The Benefits of Delivering Formative Feedback via Video-Casts

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Abstract

Universities face the challenge of offering high quality feedback in a time- and cost-efficient manner. In this context, the use of eLearning technologies offers a number of potential advantages to both the tutor and student. For example, eLearning technologies may allow students to fully engage with their studies whilst maintaining other responsibilities (such as childcare or paid employment). The mixed methods study explored both student and tutor experiences of using video-casts (via the eLearning technology, Adobe Connect) for personalised formative feedback. Twenty four final-year students were offered the opportunity to receive video-cast feedback on their project drafts alongside more traditional written and face-to-face feedback. The experiences of eighteen students and the reflections of their tutors are reported here. In summary, students found video-cast feedback to be easy to access, clear, and motivational. Tutors reported that the video-cast feedback was easy to record, and reduced workload. Specifically, subsequent meetings were more focused and further follow-up meetings were unnecessary.

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Introduction

Comprehensive and constructive feedback is essential for improving student performance (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). To be effective, feedback must be more than a simple judgment on current performance and should enable learning to take place (MacClellon 2001). In particular, students receiving feedback should be able to move forward and bridge the gap between their current level of understanding and the learning outcome which has been set (Hattie & Timperley 2007). This is especially true for formative feedback which aims to alter learning as it is taking place rather than summative feedback that is given after an assessment has been completed (Holford 2002). There are however a number of difficulties associated with the provision and receipt of feedback when it is provided in a traditional written or face-to-face form. This paper will explore how video technologies may address some of these difficulties.

For tutors, providing feedback is a time-consuming task, particularly when arranging individual face-to-face meetings or repeating / clarifying comments that have been poorly understood. These difficulties may be exacerbated by recent widening participation policy, which has both increased the number of students in Higher Education and the presence of students who may require additional support (Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, & Slack, 2006; Stefani, Tariq, Heylings & Butcher 1997). In particular, students may lack the core skills required to interpret feedback (Cook, Rushton, & Macintosh 2006), leading to misunderstanding and unfamiliarity with the implicit assumptions often made by tutors (Lea & Street 2000; Mutch, 2003). These issues limit the effectiveness of feedback (Ramsden, 1992). Furthermore, a lack of clarity about what is expected of students (Bowl, 2003) may ultimately impede student achievement, course satisfaction, and retention. Therefore, it is important to improve provision in this area.

One particular problem with written feedback is that students may believe that all written comments are equally important. This assumption may lead students to address the most (easily-corrected) superficial comments (e.g. typographical or grammatical errors), but not the more complex issues relating to content (Zamel, 1983). Video feedback may provide students with both verbal and visual cues which highlight the importance of each written comment. Whilst this form of clarification is available via face-to-face meetings, students often fail to attend or may require

additional support to reiterate these issues via email or further meetings. The provision of video feedback also has a number of practical benefits. For example, Plimmer and Mason (2006) argue that the use of eLearning technologies, such as Adobe Connect, allows students to submit work and receive feedback without physically being on campus, which is particularly beneficial for a diverse student population that may not be campus-based.

The emotional impact of receiving face-to-face feedback is poorly understood (Holford, 2002) but should not be overlooked (Robinson, Pope & Holyoak, 2013). Students may be nervous about meeting with their tutors (Brown, 2007), as negative comments can leave students with a sense of embarrassment and humiliation (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Consequently, students feeling uneasy about the quality of their work may delay scheduling a feedback session or may not schedule one at all (Nurmi, Aunola, Salmela-Aro, & Lindroos, 2003). Furthermore, for students that avoid the face-to-face meeting, the wealth of written comments which they receive can be disheartening when received without the reassurance and encouragement of their tutor (Plimmer & Mason, 2006). In part, this may reflect misinterpretation of the written feedback and the constructive manner in which it is intended.

For those attending a meeting with their tutor, the process of giving feedback is not without problems. Tutors invest a great deal of time when meeting students individually, though it can be difficult for students and tutors to find a mutually convenient meeting time. Hence the use of video feedback may allow tutors to provide students with guidance in a more time-efficient manner (Crook *et al.* 2012). In addition, the feedback can be given asynchronously, allowing feedback to be recorded and viewed at times convenient to the tutor and the student. Another issue with (potentially intimidating and stressful) face-to-face meetings is that students frequently fail to retain what is said. In addition, students may have a predisposition to only listen to the feedback which confirms their initial views (or worst fears) about their performance (Pickford & Brown, 2006). Video feedback has the potential, therefore, to reduce the anxiety associated with face-to-face meetings and ensure that those that do not attend receive additional reassurance. Indeed, it has been argued that one of the most effective forms of guidance is video or computer-assisted instructional feedback, which can provide cues and reassurance to the student (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Video technologies may also be beneficial to

those learners who absorb and retain information more effectively when it is presented in a more interactive manner such as via video presentations (Race, 2005).

The present study investigates the student experience of video feedback in comparison to traditional written and face-to-face feedback. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from students receiving the video feedback and tutor reflections were also obtained.

Method

Twenty-four psychology students in the final year of their degree were asked if they would consider viewing video feedback on their thesis draft in addition to traditional face-to-face and written feedback. Of the 24 approached, 18 students accepted the option of additional video feedback. Students who had agreed to take part were provided with their feedback via a secure web link to a short (10 to 20 minute) video prepared using Adobe Connect software. During the video session students were able to view the project draft (annotated with 'tracked changes' or PDF annotations/comments) whilst listening to their supervisor provide audio commentary. Feedback was accessed in students' own time and students could review the video feedback as many times as they wished. Students were also invited to attend face-to-face meetings regarding their project draft.

Students were then asked to provide information about their experience. Specifically, students were asked to respond to a series of online questions associated with technological issues, the quality of feedback provided, etc., on a standard 5 point Likert scale. Students also provided a range of qualitative feedback including recommendations for future delivery of video feedback via an online text box. All students receiving the video feedback completed the questionnaire 100% response rate). Informal interviews using open-ended questions were undertaken with the two tutors who provided the video feedback on the draft dissertations. The tutors were asked to reflect on both the practical and pedagogic advantages and disadvantages of using video feedback.

Results

All students found the video feedback easy to access both on campus and at home and no technical issues were reported by students or tutors. Just over two thirds (78%) of the students reported that the video feedback saved them a commute to campus, highlighting the convenience of the approach. Traditional feedback was available for those wishing to see their tutor, though a number of students found this unnecessary *'The video feedback was brilliant! When you said you will be giving video feedback I was sure I would still need to come and see you, but the video told me everything I needed to know.'* Tutors conducting face to face meetings with students that had received video feedback reported that these meetings were *'more focused'*. Specifically *'Video feedback allowed individuals to form more meaningful questions regarding feedback and so could come prepared for the meeting.'* Tutors also noted a reduction in additional emails from students who were able to view their feedback again online.

With regards to the quality of the video feedback, all students reported that the videos provided constructive feedback which was motivational and encouraged them to improve their project. However, a substantial minority did not believe that the video was of a higher quality than traditional written feedback. In addition, all students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that video feedback was useful in being able to re-review the comments that were made. As stated by one student *'Video feedback enabled me to go back and view again on areas I had forgotten what was said. Very helpful for overall understanding.'* Over 70% of students believed that video feedback was clearer than a traditional face-to-face feedback meeting and a number of advantages were noted. One participant reported *'Personally I would have been a bit embarrassed getting my feedback in person as there were a lot of amendments. This was much less painful!!'* Similar advantages were observed by tutors *'Video feedback reduced student anxiety as students knew what the problems were before attending the meeting.'* All participants reported that they would recommend video feedback to their peers.

Discussion

The current study investigated the use of video feedback. Overall, the current study has highlighted that video recordings can provide constructive feedback which is motivational and encourages students to improve their work. Additionally, the

practical benefits of online video feedback delivery mean that students are able to view the feedback more than once and reduce travel to campus.

Offering additional flexibility in the way in which students can access support may help with both retainment and achievement. Our finding that video feedback can reduce commutes to campus may seem to be a trivial issue; however, the ability to offer effective feedback via video instead of face-to-face has important implications for student retention of non-traditional students. Non-traditional students (for example, mature students or those who are the first in their family to attend university) may find regular face-to-face meetings on campus to be problematic as they are living off-campus, working to support their studies or fulfilling caring responsibilities. Reduced access to academic support can mean that these students lack guidance or become disengaged with their course (Potter, 2013). Video feedback may allow us guide and engage students who find high levels of attendance on campus difficult. However, it should also be considered that early in a student's university experience providing online feedback instead of on-campus meetings could be detrimental to student retention. Braxton and Hirschy (2004) suggest that non-traditional student retention can be impaired if students do not engage fully with the teaching/learning community. Therefore, although fewer trips on to campus may allow students to keep up with their studies, it could also harm retention by reducing friendship formation. Opportunities for students to development of relationships with tutors and peers on campus will therefore need to be carefully balanced with the benefits of online learning.

All students reported they would recommend video feedback to their peers, although a substantial minority did not believe that the video was better quality than traditional written feedback. Hence, tutors intending to provide students with video feedback should be reassured that this is an effective method of guidance and may be actually be preferred by many students. These findings also have important implications for the delivery of online distance or blended courses. Further, video feedback might be especially helpful to students who have special needs. The Widening Participation agenda has led to larger numbers of students with special needs such as dyslexia being part of the student body; HESA data for 2013/14 suggest that students with specific learning difficulties make up 1.7% of the undergraduate population in the UK. Students with difficulties such as dyslexia might

also benefit particularly from additional video feedback as they draw particularly on visual cognitive resources for learning (Bacon & Bennett, 2013).

Tutors benefited from the use of online feedback, reporting that face-to-face meetings with students were more productive or focused. Further, tutors received fewer emails from students seeking additional clarification as they were able to re-review the video commentary. As academic staff are increasingly spending a great deal of time giving typed feedback, problems such as the development of arm pain (Peper, Gibney & Wilson, 2004) associated with high levels of keyboard and mouse use are becoming more common. Therefore, alternative methods of feedback which are not reliant on typing, such as video feedback, may prevent potential health problems in academic staff.

Of course it is important to note that the tutors whose practise using video feedback is reported here may be more motivated or comfortable with technology than others. The use of eLearning technologies may create technical difficulties which lead to anxiety or frustration for tutors. Indeed, previous studies have shown that ease of use is one of the key factors which determine whether an eLearning technology will be adopted (Šumak, HeričKo, & Pušnik, 2011). Future research may consider the experiences of tutors that are not confident users of eLearning technologies as successful implementation requires the full support of academic tutors (Holley, 2000). However, in the present study neither tutors nor students experienced any technological problems when creating or accessing the feedback. It is, of course, recommended that those adopting digital technologies consider the advantages and disadvantages (including ease of use) of the specific software selected and ensure that appropriate technical support is available. Furthermore, explicit training in online pedagogy as well as ongoing technical support is essential (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, et al. 2012).

Research into the acceptability of eLearning technologies, such as video feedback, is particularly timely given that the use of such technologies in Higher Education is rapidly increasing (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The results of the current study show that whilst the majority of students initially approached agreed to receive video feedback, a minority did not. Those choosing not to receive the video feedback may have declined for a number of reasons such as reluctance to engage with technology or the belief that additional feedback was unnecessary. As students are

increasingly likely to have to engage with eLearning technologies (Gong, & Wallace, 2012) future research should investigate those factors influencing students' response to video feedback. If some students are going to be reluctant to adopt new technologies greater understanding of potential barriers and possible interventions will be needed.

In addition, the current study focused on students' initial response to video feedback. It is essential that students fully engage with the feedback process in order to enhance their understanding and develop the appropriate academic skills. Research is therefore required to investigate both the short and long-term impact of video feedback. In addition, research should consider how video feedback influences the wider student experience and issues such as satisfaction, self-efficacy and retention.

To conclude, both students and tutors reported that video feedback provides a range of practical and educational advantages compared to the provision of traditional feedback alone. Video feedback therefore enables lecturers to give personalised formative feedback to students in a time efficient, non-threatening manner and should be offered, particularly when students are unable or unwilling to attend face-to-face meetings.

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