

An evaluation of student and staff perceptions of the use of audio files for feedback on student assessments: Project report of work in progress

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Studies have indicated that students may prefer verbal to written feedback (Orsmond et al., 2005) with audio recording identified as a potential enabling technology (Hounsell, 2004). Audio feedback can bring improvements in accessibility, providing a higher degree of detail and personalisation whilst promoting a greater degree of learner engagement (Ribchester, 2008), thereby addressing several of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's seven principles of good feedback practice (2006). Merry and Orsmond (2008) provide confirmation of this in a pilot study, where fifteen students received audio feedback on their written work, the main reported drawback being the size of the audio files, resulting in some difficulties with e-mail systems. In summing up their project, they propose a series of eight guidelines to support tutors, (ibid, p.9). Perhaps the most comprehensive project undertaken in this area to date is the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded study "Sounds Good" (Rotheram, 2009). The study, which involved four universities, over 1200 students and 38 lecturers, found that audio can provide more effective feedback to students in some circumstances, notably when assessors are familiar with the technology, comments can be spoken more quickly than they can be written, the amount of feedback is sizeable and students have straightforward access to the audio files.

This project was situated in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester, which has been innovative in its desire to strengthen the mechanisms employed to enhance the quality, alignment and uptake of student feedback in recent years. It aimed to investigate the efficacy of using audio files for summative module assessment with the intention of maximising both staff time and the quality of the feedback, whilst at the same time aiming to enhance student uptake of the feedback. Its key objective was to evaluate staff and student perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using audio files as a method of assessment feedback. Motivated by a guest speaker at the 2008 University of Worcester Learning and Teaching conference (Gomez, 2008), the study aimed to extend the audio feedback aspect of his work.

An initial random sample of twenty-five student assignments submitted at the end of a second-year research methods module were selected, five of these being allocated to each of the five tutors, who were to mark the assignments. These assignments were then marked in the traditional handwritten manner as well as in the form of audio, where tutors' comments were recorded onto handheld dictation machines, these files then being uploaded to a PC. The sample of twenty-five students were then invited to take part in the study through engagement with the audio feedback received in the form of an mp3 file by e-mail, followed by participation in a focus group interview. The markers were also invited to take part in a focus group interview. Recordings of the tutor feedback and focus group interviews were then transcribed and thematically analysed. This paper gives an outline of the work in progress and presents the findings so far.

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