



FEEDBACK VIA MP3 AUDIO FILES

Providing feedback to students is time consuming for academics. However, despite the time invested in it, the feedback academics provide may not be effectively used by all students (Higgins, et al., 2002). Shriver (1992) has shown that hearing 'think-aloud reading' can help writers appreciate the needs of readers of their work, leading to improvements in writing performance. Spoken feedback from tutors as mp3 audio files is analogous to the 'think aloud reading' investigated by Shriver.

Fifteen student volunteers submitted samples of their work for formative feedback. The work included essays, parts of dissertations and written reflections. After reading students' work, feedback was recorded on a desktop PC using Audacity (audacity.sourceforge.net) with file conversion to mp3 format using Switch (www.nch.com.au/switch/index.html). Both of these packages are available as freeware. The mp3 files were then sent to the students as email attachments. Semi-structured interviews with the students took place within 3 weeks of them receiving this feedback.

Overall, the students responded very positively to this type of feedback. Reasons cited included: it was easier to understand because handwriting is often illegible; it had more depth because possible strategies for solving problems were included rather than just stating what the problems were; and it seemed 'more genuine', indicating that speech is received in a more personal way than writing.

'The spoken word meant more than words on a piece of paper'

Thirteen of the 15 students listened to the feedback more than once with some doing so while they were doing other things such as walking to work. They also appreciated the ability to pause, rewind and play sections again.

All students stated that they listened to the feedback with a copy of their submitted work in front of them at least once and 12 of the 15 students made notes on the written work as they listened to the feedback. They seemed to be able to understand the feedback to a greater extent compared to written comments.

'Tone of voice conveyed information as to whether the changes [needed] were minor or major'

Many students also stated that they would use the audio feedback they had received to improve their work for other tutors.

'It seems like written feedback just goes with one essay, but the audio feedback could go with other essays as well'

This preliminary study indicates that students perceive and implement mp3 audio feedback in more meaningful ways than written feedback. Audio feedback may be more understandable to students because they are more used to information being conveyed as sound than as written words possibly reflecting their increasing use of multimedia technology. In this context it is also interesting to note that participants gave the ability to pause and replay audio feedback as an advantage. It did not seem to have occurred to the students making these comments that they could also pause and then reread written feedback.

Students also commented that the audio feedback was more detailed than written comments and this theme was also picked up by the tutors who found themselves naturally providing examples in their audio feedback of how the work might be changed. They felt this would not have happened to the same extent in written feedback because of either time or space constraints. Additionally there was an appreciation that subtleties of thought that indicate merely possibilities for change (rather than direct instructions to change) are more easily conveyed using the spoken word than in writing. Finally it is worth noting that 4 of the 15 students interviewed reported that they often did not read written feedback because they found tutors handwriting difficult to read. Audio feedback overcomes this illegibility.

As feedback is integral to all learning this project has wide applicability across the disciplines.

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REFERENCES

Higgins, R., Hartley, P. and Skelton, A. (2002) The conscientious consumer: reconsidering the role of assessment feedback in student learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, **27** (1), 53-64

Shriver, K.A. (1992) Teaching writers to anticipate readers' needs. *Written Communication*, **9** (2), 179-208. A longer version of this paper will be submitted for publication to the *Bioscience Education e-Journal*.

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If you have any comments on the new site please send them to heabioscience@leeds.ac.uk