

Sounding out audio feedback: Does a more personalised approach tune students in or switch them off?

Dr Patricia Fell. (patricia.fell@bcu.ac.uk), Birmingham City University.

Abstract

This paper will report on the findings of an exploratory case study undertaken in order to inform and help shape the design of a proposed larger scale pilot on audio feedback within the Faculty of Health at Birmingham City University (BCU). The purpose of this case study was to explore students' attitudes and opinions to the use of digital audio files as a means of feedback on their assessed work. The 'students' chosen for this study were academic staff from within the faculty who had experienced audio feedback on the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programme. This sample was chosen as they offered a unique insight to feedback issues as both students and also as educationalists. A small scale (n=6) exploratory qualitative study was conducted using semi structured interviews as the data collection method.

The findings of this study support the emerging view from literature to date that audio feedback offers a more personalised form of feedback to students. Students do appear to appreciate the qualities such as tone of voice and nuances afforded by audio feedback. However, whether this improves the quality of student feedback, enriches the student learning experience or translates into increased student engagement with the feedback is not so certain.

The results from this study indicated that the personal nature of the feedback was not always sufficient to enhance student learning and could in some cases negatively impact on student engagement. This paper will explore key factors that affected the extent of student engagement in this case and present essential components of effective audio feedback, as identified by the students in this case study. Furthermore, the need for further research into the relationship between emotional intelligence and engagement with audio feedback will also be discussed.

Introduction

The purpose of the research reported in this paper was to undertake an exploratory case study of students' perceptions of audio feedback, the findings of which would inform the design of a proposed larger scale study. The research questions addressed within the study were:

- Do students feel that audio feedback enriches the student learning experience?
- How accessible do students find audio feedback as opposed to written feedback?
- Does audio feedback encourage greater engagement with the feedback?
- What, in the student's opinion, are the essential components of high quality, effective audio feedback?

Methods

A small scale (n=6) exploratory qualitative case study approach was adopted using semi structured interviews.

The population chosen for this research was that of staff working within the Faculty of Health who were currently or had recently been students on the PGCE programme. All these students had received, via e-mail, audio feedback in the form of a digital MP3 file following submission of a summative assignment.

Participants were recruited to the study following an invitation to participate via e-mail. Six out of ten invites agreed to participate. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed to avoid partial recall, bias and error (Denscombe, 2003; Silvermann, 2005). Themes from the interviews were identified and explored using data display, data reduction and interpretation as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Results and Discussion

In this study the majority of students perceived audio feedback to be easily accessible (6/6), more personalised (5/6), richer in terms of tone and nuances (5/6) and felt an increased sense of tutor involvement (4/6). Typical comments included:

“Liked it . It’s quite a personal way of getting feedback it did feel very personalI did feel as if he was talking to me directly”. (S1)

“Audio feedback is much richer, much richer, much more personalised, I think much more personalised” (S5)

“You picture the person saying it to you” (S5)

“Very very easy to access. Just clicked on it and away you go” (S3)

Whilst such potential benefits to the nature and content of feedback identified in this study support the findings of literature to date (Ice *et al.*, 2007; Ribchester *et al.*, 2007; Rotheram, 2007; King *et al.*, 2008; Merry and Orsmond, 2008; Nortcliffe and Middleton, 2008), the question still remains as to whether they are sufficient to fully engage students or to enrich the learning experience overall.

Certainly not all the students liked such a personalised approach, with one student stating:

“I heard probably about a couple of sentences in the beginning and I instantly realised it was too personal.... I’m certainly not a sensitive soul but it gets too personalFor me it was just a step too far in terms of feedback. I didn’t like it” (S3).

Another student found the personal, conversational nature of feedback very frustrating as she felt that she wanted to respond to issues raised.

“You couldn’t really respond to it so it was really frustrating” (S2)

In fact whilst the majority of students (5/6) had perceived value in the personal nature of audio feedback only two students stated that they would prefer audio feedback over written feedback.

Good practice guidelines advocate that feedback should be *for* learning rather than *of* learning (Black and William, 1998; Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Effective feedback should be central to formative learning. Only one student (S5) however engaged with the feedback on a deeper level and stated that they had applied the feedback in future work. Furthermore when asked if they were more or less likely to act on the feedback given when it is in an audio file format only two stated they would be more likely to act on audio feedback than written feedback.

Certainly the effect of preferred learning styles on the extent to which students retain and assimilate audio feedback was apparent from these interviews. This poses the question: should we be offering choice in the way we provide feedback?

“You visualise in a way that you don’t when you look and read text. There is something different so I think it’s a whole different mechanism of processing. In it allows for that perambulation in your brain you know... You can really engage with what has been said.”(S5)

“Personally I think I remember things better when I have read them” (S1).

Interviewees identified a number of issues which impacted on their engagement with audio feedback. Themes identified included tone of voice, physical separation of the feedback to the assignment, barriers to seeking tutorial guidance and lack of annotations and specific comments.

Finally, table one highlights what students felt were essential components of effective audio feedback. It is interesting to note that whilst some aspects were clearly specific to audio feedback, other factors relate to generic issues considered good practice for all types of feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; NUS, 2008). This study suggests that the technology needs to be used to provide carefully constructed and sensitively delivered feedback which are motivational and feedforward. In addition the findings indicate that audio feedback may work best for formative assessments or where detailed annotations are not required on scripts.

Conclusion

Whilst the limitations of such a small scale study are acknowledged, the findings do support the emerging view from literature to date that students perceive audio feedback to be accessible and more personalised than written feedback (Ice *et al.*, 2007; Ribchester *et al.*, 2007; Rotheram, 2007; King *et al.*, 2008; Merry and Orsmond, 2008; Nortcliffe and Middleton, 2008). Yet this study suggests that this perception alone may not be enough to engage students with this form of feedback and identifies factors which may affect the extent of engagement with audio feedback. Further research is required in this area, together with a need to explore the importance of emotional intelligence on the effectiveness of this exciting new mode of feedback.

Table 1: Essential components of audio feedback as perceived by students

Factor / Component	Sample Supporting Comments
Delivery in terms of clarity, tone and emotional intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Also there is the real matter of presentational style with audio feedback which is a big issue. You don’t want someone verbally scowling at you through a microphone.....A positive tone is definitely important.” (S3) • “They will be able to replay it, listening for the nuances in your voice. So I think that you would have to be very conscious and have some emotional intelligence as to what you are actually putting into the recording” (S4)
Importance of structure, possibly through use of a template	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think structure is important” (S1) • “Has to be a clear structure” (S3). • “So the structure is important” (S6)
Feed forward (formative) element	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Unless the feedback informs something then you are just not going to care” (S2). • “It really does for me boil down to whether and this goes for any feedback whether it’s going to help and whether its vital to the course or whether its just window dressing”(S3)
Accessibility and preparing students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It’s having it somewhere easily accessible. Maybe discussing it a bit more with the learners about what they can expect audio feedback to be like”(S1)
Use of accompanying written summary./ annotations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If it was be to audio I would prefer to have a written version as well”(S1) • “I would back it up with some bullet points for the student that they could then take forward” (S4). • “If it was a large piece of work that I received audio feedback on, I would need that annotation, I would so need that annotation” (S5).

References

- Black, P & William, D (1998) Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education*. 5 (1) pp 7-74.
- Denscombe M. (2003) *The Good Research Guide*. 2nd Edition. (London, Open University Press).
- Gibbs, G & Simpson, C (2004) Conditions under which assessment supports students’ learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. 1(1) pp 3-31.
- Hattie, J & Timperley, H (2007) The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*. 77 pp 81-112.
- Ice, P., Curtis, R., Phillips, P. & Wells, J. (2007). Using asynchronous audio feedback to enhance teaching presence and students’ sense of community. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. 11 (2) pp 3-25.
- King, D., McGugan, S & Bunyan, N (2008) Does it makes a difference? Replacing text with audio feedback. *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. 3 (2) pp145-163.

Merry S. & Orsmond P. (2008) Students' Attitudes to and Usage of Academic Feedback Provided Via Audio Files. *Bioscience Education*.11, available online: <http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/journal/vol11/beej-11-3.aspx>, last accessed 1.12.09.

Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis*. 2nd. Edition. (London, Sage).

National Union of Students (NUS) (2008) The great NUS feedback amnesty. *Briefing paper*. Available online: http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/2008-Feedback_Amnesty_Briefing_Paper1.pdf, last accessed 1.12.09.

Nicol, D.J. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2) pp 199-218.

Nortcliffe A.L & Middleton, A (2008) A three year case study of using audio to blend the engineers learning environment. *Journal of the Higher Education Engineering Subject Centre*. 3(2) pp 45-57.

Ribchester, C., France, D. & Wheeler, A (2007) Podcasting: A tool for enhancing assessment feedback? Education in a changing environment, University of Salford, September. Available online: http://www.ece.salford.ac.uk/proceedings/papers/15_07.pdf, last accessed 1.12.09.

Rotheram, B (2007) Using a MP3 recorder to give feedback on student assignments. *Educational Developments*. 8(2) pp 7-10.

Silverman, D. (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research*. 2nd Edition. (London, Sage).