

Electronic and audio feedback: student engagement and perception

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a pilot project on the use of electronic and audio feedback, exploring student engagement and perceptions. The purpose of the project was to find a way to encourage and motivate students to engage with the feedback process; in particular, to change from a culture of students focusing on their final numerical grades to a culture where students engage with and process their feedback. This encourages students to become agents who can self-evaluate and assess their own academic work. The ongoing project also seeks to explore how students internalise feedback, the emotional impact of receiving feedback and how audio feedback can be used to regulate and take the emotion out of giving and receiving feedback. This paper presents data that was collected in 2017/2018; however, the presentation will also include data collected during 2018/2019, and concludes with a reflection on the use of electronic and audio feedback from a lecturer perspective. A major finding is that the students did access and engage with the feedback, and identified benefits to their learning.

Introduction

Education has become a lifelong process and many students are now coming to higher education at different junctures in their lives. The students in our classrooms come from a diverse range of backgrounds and many have had very different educational experience. These factors influence how a student may engage in the classroom, their approach to learning and also how they process feedback. Evaluating and assessing student course work is a fundamental and universal responsibility of lecturers. This process of providing and receiving feedback can be an emotionally charged experience for both the lecturer and the student alike. The marketisation of higher education has resulted in students becoming increasingly assertive consumers of education with increased expectation of individualised, personal attention and grades (Martínez - Arboleda, 2018). The evaluation efforts of the lecturer, that is the grades they assign, have important and often lifelong consequences for the student, the education system and society as a whole (Brackett et al., 2013).

This small-scale innovation of practice and related research began during the academic year 2017/2018 as part of project referred to as SPEEDS (Social Policy Education Enhancing Digital Skills), a collaboration between Social Policy educators, students, and educational technologists across a number of Institutes of Technologies and Universities in the Republic of Ireland. The purpose of the collaboration was to transform personal and professional digital capacities in a teaching and learning context. This research continues to be a work in progress, with plans to develop and extend it further as part of a thesis on a Master's Degree in Teaching and Learning. This will include surveys with future cohorts plus qualitative approaches such as interview/focus groups.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McCarthy (2015, p. 153) assessment and feedback is central to student learning in higher education and effective feedback is essential “as the scaffolding that enhances learning”. He stresses that despite current literature outlining the importance of high quality and timely feedback, there are many obstacles to the delivery of such feedback. One of the major obstacles is engaging students in the assessment feedback process. Students often find that the feedback they receive is, too late, too vague and unclear due to illegible handwriting. This results in the students misunderstanding the feedback and or failing to engage with it and as a result student simply ignore the feedback provided (ibid, 2015). This is in direct contrast to audio feedback where research by Lunt and Curran (2010) found that students were ten times more likely to download an audio file online than collect their written feedback. Emery and Atkinson (2009) suggest that one minute of audio feedback is the equivalent of 100 written words

of feedback and as a result audio feedback gives lecturers a platform to provide a comprehensive and sensitive approach to providing feedback.

Research conducted by Ice et al. (2007) found that students perceive audio feedback as more supportive and caring than the more traditional approach of written feedback, reporting a greater understanding of the feedback. Further research conducted by Merry and Osmond (2007), King et al. (2008), and Hennessy and Foster (2014) also found this to be the case. In addition, Northcliffe and Middleton (2008) indicate that the tone and expression of the lecturer providing the feedback both to the depth of communication between the lecturer and the student. Simply referring to students by their name during feedback facilitates a deeper connection between the student and the lecturer (Ice et al., 2007).

The relationship and social interactions between the lecturer and the student has power at its core. Värlander (2008) argues, that as a result, giving and receiving feedback can often awake emotions such as pride or shame as well as guilt and anxiety in one or both parties. Students' emotions greatly influence the way in which they are able to receive and process feedback. Feedback can influence how a students' feel about their about their academic ability (positively and negatively) and what and how they can learn (Dweck, 1999), and sometimes the value of the feedback may be 'eclipsed by learner's reactions' to it (Race, 1995 as cited in Värlander, 2008, p. 145). Therefore, Voelkel and Mello (2014) indicate that it's easier for students to hear critical feedback than to read it. Audio feedback gives lecturers a platform to provide a comprehensive and sensitive approach to providing feedback. It should be noted that when using audio feedback, the lecturer must be mindful of their tone of voice as frustration (at a poor attempt) or weariness (having corrected large numbers) can be demotivating for a student.

Sadler (2013) argues that the role of the lecturer is not to critique and offer advise on how to improve but rather it is to teach students how to assess the quality of their work and modify it as they do it. To do this student must be taught to develop the ability to evaluate and judge their own work, so they can identify and distinguish between what is considered to be unacceptable, satisfactory, good, very good and excellent pieces of work. Clear and comprehensive feedback is one of the key pedagogical approaches which can be remodelled to support students in developing "evaluative judgement" (Joughin, et al., 2018).

2 OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

2.1 Aim of the Project

This research project seeks to evaluate the use of electronic and audio feedback as a means of enhancing the formative assessment process for students, and a mechanism for managing emotions within the feedback loop for both the lecturer and student.

2.2 Project Objectives

- To explore the extent of student engagement with audio and electronic feedback.
- To investigate students' perception of audio and electronic feedback as a feedback medium.
- To explore the emotions students and lecturers associate with feedback (ongoing)

2.3 Rationale for this Project

Over the years I found that despite the fact, I had spent hours grading and providing feedback on assignments many students failed to attend for feedback. Those who did attend appeared to have difficulty fully understanding the feedback. I felt that a number of factors may have contributed to this such as illegible handwriting, lack of detail and/or the short period of time they had to review the feedback in class. I observed a significant number of students submitting assignments year in year out with many of the same errors, and many saw little or no improvement in their grade from one assignment to the next. On some occasions when students did attend for feedback, a small minority of students became emotional (upset, disappointment and/or anger) and this appeared to impede their ability to take the feedback on board. Sometimes this impacted on me emotionally and as a result this had the potential to influence my objectiveness when grading their future assignments. Therefore, I was looking for a way to encourage students to become involved in the feedback process, and to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. I also wished to take some of the emotion out of the feedback process both for the student and for myself as the lecturer.

My current teaching includes year 1, year 2 and year 4 on the Applied Social Care Degree, students may exit at year 3 with a Level 7 degree or Year 4 with a Level 8 degree. I also teach a module on the MA in Child, Youth and Family. During the academic year 2017/2018 I decided to pilot electronic grading and audio feedback with year 1, with year 4 and with the MA students. I chose the year 1 as I have a very large number of students in the class (over 100) and I wanted to see if grading assignments electronically and providing the audio feedback would be time efficient or more time consuming than my traditional method of marking and providing feedback. I also found that year 1 students require more in-depth feedback. I wanted my students' to become engaged in the feedback process from the outset of their higher education and for them to see the value of feedback. I wanted to encourage them to place greater emphasis on the feedback rather than the grade value. I chose year 4 as they have had three years of receiving feedback in a more traditional manner and therefore they were best placed to provide me with a comparative overview of their experience of receiving traditional feedback versus the electronic and audio feedback. Finally, I chose the MA students as this is the smallest cohort of students I teach (six to eight students on average each year) and I wanted to give them an opportunity to submit a draft piece of work, receive detailed formative feedback and then submit the final submission. By assessing their work electronically, giving the audio feedback on the draft piece, and then getting the students to submit their final submission having had the benefit of the electronic and audio feedback, I could measure if the students had engaged with the feedback and implemented it into their final submission.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

In the academic year 2017/2018, I began using electronic and audio feedback using the tool Turnitin Feedback Studio. To gauge student feedback, students were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey. The survey questions consisted of a combination of quantitative (closed questions, Likert eating scale) and qualitative (open) questions. The survey was made available to 1st and 4th year students through a link in the virtual learning environment (VLE) in April 2018. Over a 12-day period 55 students responded. As this is any ongoing piece of research a revised survey was also completed by year 1, year 4 and master's students during the academic year 2018/2019 – these new findings will be presented and discussed during the oral presentation that accompanies this paper. Further research is planned, including focus groups and interviews to delve deeper into the emotions associated with feedback.

Description of the feedback approach used:

1. Students are fully briefed on the assignment and on the feedback process before doing their assignments. This included a demonstration on how to access the electronic and audio feedback.
2. Student uploads their work to the Turnitin portal of the VLE.
3. Lecturer logs onto the VLE, views the students' work, creates a suite of reusable feedback comments which can be inserted through each student's work as required.
4. For each student, the lecturer records up to three minutes of detailed formative feedback. This feedback, based on the assessment criteria, signposts elements of good work, indicates what improvements need to be made, and suggest how these can be made in order to improve and enhance their work.
5. Once all of the student assignments have been graded, a VLE announcement is made that the work has been marked and that students can now access the audio and electronic feedback.
6. One week later the numerical grade is made available to each student. This delay allows the student an opportunity to read, review and process the feedback rather than focusing exclusively on the numerical grade.

4 STUDENT FEEDBACK

4.1 Extent of student engagement with the audio feedback

Fifty-five students responded to the survey. Only three respondents indicated that they had not engaged with the electronic and audio feedback. Of these, one indicated they had not received any audio feedback (this was noted and during 2018/2019 all students were advised to contact me immediately if they did not receive audio feedback or if there were any technical glitches etc.). One student provided no further

detail as to why they did not engage in the process. However, the third student's response was very interesting as this student separately self-identified to me and outlined that they did not engage with or like the audio feedback. When I probed the student on this issue, they outlined that they would have preferred to have an opportunity to meet with me (the lecturer) to discuss the feedback. The student indicated that they had been disappointed and angry with the grade they received (it did transpire that they had read and listened to the feedback, and they did understand the feedback) and that they wanted to vent their anger and frustration. This was of significance as it indicates that the electronic and audio feedback can play a role in the management of emotions for both the student and the lecturer, and in this instance acted as a useful buffer between the student and the lecturer.

4.2 Student perceptions of electronic and audio feedback

Fig. 1., provides an overview of students' perceptions and evaluation of electronic and audio feedback, 89% (n=55) indicated that they found the feedback was useful in helping them know how to improve on future assignment, with 49% definitely agreeing. The vast majority, 95% (n=55), found the feedback easy to find in Turnitin/VLE (67% definitely agree). Specifically related to audio feedback, 86% (n=50) indicated that they found the audio feedback to be as good as an individual face-to-face feedback session with their lecturer, with 68% definitely agreeing. 80% (n=50) indicated that they would like to receive this method of feedback again (56% definitely agree). 82% (n=50) indicated that the audio feedback was easier to understand than the written feedback (62% definitely agree). 88% (n=50) felt it was more personal than written feedback (60% definitely agree).

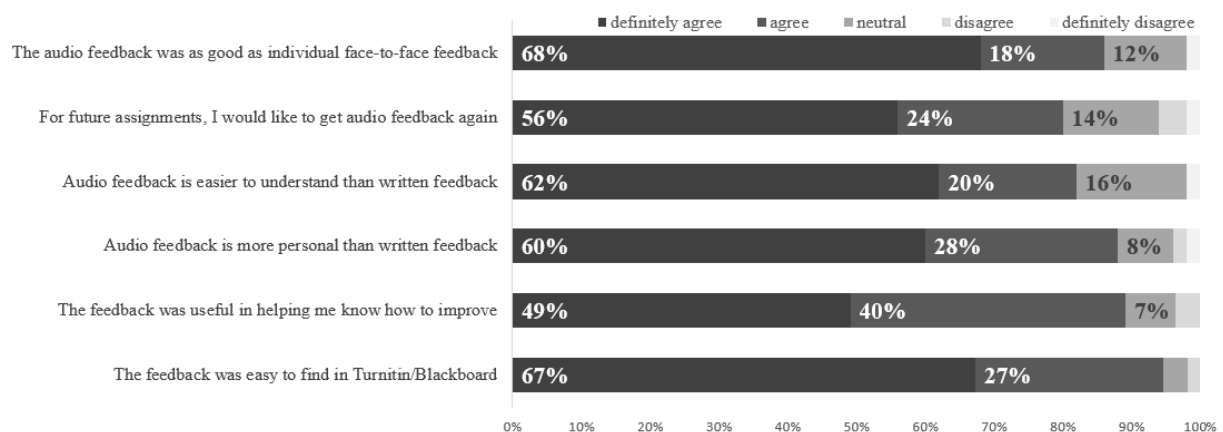


Fig. 1. Student evaluation of audio feedback

As part of the survey students were asked to answer a number of open questions in a bid to ascertain their perceptions of the audio feedback. The students were very positive in their responses and highlighted what they perceived to be the benefits of receiving electronic and audio feedback. Students particularly liked that the feedback was specific to them.

“Audio feedback is highly beneficial and allows students to feel more satisfied in understanding what they need to work on to improve in the future and why they got the given mark.”

“You get comments specifically related to your work. I found this very helpful.”

A number commented on the fact that the feedback was not only personalised but also discreet and private. It would appear that students often feel that within the class there can be a sense of competition between students to achieve the best grades and students who fall short of this can feel embarrassed, demoralised and demotivated.

“I feel when students are given their assignments for 10-15 minutes during class we may feel under pressure to accomplish a better grade as we tend to compare our work to the other students in the classroom and then if we see that we may not be doing as well as other friends or classmates it may cause more negative feeling as students could feel embarrassed that they are not doing as well as they had hoped and therefore have no sense of achievement.”

In line with the literature in the area one of the key outcomes of this research was that students clearly found the audio feedback helpful. In fact, virtually all the respondents indicated that they valued the opportunity to listen and re-listen to the feedback at a time and in a place of their choosing.

“It is easier to process feedback as you can go back over it in your own time.”

“That it was personal and you can access the assignment as many times as you wished.”

The students also indicate that having the audio feedback also benefits them when preparing either assignments and they were able to use the feedback given to enhance and improve their grades in assignments for other modules also.

“Definitely so helpful and I’ve seen my other assignments improve since this.”

One of the most common responses was that they would like to get audio feedback from all of their lectures.

“Would love if every lecturer would do this”

5 LECTURER REFLECTIONS

Evaluating and assessing student course work is a fundamental responsibility of lecturers. This process of providing and receiving feedback can be an emotionally charged experience for both the student and the lecturer alike. One of the major challenges is providing timely and comprehensive feedback to students. Traditionally feedback has been provided via marking sheets and providing student with an opportunity to view their assignment feedback and ask any questions they may have regarding the same. However, many students fail to avail of this opportunity and very often it is only students who do very well or students who wished to question their grade show up to the feedback sessions. Therefore, I felt there was a need to reach out directly to each student in a more positive and personalised way, and to try to engage as many of them as possible in the feedback process. Electronic and audio feedback has provided me with an opportunity to do this.

By using audio feedback, I was able to speak directly to students. I was able to provide them with clear and comprehensive feedback that they could access time and time again. Also via the audio feedback I encouraged students to place more emphasis on engaging with the feedback rather than the grade. I attempted to encourage this by releasing the audio and electronic feedback to the students two days before I made their grades available. I was also able to monitor who had reviewed the feedback.

Electronic and audio feedback also provided me with an opportunity to provide my students with feed forward. Prior to engaging with this project previous the MA students wrote an assignment weighted at 60%. I would grade it and provide feedback, however the feedback was redundant as this programme runs for one year, so they had no opportunity to use the feedback I provided to improve and enhance their grade. Therefore, by providing these students with an opportunity to submit a draft assignment, the feedforward provided each student with an opportunity to engage with, process and implement the feedback into their final submission which would then be graded. This gave the students an opportunity to improve and enhance their submission and ultimately their grades. This did in fact happen, the majority of the final submission were substantially better than the original draft.

I now provide audio and electronic feedback to all of my students across all of the programmes that I am teaching. Since the beginning of this academic year 2018/2019, all of my assessments are via the use of digital technology and as a result I have gone paperless which also has a positive impact environmentally. Now I cannot imagine retuning to the more traditional methods of doing assessments and providing feedback.

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