

Now I'm a Person: Feedback by audio and text annotation

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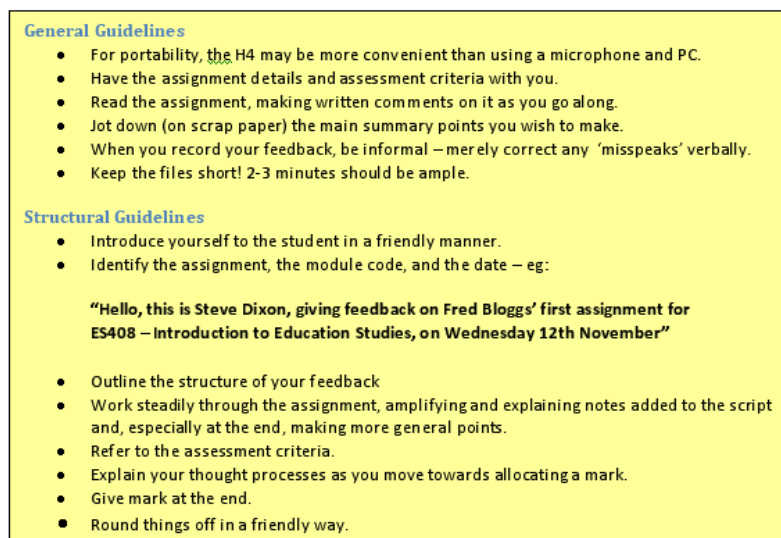
Abstract - With increased VLE use and blended approaches to delivery, opportunities are now available to re-appraise different ways of recording and giving feedback. Under the auspices of JISC's *Sounds Good 2*, staff at Newman University college trialled audio feedback in order to test the hypothesis that it can benefit staff and students by both saving assessors' time and providing richer feedback to students. During a compulsory first year module in Education Studies, 83 students were asked to submit a 1500 word essay as a text file via Moodle. This online submission allowed for both traditional written annotation of the original script as well as the embedding of an audio mp3 file for student feedback. Initial findings show that an overwhelming majority of respondents were very enthusiastic about the use of audio feedback with indications that the medium facilitates a shift in the nature of the feedback and the staff-student dynamic.

Introduction

Previous research has shown that the provision of digital audio feedback files can both save academics' time and facilitate an increase in feedback given (Ice et al, 2007), as well as highlighting the enthusiasm of students for the medium (Merry and Orsmond, 2008). Although Education Studies staff had used podcasting to support lectures, little had been done to explore the potential of digital audio for feedback purposes. In July 2008, the institution was invited to participate in *Sounds Good 2*, and it was decided to trial the project in a compulsory first year module - ES408: Introduction to Education Studies, where students are required to submit a short (1500 word) essay approximately a third of the way through the module. Although a summative piece, the timing of this assessment also allows for formative feedback within the modular structure. In the previous academic year (2007/8), electronic submission of this assignment via Newman's VLE (Moodle) had been successfully trialled, and the addition of audio feedback was deemed a natural progression to this. Notably, as well as giving audio feedback, electronic submission still allowed for in-script comments from marking tutors.

Background

A range of key decisions needed to be made, particularly regarding equipment, standards and training. For reasons of both quality of recording and compatibility of files, it was decided to offer staff the choice of using either a digital microphone with recording software (Audacity) or a digital sound recorder (H4 Zoom). Training sessions on the use of both tools and the uploading of files into Moodle were given, yet it was also felt that both general and structural guidelines were needed for the format of the feedback, the development of these being informed by both recommendations from *Sounds Good* (Rotheram 2009b) and institutional procedures. These would reflect the formative and informal nature of the process (particularly appropriate as this was the students' first ever HE assignment) as well as giving a set of protocols for staff to follow (**Fig. 1**).



General Guidelines

- For portability, the H4 may be more convenient than using a microphone and PC.
- Have the assignment details and assessment criteria with you.
- Read the assignment, making written comments on it as you go along.
- Jot down (on scrap paper) the main summary points you wish to make.
- When you record your feedback, be informal – merely correct any 'misspeaks' verbally.
- Keep the files short! 2-3 minutes should be ample.

Structural Guidelines

- Introduce yourself to the student in a friendly manner.
- Identify the assignment, the module code, and the date – eg:

"Hello, this is Steve Dixon, giving feedback on Fred Bloggs' first assignment for ES408 – Introduction to Education Studies, on Wednesday 12th November"
- Outline the structure of your feedback
- Work steadily through the assignment, amplifying and explaining notes added to the script and, especially at the end, making more general points.
- Refer to the assessment criteria.
- Explain your thought processes as you move towards allocating a mark.
- Give mark at the end.
- Round things off in a friendly way.

Fig 1 – Feedback Guidelines

Both the External Examiner and the College's Exams and Assessments were informed of the change of practice (Rotheram 2009b). 83 students were enrolled on the module, and, with regard to both personal preference and SENDA, all were given the option of receiving written feedback (or indeed both), although none requested this. A module team of 6 staff marked assignments, posting comments and feedback via Moodle (Fig. 2). Following the *Sounds Good 2* methodology, data-gathering was completed by questionnaires to both staff and students.

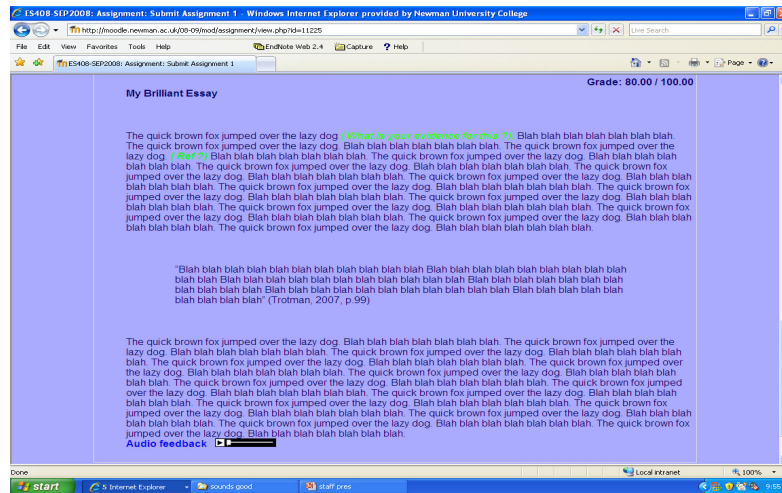


Fig. 2 - Student view of in-script comments and audio feedback via Moodle

Response from Education Studies Staff

All six marking staff completed the questionnaire, five using an H4 Zoom Recorder and one a digital microphone with Audacity software. It is worth noting that the same five who used the H4 found the process of recording and file transfer either easy or fairly easy, whereas the microphone user found this difficult (although this may have been due to network problems). Similarly, whereas the digital microphone user found that giving audio feedback actually took longer than traditional means, of those using the H4s four considered that the process saved time, whereas one thought it took about the same amount of time (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 - Education Studies Staff Responses

Staff commented on both the medium – *“interesting and exciting, a richer process”, “it’s more personal, and less ambiguous”, and “greater depth, as it’s more personal and formative”* – as well as reflecting on the nature of feedback itself and, indeed, their own professional practice – *“it changes nature and quality of feedback”, “it has profoundly reframed the way I give feedback”, and “it changes the student/tutor dynamic”*. All staff felt that they were able to give more feedback, and although a quantitative measurement was outside the scope of the project, this does to some extent echo Ice et al’s findings that giving audio feedback was able to “reduce the time required to provide feedback by approximately 75%”, and that “this reduction in time was coupled with a 255% increase in the quantity of feedback provided”. (2007: p19)

Student Responses

57 completed questionnaires were received from students. As the audio files were posted back to the students via Moodle, it is not surprising that all listened via a PC, and none via a portable MP3 player. However, what is interesting is that 86% listened to the files at home rather than on campus (see Fig. 4). As could possibly have been expected in the age of the “digital native”, there were no students who had any problems in accessing or listening to the files (see Fig. 5).

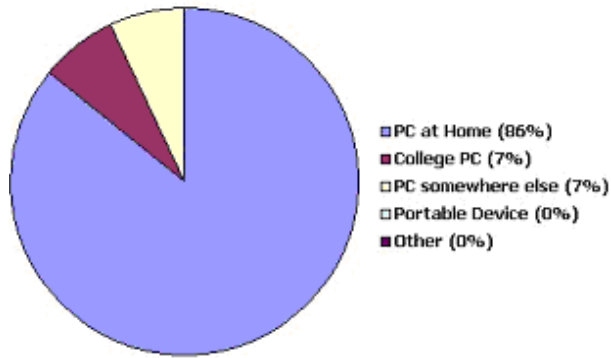


Fig. 4 - How students listened to the audio feedback



Fig. 5 – Ease of access and play

In Merry & Orsmond's study (2008) students reported that audio feedback included more in-depth strategies for improvement rather than pointing out problems, and they argued that "students perceive and implement audio file feedback in different and more meaningful ways than written feedback". Similarly, and although some leeway has to be allowed for the concept of novelty value, responses from students were overwhelmingly positive. Only 4 of the 57 respondents claimed that they would have preferred written feedback *in addition* to audio, and the only negative comment dealt with the *content* of the feedback, rather than the format. Comments ranged from the generally enthusiastic - "Do it for all modules!", "An excellent idea", "Brilliant!" - to those comparing mediums of feedback - "100 times better than written feedback" - to those stressing ease of understanding (particularly on how tone of voice was useful in gauging the importance of issues raised), the personal nature of the feedback and how this can be utilised differently:

"You can listen whilst going back over your essay" "Much more specific and easier to understand"
 "Easier to interpret" "Much more personal – a real person is talking to you"
 "Very helpful" "Better – it felt like Steve was in the room with me".
 "Much more encouraging – I've played the file again to help with other essays"

It could be argued that these hint at a paradigm shift in the feedback process – a move from statement to discourse and what Dagen et al (2008: p163) identify as the possibility of establishing more meaningful relationships with students. Similarly, there are echoes here of Hyland's (1990: p285) argument that for feedback to be generally effective, it must be *interactive*, what Carless (2006: p231) highlights as "assessment dialogue", rather than traditional feedback. Pointedly, students were *thanking* staff for feedback by their own volition, and none highlighted that they no longer had to decipher illegible handwriting.

Conclusion

Audio feedback can undoubtedly save marking time (dependent on staff familiarity), and its use has the potential to facilitate a discourse which is more detailed, pertinent and personal in nature, thus improving the students' learning experience. However, there *are* areas where audio feedback can be more time-consuming (not least for the students) – having also trialled its use at M level, where all assignments are double marked, it was notable how much longer it took the second marker to listen to comments before adding their own. Other staff have also questioned its potential to save time – notably those who use dictation software to generate text feedback. This, I feel, misses the point – surely it is the very nature of the audio medium in providing *informal* and *understandable* feedback that is crucial here? As Mason and Rennie highlight:

"Compared with written text, the spoken word can influence both cognition (adding clarity and meaning) and motivation (by conveying directly a sense of the person creating those words. Audio is an extremely powerful medium for conveying feelings, attitudes and atmosphere." (2008, p.70)

This echoes Salmon's (2008:p72) claim that the audio medium allows for the formative and emotional nature of feedback to shine through, or indeed, enables a sharing of ideas in a "real, raw and spontaneous way" (Exley and Dinnick, 2009: p165).

Generally, staff found the process much less onerous, and involvement led to reflection on the nature and purpose of feedback itself. Notably, although including endless guidelines on assessment, the institution's own Learning and Teaching Strategy includes nothing on the feedback process. Other institutional regulations also needed consideration – the fact that all audio files were transmitted via Moodle also meant that all were automatically archived, for example. The use of audio feedback easily allowed staff to meet the recommended maximum turnaround time for a module's assignments (3 weeks), although it may be some time before that for an individual assignment (15 minutes) is met, if ever. As Rotheram (2009b) shows, the 2005 HEFCE Student Survey found that feedback is one of the aspects of higher education with which students are least satisfied. The "Osney Grange Group" has gone so far as to argue that feedback has become a product rather than process, and no longer has emphasis on dialogue (Attwood, 2009). It is important to realise that the methodology used, although raising several interesting and pertinent issues, was basically a measure of time and preference, not the *effectiveness* of audio feedback, or indeed, an in-depth analysis of levels of student engagement - these are areas that require further study.

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