An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Student Feedback in Digital Audio Form

Abstract

This project piloted the provision of feedback to Law students on assessment tasks, both formative and summative, in digital audio format, in order to enhance both the effectiveness of such feedback and its convenience in terms of delivery and accessibility to students, together with more effective use of staff time. A successful outcome will be measurable as:

- Increased student satisfaction as to the methods by which feedback is provided to them.
- The development of student skills and confidence, evidenced by an improvement of performance between formative and summative assessment tasks.
- A more efficient use of staff time in the preparation and provision of feedback processes.
- Dissemination of the project within and beyond Anglia Ruskin University.

Keywords

feedback, digital audio
Introduction
The National Student Survey 2010 (NSS, 2010) reported that just 67% of students in England (registered at HEIs and FECs) recorded satisfaction with regard to Assessment and Feedback when answering Questions 5-9. This compares somewhat poorly with the levels of satisfaction in other areas, including Academic Support (Q10-12: 75%) and Overall Satisfaction (Q22: 82%). Whilst feedback is clearly a key concern for students, with increasing pressure on universities to achieve high standards of student satisfaction and thereby achieve and maintain high rankings in league tables, the level of satisfaction for feedback is an issue which must concern us all.

Anglia Law School (ALS) has undertaken considerable work in the past three years to improve feedback satisfaction amongst its students, including the introduction in 2009 of newly designed feedback sheets requiring staff to provide individual typed feedback to each student on every coursework assessment, both written and oral. Feedback sheets contain a series of headings requiring staff to specifically address certain topics, including ‘content’, ‘presentation’, and ‘points to improve for future work’. Following the typed feedback initiative, ALS’s NSS scores in relation to feedback showed considerable improvement, increasing by over 20% in relation to both Question 8 (‘I have received detailed comments on my work’) and Question 9 (‘Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand’).

Notwithstanding the successful introduction of the typed sheets, ALS’s NSS scores for feedback still left room for improvement. Further discussions were held at departmental level with a view to introducing additional measures to build upon and further improve ALS feedback initiatives to ensure they were working as effectively as possible for students.

It had become clear that a number of students were choosing not to collect their typed feedback sheets and so an issue of concern was that they were failing to take advantage of a valuable opportunity to benefit from specific and individually tailored comments on their work. As a result, measures to ensure students received their feedback in a convenient, effortless and readily accessible method were mooted, including the possibility of emailing feedback direct to students.

From a staff member’s perspective, the provision of detailed typed feedback imposes a significant, time-consuming burden, particularly where staff teach on compulsory modules taken by large cohorts or where staff do not possess proficient touch typing skills. The popularity of typed feedback sheets amongst staff has varied and there is evidence to suggest that the depth of feedback to students has differed slightly according to which member of staff completes the typed sheet.

With the issues of staff time and failure of students to collect feedback in mind, the project team decided to undertake a trial of a more innovative method of providing feedback. Mindful of the recommendation from our Students’ Union that we, as an institution, should continue to investigate innovative ways of improving assessment, for example electronic/email feedback (Anglia Ruskin Students’ Union, 2009), the project team submitted an application for a Learning and Teaching Project to trial digital audio feedback during the academic year 2010-2011 on two undergraduate Law modules.

Rationale and Aims of the Project
The idea of providing feedback via audio recording is not new, with Rust (2001) commenting a decade ago upon the possible advantages of using audio cassette recordings as a feedback mechanism. However, only in the last few years, with the development and more commonplace use of digital technology, has research into the use of recorded audio feedback increased (e.g. Merry and Orsmond, 2008; Rotheram, 2009; Ekinsmyth, 2010). Research pilots in various disciplines have been undertaken in recent years, using a number of different digital audio formats. However, many research projects have tended to have a specific focus upon either formative assessment feedback (Merry and Orsmond, 2008) or upon summative work (Ekinsmyth, 2010) and many have been small scale, particularly in terms of the numbers of students given the feedback. The JISC-funded ‘Sounds Good’ project led by Rotheram (‘Sounds Good’, 2009) was of a significant scale and did include feedback on both formative and summative assessment. In common with the other smaller scale pilots mentioned above, staff and student responses were generally positive but expressed some reservations regarding longer term student satisfaction with audio feedback and about staff efficiency gains.

As mentioned earlier, we wished to research the possible advantages of audio digital feedback on summative work. However, with the Law School introducing a much more systematic and embedded
approach to formative assessment from September 2010, investigating the usefulness and efficiency of
digital audio feedback for formative work was also a key aim of our project. We also wanted the pilot to
involve substantial student numbers, not only to try and gain representative student responses, but also to
judge as accurately as possible the efficiency of audio feedback from a staff perspective and to be able
compare the time spent with that for typing feedback.

The digital audio format was chosen as it was thought likely to improve student satisfaction because it would:

- facilitate provision of detailed individual comments closely and expressly linked to assessment
criteria and learning outcomes;
- facilitate provision of specific feed-forward as well as feedback comments;
- be convenient and easily accessible for students and therefore facilitate and encourage its use
by students;
- be very similar to one-to-one feedback, which research undertaken by the National Union of
Students (NUS, 2008) has shown to be students' preferred mechanism.

The key aims were to investigate:

- whether student satisfaction with feedback would be improved by the use of audio
recorded feedback;
- whether the staff burden in providing effective feedback could be reduced by the use of
audio feedback;
- any technological or other access issues involved in the use of audio feedback.

Methodology

Two undergraduate modules were chosen for the purposes of the trial: the Level 2 Criminal Law module in
relation to formative assessment and the Level 2 Law in Practice 2 module’s summative assessments.
These modules were selected not only because they were both compulsory and involved larger student
numbers, but also because using these modules allowed the audio format to be tested on very different
types of assessment task. The Criminal Law formative assessment asked students to answer practice
exam questions. In this module, in order to meet professional body requirements, exam questions have a
heavy emphasis upon testing knowledge and understanding of the subject. In contrast, the Law in Practice
2 summative coursework (which is not subject to professional body rules) was mainly focused upon
assessing the development of particular skills, including research, fact analysis and professional/
workplace writing skills. Given the very differing types of assessments, and that the feedback was going to
be given in relation to both formative and summative assessment tasks, the project team considered that
the format, if seen to be effective, would be widely transferrable.

Feedback was recorded by means of Audacity software (downloaded free of charge from the Audacity
website) using integrated microphones and headsets, which were purchased for all the team members
(£40 per set). The recordings were then saved into an MP3 file (labelled with the student SID number) and
emailed to the student. The ALSS Technologist, Chris Herbert, produced very useful guidance sheets
illustrating how to start using the software and how to save the files.

Students on the modules were informed about the digital audio feedback trial in initial lectures as well as in
their module guides. They were given the opportunity to opt out of the trial and, had they done so, they
would have received a standard ALS typed feedback sheet. However, no students on either module chose
to do so. The audio feedback included a reminder that the tutor was available to give additional, individual
face-to-face feedback and encouraged the student to contact the tutor to arrange a meeting.

Focus groups, facilitated by a researcher independent of the project team and teaching staff, were set up,
to which 25% of the cohort (randomly selected) were invited by personal email and letter. However,
attendance was extremely poor and the feedback obtained from the groups cannot therefore be regarded
as representative. Additional informal feedback was given to tutors by a small number of students.
The team held a planning meeting to agree a consistent approach, and regular informal communication between members took place during the marking and feedback process, at the end of which a formal meeting was held to debrief the pilot.

**Results**

Student feedback indicated:

- a general liking for digital audio feedback;
- they were better able to ‘get the feel’ for what the tutor was saying due to nuances, tonal expression and greater use of examples, giving students a fuller understanding;
- generally they found the tone of the feedback more constructive;
- in an ideal world, they would have preferred the opportunity of face-to-face, one-to-one feedback with their tutors for all assessment tasks;
- only one student sought additional face-to-face feedback;
- technical issues were limited to a few students who did not receive the email due to full inboxes.

Staff feedback:

- the audio format was initially time consuming but less so with practice. One particular issue with the headset was that it was designed to be able to pause recording by touching the headset in a particular place but this was often done accidentally;
- the team found editing problematic, so any errors/omissions in the initial recording had to be rectified by re-recording, highlighting the need for training in editing;
- from the team’s perspective, the feedback seemed fuller and more constructive;
- some variation in length of feedback was noted, ranging from 4-12 minutes per student;
- issues arose for staff in shared offices due to levels of background noise and/or the noise generated whilst recording;
- the need was identified for a common checklist to ensure key information was given to all students and in the same order, e.g. name of tutor providing feedback; mark.

**Conclusion**

The level of student response was insufficient for the results to be reliable and therefore would not justify the adoption of digital audio feedback for all modules within ALS. However, given the generally positive tenor of the feedback received, the team will extend the pilot into 2011-2012 with a view to obtaining more reliable results by adapting our methods of eliciting student feedback. This will include making clearer to students the potential benefits of the pilot in terms of meeting student needs and, therefore, how key their involvement is in evaluating its effectiveness.

Staff involved in the pilot overall preferred audio feedback to typing, finding it more effective and possibly more efficient. However, increased flexibility, particularly in terms of the locations where feedback can be recorded, would be given by using handheld recording devices, and this will be included within the extended pilot. The extended pilot will also incorporate editing training and the development of a standard information checklist, both of which may improve efficiency.

**References**


