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Sounds Good: using audio to give assessment feedback

Bob Rotheram

Introduction

Feedback on student work is a problem in higher education (see, for example, the National Student Survey, 2009). On the one hand, students often complain they get too little, too late, and that they sometimes struggle to read or understand it. On the other hand, staff sometimes grumble that they spend ages assessing students' assignments, but students are only interested in their mark, so don't read the feedback. Worse, some don't even bother to collect it.

Could technology help? Some years ago, Rust suggested using audiotape.

"While reducing the time you spend, this may actually increase rather than reduce the amount of feedback given ... Students frequently say that they get far more information from taped comments, including the tone of one's voice, than they do from written comments, and they also do not have to try to cope with some of our illegible writing."
(Rust, 2001: 22)

But the idea didn't catch on. Perhaps it was partly because of the clunky technology of the time: audio cassettes. Since then, digital audio has arrived: 'ripping' music CDs, Skype and the 'Listen Again' facility on the BBC website are but a few examples; many students have MP3 players. Digital audio is easy to record, manipulate and transport. I wondered whether it would be worth trying to use it for feedback.

My first experience (Rotheram, 2007) was very positive and encouraging. The students were new lecturers on a PGCHE programme, where the norm was to provide extensive feedback on each assignment – 500 words or so. This used to take me quite a while to write, but I was soon able to save time by recording my comments with the free software package 'Audacity', and sending each student an MP3 file containing their feedback. They loved it, noting its highly personal nature and that it engaged them more than written comments. Clearly, using digital audio feedback benefited me and the students. They probably weren't typical students and there may have been a novelty effect, but it seemed sensible to explore further.

Sounds Good

The opportunity came when the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded my project 'Sounds Good: Quicker, better assessment using audio feedback'. Initially, the project was sponsored from January – July 2008. During this time a team of Leeds Met lecturers experimented with digital audio to give formative and summative feedback on students' coursework. Later, a second stage, 'Sounds Good 2', was funded until February 2009. In this phase the work at Leeds Met expanded and audio feedback was introduced to three other higher education institutions: Newman University College, Birmingham; University of Northampton; and York St John University.

The main aim was to test the hypothesis that using digital audio for feedback can benefit staff and students by:

- saving assessors' time (speaking the feedback rather than writing it)
- providing richer feedback to students (speech contains non-verbal communication).

Tutors used digital audio to record formative and summative feedback on students' coursework, typically in MP3 format. The feedback was usually delivered via email and Virtual Learning Environments.

The project was mainly a qualitative study, but it produced a few statistics. Taking the two phases together, 38 lecturers in the four institutions supplied audio feedback to over 1,200 students at all educational levels from Foundation Degree and first-year undergraduate to doctoral. The student numbers on modules ranged from 3 to 151.

Sounds Good received considerable positive publicity, including being shortlisted for a *Times Higher* award. During the funding period I gave 24 presentations about audio feedback in the UK, US and Canada, mostly by invitation.

Learning points

The project plan contained five main evaluation questions, listed here with brief answers:

1. Without reducing the amount of feedback, in what circumstances can using digital audio save assessors' time?

The most favourable circumstances seem to be:

- The assessor is comfortable with the technology
- The assessor writes or types slowly but records speech quickly
- Substantial feedback is given
- The audio file can be delivered easily to the student.

2. Does digital audio feedback improve students' learning experience?

Students were overwhelmingly positive about receiving audio feedback on their coursework. They frequently remarked approvingly about its personal nature and the detail provided, evidence that the lecturer had carefully considered their work.

"Very helpful. It felt like the tutor was able to expand more... Often when you read feedback, things can get misunderstood or meant in a different way. I felt this way was very clear."

On the other hand, a small minority of students said they preferred written feedback; a few asked for both audio and written comments.

3. What do assessors think of digital audio as a medium for providing feedback to students?

The Sounds Good team were strongly in favour of audio feedback; most said they intend to continue using it. Only a minority managed to save time but, even if they didn't, several members of the team commented that they were able to give more, and higher-quality, feedback using audio, which they felt was worthwhile. One remarked:

"The feedback became almost an online tutorial."

4. What recommendations are there for improved practice?

Practice guidelines have been published on using digital audio for assessment feedback (Rotheram, 2009). They are grouped under four headings: saving time; technical matters; administration; feedback structure. The main points are:

- Whether you eventually save time will depend on factors such as how much feedback you give and how quickly you write, type and speak
- Consider accepting a longer pay-back period. Experiment with spending more time in the short term, using audio to give students more extensive advice and richer feedback. It may save you and your colleagues work in the long term
- Make your audio files as small as possible, so they can be sent quickly and stored economically
- Use the minimum acceptable sound quality for the particular purpose
- Keep feedback short – don't 'overdo it'. Only go beyond five minutes if there is a good reason
- Make sure key administrative and quality assurance staff accept you are giving audio rather than written feedback.

5. What should be explored next?

Here are some issues which seem to be worth exploring, if resources permit:

- Can staff become quicker in providing audio feedback if they persist?
- Does using audio to provide more extensive guidance and richer feedback lead to saving staff time in the medium-to-long-term?
- How may the practice guidelines be improved?
- How successfully can audio feedback be combined with electronic submission of assignments?
- Can speech-to-text software be used to generate written feedback automatically (and sufficiently faithfully) at the same time as audio feedback?
- Can the transmission of feedback files to students be automated? (Doing it manually is problematic for large cohorts.)
- Does the novelty of audio – for students and staff – wear off with repeated use?
- How effective is audio feedback? How well does it enable students to learn?

Of these issues, perhaps the most urgent is automating the transmission of feedback files to students.

Conclusions

Sounds Good worked very well. It enabled some valuable exploration and produced useful practice guidelines. Using audio for assessment feedback proved popular with students and staff. The hypothesis – that audio feedback can benefit both parties – was substantiated in some circumstances. Most UK higher education lecturers would probably find it worth giving audio feedback an extended trial with at least some of their assessment work. For busy people it would be sensible to ‘start small’ and look for ‘quick wins’, including:

- ‘one-to-many’ communications, such as feedback to a whole group
- where detail or the personal touch are particularly important.

However, some caution is appropriate. Sounds Good generated case studies, some of them very small, about the use of digital audio or video, so it is difficult to generalise from the project. Also, Sounds Good did not study the effectiveness of audio feedback. Nevertheless, comments from students and staff were remarkably consistent – and generally positive – throughout.

Much remains to be explored. There is plenty of scope for larger trials of audio feedback, attempting to tease out the variables and to study its effectiveness. Audio feedback is already an attractive proposition. If assessors could be confident that – regardless of cohort size – students could quickly be sent their feedback, even more would probably find it worth adopting.

Website

www.soundsgood.org.uk (for project blog and downloads including final report)

References

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