

‘Are you listening please?’ The advantages of electronic audio feedback compared to written feedback

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Feedback on students’ work is, probably, one of the most important aspects of learning, yet students’ report, according to the National Union of Students (NUS) Survey of 2008, unhappiness with the feedback process. Students were unhappy with the quality, detail and timing of feedback. This paper examines the benefits of using audio, as opposed to written, feedback in an attempt to overcome student criticisms. Using the Audacity audio software MP3 feedback files were created and sent to 60 students either via a VLE or email. The students were asked to complete an online survey on audio feedback. Twenty-six students responded. The results were, generally, very positive. The use of audio feedback seemed to have overcome the problems reported by the NUS survey. Students are at least 10 times more likely to open audio files compared to collecting written feedback. The paper concludes with reflections, and advice, on introducing audio feedback.

Keywords: feedback; audio; audacity; MP3 files; technology

Introduction

It is the contention of this paper that audio feedback offers a positive advance on written feedback and might, therefore, overcome problems associated with the latter.

The importance of feedback to students in higher education has been widely recognised. Bloxham and Boyd (2007, 20), for example, identify feedback as ‘the most important aspect of the assessment process in raising achievement’. However, opinion remains divided on the extent to which students’ value feedback (Hartley, Skelton, and Higgins 2002; Hounsell et al. 2006). It might even be the case that ‘feedback, even of the most carefully crafted type, could be fated to be misunderstood and ignored’ (Mutch 2003, 73).

The requirement, and expectation, of teachers to provide feedback by their employers is, however, not in question. One reason for this could be the suggested link between feedback and student retention (Denton 2003). Feedback needs to be accessed by students as they study but, unfortunately, feedback can be a post-module experience for most students. Only 30% of students agreed that feedback was prompt (the NUS Survey 2008). Using audio feedback for formative and summative work could overcome the timeliness issue.

The increase in student numbers in higher education has had a major impact on many areas of academia. Gibbs (1992, 5) records a harassed teacher’s comment;

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'We've got 120 students on the course. That's four weeks' solid work doing nothing else but marking. Are we going to lower our standards?' Is the standard under threat here the quality of feedback? Has the 'massification' of higher education increased the marking and feedback load but reduced the time, per student, devoted to feedback? Carless, Joughin, and Liu (2006) found that tutors felt feedback could be very time consuming. Furthermore, the adoption of the semester, and module, has led, according to Heywood (2000, 169), to a pattern of 'the next semester begins and often students receive no feedback about their results until much later. Anxiety may be caused by lack of feedback.'

It is the our view, despite comprehensive work on how to deliver good quality feedback, for example Juwah et al. (2004), that the current dominant method of handwritten comments on students' work, summarised on a triplicate coversheet and returned weeks after the submission date is no longer, if it ever was, appropriate. Higher education institutions' approach to the delivery of feedback has been slow in responding to advances in technology and the increase in student numbers. The consequences are student dissatisfaction with feedback and deterioration in the quality of feedback to students. For example, the NUS Survey (2008) of student opinions showed the following responses.

This is not a ringing endorsement of universities' ability to deliver feedback by those who have spent three years studying for a degree and has been observed by others including O'Brien and Sparshatt (n.d.). Newstead and Hoskins (2003) suggest that certain university procedures and actions can de-motivate students, in particular feedback, as both the mark awarded and written comments are very important to student levels of motivation. Given the poor performance by universities, as evidenced by the NUS Survey (2008), in delivering feedback what can new technologies offer by way of improvement?

The advent of audio feedback technology is relatively new and its use in higher education as a vehicle for feedback is in its infancy. Consequently, there is not a substantial body of research on the subject. Merry and Orsmond (2007), Ice et al. (2007) and Rotherham (2008) show positive responses by students to audio feedback. Moreover, Ice et al. (2007) found audio feedback possessed increased effectiveness over text-based feedback relating to involvement and retention of content. Interestingly, students felt audio feedback showed that the tutor cared more about them. This is a key point when considering retention of students (Tinto 2002). The frequency of feedback is very important in encouraging students to stay, which is entirely consistent with Heywood's (2000) comment above. It is the authors' belief that the method of delivery of feedback along with its quality and frequency can have a positive impact on students' experience of higher education and their development as learners.

Table 1. Students' views on feedback.

| Statement | All university median agreed/strongly agreed (%) |
|---|--|
| Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand | 38 |
| I have received detailed comments on my work | 36 |
| Feedback on my work has been prompt | 30 |

This paper examines the use of audio feedback, delivered through a virtual learning environment (VLE) and email, from tutor, and student, perspectives. The authors seek to confirm and build on previous work in this area in the context of a new university by asking, 'To what extent, if any, does electronic audio feedback represent an improvement on written feedback in terms of efficiency (staff experience) and perceived quality (student learning and experience)?'

The paper will analyse the experience of two lecturers, at an inner city, new university, using audio files for both formative, and summative, feedback. A comparison of audio, and written, feedback in terms of time taken to deliver and practicality is conducted. An online survey, using Survey Monkey, was distributed with the audio files to students at certificate, and intermediate, levels. The results of the survey provide evidence of students' views on audio feedback.

Method

Tutor experience

The analysis of tutor experience involved the authors comparing marking times for scripts using written and audio feedback methods. The tutors read students' work and annotated as normal. Then, using Audacity software to produce audio files, the tutors created MP3 audio feedback files. A comparison was then made between the average length of an audio file and how long it took to write feedback for pieces of work from the same module. We wanted to discover if audio feedback was more efficient than the written variety.

Student experience

To examine the student experience, we invited all students who received audio feedback to complete an online survey. The survey questions, see Appendix 1, were generated in part from previous studies on the subject and also on the functions of feedback. Ice et al. (2007) and Merry and Orsmond (2007) reported that students responded very positively to audio feedback so the survey asked students to rate the following statements using a summated rating (Lickert) scale.

Results

Tutor experience

Overall, both tutors found the software easy to download, understand and use. In the context of a VLE as a vehicle for disseminating feedback to students, there were no issues. However, the tutor who emailed students their feedback found some issues about the size of the audio file. This was overcome by using MP3, as opposed to WAV, files.

In terms of time taken to deliver audio feedback, the average time was five minutes for a 2000-word coursework. This is significantly less than the typical 30 minutes to write comments on the coversheet and in the body of the work. This could help to overcome the 'workload' issued raised by Gibbs' (1992) stressed lecturer. The rule of thumb appears to be that one-minute of audio is equal to six minutes of writing.

To test the efficiency of audio feedback an experiment was conducted. Appendix 2 shows an example of written feedback. The tutors took, on average, three minutes

to type the sample, four minutes to write it by hand and 40 seconds to record it. Again, audio is significantly quicker. This is no surprise as we speak quicker than we write. The ratio appears to be, of the order of, one minute talking equals six minutes writing. So, given the technology, it makes sense to use audio but what did the students think?

Student experience

All 60 students who received audio feedback were asked to complete the survey and 26 responded to give a response rate of 43%. Their responses, using the Lickert scale and based on the questions listed in Appendix 1, are reported in Figures 1–5.

Free text responses

As interesting and informative as the above tables are, we were more interested to read the opinions of the respondents so we asked a final, freeform question. The students

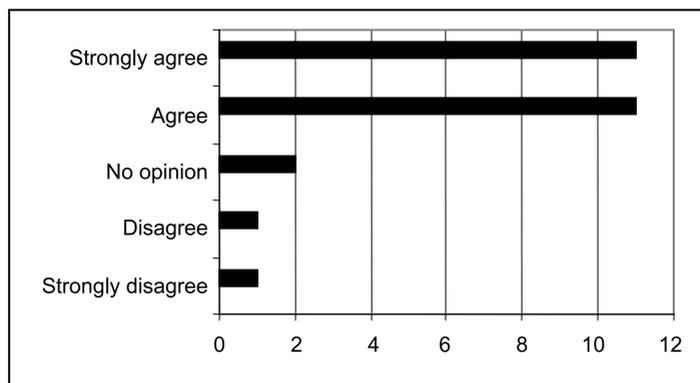


Figure 1. The audio feedback helped me to see what I had missed out in my coursework.

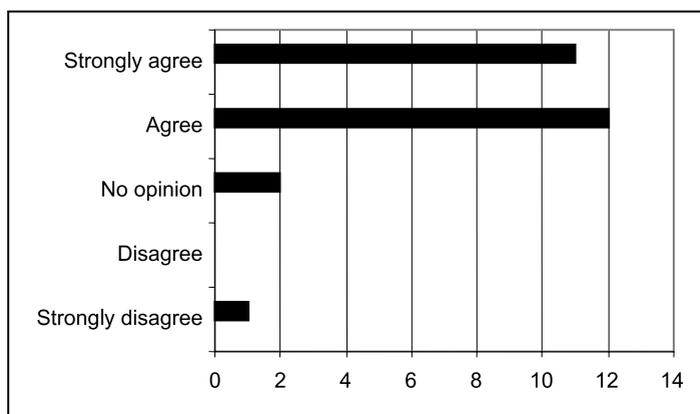


Figure 2. The audio feedback helped me to see how I could have improved my coursework.

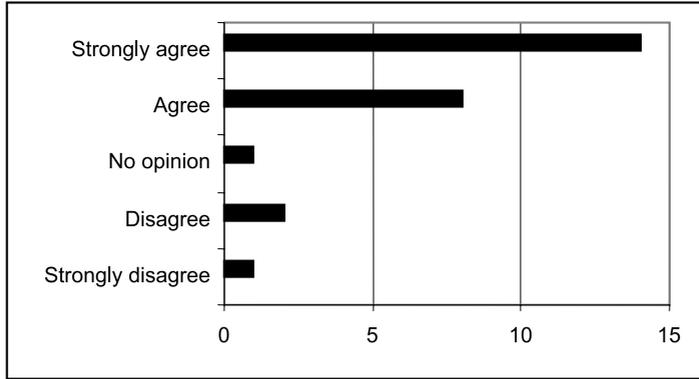


Figure 3. I found it easy to access the audio feedback.

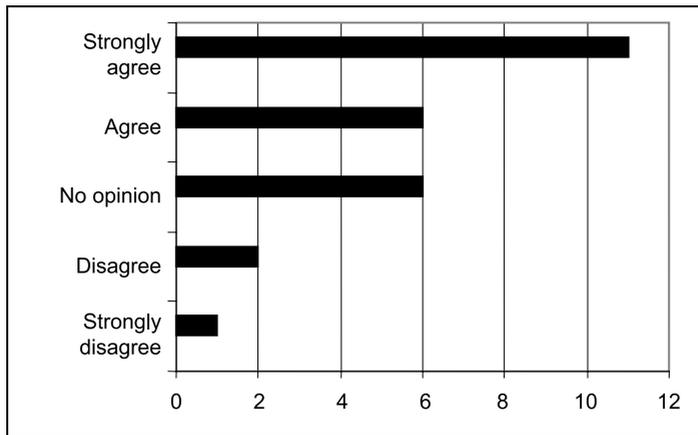


Figure 4. I found the audio feedback more helpful than the written comments on the coursework and pink mark sheet that I have received for other modules.

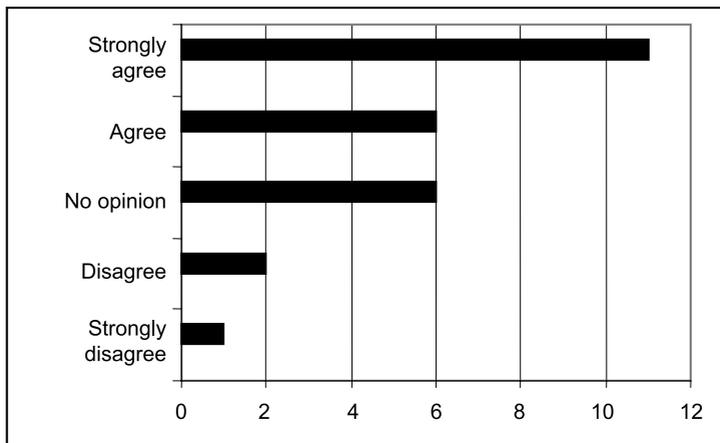


Figure 5. In future I would like to receive my feedback using the audio method.

were asked the following: 'Please could you use the box below to give any comments not covered above? You might want to tell us about how the audio feedback could be improved, what you particularly liked/did not like about audio feedback or other comments about audio feedback in general.' These freeform responses are reported in Appendix 3.

Analysis

Tutor experience

Overall, the tutors found using the audio feedback method very easy. There were not significant issues in using the Audacity software to record feedback or the VLE to disseminate feedback to students.

Comparing the efficiency of audio feedback with other methods, as shown by the Appendix 2 example, demonstrates that audio feedback is fast and, probably, much quicker than written, or typed, feedback.

It should also be remembered that writing, typing and speaking speeds would vary between individuals (Rotherham 2008), but both authors found that they were able to deliver much more detailed, bespoke feedback to students. The spoken word can possess greater emphasis than the written word and the points made can be more pointed. As Student 12 says 'It was a personal address to me and my coursework, quite like sitting in John's office and getting him to explain what I need to do.' This is, we believe, one of the most significant advantages of audio feedback as the audio monolog can use a wider, richer and more direct vocabulary than formal written English permits.

Student experience

This paper's findings are in line with Merry and Orsmond's (2007) conclusion that students are very positive about audio feedback. Looking at Figures 1 and 2, it is clear that the majority of respondents feel very positive towards the audio feedback they received as 85% agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback helped them see what they had missed out from their coursework, and 88% agreed or strongly agreed that the feedback would help them improve their coursework. The students' comments also confirm the point about quality and detail, with 75% of students saying that they felt the audio feedback was more detailed than written comments.

Figure 5 presents the results of student preference between audio feedback and the written approach. The result was 65% saying that they agreed or strongly agreed that audio feedback was preferred. This majority view could be due to the poor standard of feedback they receive in general as evidenced by the 2008 NUS survey and some of the comments made regarding written feedback being:

- lost sometimes by the undergraduate centre (student 4). This cannot happen with audio files.
- impossible to read the scribbles on the coursework/pink sheet (student 5). Hopefully, the audio files overcome this issue.
- the pink sheet is a standardised collection of 40 words (student 8). Both students 8 and 12 commented on the personal nature of the audio files (Rotherham 2008; Merry and Orsmond 2007; Ice et al. 2007) despite the absence of face-to-face meetings.

It would appear that audio files could overcome the problems associated with written comments. In addition, it is easier to keep a record of this type of feedback for future reference.

There is, however, the issue of audio feedback for hearing impaired students. Tutors would need to be alerted to student disability so that arrangements can be made to facilitate the learning of students with disabilities. Obviously, audio feedback would not be appropriate. But audio feedback is preferable for students with reading and sight issues.

The fact that audio feedback was delivered quickly (students 5, 6 and 10) was seen as an advantage (Hounsell et al. 2006). Finally, it is worth focussing on the comment of student 2 who said that he would like the mark to be given immediately because this would reduce anxiety. Rotherham (2008) suggests decoupling audio feedback from the mark by producing two audio files. This is possible but might stop the student listening to the feedback.

However, when Figure 4 is compared with the results of Figure 5 which asked whether students would like to receive audio feedback in the future, the answer was, again, very positive, with 92% saying they agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to receive audio feedback from their tutors in the future.

It is the authors' experience that very few students bother to collect their written feedback after summative assessment. Audio feedback may help to address this as the feedback is sent to the student. Blackboard and email can record which students have opened their audio file and when it was opened. Our experience is that the collection response by students from tutors' offices is less than 5% while downloading of audio files was never less than 50%.

Finally, it is worth considering the points made by students 5 and 12 that audio feedback can be listened to anywhere. This is a particular advantage for international students who are often unable to come into the university to pick up a written form. Figure 3 shows that 85% of students had no difficulty accessing the audio feedback. Drilling down into the no opinion or disagree responses only one out of four used the VLE, the others received the audio file by email. This demonstrates the efficacy of VLEs as a method for the dissemination of audio feedback and addresses the question posed by Merry and Orsmond (2007) regarding the integration of the method into VLEs.

Conclusion and recommendations

The positive findings of previous studies are confirmed by this study. Tutors found the method to be efficient and effective and the response from students was very positive.

These findings should be tempered by the potential halo effect, in that audio feedback is new and, in contrast to generally poor standards of existing feedback, is received with disproportionately high levels of student enthusiasm. Perhaps, more importantly, there is a danger that audio feedback might substitute face-to-face tutor student interactions, which would not be a desirable outcome.

While there might be issues to be addressed relating to the use of audio feedback, the overall response to this paper and others research is very encouraging. In the face of increasing numbers of 'tech savvy' students who will demand better standards of feedback, the audio feedback method will go some way to addressing their needs. Furthermore, the use of VLEs to disseminate feedback is very helpful, in particular to

international students who will not be able to access feedback having returned to their country of origin at the end of the semester.

Students appear to enjoy audio feedback and people usually prefer things that they enjoy to those they do not. Students do not seem to enjoy collecting feedback in person but are happy to open audio files via VLEs and email. Given the importance of feedback and the findings of the NUS Survey (2008) audio feedback offers significant advantages over the uncollected, written alternative. Indeed, students, who received audio feedback that disappointed them, have asked to meet with tutors to discuss the audio comments. This happens rarely, if at all, with written feedback due to the very low uplift rates.

It would appear that audio feedback overcomes the timing, quality and detail issues raised in the NUS Survey (2008).

To tutors who are interested in using the audio method, the following suggestions are made:

- (1) The most efficient way to disseminate audio feedback is via a VLE using, if possible, an online submission system.
- (2) Tutors should have a set of criteria noted so that they comment consistently on each paper.
- (3) The student should be encouraged at the beginning of the audio feedback recording to have their coursework in front of them.
- (4) Wherever possible grades should be given at the end of the audio feedback and broken down so the student can understand where they gained or lost marks.

Future research

Rotherham (2008) is conducting research with several academic institutions to look at how audio feedback is received by teachers and students. A piece of research to analyse the relationship between the NUS survey results in relation to feedback and the use of audio technology would be helpful in that if a correlation between increased use of audio feedback and more positive NUS survey results was shown, this would demonstrate with a greater degree of objectivity how effective the method is in improving the student experience.

Notes on contributors

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Appendix 1. The survey questions

1. The audio feedback helped me to see what I had missed out in my coursework.
2. The audio feedback helped me to see how I could have improved my coursework.
3. I found the audio feedback more helpful than the written comments on the coursework and pink mark sheet that I have received for other modules.
4. In future I would like to receive my feedback using the audio method.
5. The audio feedback will help me in the future to improve my coursework on other modules.
6. Other questions were asked regarding how the student had found out that they had audio feedback and how easy it was to access and listen to the audio file.

Appendix 2. Same feedback using different methods

Overall a very good proposal. The covering letter is a little weak and could have been formatted more carefully. Normally, the proposal would have one aim and several objectives, you mentioned the 1:3 ratio but could you have mentioned the target of £400 (and that you might exceed it?). For the most part you are client focussed but occasionally you lose the selling to the client tone, e.g. you say a tight budget but remember the proposal is going to the people who are giving you the tight budget! Your blog gives some useful insights but could you have considered future goals and behaviour with a little more detail and specificity.

Appendix 3. The freeform student responses

Student 1

I really liked the audio feedback, it gives more detailed information and good tips on how to improve.

Student 2

I would like my mark to be given immediately rather than going through all the points as the wait made me more nervous than was necessary. I do not know if we will receive a paper version of this ... it would be nice to have one but I could always write it out myself!

Student 3

Personally, I've found it easy to access on the VLE. I also think it is a good approach of giving feedback. Partly because on augmenting my coursework the examiner read my notes directly and then he explains what it is wrong and how it could possibly be improved. Which make you actually directly confront your mistakes, unlike written comments, which usually give you an overall [view] of your coursework without necessarily pointing a finger on your mistakes, you only find out once you have spoken to the examiner (if you do so). Although I was not really happy with my mark, I know exactly what put it as a low one. And I can only blame myself instead of thinking: the examiner was tired and he had so many coursework to mark he just wanted to do it as fast as possible

Student 4

I think the audio feedback is a great idea, it makes life easier for students and tutors as sometimes written feedback is not descriptive enough. It prevents students from having to meet up with tutors to discuss feedback as written feedback is not that helpful and can get lost sometimes by the undergraduate centre.

Student 5

The audio feedback is a very good idea, as most students want the feedback as soon as possible, and this seems to be the best way. Most students are abroad around this period and with the

audio it is easier to access feedback and listen anywhere. Most times it is impossible to read the scribbles on the coursework/pink sheet. I hope more teachers will adapt this method. Very pleased!

Student 6

I found the audio feedback very helpful as it allowed my tutor to elaborate on his feedback and reasons for marks. It also informed me of where I went wrong and how I can improve. Fast and effective.

Student 7

Very specific.

Student 8

The audio feedback gives the feeling of a personalised feedback, mentioning specific points of improvement, while the pink sheet is a standardised collection of 40 words

Student 9

It was great, explained where to improve etc. was easier to understand than written pieces.

Student 10

I think it's amazing and really easy. Thanks.

Student 11

A mixture of both should be used.

Student 12

It was a personal address to me and my coursework, quite like sitting in John's office and getting him to explain what I need to do only with the advantage of saving travelling, time and being able to make the change instantly.

Student 13

Well, I strongly agree with audio feedback and this is very good way of feedback and also we can hear the comments and also we can know about our coursework. What we have missed in the coursework and further how we can improve our coursework. So this is very good way of feedback

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