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Personal Examination Feedback Using MP3 Audio

Introduction

The driving factors for this study were two-fold; student feedback requirements and the time spent by academic tutors providing individual feedback several months post-examination sitting. National Student Survey responses for Leeds Metropolitan University BA Marketing students (both 2007 and 2008) had highlighted the requirement for improved feedback (National Student Survey, 2008). This was a common issue across many institutions (Race, 2007) particularly with reference to examination feedback.

Leeds Metropolitan University's response to this has been the use of 'generic feedback' available to all students – however, during Semester 1 in the 2007/8 academic year a total of 60% of students studying Strategic Marketing and Strategic Marketing Management within the Faculty of Business & Law arranged individual examination feedback sessions. A 'feedback week' post-results release resulted in two students attending. However, in the weeks following in excess of 40 students requested personal feedback sessions. Each student was provided with a photocopy of their examination paper, the generic feedback sheet and the examination paper they sat. In addition personal feedback was provided, resulting in the total time spent being in excess of one hour per student. Over 40 hours had been spent by tutors providing individual feedback for this one small subject area, sometimes two months after the actual examination had been sat. There must be a better solution – both for students in terms of feedback provision and academics' work/life balance (Carless, 2006).

Feedback is an essential component of the educational process (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004) and is "the basis for self-correcting enquiry" (Novak, 2002; p. 110). It is a motivational tool (Salmon, 2004) for students and an opportunity to reflect on progress (Race, 2007). Audio feedback mechanisms offer 'think-aloud reading' feedback for listeners to evaluate their performance (Shriver, 1992). The use of individual audio feedback within assignments has occurred at a pilot level previously (Merry & Orsmond, 2007) however no individual examination feedback for marketing students has previously been attempted.

Leeds Metropolitan University has been piloting an audio feedback process during the 2007/8 academic year, termed Sounds Good, operated by Bob Rotherham (Rotherham, 2008) providing group assignment feedback pilots together with group examination and individual assignment feedback pilots on a more limited scale. A decision was taken by the module leader for the two Strategic Marketing and Strategic Marketing Management modules to utilise examination feedback – on an individual rather than group basis, representing a significant development with the Sounds Good pilot process. By undertaking this method the intention was to improve feedback quality and delivery times, together with reducing the requirement for tutor feedback. This project was incorporated into the 2008/9 Sounds Good 2 pilot project as the only individual examination audio feedback pilot operated within Leeds Metropolitan University.

Methodology

The pilot study commenced in Semester 2 2007/8 with one subject area continuing into Semester 1 2008/9 with two subjects. This is planned to continue into Semester 2 2008/9 at a much-increased level due to the differential nature of student numbers on the Strategic

Marketing module within the Faculty of Business & Law (Table 1). Prior to the use of individual audio feedback consent was gained from the students on each module.

Table 1: Examination feedback totals

Subject	Examination Feedback		
	Sem 2 2007/8	Sem 1 2008/9	Planned Sem 2 2008/9
Strategic Marketing (UG Level 3)	-	16	138
Strategic Marketing Management (Level M)	27	37	29
Total	27	53	167

Each students' paper was marked anonymously using both pen-based comments together with an MP3 audio recording using their student number as a reference code and filename. This was then recorded using PC-based audio recording software and headset microphone concurrent with the examination marking for that particular student. For the 3-hour examination paper each recording lasted 2-3 minutes, with each recorded MP3 file plus e-mail taking an addition 3 minutes per paper to complete.

This recording was attached to an e-mail sent to their university e-mail account together with a copy of the required generic feedback. Several options for feedback delivery were considered, including delivery using the university's own online learning system X-Stream, however personal student e-mail accounts were the logical route to ensure recipient accuracy.

In order to gauge the suitability of this feedback method the e-mail incorporated five open-ended questions designed to evaluate student perception.

1. Is providing audio feedback a helpful approach?
2. Would you like individual audio feedback again - for examinations and/or assignments?
3. Would you prefer the individual feedback to be delivered in another format; i.e. alternative audio format or video delivery?
4. What could be done do improve audio feedback in the future?
5. Is the delivery method (i.e. to your student email account) the most appropriate method or could alternative methods be used (i.e. USB stick/X-Stream)?

The use of an open-ended methodology provided the opportunity for detailed student responses rather than a more simplistic Likert-scale method (Wilson, 2006). As such, the expected level of responses was lower from the 70 students receiving individual audio feedback with a more detailed quality of response.

Findings

A total of 70 individual audio examination feedback MP3 files were sent between May 2008 and January 2009. Seven student feedback responses were received (10% response rate) via e-mail incorporating detailed comments.

Question:

1. *Is providing audio feedback a helpful approach?*

”As an international student that English is not my first language, I am very happy for this method. I will be forced to understand an analysis in English. Although the lack of this method is a person could misunderstand because reading is more easy to understand than listening.” [M-level Student MR]

”I found the exam feedback very helpful and useful. It provides very good feedback which is clearly presented and easy to use. I think also that it will help students to improve upon exam technique because the recording states what you have done correctly and also where you can improve. This may improve future exam results.” [Level 3 Student CD]

” Providing feedback is helpful but i don't see any interest in receiving it as an audio file. A written feedback would have been as effective.” [Level 3 Student LC]

“Your innovative endeavour to help students with audio feedback is very much appreciated and I do hope future students seek the same benefit.” [M-level student RS]

“I really appreciate the efforts taken by you in providing us the express result via MP3.” [M-level student SS]

“This initiative of yours is really helpful in early and easy access to our results.” [M-level student NS]

2. *Would you like individual audio feedback again - for examinations and/or assignments?*

”Yes, I would be happy to receive a feedback in audio.” [M-level Student MR]

” I also found the generic feedback for everybody who took the exam useful as well.” [Level 3 Student CD]

” Only if it is the only type of feedback i could get. I'd rather have an audio feedback than none at all.” [Level 3 Student LC]

3. *Would you prefer the individual feedback to be delivered in another format; i.e. alternative audio format or video delivery?*

”It doesn't have to be in video.....In audio is enough.” [M-level Student ML]

” I would prefer receiving a written feedback. Mostly because I have a photographic memory so i don't really remember any of what i just listened to. Also, being an international student, when i will send it to my parents (who will probably be asking for it) I will have to translate it to them because they can read English (or it is easier to translate it using automatic translation software) but they will have difficulties understanding an audio file.” [Level 3 Student LC]

4. *What could be done do improve audio feedback in the future?*

” Just make sure that the sound quality is good. It would be very difficult to hear it if the sound quality is just moderate.” [M-level Student MR]

”Maybe give a little bit more details about both what we have written, because when listening to the feedback we don't have our paper with us and might not remember exactly what we did, and what the teacher expected from us (I don't know if we get any additional feedback or if it is any more detailed. If it is receiving these informations later is enough as long as we get them). Maybe give some examples. Also be a little more specific than "scores poorly" but give some idea of the grade per question.” [Level 3 Student LC]

“The feedback was beneficial as it outlined what was expected in case study analysis and what we had missed in our answers. However a more in-depth analysis of the paper would be beneficial rather than just an outline of the key issues noticed. It is very beneficial for international students to receive this kind of feedback as it will give us a clear direction in what is expected in case study analysis and open book examinations.” [M-level Student SS]

5. *Is the delivery method (i.e. to your student email account) the most appropriate method or could alternative methods be used (i.e. USB stick/X-Stream)?*

” Sending it via email is the best because student tend to open his/her email more often than X-Stream. No need via USB Flash Disk, it would just make things more complicated.” [M-level Student ML]

” Getting the feedback sent to your student email account was a good way of doing it; however, I think that sending it through X-Stream would be just as suitable.” [Level 3 Student CD]

”I didn't mind receiving the feedback by email but for student who are more concerned by the confidentiality of their feedback i think it might be safer to send it on X-stream.” [Level 3 Student LC]

In addition from the Semester 2 2007/8 cohort only one student requested individual feedback following the audio e-mail with three students from the Semester 1 2008/9 cohort requesting feedback, representing under 6% of the cohort rather than 60%. As such this represents a significant time-saving for the academic tutor even when including the recording time for the audio MP3 file.

Conclusions

The process of providing individual audio feedback for assignments is a new development within many academic circles. To expand this into individual examination feedback is a challenging one – with varying responses from students, akin to other studies using audio feedback (Merry & Orsmond, 2007). Developmentally students appear to strongly favour both the earlier feedback and the usage of individual audio files whilst also offering time-saving from an academic perspective without the requirement for additional visual aspects. The pilot will continue into Semester 2 2008/9 as part of the Sounds Good 2 project, with further evaluation being possible from a sample size approaching 250 audio feedback reports. In addition it is recommended that other institutions consider the use of individual examination feedback by audio in order to improve student development.

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