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Audio feedback on student assignments: boon or burden?

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Abstract

This paper considers the pros and cons of giving formative feedback by audio as well as in writing. Post-qualification nursing students studying mentorship skills received both types of feedback, and were then asked to give their views on the two methods, either by participation in a survey or by personal interview or by both. Audio feedback proved popular: students found it more 'personal' than feedback in writing, though they valued the complementarity of blended feedback (audio and written), and preferred to have both rather than either. A focus group with lecturers uncovered a degree of ambivalence, however: they shared with students the ideal of feedback as inter-personal and relationship-based, but providing both sorts of feedback required more of their time and appeared to involve duplication.

Introduction

UK undergraduates report less satisfaction with the feedback they receive on their academic work than with all other aspects of their academic experience, as captured by the National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2)11). Higgins et al (2001) argue that feedback is a problematic form of communication, because teachers and students understand it differently. For example, students may not interpret written comments as the tutors intended (Charnock, 2000), or understand the points being made (Weaver, 2006). Receiving and using feedback to enhance their learning are therefore particular skills that students have to acquire (Mutch, 2003).

One purpose of feedback is to influence future academic performance. To do this, it needs to be part of a developmental process and built into module design (Mutch, 2003). It is therefore common practice to require students to complete assignments part-way through a module in

order that they can receive formative feedback that will help them to optimise their performance in the summative assignment at the end of the module. Using feedback in this way has been termed feed-forward (Higgins et al, 2001).

Such a process can be difficult to achieve in short courses, where there is limited time to submit, mark and feed back on formative work. This paper considers a five-day course on mentorship to prepare health care practitioners in supporting and assessing pre-qualification health care students on placement in clinical settings. The course is run twelve times a year by the School of Health Sciences, City University London. Classes typically include 30 – 36 students, who are usually qualified nurses. They are required to undertake supervised mentoring of a learner in their own clinical area. They are also required to complete some academic work which, at the time of this study, consisted of two pieces of written work. First, they had to write a five-hundred word case study of the learner whom they supported. This was peer-reviewed in class, and students could also request written feedback from lecturers if they wished. Second, students were required to write a 3000 word essay, known as the summative assignment. The simple inclusion in the final submission of the formative essay and a report of the peer feedback gained 10% of the total marks, regardless of quality; the remaining 90% of the marks were awarded for the academic quality of the summative assignment.

The motivations of students on this short course are likely to be different from those of undergraduates. They may be attending the course because their manager requires them to, or as part of a career plan, without their being interested in academic study as such, or committed to any further study. The purpose of feedback on the formative assignment was therefore primarily to build students' competence and confidence in tackling the summative assignment. But despite the provision of formative feedback, the quality of the summative assignments submitted was not high, and lecturers therefore deliberated about how to support

students to produce better work. The audio feedback project described in this paper was one result.

Though face to face oral feedback could be seen as ideal, and is preferred to written feedback by students (Orsmond et al, 2002), this is not possible within the resources available for this course of study. Audio feedback was therefore chosen as a practicable method, positioned somewhere between written and face-to-face feedback. Evidence from other research suggests that learners prefer audio to written feedback (Merry et al, 2008). More specifically, audio feedback is seen as of particular advantage to learners whose first language is not English (Rotherham, 2007), of whom there usually many on this course. It may also benefit students with dyslexia; people with dyslexia are disproportionately attracted to health care professions (Taylor and Walker, 2003). In offering both modes of feedback, the project took a blended learning approach (Graham, 2005).

Lecturers presented the project to students (four classes running in parallel, 163 students altogether). Participants could choose to receive audio feedback regardless of whether they also chose to take part in the evaluation. Of 101 students who opted to receive audio feedback, only one chose not to take part in the evaluation. Students choosing to participate in the project used the university's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to submit their formative essay (paper submission was possible for non-participants). Lecturers gave audio feedback by creating MP3 files, either using Audacity® which is free, open source software for recording and editing any sound (http://audacity.sourceforge.net/) or speaking into audio recorders. They then uploaded these files into the VLE. Each student only had access to his or her own feedback, which typically lasted between one and three minutes. Students also received written feedback. The project was funded internally by City University London's Learning Development Centre, and received approval from the School of Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Aims and objectives of the project

The project sought to improve learning and teaching by enhancing learner ability to make effective use of audio feedback; and to evaluate learner and lecturer use of audio feedback. This paper reports the evaluation results.

Design and methods

This was a three-phase project. Phase 1 included identifying evidence-based technologies for audio feedback, and piloting evaluation tools and guidelines for learners and lecturers. Phase 2 was the implementation phase. Phase 3 evaluated the project, and some of the results are reported here.

The evaluation consisted of a survey (available online and on paper); semi-structured interviews with students; and a focus group with lecturers. The survey was piloted in December 2010 and carried out between March and May 2011 Interviews and the focus group were conducted between August and December 2011, and were taped, transcribed and analysed thematically.

Findings

Four lecturers (L1-L4) took part in the focus group. There were forty-nine student responses to the survey: three online and forty-six on paper. Forty-five students (out of 49, 91.8%) had submitted their formative essay by the VLE, and were therefore provided with audio feedback. Thirty-one of these (68.9% of 45) had listened to their audio feedback. There were quite high levels of missing data throughout. Data relating to IT glitches or competence issues are not reported here. Four students (S1-S4) were interviewed, though only two were from the mentorship class. The other two (S3 and S4) were undergraduate nursing students who had been given audio feedback by another lecturer: she had heard about the project and decided to explore the idea herself. One undergraduate (S4) was interviewed by phone and

this was not recorded: the interviewer took notes and typed them up immediately afterwards. Undergraduates interviewed did not make noticeably different points from the post-qualified.

Two main themes emerged from the various data sets: blended feedback, and the feedback relationship.

Blended feedback

The provision of two sorts of feedback in parallel was welcomed by students. Survey respondents were asked whether they preferred audio or written feedback or both, and why. Of 35 respondents, 31 (88.6%) preferred to receive both sorts of feedback. (As the number of responses exceeded the number who had listened to audio feedback, some respondents must have answered on the basis of intention rather than of experience.) The survey also asked which form(s) of feedback would help with their learning in future. Only one ticked 'audio only', while eight (16.3% of 46) ticked 'written only'; but thirty-seven (80.4%) ticked 'audio and written'. These results indicate a positive acceptance of blended feedback, which was confirmed in the interviews.

> **'***The more feedback the better really, basically is what I'm getting at, and in various forms.' (S1)*

One student preferred audio because

> *'some things just when you hear them stick in your mind differently than if you read. You can sometimes read without reading, so to speak. You look at it, but it doesn't always necessarily sink in.' (S1)*

But she went on to point out that written feedback also had advantages.

> *'the audio was good but then you have to keep going back and listening to it… whereas if it's something written it can be a bit easier to quickly look at … because*

you do forget stuff … although you may remember some aspects, you're bound to forget some bits as well.' (S1)

Another student similarly articulated the strengths of both sorts of feedback. She felt that the audio feedback provided more points in less time. On the other hand,

'I am quite visual, so I do, I did like the system of highlighting [in written feedback]… I automatically knew where it was and I didn't have to read my essay at the same time and make notes and rewind.' (S2)

One student had a clear preference:

'[with audio feedback] I was more concentrating and focused. When I'm reading, I'm easily distracted; when listening, I'm more attentive, I would say.' (S3)

One student interviewed described making notes:

'Even with the audio feedback I'm always, I'm there jotting notes down and reading my essay and putting notes on it. So I'm actually writing, I'm reading, I'm listening to audio and I'm doing the written, physically doing the written feedback for myself.' (S2)

Some lecturers agreed with students that the two methods were complementary. Two of them discussed how their own oral and written feedback differed:

'[when giving written feedback] usually my focus would be on the gaps, but when I was doing the audio I felt my focus changed, I felt I had to say something good first, I just felt obligated to do it for some reason.' (L3)

'I'd probably do the same thing. When I am giving written feedback it's always critically, negatively focussed. But the audio feedback, yeah, I, as a person I am a bit of a conflict avoider … I would hedge around a situation to try and avoid having to do that upsetting kind of work. … I would find myself doing the same thing of being

much more positive in my verbal feedback and much more negative in the written feedback.' (L4)

However, there was some concern at the possibility of duplication rather than complementarity in giving both sorts of feedback.

'for me it was confusing about what went in the written bit and what went in the audio; and why I was doing both; and whether they should be the same or different.' (L1)

Some lecturers were also concerned by the extra work involved in providing two sorts. In fact, accessing both feedback sources required more efforts of students too, but such effort for an individual student would be minimal compared with that for lecturers marking up to 36 pieces of work. The work involved had sensitised lecturers to the wider questions of whether the effort required by feeding back (using whatever mode) was justified by the benefits to students; no conclusion could be reached about this as it was impossible to measure.

The feedback relationship

A recurring theme was the way in which audio feedback created a valued sense of *relationship*. Ninety per cent (27 of 30 survey respondents) agreed that 'audio feels more personal'. This is confirmed by other results. For example, respondents were asked to score their agreement (1 = low agreement, 5 = high) with a number of statements (thus, 2.5 represents neither low nor high agreement). The statement 'audio feedback helped me experience teacher's presence and interest in my learning' scored 4.0, while 'Compared with written comment, audio feedback reflects a sense of caring in my tutor' scored 3.5.

Interviewed students also spoke appreciatively of the personal element:

'it is very comforting to know that your tutor, that is your tutor, they're there, they're talking you through it. So there's a bit of a childlike way of thinking about it.' (S2)

This was confirmed in all the other interviews

> *'I knew the voice of my tutor from the classroom, so hearing her voice when I was at home, it was like she was really talking to me, it was personalised… Knowing the voice, it helps.' (S3)*

Lecturers discussed feedback in general in interactive terms:

> *'I see feedback as dialogue, as a form of relationship…' (L3)*

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But in practice, this was difficult to achieve.

> *'It's really difficult to try and provide something that's meaningful when you don't really know the student that well. And the classes are fairly large.' (L2)*

The lack of personal knowledge of students made giving feedback harder.

> *'I'm thinking, will they know what I'm getting at? When I say 'why?' or 'clarify', do they actually know what I mean by this?' (L2)*

This discussion suggests that face-to-face feedback was preferable, exactly because this enabled dialogue within a relationship. But such dialogue did not guarantee mutual understanding.

> *'I find it much, very difficult when we're face to face and you're trying to explain something and you get the blank look.' (L1)*

When discussing audio feedback in particular, there were different views about whether or not the use of the voice made feeding back feel more personal and interactive. One lecturer did enjoy the feeling of talking to an individual.

> *'If I think about feedback as a relationship actually I feel like I'm having more of a relationship with somebody talking to them than I do writing to them'. (L4)*

But others disagreed:

> *'I just don't like it because it was talking into the void. Why am I talking when there's nobody here? It's just talking to a machine, they may listen to it, they may not, but we're not having a dialogue.' (L2)*

However, though these views differ in some respects, they all appear to derive from an underlying belief that a good interpersonal relationship is a desirable basis for giving feedback of any sort.

Discussion

There were a number of limitations to the evaluation. First, its design allowed the capture of perceptions of the benefits of audio feedback, but not of actual behaviour or learning in the short- or medium-term. Second, it focused on the process and provision of feedback, not its content or use. Third, response rates were low.

Findings should not be generalised to undergraduate courses, as this was a short course for qualified healthcare professionals as part of their continuing professional development. Students were not necessarily motivated primarily to achieve academic excellence, and lecturers were aware that the purpose of feedback was to help them achieve a pass at summative assessment rather than to support academic progress in the medium or long term.

One challenge of providing useful feedback in such a course arises from the limited contact between lecturers and students (25 hours of contact time over five days, with classes typically of 30 to 36). Focus group data quoted above illustrates this. Other research evidence supports our finding that feedback is ideally a communication within a relationship, where time and continuity are needed for the relationship to develop (Higgins et al, 2001). Clearly, this is difficult in short courses with large class sizes. Class size also means a considerable marking

burden for each lecturer. Students' apparent preference for both sorts of feedback rather than just one has serious implications for lecturers' time. Although (after practice) audio feedback in itself may be faster than written, the provision of both adds to the burden and may not be sustainable. However, students' comments about the personal and comforting nature of audio feedback may suggest its application as a way of personalising learning in large groups, especially when learning might be delivered remotely to some extent, such as in e- or blended learning (Claus, 2003).

However, the suggestion that the mode of feedback changes content is important. If lecturers are more likely to be positive in audio than in written feedback, this may be why students like it. But while accentuating the positive may enhance student's motivation to learn, it may also deflect attention from advice on how to improve. As Kluger and Van Dijk (2010) suggest, the value and effects of positive and negative feedback vary according to students' motivations. In this case, lecturers do not know students well enough to customise feedback to individual's motivations. Unsurprisingly, Kluger and Van Dijk (2010) suggest a one-to-one interview as the way forward, a solution that endorses the value placed on dialogue and relationship in our study but is impracticable. The challenge is to devise a practicable but 'good enough' feedback process from which students are likely to benefit. One way forward has been adopted by some of our colleagues, who on the basis of this project now give audio feedback to students who fail assignments and therefore have an urgent need to learn from feedback. Others give general audio feedback to a whole student group, although it seems likely that this will reduce the sense of personal relationship: it would be interesting to research if this is the case.

Conclusion

We report our findings here primarily in order to help others considering how to give more effective formative feedback. It appears that qualified nurses are receptive to a blended feedback approach when studying, and that audio feedback may go some way to satisfy the

appetite for a more personal contact. However, research evidence of whether audio feedback is more effective than written in improving later work is needed.

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