Sounding Good: Exploring the potential of audio feedback

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Abstract

Most academics find the process of giving detailed, appropriate feedback to students an extremely time-consuming one. With increased VLE use and blended approaches to delivery, opportunities are now available to re-appraise different ways of recording and giving feedback to students. Under the auspices of the Joint Information Systems Committee's (JISC) Sounds Good project (Rotheram, 2009a), the main aims of this research project were to test the hypothesis that using digital audio feedback can benefit staff and students by both saving assessors' time and providing richer feedback to students. During a compulsory first year module for Education Studies students at Newman University College, 83 students were asked to submit a 1500 word essay as a text file via Moodle. This online submission allowed for both traditional written annotation of the original script as well as the embedding of an audio mp3 file for student feedback. A total of six Education Studies teaching staff were involved in the marking process, and views were elicited from both staff and students via questionnaire after the marking process was completed. Initial findings show that an overwhelming majority of respondents were very enthusiastic about the use of audio feedback, although a number of guidelines and recommendations were needed for its future use.

Keywords: feedback, audio, mp3, VLE, Moodle

Background

Previous research has shown that the provision of audio feedback through recorded MP3 files can both save academics' time and facilitate an increase in feedback given (Ice et al, 2007), as well as highlighting the enthusiasm of students for the medium (Merry and Orsmond, 2008). Originally based at Leeds Metropolitan University, *Sounds Good* was a JISC funded project investigating whether giving audio feedback to students saved academics' time and improved the quality of feedback (Rotheram, 2009a). Seventeen academics from various departments participated in the project, and initial findings showed that although most academics found that it did not save time, some found it quicker with more practice, and most said quality of feedback given was higher. Student responses to the project were mostly very positive, as they liked both the greater detail and personal nature of the feedback given. Although some students preferred receiving both written and audio

feedback, a minority expressed a preference for written feedback, as they found audio files more difficult to "skim" – obviously, one can question whether this is a negative outcome. A follow up project, Sounds Good 2 (Rotheram, 2009a), had the remit of including a wider selection of HEIs, and in July 2008 Newman University College was invited to participate, along with York St John University and the University of Northampton.

Sounding Good at Newman University College

At Newman University College, Education Studies is offered on the Combined Honours degree programme as a major, joint or minor route, and all students have to complete a compulsory double module in the first term – ES408: Introduction to Education Studies. As part of the assessment to this module, students are required to submit a short (1500 word) essay approximately a third of the way through the module. Although a summative piece, the timing of this assessment also allows for formative feedback within the modular structure. In the previous academic year (2007/8), electronic submission of this assignment via Newman's VLE (Moodle) had been successfully trialled, and the addition of audio feedback seemed like a natural progression to this. Notably, as well as giving audio feedback, electronic submission still allowed for in-script comments from marking tutors.

Key decisions

A range of key decisions needed to be made before the project could begin, particularly with regard to equipment, standards and training. In terms of recording staff feedback, the choice of equipment was narrowed down to four options: mobile phone devices, digital dictaphones, digital microphones and digital sound recorders (see **Figure 1**). For reasons of both quality of sound recording and compatibility of files (MP3 format was agreed as a standard - Rotheram, 2009b: p2), it was decided to offer staff the choice of using either a digital microphone with recording software (Audacity) or a digital sound recorder (the department already had access to several H4 Zoom recorders).

Figure 1 – range of sound recording devices available

Training sessions on the use of both tools were given to all the Education Studies staff involved in marking the assessments, as well as guidelines on giving the feedback and uploading the files into Moodle. Some members of staff were already familiar with the H4 Zoom Recorders, having used these to

create podcasts of lectures – it was felt, however, that both general and structural guidelines were needed for the format of the feedback. The development of guidelines was informed by both recommendations from the Sounds Good project (Rotheram, 2009c) and local institutional procedures. These would reflect the formative and informal nature of the process (particularly appropriate as this was probably the students' first ever HE assignment) as well as giving a standard structure and set of protocols for staff to follow, and were agreed as follows:

General Guidelines

- A handheld digital audio recorder (eg the H4) will probably be more convenient than using a microphone connected to a computer.
- Have the assignment details and assessment criteria with you.
- Read the assignment, making written comments on it as you go along.
- Jot down (on scrap paper) the main summary points you wish to make. (See below for a general structure.)
- When you record your feedback, don't bother to erase and re-record 'misspeaks'; just correct them immediately, as in conversation.
- Keep the files short! 2-3 minutes should be ample

Structural Guidelines

- Introduce yourself to the student in a friendly manner.
- Say which assignment you are giving feedback on, the module code, and the date - eg, you could begin the recording with:

  "Hello, this is Steve Dixon, giving feedback on Fred Bloggs' first assignment for ES408 – Introduction to Education Studies, on Wednesday 12th November"

- Outline the main elements of the comments which you'll be giving
- Work steadily through the assignment, amplifying and explaining notes added to the script and, especially at the end, making more general points.
- Refer to the assessment criteria.
- Explain your thought processes as you move towards allocating a mark.
- Give mark at the end.
- Round things off in a friendly way.

Before the module began, both the External Examiner and the office responsible for Exams and Assessments were informed of the change of practice (Rotheram 2009c: p2). A total of 83 students enrolled on the module, and the project was explained to them in their second week. In line with the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act – SENDA – (Office of Public Sector Information, 2001) and with regard to personal preference, all students

were given the option of receiving written feedback (or indeed both), although none requested this. A module team of 6 Education Studies staff marked the 83 assignments, and comments and feedback were posted via Moodle. An example of a student's view of this can be seen in **Figure 2** below
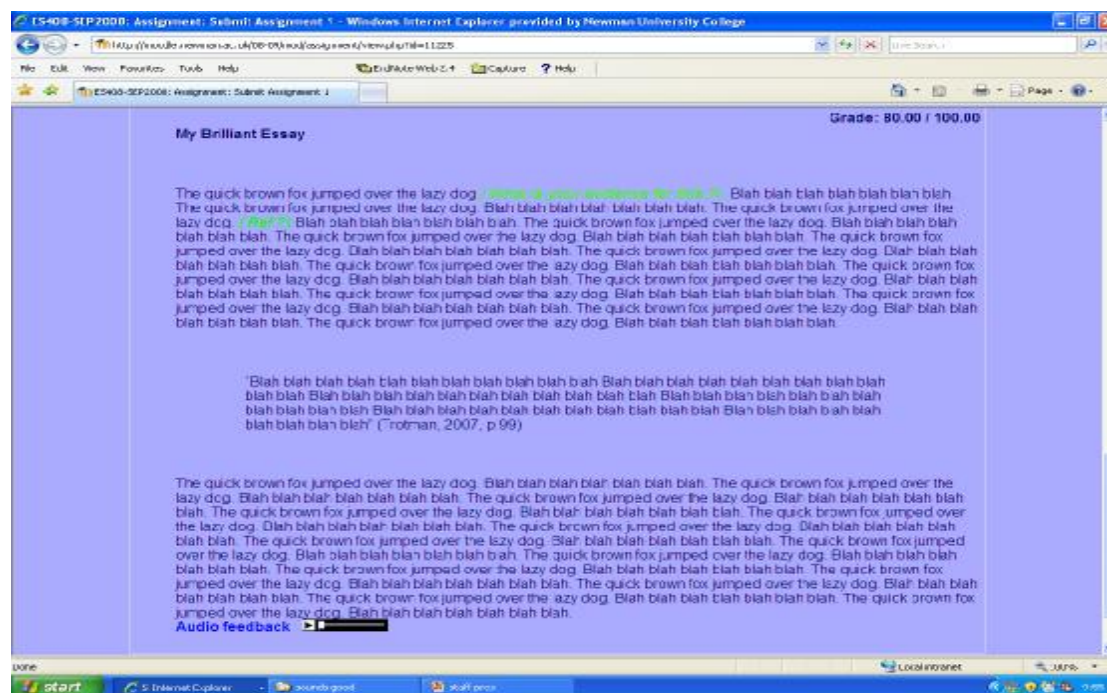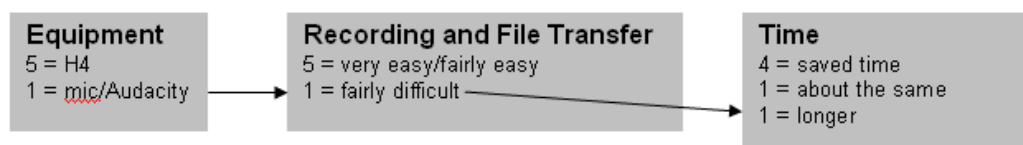

Figure 2 - Student view of in-script comments and audio feedback via Moodle

After the marking cycle was completed, data-gathering was done by giving questionnaires to all participating staff and students. The detail of these followed the Sounds Good 2 methodology devised by Leeds Metropolitan University. Staff were asked about the specific tools they used, their ease of use, sending feedback to students, the length of feedback given, and were also asked for comments on the audio feedback process, particularly in terms of time and nature when comparing it to their usual methods. Students were asked to comment on the length of the feedback, how they listened, and again, its ease of use, as well as providing general comments on its helpfulness and comparing it with written feedback.

Response from Education Studies Staff

A total of six Education studies staff gave audio feedback, and all responded to the Staff Questionnaire. Of these six, five used an H4 Zoom Recorder and one used a digital microphone with Audacity software. It may be worth noting that the same five who used the H4 found the process of recording and file transfer either easy or fairly easy, whereas the microphone user found this difficult (although much of this was due to network problems rather than the recording per se). Similarly, whereas the digital microphone user found that giving audio feedback actually took longer than traditional means, of those

using the H4s four considered that the process saved time, whereas one thought it took about the same amount of time (**Figure 3** below).


Equipment	Recording and File Transfer	Time
5 = H4	5 = very easy/fairly easy	4 = saved time
1 = mic/Audacity	1 = fairly difficult	1 = about the same
		1 = longer

Figure 3 – Education Studies Staff Responses

Staff commented on both the medium – *"interesting and exciting, a richer process"*, *"it's more personal, and less ambiguous"*, and *"greater depth, as it's more personal and formative"* – as well as reflecting on the nature of feedback itself and, indeed, their own professional practice – *"it changes nature and quality of feedback"*, *"it has profoundly reframed the way I give feedback"*, and *"it changes the student/tutor dynamic"*. Interestingly, whereas all staff felt that audio feedback facilitated more depth and detail, one member felt that it was not suitable for Masters Level marking, precisely because Masters level feedback needed more depth and detail. All staff felt that they were able to give more feedback, and although a quantitative measurement was outside the scope of the project, this does to some extent echo Ice et al's findings that giving audio feedback was able to 'reduce the time required to provide feedback by approximately 75%' , and that 'this reduction in time was coupled with a 255% increase in the quantity of feedback provided'. (Ice et al, 2007: p19)

Student Responses

Completed questionnaires were received from 57 of the 83 students who received audio feedback. As the audio files were posted back to the students via Moodle, the responses to the question "Where did you listen to the audio feedback?" may easily be deemed irrelevant, as, as expected, all listened via a PC, and none via a portable MP3 player. However, what is interesting is that 86% listened to the files at home rather than at college (see **Figure 4**)

- PC at Home (86%)
- College PC (7%)
- PC somewhere else (7%)
- Portable Device (0%)
- Other (0%)
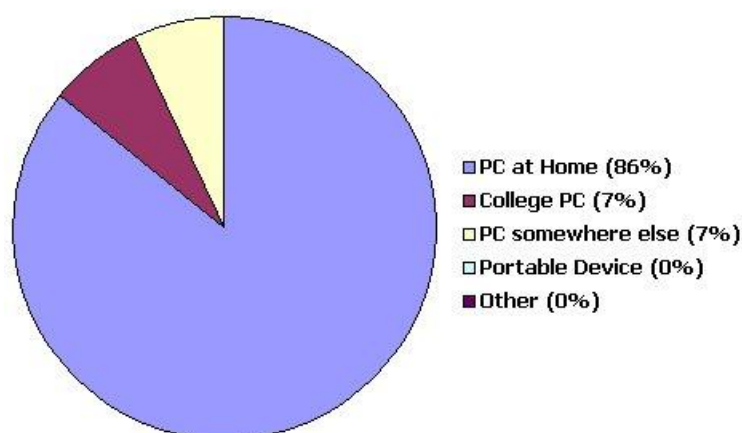
Figure 4 – How students listened to the audio feedback

As could possibly have been expected in the age of the "digital native", there were no students who had any problems in accessing or listening to the files (see **Figure 5**)

- Very Easy (68%)
- Fairly Easy (25%)
- Neither Easy nor Difficult (7%)
- Fairly Difficult (0%)
- Very Difficult (0%)

Figure 5 – Ease of access and play

In Merry & Orsmond's study (2008) students reported that audio feedback included more in-depth strategies for improvement rather than pointing out problems, and they argued that "students perceive and implement audio file feedback in different and more meaningful ways than written feedback". Similarly, and although some leeway has to be allowed for the concept of novelty value, responses from Newman University College Education Studies students, were, on the whole, overwhelmingly positive. Only 4 of the 57 respondents claimed that they would have preferred written feedback *in addition* to audio (although none had requested this) and the only negative comment on the process dealt with the *content* of the feedback, rather than the format.

Comments from Newman University College Education Studies students ranged from the generally enthusiastic:

"*Do it for all modules!*",
"*An excellent idea*",
"*Brilliant!*",

to those comparing mediums of feedback:

"*100 times better that written feedback*",

to those stressing ease of understanding (particularly on how tone of voice was useful in seeing how major problems were), the personal nature of the feedback and how this can be utilised differently:

"*You can listen whilst going back over your essay*",
"*Much more specific and easier to understand*",
"*Much more personal – a real person is talking to you*",
"*Easier to interpret*",
"*Very helpful*",
"*Much more encouraging – I've played the file again to help with other essays*",
"*Much better – it felt like Steve was in the room with me*".

It could be argued that these hint at a paradigm shift in the feedback process – a move from statement to discourse and what Dagen et al (2008: p163) identify as the possibility of establishing more meaningful relationships with students. Similarly, there are echoes here of Hyland's (1990: p285) argument that for feedback to be generally effective, it must be *interactive*, what Carless (2006: p231) highlights as "assessment dialogue", rather than traditional feedback. Pointedly, no students highlighted that they no longer had to decipher illegible handwriting.

Reflections and Recommendations

Using the Leeds Met framework (Rotheram, 2009a), one can surmise that the project was a real success. Audio feedback can undoubtedly save marking time (once staff are familiar with the technology), and its use has the potential to facilitate a discourse which is more detailed, pertinent and personal in nature, thus improving the students' learning experience.

There are obviously areas where audio feedback does not save time (not least for the students) – having also trialled its use at M level, where all assignments are double marked, it was notable how much longer it took the second marker to listen to the first markers comments before adding their own, as opposed to reading a standard feedback sheet. Other staff have also questioned its potential to save time – notably those who use dictation software (such as Dragon Naturally Speaking) to generate text feedback. This, I feel, misses the point – surely it is the very nature of the audio medium in providing *informal* and *understandable* feedback that is crucial here? Rotheram (2009d: p1) highlights that speech is potentially a richer medium than written text, although I would argue that this is perhaps not so clear cut – speech and writing offer different but complementary tools. This echoes Salmon's (2008:p72) claim that the audio medium allows for the formative and emotional nature of feedback to shine through, or indeed, enables a sharing of ideas in a "real, raw and spontaneous way" (Exley and Dinnick, 2009: p165). It is this *emotional* context which is potentially exciting – even those students who required more detailed face-to-face meetings after the assessment commented on how they felt both more confident and comfortable in doing this after having already heard the personal feedback from the tutor.

On a personal level, I found the process much less onerous, and my involvement actually led me to reflect on the nature and purpose of feedback

itself. Notably, although including endless guidelines on assessment, my own institution's Learning and Teaching Strategy includes nothing on the feedback process. Other institutional regulations also needed consideration, particularly those stipulated by our Exams and Assessments department – the fact that all audio files were transmitted via Moodle also meant that all were automatically archived, for example. The use of audio feedback easily allowed staff to meet the recommended maximum turnaround time for a module's assignments (3 weeks), although it may be some time before that for an individual assignment (15 minutes) is met, if ever.

As Rotheram (2009c) shows, the 2005 HEFCE Student Survey found that feedback is one of the aspects of higher education with which students are least satisfied. One could argue that audio feedback does have the potential to meet the requirements of feedback suggested by Brown et al (2003), if detailed, prompt, understandable. It is important to realise that the methodology defined by the Sounds Good project, although raising several interesting and pertinent issues, was basically a measure of both time and preference, not the *effectiveness* of audio feedback, or indeed, an in-depth analysis of levels of student engagement. I feel that these are areas that require further and deeper study.

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