

A Word in Your Ear

Proposal

Group Assessment Feedback: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

Introduction

Southampton Solent University's project: The use of audio to deliver effective feedback on student assessment; involved using audio feedback to improve student's perception of feedback given by their tutor and to provide the tutor with a potentially quicker or more efficient way of delivering feedback, in anticipation of online submission and, potentially, online marking.

The project raised a number of issues; of particular interest was feedback delivered to students working in groups which in one case was very successful and in another not at all workable.

This paper outlines the specific issues encountered with providing feedback to groups; the positive responses from the successful case study and the responses from the unworkable case study as well as an overview of the technology used to ensure effective secure delivery to groups.

The Good: Where it works

The successful case study involved a cohort of five groups of level 1 law students whose assessment involved giving a group presentation which was assessed by the first marker and recorded on DVD for second marking. The feedback was given in the form a recorded conversation between the first and second marker at the moderation stage. The feedback was delivered securely to each group via the University's VLE (Moodle).

Case Study 4 Outline

This case study involved the unit HND 2 Alternative Dispute Resolution LAW511. The unit contained 13 students who undertook group presentations as part of their assessment. The unit leader recorded the presentations onto DVD and made written notes throughout the presentations. The DVD was then passed on to be second marked by another tutor; It is normal practice for both markers to meet and moderate the marks, then arrange group appointments to give in depth feedback. For the audio project the tutor recorded the conversation between the two markers, in which in-depth detailed feedback was given on each on the group presentations. The audio file was then uploaded onto the VLE, which provided for a secure delivery of the audio file. Each group had individual access to the file which applied to them. The students were sent notification of the audio files via an email alert sent by the tutor from Moodle. The student surveys were uploaded onto their Moodle site for students to lodge their comments as to the quality of feedback given.

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Case Study 4 Findings

This case study posed no difficulties for the tutor in the administering of the technology. The use of the recording device was straight forward for the purposes of the case study. It was simply a case of recording the conversation between the first marker and the second marker to give feedback to each presentation group. The delivery of the audio files were deployed through the university's VLE using the 'Advanced Uploading of Assignments Tool'; although the tutor did require further training from LIS team in using the Moodle tool as there were issues of privacy to consider, the VLE also allowed for the monitoring of receipt of feedback by the students.

The time consideration involved in the creating of the audio files were similar to that of creating written feedback, although some time was saved overall. The process involved the two markers discussing the presentation from notes previously made during the presentation. Each audio file was around 5 to 6 minutes in length and so provided much more detail than that which could be achieved through written feedback. However, as the usual practice would be for the 2 markers to meet with presentation groups at a later date to present feedback; the creating of the audio files saved time for both tutors concerned as the normal process would require both tutor blocking out an entire afternoon to book group appointments; whereas the creating of all the audio files took an hour in total.

The quality of the feedback given was perceived as an improvement to written comments. Within each file, both tutors were able to delivery a great deal of depth to comments made, and the feedback followed the solid structure of the written feedback sheet, which allowed for cohesive constructive feedback, rather than an ad hoc conversation taking place between 5 students and 2 tutors. The overall quality of the feedback on the files was a definite improvement, as both markers were able to fully express in great detail any points that they wanted to make. This process also allows for the students to experience feedback from both markers, and more importantly provided a means of clarification of points made, so that points made were not incorrectly interpreted, which can be an issue within written feedback.

The tutor's perception of student engagement with the audio feedback was positive. The general opinion of the students was that the quality was an improvement compared to previous feedback received, and they certainly liked the idea of listening to the comments of both makers. However, the feedback given was summative and delivered at the end of term.

The tutor gave a positive overall response to the use of audio feedback. It was a method which worked with the assessment tested; it allowed for good quality in depth feedback, which also saved both the staff and students involved a great deal of time. The technology was straight forward and easy to use, and had great application to the teaching practices involved. The use of the university's VLE meant that this was a workable method, with solid accessibility for the tutor and students. It was of great importance to the tutor that the issue of privacy was considered, and again this was achieved through the VLE.

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The response rate from the students in case study 4 was reasonably solid as 10 responded to the pre audio survey and 5 responded to the post audio survey out of 13.

The general opinion from students was that the quality of the feedback given was very good and was a notable improvement to that of written feedback. *“Preferred to that of written feedback, made a lot more sense, and could decipher where and what could be improved”* The submitted comments from students showed that all found the recorded conversation between the markers added to the depth of the feedback received. *“Very helpful, good to hear detailed explanation of all relevant good and bad points of our presentation and what could have been done to achieve a greater mark. I feel that the two lecturers recording together helped incorporate both opinions to provide better overall guidance and feedback”*

The engagement of students from the audio feedback generated a mixed reaction; however, some did struggle to relate to future work outside of the unit studied, others felt the guidance given was of use to future studies. *“I took notes on the areas in which I could have improved”* According to the pre audio survey, the most common activity that student undertake after receiving feedback was to speak to peers, tutor and apply to next assignment. The general opinion from the students was that the audio provided specific guidance and was very helpful to consider when undertaking future work.

Accessibility did not appear to present student with any problems, with all students stating that they faced no technical problems in receiving the audio files. When asked their opinions on preference of type of feedback, only 1 student stated that they preferred written feedback. *“I prefer written feedback however, audio feedback is just as helpful”* Which meant that a clear majority preferred audio feedback *“Much easier to understand than written feedback, which is often hard to read. This is much clearer, giving the lecturers an opportunity to provide a detailed evaluation of our work. The fact that the mark was achieved by the discussion of both markers together, makes it easier to understand how the mark was granted”* overall, the general consensus was a preference to audio feedback, with many commenting that they would like to receive this method again in future.

The bad: Where it doesn't work

The unsuccessful case study will be used to highlight the difficulties within different assessment strategies. The audio feedback was created during the formative stage of client appraisal interviews. Students were working on a one to one basis as fitness instructors interviewing clients during a weekly gym class session, while the tutor circulated the room observing the interviews and recording her observations. The study revealed two inherent problems: The students found the tutors background comments distracting while they worked. The tutor struggled to edit and control the increasing number of audio files, as a full file could not be created in one go as she moved backwards and forwards around the interviews. Although it is clear that the students were not working in groups, it still falls under the issue of providing audio feedback concurrently to a multitude of students.

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Case Study 3 Outline

The tutor who took part in the third case study, used the unit LEI294 level 3 Personal Training for Special Conditions on the BAFPT degree. The assessment for this unit is a practical session in the gym where students interview clients to assess their training needs. The students undertake weekly practice sessions in which the tutor would give continuous formative feedback leading up to the formal assessment at the end of the year. The tutor's normal feedback practice was to create written feedback as she moved around the students and their clients. The project allowed the tutor the opportunity to digitally record her comments as she moved around the groups. The tutor, was however, faced with a number of difficulties with utilising this form of feedback (see findings) and felt that the files she had created needed to be rerecorded. It was the rerecorded files that were then sent to individual students via an email attachment. The tutor noted that this system was of no benefit to this type of assessment and felt the need to suspend any further attempts at creating audio files.

Case Study 3 Findings:

The third case study encountered a number of difficulties with using the technology; in creating the audio files and within the delivery of the audio files to the students. The first problem the tutor faced was in the general use of the recording device; the assessment required the tutor to oversee her students working with clients within the gym, which meant she needed to flick back and forth through the files as she circulated the gym adding feedback as and when necessary. The device allowed for the tutor to flick through the files, but the difficulty arose when trying to allocate the right file to particular students. As this became more impossible as the session continued with more files being created; it became apparent to the tutor that the recording device was not suitable for the purpose she required, and was of limited use to her need.

The tutor also faced complications in the delivery of the audio files to the students. It became evident that more training was needed in this area, as the tutor was unaware of the tools available on the university's VLE. The method chosen by the tutor was to upload the audio files and send them via an email attachment; although the tutor could not recall how this was achieved. This is a solid example of the need for further training, practice and technical support for tutors.

Due to the technical difficulties faced in case study 3, the tutor acknowledged that the quality of the feedback had been affected. It was essential for the gym session that students are given immediate feedback after the session, and this was not possible with audio feedback files. Although the tutor did attempt to create post event audio feedback files from the written notes created during the gym session. These notes were then transformed into a fresh audio recording, and these files were then sent to the students. The recording of the audio files was found by the tutor to be counter-productive, so this was not a technique to venture forward with in principle.

As far as student engagement, the tutor noted that this was difficult to measure as no feedback from students was obtained by the tutor. Although speculation that the student may

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have not read the email due to the written notes received immediately after the gym session. The lack of response from students meant that the tutor doubted whether the students engaged with the audio feedback. However, during the gym session, students were of the opinion that the recording of the audio feedback was distracting and disruptive to the student - client interviews, and so were of the preference of receiving written feedback in these circumstances.

The tutors overall impression of this method of giving feedback was that in principle it is a great concept that would certainly have a place in current teaching practices; just not in the practical gym sessions which required immediate feedback. The importance of recognising the availability of access to technology can be an essential tool; especially when a specific need is found. The tutor speculated that this type of technology could find a place with perhaps distance learning or learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Although the method became impractical for the gym sessions, the tutor was of the opinion that it could be put to use for the final practical gym session which is formally assessed, or during the marking of client files.

Due to the impractical nature of using the recording device, the tutor felt the need to abandon the experiment within the gym session. As such, there is no qualitative or quantitative data received from the students involved.

The Ugly: Technology / Secure Delivery

A key issue within providing audio feedback to groups was the need to provide a secure system of delivery. A method of secure delivery of feedback to students was devised using a combination of the Moodle 'Advanced Uploading of Assignments' activity in concert with the Moodle 'groups' tool in one instance, and private group forums in another. The devices used to capture the recording were the Sony UX80 and UX81 digital recorders that had the advantage of recording directly into mp3 format for ease of distribution involving no file conversion on the part of the tutor.

Recommendations

Effective Delivery: Project leader to review and improve delivery via the university's VLE; using Moodle's 'Advanced Uploading of Assignments' tool. This is to be the basis of a bespoke mechanism for delivery of audio feedback files.

Training: Project team is to embark upon creating staff training guidelines on how to effectively use available delivery mechanisms, and how to give good feedback (guidance on best practice).

Considerations

Accessibility: provisions need to be made for an alternative format for those who need them for accessibility purposes.

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Student Access: This should be considered as although students have access to audio files via VLE on campus, there could be concerns of accessibility for those off campus. For example: no internet access to the VLE site, or an issue of technology not being available: such as sound outputs in the computer; i.e. lack of head phones or sound card.

Staff Training and Technology: It would be essential to provide staff with the appropriate training in the effective use of technology. This would include training on the digital recording devices and in effective delivery of the audio files. The training would also need to include an element of contemplation of effective time management in both the creation and delivery of audio files. Staff also need to be provided with the appropriate equipment - 15 sets of mp3 recorders and headsets have been purchased from project funds for staff use.

Conclusion

Staff:

The findings generated from the staff interviews showed that overall there was definitely a place in their current teaching practices for providing audio feedback to their students. There appeared to be a distinct improvement in the quality of the feedback compared to that of other forms, namely written. Most found it evident that audio allowed for far more detail and clarity of comment in expression. However, this was just the perception of the staff involved.

The technology seemed relatively straight forward and easy to use. However, it is necessary that staff receive the requisite training in the use of the recording device and in the delivery of the audio files via the VLE. Two of the tutors involved both expressed a need for further training in the technology. All members felt that there could be a place and need for audio within the units they teach.

As far as time saving, this generated more of a mixed response amongst staff. For some it was evident that audio could prove to be a time saving exercise and for one it was impractical and became counter-productive. However, most were of the opinion that this method is one which needs practice and over time will become quicker with use. The main concern raised was the university and external examiners acceptance of the audio files as a record of assessed work and feedback.

Students:

The overall general opinions amongst the students was that the quality of the feedback had improved, compared to that of the normal method of feedback. There appeared to be no confusion as to the points/comments raised in the feedback files, so there was a definite clarity within the feedback. There was a good solid reaction to the audio files, and no comments suggested that the feedback was of poor quality. Many felt that as each file was around 5 minutes in length, this provided far more depth than that which could be achieved in writing a paragraph on the front of the assignment sheet.

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The level of student engagement is difficult to measure due to the limited quantitative data received from students, as only 2 out of the 4 case studies from the wider study received any feedback on the audio files. The comments that were submitted showed that there was some engagement with the feedback provided on the audio files as students noted the different activities they undertook as a result from tutor comments. However, this is difficult to accurately compare to the activities undertaken as a result of other methods of feedback delivery. From the pre and post survey results, it does suggest that fewer students admitted to speaking to peers and more students noted the areas of improvement in their work as a result of the audio files.

The audio files generated a mixed reaction in student perception of feedback. Although the majority of students admitted a preference to audio feedback, some had reservations and noted a preference to written words on their work. Most of the data received from the students contained positive comments to both a novel method of feedback delivery and the improvement of quality in feedback. Overall, 62% of students preferred audio feedback; 15% preferred written and 23% noted no preference. It can therefore be concluded that, at the very least audio is no worse than other methods, and at best, provides more in depth, detailed feedback, which is easier to understand.

To summarise group audio feedback

- It can be effective in the right group environment
- VLE modes of delivery are secure
- Students engagement measured by discussion forum
- Students liked it!
- Reasonably straightforward process provided support given
- Can be time saving over time (and with practice)
- Accepted by external examiners