

Feedback session

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Short description

The “feed-back” session of a study consists in presenting, opening to debate and inputs, and sometimes strategically shaping the findings or preliminary findings of a research project, with the key people with whom it is being or it has been carried out. It can take an individual form, with a discussion around the draft research report with selected respondents who have been particularly involved in the research project; a collective form, through a collective or public presentation of research results and outputs (with different degrees of interactivity), or both.

The moment of feedback can be part of the research work, a methodology for opening up new fields, correcting analyses or formulating new hypotheses with the research subjects. In this way, it plays a part in the co-production of knowledge, and goes beyond research dissemination. Finally, the feedback period may also play the role of a moment of mediation between the different groups and person researched – by presenting their voices in situations where various actors do not talk, consider nor hear one another.

Tags/ keywords: Method, Group, debate, collective, mediation.

Details

The french term « restitution » seems to us partly misleading: as if knowledge had been « taken » from respondents, and needed to be « given back » to them (like stolen goods). « Feedback » seems more appropriate to what the research process actually consists in : where knowledge circulates, is transformed by the multiple voices contributing to it, and can be consolidated into academic knowledge when following specific processes. « Feeding back » the respondents with that consolidated knowledge responds to the way multiple respondents « fed » the researcher with their own knowledges, individually or collectively. Knowledge that is not only the repetition or collation of the voices heard when conducting research, is often the most useful to the respondents.

Individuals feedback session

Individual feed-back session can be seen as an ethical duty owed to the main respondents to whom the researcher is accountable (and there can be different levels of accountability):

- respondents are minimally entitled to control their own words (if quoted) and to require anonymization, or on the contrary, request to be nominally quoted if they want to ; and given the opportunity to reformulate or to complement what they have said during the course of the research.
- they are also minimally entitled to see how their knowledge and words have been used for the research purpose, by having access to research outputs.

Individual feed-back sessions generally go further than checking quotations or making the final research report available: the main respondents are invited to comment, discuss, or even challenge the (draft) research results – within the limits of the researchers' right to protect their intellectual autonomy. This often leads to identifying mistakes or complementing facts; pinpointing missing dimensions, understandings or viewpoints that the researcher might have overseen; reformulating critical ideas that may be sensitive and could be brought forward in different, less offensive ways; to contesting researchers' analyses. In this last instance, there is a fine line between opening the door to debate around these findings with the main respondents, and protecting the autonomy of academic critical research, which remain essential.

Whilst researchers' critical analyses remain their own, debates around these are always productive. Researchers might still hold on to their analyses – but better phrase them, demonstrate their point, unpack their argument. They may indicate in the final text that some actors disagree with their analysis, acknowledging difference. They may better understand how or why a given idea is sensitive (in ways they did not necessarily foresee) or may be, in some cases, convinced that their analysis is incomplete and needs to be complemented.

These individual feedback sessions are generally moments where the respondents or research partners fully understand what the research meant or means – seeing the materiality of a research output. These are often intense moments of research co-production, whether the respondent opens up and complements their own previous research inputs, or where they challenge what they see as unfair analyses – and the research output may become an object of negotiation.

Collective feedback session

Collective feedback sessions take a variety of forms. Minimally they consist in presenting research results to the broader public, in a public meeting where the day and time of the week as much as the site of presentation is to be strategically chosen, as well as the way the invitation to the meeting is disseminated. Even in those basic forms, these sessions need to be planned in the format and

content of what will be presented, so that the research results can be heard by the audience. This involves avoiding jargon, selecting what may interest the audience and what the main idea one wants to argue should be; but also treading carefully to be able to present the more critical results without having members of the audience losing face or walking out of the meeting.

In some instances, these collective feedback sessions can take an interactive nature – beyond the questions and answers moment after the presentation: interactive photo exhibition, workshop around key questions, collective mapping sessions, urban walks where multiple voices contribute. Ultimately, such research outputs presented publicly and what has emerged from the event (debate, collective outputs) can also be disseminated by being posted online.

In more sophisticated forms, collective feedback sessions may also become moments of mediation between fragmented parties. In some cases, the feedback session may be not entirely public, aimed at a specific group of stakeholders involved in a tense or conflict-ridden situation. The ability of research to seek each parties' point of view, unpack their rationality and practices that are not always seen nor understood by other parties, is unique in many respects. The delimitation of a scientific framework and the exposure, aiming for objectivity of a situation or conflicting positions; the simple fact of being a "third party", partly external to the situation, and opening a space for discussion out of the usual political terrain, incites the stakeholders to listen and express themselves in a way that is different than how they would in a decision-making or confrontation moment. Without ever guaranteeing it, the feedback session can then contribute to re-establish a broken dialogue, and to progress towards conflict resolution.

These collective feedback sessions are more interesting if planned together with the research partner or main respondents, in order to ensure they are meaningful to the community or audience they are aimed at, both in their format and in their content. Such a framing of the collective feedback session may well emerge from the discussions developing in individual feedback sessions.

Who can use this method/ be involved?

Any researcher or student involved in collaboration with communities, institutions or social movements in the course of the research. This does require however a certain understanding of local politics, an ability to facilitate meetings, and a level of maturity in order to find a balance between one's intellectual autonomy and the openness to stakeholders' debate.

Steps

Before the Feedback Session

- Analyse the data, clarify your main conclusions
- Contact the groups or key stakeholder in the research to organize the session: define the audience of the session, find a convenient location, date and time;
- Find an appropriate format for the restitution depending on the public and of the purpose of the event (information, debate, conflict-resolution, etc) : exhibition, workshop, conference, urban walk
- Possibly: discuss the content with key actors, frame it strategically so that the key elements can be heard and debated (“choose your battle”; don’t humiliate any stakeholders even if you criticize their actions)
- Rehearse

During the feedback session

- Expose your data, result and analysis – avoiding jargon, use quotes and people’s own words (anonymized if needed) to ground analyses into real experience
- Leave room for questions, discontent and opposition towards your research
- Leave room but facilitate eventual discussion and arguments between different members of the audience
- Take notes of what’s going on and how people react, who came, ...
- If the session is of an interactive nature, organize the programme to leave room for interventions from stakeholders or members of the public, and train your facilitators
- Take photo and eventually record

After the feedback session

- Leave a moment for refreshment and snacks to materially thank people for engaging and participating with the research, and to informally continue the exchange
- Write notes of the session and what has come out of it (ideas, debates, outputs), that might help refine the research results
- Write a blog or short text about the event

Resources and materials required

- Recording device
- Food and drinks
- Microphone
- Notes material
- Medium to present the findings: powerpoint presentation requiring video projector ; posters requiring printing and space for them to be exposed, scale model requiring a table, tables, paper and pens for interactive sessions in small teams, etc.

Tips/ What to pay attention to

To organize a good feedback session you have to ask yourself:

- What is the utility of the knowledge produced, and for whom?
- What the restitution is about, what is its objective? (sharing knowledge, debating an idea, presenting different planning options, mediating a conflict?)
- When should it take place in the research process (intermediary session, final session)?
- What format should it take for the objective to be reached?
- How to strategically select the parts of my findings that the audience will relate to, find relevant?
- How to present the findings so that they are understandable by the audience, and that the various members of the public can hear it even if it is critical, without losing face?
- If there are groups of the audience that are particularly marginal or difficult to reach, or not accustomed to voice their views publicly, how to best reach them – possibly separately in advance (or individual feedback session)- so that they come prepared for the public debate?

Examples of use

- A « mediation » feedback session around the process of school yards transformation (internal to the municipality – mediating between schools and council, and between various councilors and departments within the municipality) <https://atelier4-5.mmsch.fr/actualites/une-restitution-mediation-autour-des-cours-decoles-desimpermeabilisees>
- A « mediation » feedback session around the place of Public Bath house Crillon in the neighbourhood (public exhibition in the public bath house, where all conflicting stakeholders gathered : residents, users, street level municipal agents, senior administration, district councilors, central councilors...): <https://atelier4-5.mmsch.fr/actualites/restitution-les-bains-douches-crillon-et-le-quartier>

- A public feedback on « popular uses of Parc Longchamp » / « Working people in Park Longchamp », to highlight invisible issues (risk of gentrification and exclusion) in the Park's renovation process, and bring it to the public debate: <https://atelier4-5.msh.fr/actualites/restitution-publique-enquete-sur-le-parc-longchamp>
- A participatory photo exhibition on « Uses of the public space of Espace Beausoleil » (where residents were asked to select pictures that they liked, disliked or found characteristic of their neighborhoods, and explain why) : <https://atelier4-5.msh.fr/documents/usages-de-lespace-multisport-beausoleil-une-expo-photo-interactive>
- See also a full set of forms of feedback sessions experienced in Johannesburg (2010-2012), under Yeoville Studio <https://www.wits.ac.za/yeovillestudio/events--outreach/>