

Audio feedback

Introduction

There is clear evidence that traditional ways of providing feedback are not working. The National Student Survey repeatedly shows that students are dissatisfied with the provision of feedback. A recent literature review from Sheffield Hallam University found widespread reports that current practices of using feedback are ineffective, and that students often do not understand feedback because of florid language or poor handwriting. At LSE, at a recent undergraduate consultative forum there were several complaints that the written end-of-term feedback provided through LSEforYou is very impersonal, and sometimes hard to relate to one's own progress.

The use of audio feedback, that is, recorded spoken feedback, may provide an alternative or complement to written comments that would improve the quality of feedback received by students. In this report I review the use of audio feedback in UK institutions, draw conclusions on its advantages and disadvantages for students and teachers, and suggest some ways in which it might be used at LSE.

A note on terminology: throughout this report I use the word 'teacher' to refer to all those engaged in the process of teaching – including course convenors, lecturers and GTAs.

Use of audio feedback in UK HE

The findings of this report are based on a number of case studies in the use of audio feedback from universities around the UK. I list the case studies below, to give a summary of sources and to indicate the range of institutions that are making use of audio feedback, including some in a research-led, social science context.

- Leeds Metropolitan University: This was the lead institution for *Sounds Good*, a JISC-funded project investigating the use of audio feedback. Over the 2 phases of the project, 38 staff across 4 institutions (the others being Newman University College, Birmingham, University of Northampton and York St John University) were involved in providing audio feedback to 1200 students. Various methods of recording and distributing audio were tried. Students and staff were surveyed by questionnaire and reflective summaries.
- University of Chester: Audio feedback was provided to 130 undergraduate students in Geography & Development Studies over the course of 2 years. Summative feedback was given for fieldwork reports, oral presentations and short tests. The feedback was recorded on iPods and distributed via the VLE. Student attitudes were evaluated by pre- and post-feedback surveys and by focus groups.
- University of Leeds: A lecturer in Public Policy has used audio feedback for summative assessments with 40 (out of 90) students on a 2nd year undergraduate European Union module. Feedback was recorded on an iPhone and uploaded to the BlackBoard VLE for distribution to students. Audio files were also sent out to external examiners.
- University of Liverpool: Audio feedback was used for *summative* essay assignments as part of two projects: one with 15 Sociology undergraduates

and one with 7 Health Sciences undergraduates (all volunteers). In project 1, staff recorded feedback using digital voice recorders and distributed the files to individual students using BlackBoard. In project 2, audio comments were inserted into the Word documents submitted by students.

- University of Durham: A lecturer in Applied Social Sciences now uses audio feedback routinely for all assignments, where possible. Students receive, on average, 5 minutes of audio feedback per essay. She uses a digital recorder and distributes files via the VLE. She has also used Dragon voice recognition software to make transcripts of her feedback, which she says achieves 95% accuracy.
- Staffordshire University: Two tutors in Human Biological Sciences provided audio feedback to 15 student volunteers (9 second-year and 6 third-year undergraduates). Audio feedback on various types of written assignment was recorded on the tutors' PCs and emailed to students. Students were interviewed 3 weeks after receipt of their feedback, and the tutors kept notes about their experience.

There is also evidence of use at Queen's University, Belfast, Sheffield Hallam University, Liverpool John Moores and at the Universities of Cardiff, Edinburgh and Exeter but details were insufficient to include them as case studies here.

Audio feedback and students

All of the aforementioned studies found that students in general preferred audio feedback over written feedback, though one must consider that in many of these studies the students had volunteered for the experiment, and that the novelty factor may also play a role. The following list of advantages is compiled from the findings of the various studies.

The major advantage for the student is that audio feedback typically means more, and better, feedback. Spoken feedback is most often clearer than written feedback, with less scope for ambiguity. Since it is quicker to speak than to write, spoken feedback is often more detailed than its written equivalent. Speech can also communicate meaning other than that which lies in the words themselves; vocal emphasis can convey the importance of certain points, and pace can be varied to focus attention on complicated concepts.

There is also an empathetic aspect to voice. Students reported that they found audio feedback "more personal", and that it seems 'alive' where text can feel 'dead'. The tutor's voice can convey a sense that he/she is interested in the student's work. It may also allow the tutor to deliver negative or critical feedback more tactfully, although at both Liverpool and Durham students commented that they found negative feedback harder to take when it was spoken. Some students in the *Sounds Good* project at Leeds Metropolitan University even found recorded audio feedback preferable to face-to-face feedback: comments can be received without the student feeling under pressure to react or explain, there is less sense of 'losing face' if the news is bad, and the feedback can be listened to more than once if anything isn't clear the first time round.

There are also good practical reasons why students may benefit from audio feedback. Handwritten comments are often difficult to read, and even word-processed

comments can be hard to decipher when scattered throughout a document using Word's Track Changes and Commenting features. There are also obvious benefits for students with dyslexia or visual impairments.

One disadvantage that was highlighted on one study was the separation of audio feedback from the work being assessed, unlike comments that are written or typed in the margins. However, the approach taken at the University of Liverpool of adding audio comments into Word documents addresses this.

Audio feedback and teachers

The benefits to students are also benefits to teachers since it means they are teaching more effectively, and their students are more satisfied. However, the direct advantages for teachers are not so clear-cut. While it is clear from the studies that recording feedback is, word-for-word, faster than writing it, it is not necessarily the case that the whole process is less onerous.

In the *Sounds Good* project, teachers said that using audio feedback did not save them time, but that they were able to provide more and better feedback within that same time. This suggests that teachers could be encouraged to limit themselves to shorter segments of audio feedback. A limit of 5 minutes is widely suggested in the studies.

Another reason that time savings may not be realised is that it may take longer to produce the feedback in the short term, when teachers are getting to grips with the technologies involved, but becomes quicker thereafter. The project director of *Sounds Good* reports that he needed to produce about 12 pieces of feedback before he achieved maximum efficiency; thereafter he was able to create and review a 5-minute recording in about 15 minutes.

There are also problems reported with the editing of feedback once it is recorded. At the University of Liverpool, staff using voice recorders were not able to easily edit their audio feedback, and often had to re-record the whole thing. These problems, however, were mitigated when Word was used to record comments within documents. This led to the production of much shorter, more focused audio comments, in which there was less scope to go wrong, and which were easy to re-record.

A benefit mentioned by the lecturer at Leeds University was that he experienced a fall, from 50% to 5%, in the number of students requesting follow-up meetings after receiving essay feedback. He suggests that this is because the audio feedback is less ambiguous than written, and estimates that this fall has saved him about 6 hours' worth of meetings. For the same reasons, he also saves time having to review his own feedback in preparation for such meetings.

Another benefit to teachers, not noted in any of the studies but mentioned in literature elsewhere, is physical: audio feedback removes the need to write or type a large amount of text, and so helps mitigate physical problems like RSI.

Some studies asked teachers the question whether they would use this approach again, with mixed results. The majority of teachers involved in *Sounds Good* said that they would continue to use audio feedback after the end of the project. At Liverpool, the teachers involved in the first project using voice recorders found the whole process

too onerous and were strongly opposed to using it again, but those involved in the second project using Word were much more positive.

Criteria for success


These criteria have been compiled from various projects cited above and from other writings on the subject listed in the bibliography:

- Don't try to make a perfect recording. People pause, stumble, say 'errr' in real life so there's no problem if you do so in the recording. In fact, it may make your feedback more human if you do make mistakes.
- You don't need a script. However, you do need to prepare. Use assessment criteria as a guide to what you will say.
- Keep it short and to the point. Don't try to cover too much in one recording. Aim for a 5-minute maximum.
- Practice makes perfect. It might take a while to record your first few pieces of feedback, but it will get easier and quicker with repetition.
- You don't have to abandon writing altogether. Some things are easier to explain with a drawing or simply an arrow. Combine audio and writing to get the best of both worlds.
- Make sure that the feedback goes to the right people, and only to them. Make use of email or VLE features to enable this.
- Start small; an easy way in is to start with generic feedback that can be made available to all students, perhaps picking up on common misunderstandings in their work. Then you only have one recording to make and distribute.
- Try providing audio feedback *before* releasing the grades. There is evidence that this causes students to pay more attention to the feedback.

Application at LSE

Various technological approaches to the creation and distribution of audio feedback are apparent at the universities studied in this report. Most have used digital voice recorders (whether as dedicated devices or on the teacher's own iPhone) to record the audio and transfer the resulting file to PC, though some have used recording software on the teacher's PC. The audio file is then sent to the appropriate student, either as an email attachment or via a VLE. The latter approach makes the process easier, as the teacher just has to click on a student's name, rather than look up their email address, and there are none of the problems that can affect the sending of large files by email.

At LSE, recent developments in the *Wimba Voice Tools* suite, a plug-in to Moodle, make it possible to record *and* distribute audio feedback completely within the VLE. The new *Voice Authoring* feature allows a teacher to record audio feedback and attach it within the feedback field that Moodle provides as part of its *Assignment* activity. All the teacher requires is a headset that they can plug into their PC. We believe this approach offers the most hassle-free way for teachers to use audio feedback without losing any of its advantages.

However, there are alternative approaches that should not be forgotten. The University of Liverpool found merit in the use of audio comments within Word documents, both because teachers were already familiar with the software and because it allows the comments to be added at the point in the text where they are most relevant. The *Insert Voice* button  on the *Reviewing* toolbar in Word allows

this to be done at the click of a button. This approach might be tried at LSE to see how it compares with the *Wimba* method.

Another approach that may prove effective is the use of screen capture software to record both the teacher's voice and their on-screen activity, for example highlighting areas of the students' submission while talking about those parts. There are open source applications available (e.g. [Jing](#), [Screen Toaster](#), [Wink](#) and [Debut](#)) that would allow us to do this, and colleagues in the Careers department have already successfully used this approach.

Conclusion

The benefits to students of audio feedback seem unambiguous. In all of the studies covered in this report, the students responded positively to the introduction of audio feedback and provided consistent reasons for their appreciation of it. For teachers, the benefits appear to be more dependent on the way in which audio feedback is implemented. Good initial training and clear guidelines for effective practice will be vital to its success. The criteria listed above can form the basis of such training and guidance. Also, recent technological developments mean that the practical process of recording and distributing audio feedback is much simpler than it would have been a year ago.

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