

Podcast or Prose? Feedback on my Feedback

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Abstract

This article details a study into using podcasts (digitally recorded sound files – in this instance with visuals) as an alternative medium in which to provide students from a variety of academic disciplines with formative and summative feedback on their assessments for a ten credit online work based learning module. The study aims to identify whether students prefer podcasts to prose, and to disseminate the findings to academics interested in alternatives to traditional written feedback. It is suggested that podcasts are congruent with a wholly online learning experience but offer the opportunity for a more personalised approach from a tutor they would usually not meet. In addition it may benefit students who learn best by visual and/or auditory means and podcasts may, therefore, enhance students' engagement with the feedback provided.

Introduction

Race, Brown and Smith (2005) preface their book *500 Tips for Assessment* by emphasising that nothing is more important to students' learning than assessment and feedback. Assessment is integral to the learning experience. It develops curriculum understanding and facilitates study progression. However, National Student Survey data has previously demonstrated student dissatisfaction with assessment feedback with some modest recent improvement (HEFCE 2011). So how do we bridge the gap between student expectations and the feedback practice of lecturers?

One option is to try to identify students' preferred feedback medium. The research planned in this study aims to identify students' preference when offered the choice of audio-visual or written feedback for assignments submitted on a ten credit distance learning module.

Context

UCLan offers students the opportunity to achieve an Employability & Enterprise Award via personalised selection and study of academically accredited modules specifically designed to develop a variety of transferable skills such as problem solving, teamwork

and commercial awareness through active learning, reflection and employer engagement.

Feedback to students is critical for enhancing their learning from the modules, and for providing advice and guidance to develop their employability skills further. Feedback via podcast is congruent with online study and offers the potential to make feedback richer and more personal than written feedback. This paper draws on the experiences and subsequent feedback of 20 students (who originated from a variety of degree disciplines from level 4 to level 6) to find out whether podcasts are the feedback medium most likely to be absorbed, understood and acted upon by on-line students to enhance their employability and maximise their chance of career success after graduation.

Rationale

A podcast is a digitally recorded sound file (sometimes also with visuals) (Edirisingha, Hawkridge & Fothergill 2012). According to a relatively small literature base, audio feedback has been in use since 1996 (King, McGugan & Bunyan, 2008). Yet despite technological advances and an institutional framework in the UK that is supportive of the use of technology for student learning (France & Wheeler, 2007), audio feedback is a relatively unexplored mechanism of assessment for online learning. Research into student perceptions and attitudes to podcasting is similarly limited (Brookes 2010). It is hoped that the future findings of this case study when disseminated in the UCLan Journal of Pedagogic Research will:

- enhance our students' experience of feedback through research informed practice
- encourage UCLan staff to experiment with podcasting using Adobe Connect as a complementary or alternative method of both formative and summative feedback in view of the university wide adoption of Blackboard and the imminent introduction of Pebble Pad; and
- demonstrate a commitment to developing innovative and effective assessment initiatives that contribute to the pedagogy of employability education.

Study Background

The module was assessed via two written assignments. The first assignment was an outline report plan submitted half way through the duration of the module. Students received feedback via a podcast. The podcast contained summative feedback justifying the grade as well as feed forward recommendations for actions for their final assignment.

The podcasts usually lasted between three and five minutes. Previous research has demonstrated that 1 minute of speech usually produces about 100 words of good quality feedback (King, McGugan & Bunyan, 2008). Podcasts were made using Adobe Connect. Using a split screen students were able to see their written assignment on screen with added tutor annotations, as well as a head and shoulders audio-visual of the tutor giving verbal feedback in accordance with the marking criteria and learning outcomes, and future recommendations for the final assignment. The podcasts could be viewed by the student opening an individual secure web link that was uploaded to their feedback area on Blackboard.

The final assignment was a report based on assignment 1 for which students received both written feedback and a podcast between three and five minutes long.

Students received both the written feedback and podcast without the mark for this assignment or their overall module grade. They were asked to complete an online survey identifying their preferred feedback medium and commenting on the relative ease of use and understanding of content for each medium. Once marking was completed permission was sought from questionnaire participants to use their feedback to inform future teaching practice. Once they had completed the questionnaire, they then received their grades.

In light of the small number of students in this case study, the survey offered considerable opportunity for students to add anecdotal and reflective comments in the survey for qualitative rather than quantitative analysis with the opportunity for any recurring themes to be identified linguistically.

Research Activity

At the time of writing the survey is still open. Analysis of the completed questionnaires will take place between July and September 2012 with the aim of reporting the findings in a subsequent issue of the *UCLan Journal for Pedagogic Research*. As this research is with a small group of participants, all recommendations will be tentative and will require further investigation.

The findings will be used to

- inform colleagues of distance learners' attitudes to podcasts as a feedback medium, and
- reflect on the implications of podcasting as a feedback tool for enhancing students' employability in today's fiercely competitive graduate market.

Anticipated Conclusions and Expectations

Previous research into students' attitudes to feedback from podcasts is generally positive (Brookes, 2010; Ekinsmyth, 2012; France & Wheeler, 2007) and it is reasonable to conclude a similar outcome in this case study. It is hoped that the students will indicate an empirical and anecdotally substantiated preference for a particular feedback medium which may or may not be congruent with the technology orientated learning experience of this module.

References

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