
Using Audio Podcasts to Provide Student Feedback: Exploring the Issues

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of audio podcasting as an alternative to the written word in providing feedback to student assignments. According to a seminal work on assessment by Rowntree (1977), good student feedback can be considered the “life-blood” of learning. Within higher education (HE), student feedback has most often been given within a written format and its effectiveness has been debated over many years (Price et al, 2010). This paper will explore the use of an innovative method of providing feedback to students, that of digital audio playback using an mp3 file format. Various issues that could potentially affect the utilisation of using this approach, such as staff and student attitude, technical issues/barriers and briefly, theoretical imperatives are explored. Best practice according to the published evidence is outlined and recommendations for further research are suggested.

Current debate on feedback standards

Recent reports (Ekinsmyth, 2009, Weaver 2006, Hepplestone et al 2010) have provided evidence that a significant proportion of staff within the HE sector are often failing to provide adequate feedback that enables students to improve their performance for their next essay (NSS 2006-2009). In a multi-method study of student’s experiences, Weaver (2006) found that feedback was often very non-specific, focused too much on the negative and was not related to the learning outcomes on which the students were being assessed. Another common complaint is that feedback is not provided soon enough to enable the student to feed forward and therefore improve their writing skills before the next essay is due in even if they can understand the teachers comments (Hepplestone et al, 2010).

There have been attempts to rationalise and provide principles of providing good feedback practice for teaching staff. For example, Rust et al (2005) argue for a more social constructivist approach by encouraging students to really engage with the feedback process. Whilst it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss this issue in more detail, there does

appear to be a consensus within HE that poor and inconsistent feedback is being provided to students by a significant proportion of staff (Glover & Brown,2006) There is an opportunity to improve and innovate how students are given feedback to enable a better understanding of their work. This would increase their ability to feed forward into the next assessment by using an alternative method of providing feedback that can engage the student more fully within the feedback process. However, King et al (2008) caution with a proviso that it is important to bear in mind that any new feedback strategy should not have a negative effect on the already high work load burden of teaching staff within H.E.

The rise of the podcast

Over the past 15 years or so technology enhanced learning (TEL) strategies have been increasingly influencing the way teaching and learning has been conducted within H.E. (Conole & Oliver, 2007). Web 2.0 tools such as wikis, blogs and podcasts are being increasingly utilised with a pedagogical underpinning to student learning (Grossek 2009). A podcast can be defined as a digital media file that can be audio or both audio and vision, usually available direct from a website (streaming or via a file) and can be played on a portable media player or most personal computers (Salmon et al, 2008).

Podcasts themselves have been developed to be utilised within a range of strategies within H.E., including supplementing and summarising teaching sessions,

recording lectures, student created podcasts and also providing audio feedback for student work. There have been a range of small-scale research studies that have attempted to add credibility to the use of podcasting within H.E., although some studies appear more credible than others (Heilesen 2010). This paper will restrict itself to exploring the published literature on using podcast technology to provide audio feedback from staff on students work.

Utilising recorded media to provide aural feedback is not a new phenomenon. In past decades, media such as audio cassette recordings have been utilised. This retained the difficulties of using a cumbersome physical method (Taped cassette) to store the recordings (Lee et al 2009). Clearly since the development of the MP3 recorder which compresses digital recordings into a viable size for easy transit for web storage and synchronisation with computers and portable mp3 players, this issue has been resolved. It is interesting to note however that the so-called “revolution” in mobile learning that postulated that students would prefer to listen to educational podcasts by utilising these small mobile devices to enable true ‘mobile learning’ on the move, has never materialised. Most students prefer to listen to such podcasts whilst listening on their computers during dedicated ‘private’ study times (Lee & Chan, 2007).

It is now possible to use very simple recording equipment such as a pc or lap-

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top, a microphone and speakers in conjunction with some free open-source software (Audacity, available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>) to enable easy editing of recorded podcasts (Mobbs et al, 2008). Security is not an issue as audio files can be stored in the same way as text files are stored within secure university servers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the technicalities of producing podcasts. Suffice to say the learning curve in my view is no more difficult than learning to use Microsoft Word at a practical level.

A recent literature review on delivering feedback using different technologies included exploring the use of podcasts to provide feedback (Hepplestone et al, 2010). This review identified a number of studies that have explored this issue over recent years. Major common themes explored by these studies are student views, staff views and technical issues regarding recording the podcasts themselves and delivery of the audio feedback to students. Each aspect will be examined in turn.

The student experience

Obviously the student experience is of fundamental importance when considering the use of podcasts for providing feedback. Merry and Ormond (2008) found several positive factors from students as a result of their small mixed methods study of 15 biological science students. They concluded that students perceived feedback podcasts as more meaningful, had more depth and was more personal than written feedback. Interestingly, this study contained a direct comparison with written feedback by using independently both written and audio methods for the same 12 essays. One particular finding from this study stands out. Essentially, they found that identifying errors is much more evident within written feedback. Perhaps it is easier to mark mistakes on the written page than speak them into a microphone, although this can only be conjecture and would need further research studies to explore this notion further.

A study by France and Wheeler (2007) also agreed with Merry and Ormonds (2008) general findings and added that students found that the 'tone' of the feedback delivery was important and

emphasised the important parts of a feedback podcast. Ribchester et al (2008) found that, when asked to give a choice after experiencing auditory feedback, most students within their study had a preference for auditory modes when compared to written feedback. This suggests that podcasts promoted a deeper engagement of students with the feedback itself, thus providing some hope that this would promote the notion of using students to feeding-forward to the next assignment, a crucial element within the process of a student's overall learning (Brown, 2007).

The staff experience

Clearly it is important that the views of staff are sought as they would be challenged with the production of this type of feedback format, although it is interesting to note that this is more sparsely covered within the literature than exploring student views, which is much more prevalent. Based on the preliminary results of an on-going study, Ekinsmyth (2009) focuses her thinking on these staff perspectives. Her findings highlight issues around staff resistance to changing existing feedback methods due to various reasons, including comfort in the past ('why fix what isn't (perceived to be) broken?'), time pressures to take on new skills and perhaps an unwillingness to accept the importance of the feedback process within a student's learning. This last point however appears to be a personal reflection on the author's part and is not supported by her evidence, which seems to be based on the reflections of only three members of staff, including the author. To sum up these views, having to overcome a teacher's traditional economies of practice appears to be a challenge.

Other views are prevalent within the published literature. Merry and Ormond (2008) discovered a more positive attitude from staff within their study, citing staff views that audio files could provide a more detailed feedback than the written equivalent, finding it generally easier to provide suggestions within their audio feedback than they felt they would if written feedback had been utilised. This was combined with a perception that time could be saved when compared with written feedback. However, this only appeared to be opinions expressed by staff involved within their study and

should therefore be viewed with caution. Ribchester et al (2008) suggested that markers can actually speak faster than they can write and therefore should in theory be able to provide more feedback within a similar timeframe. Rotheram (2007) suggests that it is possible to record five minutes of detailed feedback within ten minutes when practised. The average person would clearly find it difficult to produce as much written feedback within the same time period. King et al (2008) actually compared time taken/average words spoken in a study comparing both written and audio feedback practice within three social science modules. They found that 1 minute of audio feedback actually produced on average 100 words, again impossible to match in terms of speed when using written feedback. King et al (2008) also found that the staff involved in this study generally found they spent more time producing audio feedback than written (Each staff member had both written and audio feedback to provide within a marking group with audio feedback being given to student volunteers within each marking group, so each student received either written or audio, but not both). However, no training was provided by the study organiser's to help staff produce the audio feedback using pc, microphone and Audacity software, with some staff deciding to re-record whole feedback recordings apparently due to a lack of knowledge of how to edit a feedback recording using the software provided. It could therefore be surmised that time was wasted by staff who were not competent within the production process and that given sufficient training and practice, a quicker outcome to audio feedback production could be achieved.

Theoretical views

Apart from more practical benefits suggested previously, are there any overt or theoretical benefits in utilising audio over written feedback? King et al (2008) alludes to audio being a more 'richer, more authentic kind of feedback' with potential benefits of a greater, deeper understanding of the subject being studied. In an important paper regarding formative assessment, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have outlined seven principles of providing good feedback, one of which states that it should deliver high quality information about the students own

learning. Clearly this is dependent on the individual marker, although the potential to deliver richer, deeper feedback via an audio podcast is apparent. Price et al (2010) discovered a high level of confusion amongst staff regarding the very purpose of feedback and also argued that it is very difficult to demonstrate effectiveness whatever feedback strategy you use. Savin-Baden (2010) argues that using podcasts to deliver feedback should be based on the principles of dialogic learning, a theory that suggests students gain understanding and insight from creating dialogue within the learning environment. It is outside the scope of this paper to explore this subject further. It is acknowledged however that as with any new education innovation that invites a practice change, the educational pedagogy should always lead the technology and not vice-versa.

Good practice strategies

Clearly there are many practical issues

to overcome before the use of audio could be used as an alternative to written feedback within higher education, to the benefit of both students and staff. Some authors (France & Ribchester 2008, Lunt & Curran 2010 Savin-Baden 2010) have suggested frameworks/strategies that enable podcasts to be produced by staff with increased efficiency, consistency, student engagement and meaning that will enable students to receive, it is argued, a deeper quality of feedback (see Figure 1 for good practice ideas by various authors). Word constraints have not allowed a fuller exploration of these strategies.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly explored the innovative use of digital audio podcasts to provide feedback to students work. There are clearly many issues that can affect the success or otherwise of using such a strategy, including student and staff attitudes, pedagogical principles and technical issues that need to be overcome before becoming accepted educa-

tional practice. Certainly other areas not directly apparent within the literature searched need also to be explored, such as international students and students with hearing difficulties and the issues that both factors obviously bring up. Most studies are small scale and appear to mainly elicit students views and experience of the use of podcasting to provide student feedback. It can be argued however that staff perspectives/attitudes are more important as they are the ones that would have to implement such a strategy and also appear, according to the literature, as being the biggest obstacle to overcome, acknowledging there is a dearth of literature published on eliciting staff views on this subject. More detailed research to determine the real reasons why staff are apparently often slow to accept innovative change such as this is needed if we are to grasp the potential of the technical revolution that is currently sweeping our educational system.

Figure 1

The following is a list of combined strategies taken from France & Ribchester (2008), Lunt & Curran (2010), Savin-Baden (2010) and King et al (2008) that should improve the standards, efficiencies and effectiveness of using podcasts feedback strategies within H.E. for staff to utilise within their practice.

- Encourage students to have the coursework in front of them when listening to audio feedback.
- Agree on a sensible time limit for all feedback (eg 5 minutes) that all markers should aim to achieve, bearing in mind that five minutes of feedback gives you approximately 500 words.
- Provide staff training and development regarding the recording and editing of podcasts, bearing in mind however that the 'rough and ready' recording that requires minimal or even no editing is preferable as this can be more authentic.
- Markers should be encouraged to use marking criteria provided for assessment to help frame their comments but not resort to reading scripts as this appears unnatural and would be too time consuming to write anyway.
- It may be easier to start with using audio feedback within formative assessment as it may be considered more relaxed than summative and therefore enable staff to gain confidence in this process.

Key Points

Feedback is usually written in nature and has often been criticised for being non-focussed, inadequate and given too late to 'feed forward' into subsequent assignments.

TEL strategies are increasingly influential within HE teaching and learning environments.

Podcasts have evolved to become a flexible, popular, student tool for enhancing learning opportunities.

Recordings can be stored and archived in convenient, secure digital format and produced via the use of simple to use freely available software.

Time saved using podcasts for feedback can be considerable when compared with text.

Studies demonstrate that students find feedback via podcast had more meaning, depth and was perceived as being more personal when compared to written feedback.

Research suggests that staff have been more resistant to this kind of innovation when traditional economies of practice are challenged.

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