was asked how she was being supported to ensure that a formative framework was being implemented in her university, she switched the topic to Competency-Based Education (CBE) rather than addressing formative feedback for students

(Participant 8, lines 3370-3373) and the importance of needs-based assessments. In this case, the participant seemed to define formative assessment as what takes place within CBE and assessments to determine the needs of students. She indicated that the CUE does give guidelines, but those instructions do not necessarily promote formative assessment: The CUE "gives us guidelines on how we are supposed to write proper programs for institutions" (line 3381). She further mentioned the exam policy which is dictated by the CUE, saying that "the assessment initially we were doing 30% [continuous assessment tests (CATs)] and 70% [final exam]. That is now changing" (line 3521-3522). What is noticeable about this comment is that the CUE sets requirements for a percentage of CATS and the final but does not seem to connect CATS with genuine formative feedback for student learning. Instead, the CATs that the CUE expects are a series of assessments during the course without necessarily giving specific feedback to the students.

A HOD from the same Kenyan university seemed to connect the appropriate use of the word formative assessment for students within the CBC framework, a policy from the CUE. He seems to understand that to have a truly competency-based curriculum, students need feedback on how their learning is progressing. In this way, the CUE's promotion of CBC can help try to implement formative feedback within the higher education system. In discussing the rationale for the CBC, he noted the following:

> There was a lot of summative assessment in school, all the reason why they have to [move] towards formative. And you and I know that formative is learner-centered…The learner should be able to apply the knowledge, and should be involved in the learning process as opposed to summative, where the teacher does much of it…(Participant 7, Line 3043-3046)

In the case of Rwanda, it emerged that policies put in place by the Higher Education Council (HEC) seemed to be effective in monitoring and giving feedback on student learning. One of the participants alluded that:

> In terms of HEC, what they do is that constant institutional audit. They just write to you in a week and say, we are coming to check how you do assessments... there has to be a variety of assessments and the regulatory bodies that come there… that keeps us aligned to say that, hey, we don't get relaxed on this because we have gotten a charter (Participant 6, lines 2869-2877).

The participants in Rwanda appreciated the role of HEC in ensuring that formative feedback is being implemented in their higher learning institutions. They have policies that facilitate the monitoring of student learning and ensure alignment with educational objectives.

One faculty member from Rwanda demonstrated how the government body influences what happens at the university level, particularly as it relates to the CBC, and refers to the use of a portfolio.

> Some years ago started lecturing using knowledge-based education… you know by the rate of which, actually we moved to another system, I think even in Kenya it's in place, which is called CBC, Competency-Based Curriculum. And that one, you know, is mandatory because you need to keep a portfolio with the students. (Participant 1, lines 45-50)

It is obvious from the data that we see the traditional power dynamic flowing top-down, from the ministries of education to the commissions or councils of higher learning, along with ad hoc committees for curriculum review and revision, to the senior institutional administration,

to the deans and heads of departments to faculty and finally to the students. This structure yields positive results for creating formative feedback systems when the top of the power structure initiates a policy for it to be done, as in the case of Rwanda. However, this is not the case in Burundi, and in Kenya, there seems to be an effort, but with unclear terms related to the concept of formative feedback. Figure 1 demonstrates how power flows down from the top and how little power faculty or even students have to engage in formative feedback activities. Another problem with this power dynamic is that deans, heads of departments, and faculty may simply decide to wait for a policy to come down from on high before they initiate formative feedback practices.

Figure 1: The Flow of Power for Higher Learning Institutions
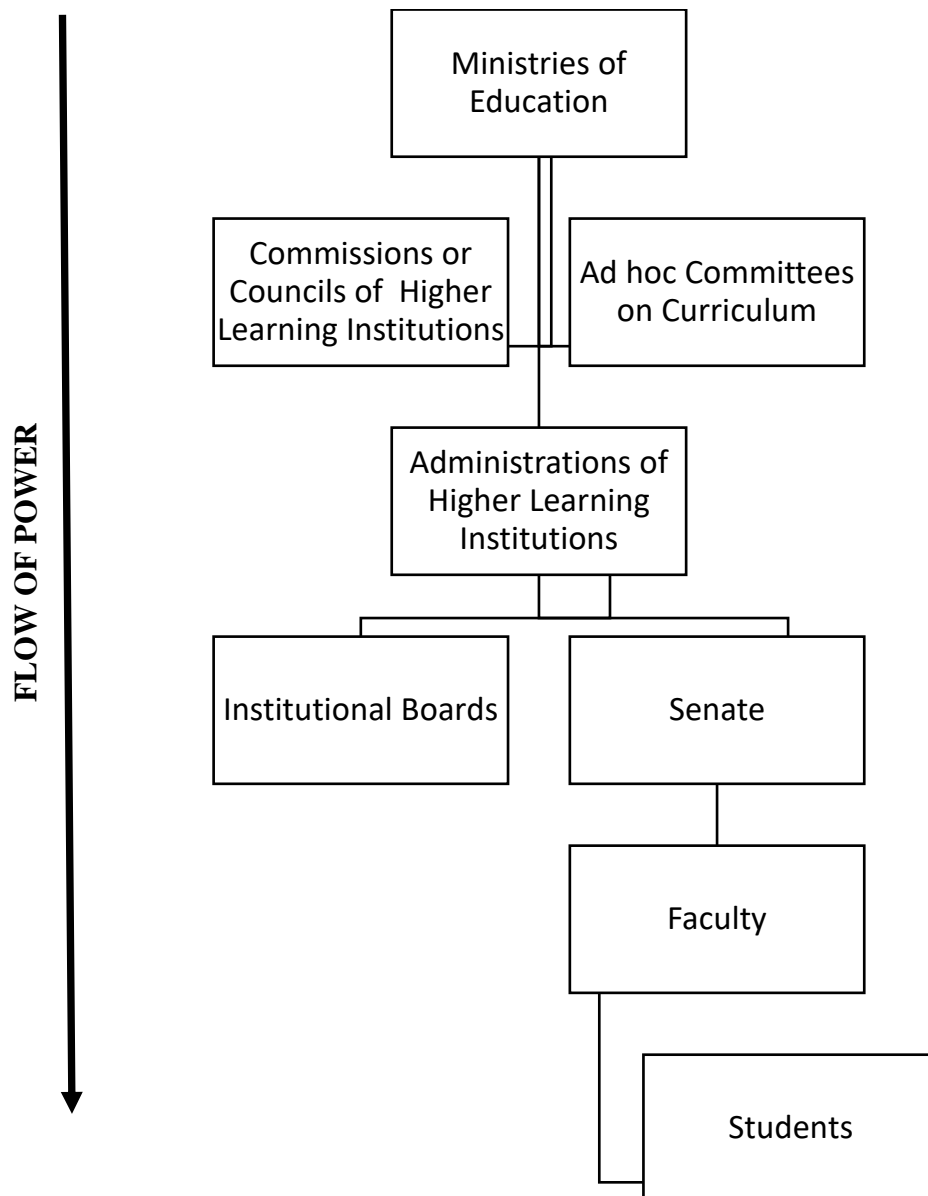
Integration of the Finding with Transformative Learning Theory and Critical Pedagogy

Since government educational agencies greatly influence higher learning institutions, it is important to analyze how they might be able to promote an effective system for formative feedback that leads to improved student learning. According to the statements made in their policy reports and from participants in this study, noted above, there seems to be a need for the personnel of these government agencies to understand what formative feedback is. Feedback is "indicating verbally or in writing the correctness of an answer or other response" (McMillan, 2001, p. 395). In other words, most of the assessments done in the name of "formative assessments" are still quite summative in relationship to the students—they receive a mark with little specificity on how to improve their learning. While these types of continuous assessments may shed light on the effectiveness of instruction for the instructors, it does little to inform students in real time how to correct mistakes or improve their competency. Since the personnel of these agencies seem to lack a clear understanding of feedback, it appears that they need a shift in their mindset about what formative assessment entails, particularly as it relates to feedback for students. According to Mezirow, people can be stuck in their meaning perspectives or mindsets, not being able to see a different perspective (Mezirow, 2012), which seems to be the case with some of the people who are making policies about formative assessments. It seems that they need a transformative learning experience to understand and embrace a new way of thinking about formative assessment and feedback for student learning. A transformative learning experience would start with a disorienting dilemma, such as asking these officials when they received marks (which they may call feedback) while they were in university, and how they used those marks to improve their learning or competency. As they reflect on how little marks and results shed light on what was incorrect or how to improve, they may experience a disorienting dilemma.

Participants' perspectives revealed a consensus on the shift in education from traditional knowledge-based models to competency-based education. The adoption of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) underscored the growing emphasis on integrating formative feedback into educational practices. Constructivist theories emphasize the active role of learners in constructing their knowledge and understanding through authentic experiences and problem-solving activities. Competency-based education, rooted in constructivism, prioritizes the development of practical skills and competencies essential for real-world applications. However, the agencies do not seem to be making this connection between CBC and the need for formative feedback to students for improved learning.

One way to improve the relationship between government agencies and higher learning institutions is by considering critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970). This theory emphasizes the importance of challenging dominant power structures and fostering critical consciousness among students. Within higher education, critical pedagogy serves as a lens through which the relationship between government agencies and institutions can be examined. Institutions often adhere to assessment policies set forth by national commissions, which can shape the educational landscape significantly. However, critical pedagogy prompts stakeholders, in this case, educators, administrators, policymakers, and students, to critically analyze these policies. It urges them to scrutinize the underlying assumptions and implications of assessment measures, considering how they might perpetuate or challenge existing power structures and inequalities. By employing critical pedagogy in higher education, stakeholders can engage in meaningful dialogue and reflection about the purpose and consequences of assessment policies. They can explore whether these policies truly serve the interests of all students or if they inadvertently reinforce systemic injustices. Moreover, critical pedagogy encourages the

development of alternative assessment methods that align with its principles of empowerment and liberation. This approach ultimately seeks to transform higher education into a more equitable and inclusive space where students are empowered to critically engage with knowledge and society. Conclusively, critical pedagogy can inform discussions surrounding the relationship between national commissions and institutions by encouraging stakeholders to critically examine the underlying assumptions and implications of assessment policies.

How the Research Objective was Achieved

The main factor that influences the understanding and use of formative feedback that emerged from the data is the deeply held assumption that they already know what formative feedback is. Most faculty from Burundi and Kenya seem to equate tests and other forms of assessment with formative feedback, even when no specific responses are given to individual students to improve their learning. They appear to be unaware that even though they are the instructors, they need to become students of formative assessment theory and practices. This factor is influenced by the prevailing culture that leads faculty to say they have achieved their credentials and do not need to learn. Now, they seem to see themselves as over the students, with no need to learn.

In Burundi and Kenya, the fact that language surrounding the issue of formative feedback is ambiguous and unclear hinders the use of a formative feedback system. For example, terms such as assessment, evaluation, formative assessment, formative evaluation, continuous assessment tests, and feedback all seem to be used interchangeably. For this study, formative feedback was described to the participants as oral or written descriptive comments given to students to help them improve their learning. Making this distinction clear needs to be done intentionally. There should be shared efforts to create and disseminate definitions and recommendations for formative feedback to overcome this problem. Professional development programs and educational policies need to highlight the unique goals and techniques of formative feedback to guarantee that all parties involved are on the same page and can participate in the process efficiently. To properly use formative feedback to improve student learning and accomplishment, there must be clarity in the educational environment.

In Rwanda, as faculty use genuine formative feedback and see positive results, and as students experience receiving constructive responses, they want to continue using this practice. They see the value of the process which helps students to improve their learning. The implementation of a formative feedback system in Rwanda seems to be working well, in part, due to how well the policy is written by their Higher Education Council. The clarity of what needs to be done is leading to a positive feeling about the process. One faculty member even reported feeling excited about using formative feedback to help students learn. Furthermore, the Higher Education Council of Rwanda places a strong emphasis on the value of prompt, detailed, and useful feedback since it enables students to make significant progress. In addition to bettering student performance, faculty members have reported feeling more satisfied with their jobs. A faculty member even conveyed enthusiasm regarding the use of formative feedback, stating that it had improved their relationship with students and changed the way they teach. The enthusiasm and dedication of educators are vital to the continuation and growth of formative feedback.

The experience from Rwanda shows that formative feedback can significantly improve the learning process when it is encouraged by explicit policies and accepted by both teachers and students. The Higher Education Council's somewhat well-organized framework is an example that other educational systems might use to adopt efficient formative feedback procedures.

Consequently, Rwanda is seeing a cultural shift in education, with constructive criticism and ongoing development becoming essential components of the educational process.

Conclusion

A significant discovery from the data is that formative feedback is a concept that is still not understood within the context of higher education in East Africa. The data demonstrated a clear challenge of misunderstanding surrounding formative feedback, its definition, and practice in the higher education context. These disintegrated understandings lead to perceiving formative feedback as an evaluation of a course or program of study, continuous summative tests, and examinations, and ranking and tracking students by awarding them marks or grades. From the findings, it is evident that there is a lack of agreement among government officials, higher learning institution administrators, faculty, and students regarding what formative feedback is and could be.

As a result of an analysis of the policy documents throughout Burundi, Rwanda, and Kenya providing inadequate policies that clearly define and differentiate between formative assessments and formative feedback or guidance on how they are used to support student learning, a qualitative study could be conducted analyzing how different policy documents of government agencies throughout the entire East African region to discover how formative feedback is defined and how it is perceived as different from other kinds of assessments. Comparing the findings of this study could lead to catalyzing robust conversations among key stakeholders from the government and institutions of higher learning to begin developing shared definitions and creating sustainable formative feedback systems across East Africa.

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