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Ryder, Agi and Davis, Carole (2016) Using audio feedback with distance learning students to enhance their learning on a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education programme. Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal, 1 (1).

Published version (with publisher's formatting)

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Using audio feedback with distance learning students to enhance their learning on a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education programme

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Introduction

Our aim is to investigate the use of audio feedback for formative assessment on a Postgraduate Certificate Higher Education in Teaching and Supporting Learning (PG Cert HE) programme. The case study draws on the experience of the participants who undertook this programme at a distance, as well as the reflections of the teaching team. Our study aims to address some of these issues and provide educators with an account of how audio feedback might be successfully integrated into distance learning programmes.

This case study focuses on the experience of participants who undertook the programme in the 2014-15 academic year. Our study aims to:

- Show how audio feedback might be successfully integrated into distance learning programmes in a way that was timely and time efficient;
- Explore ways of creating a distance education experience that felt more personal and individualized;
- Consider how audio feedback allows the programme team to model the way for the participating academics and staff supporting learning.

Context and background

This case study is situated in a post-92 higher education institution in the UK. Our institution has offered a PG Cert HE for a number of years. The programme is run over one year in part-time mode and is delivered either face-to-face or by distance learning over one calendar year. The distance version of the programme seeks to create an online space where individuals can come together to create a community of learners with a distinct cohort identity. For many participants who are unable to attend face-to-face workshops this flexible approach provides an alternative but equivalent professional development experience. There is a high progression and achievement rate with 95% of participants completing the programme within 15 months. The target audience are academics who are teaching on undergraduate and masters programmes and the aim is to promote participation and equality of opportunity for them to participate in the programme where peer learning and peer assessment is a key feature.

When embarking on delivery by distance experience we recognised that motivation, isolation, lack of personal connection can be features of studying in this mode. Our aim was to lead by example and provide engaging, constructive and personalized feedback to our learners.

Our own 'student body' consists of academic staff and staff supporting learning at our own institution and at collaborative partner institutions, so there is a strong leadership and role-modelling element to our work. The programme team is in a strong position to influence the professional development of academics and staff supporting learning and as a direct consequence of them participating in the PG Cert HE are able to facilitate them in improving the learning experience, progression and achievements of their own students. Whilst on the PG Cert HE the participants have overlapping experiences whereby they find themselves simultaneously students and teachers. With an increasing emphasis on the student experience, measuring satisfaction, particularly in relation to assessment experiences and receiving feedback, we wanted our participants to consider how it felt to be on the receiving end.

As educational developers we are often reminded of the transformational impact of effective formative feedback both professionally and personally, as a vehicle to engage others and improve performance, laying the way for powerful and satisfying dialogic interaction (Jawah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol, Ross, & Smith, 2004; Boud, 2010; Price, Rust, O'Donovan, Handley, & Bryant, 2012).

Previous research found that audio feedback can enhance the learners' engagement with feedback (Rotheram, 2007; Nortcliffe & Middleton, 2008; Davis & Ryder, 2012) and can add a 'personal touch' to learning, which is highly desirable in the case of distance learners. Providing audio feedback can be a time efficient way of delivering personalised and timely feedback to learners, which is a challenge many educators face in modern higher education (Rotheram, 2009; Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin, & Thorpe, 2011; Carruthers, MaCarron, Bolan, Devine, McMahan-Beattie, & Burns, 2015). Moreover, using audio feedback with PG Cert HE participants can be a way of demonstrating 'leading by example' and demonstrating innovative ways of providing feedback for a variety of learners.

Previously we had embarked on research which explored the use of audio feedback for participants on the face-to-face mode of the PG Cert HE following our summative observation of teaching (Davis & Ryder, 2012; Davis, 2014). Our objectives had been to gain a greater understanding of the issues surrounding the use of audio feedback in higher education and whether new technology might provide additional benefits and offer exemplars of best practice in audio feedback. Our findings showed that for the academic staff receiving audio feedback it was a complex area which raised questions about perceptions of feedback, personal preferences and what should come after the feedback. Some participants while appreciative of audio feedback still preferred written feedback; missed the conventional structure and familiarity of written feedback, others wanted both written and audio feedback also a clearer strategy for what might come next.

From the perspective of those giving the audio feedback, the literature (Nortcliffe & Middleton, 2008; Rotheram, 2009; Carruthers et al., 2015), and our own experience suggests that while many lecturers were generally comfortable with giving written feedback, recording it and then making that recording available to students can sometimes bring with a level of discomfort and uncertainty. Our study aims to

address some of these issues and provide educators with an account of how audio feedback might be successfully integrated into distance learning programmes.

Methodology

The research adopted an action research methodology (McNiff, 2013; Gray, 2014) with the ultimate aim of changing practice (Kemmis, 2009). The research questions focused on exploring participants' previous experiences with audio feedback, their perception of receiving audio feedback as students and its impact on their own practice. The data collection method included an open ended survey that focused on gathering in-depth qualitative data from the participants in order to explore their experiences. This was complemented by the reflections of the programme team that further informed the project. The participants invited to participate represented a variety of genders, disciplines, types of institutions, locations and modes of teaching. Data was analysed using open coding (Charmaz, 2014). In line with standard practice in research ethics; participants gave written consent, were told they can withdraw at any time and that their anonymity would be protected.

The experience of the participants was evaluated using a questionnaire focusing on their previous and current experience of audio feedback and its impact on their practice. We consider the experience of six of the seventeen participants in depth. The students were selected to ensure a variety of views and experiences are represented, such as gender, disciplinary background and different international locations which is representative of the cohort of students undertaking this programme. The sample was relatively small and we are not claiming generalisability but we do suggest that these six individuals to tell us about distance education, audio feedback and best practice.

Practice

Audio feedback was provided to participants on the last module of the programme, Theory into Practice (30 credits in size in UK terms). The assessment of this module requires participants to submit a 3,500 word practice project that focuses on enhancing a specific aspect of their professional teaching practice. This exercise requires participants to engage in a form of practitioner or action research to evaluate their practice. They submit a project proposal in writing, where they record their initial ideas and consider the structure or main steps of their project, as well as explore suitable literature that underpins their work. Audio feedback was provided on these proposals. While the programme makes regular use of webinars and Skype tutorials, this was the first time participants received recorded verbal feedback.

The participants came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, such as nutrition, alternative medicine, law, audio engineering, sport science, and media. They formed an international cohort, with some participants based in various areas of the UK, while others were situated on international campuses, such as Mauritius or Malta. Between them they had a wealth of experience, though individually they were early career academics. They were subject experts of their respective disciplines and decided to undertake this programme in order to improve their own teaching practice and ultimately provide their students with a more satisfying and effective learning experience.

The audio feedback on the project proposal was recorded for each participant by one of the tutors on the programme. The audio feedback followed a general structure of four main points. First, the tutor identified herself and greeted the participant. Then the main points of the proposal were addressed and feedback was given on the elements of the proposal. This was followed by feedforward where participants were offered advice on additional ideas or literature to consider. The feedback ended with a summary and offer of additional support. Structuring the feedback this way ensured consistency across the cohort. The tutors are experienced at recording audio feedback and have done so many times over the years with different cohorts. The audio feedback was recorded on Garageband (Mac software) and saved as .mp3 files. These files were uploaded to Moodle, the learning platform for the programme. The feedback was only accessible to the individual participant to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Each feedback was an audio recording of 6-9 minutes.

Evaluation

Previous experience of receiving feedback

None of the six participants who gave detailed evaluation had received audio feedback before. This aspect of novelty encouraged them to compare the experience with receiving written feedback and interestingly none of the participants compared it with their experience of receiving face-to-face feedback - which might inform future research.

The point emerged that text can sometimes appear an inflexible way of providing feedback on assignments, and in the absence of an active voice with its' natural register, cadence and inflexions, might be misinterpreted. On the other hand audio feedback is more compelling and easier to engage with:

It was easy to listen to; I was interested and engaged with what was being said. I sat and listened to it for the full 9 minutes, I'm not sure I would have sat and read feedback for that amount of time. I also repeated the feedback a few weeks later to ensure I had picked up on all the points raised and this was useful as I had a slightly different perspective as I had written more of my project by then. (Participant 6)

Audio feedback as a human response

I really liked it. It felt very personal and as much as I do like to refer to written notes I also respond better when emotion is attached (Participant 1)

There is an inference here that because the feedback is individualised led to being more likely to be listened to. This suggests that the spoken word takes the recipient of feedback into a different space, which then makes the feedback more likely to be heard and acted upon.

Hearing someone's voice makes it easier to emphasise the importance of certain areas of required improvement more so than the others ... (Participant 2)

This view is further supported in the following comments of Participant 3 who appears to experience the spoken word as recognition of himself and leads us to consider whether distance learning programmes where the tutor may be both voiceless and faceless leave some participants feeling at a disadvantage:

It was useful to hear a human response to my work, as strange as that sounds. It made it more personal and allowed me to discern better what was salient (Participant 3)

This extract also suggests that for this individual the verbal delivery is better able to identify what aspects of their presentation and project proposal they needed to focus on and therefore pay more attention to. This participant also reminds us that learning is an intensively social experience where relationships matter:

I think that since it's so easy to reduce a personal connection in DE, audio feedback helps to remind everyone that we're dealing with people (Participant 3)

The response to audio-feedback was affirming and appreciative:

I felt like I knew (the tutor) from the forum interaction and from tutorials and so it felt positive hearing her voice, the feedback was expressed very clearly. (Participant 6)

Central to our exploration of the distance education experience was the notion of 'substitution' or to paraphrase the following participant the concept of 'mimicry':

As a person who spends his waking hours looking at a screen it's nice to hear someone's voice for a change. I think it introduces a degree of variety And also allows you to mimic the 'personal' qualities a person might experience during a face-to-face tutorial. (Participant 1)

So this is where it is suggested that in the absence of face-to-face contact this is at best an equivalent experience or at worst the next best thing.

Audio feedback for distance learners

I think audio feedback Would only be useful if you teach students who for whatever reason can't make a scheduled tutorial. (Participant 1)

It was argued that there is a place for audio feedback only when students can't attend face-to-face tutorials so an implicit assumption that face-to-face feedback is always preferable. This adaptive mode of delivery was championed within the context of a lack of face-to-face contact as a vehicle for an inclusive, person-centred approach.

... I firmly believe it offers an advantage to hear an assessor's voice on a DE programme. It's easier to pick up on areas that need to be prioritised for successful completion of a particular task (Participant 2)

It feels less confrontational than having face-to-face feedback. It is hard to not be impersonal on a DE programme so audio feedback adds the human aspect ... (Participant 5)

There is a need to equalise and compensate with the following extract suggesting that it is possible to replicate an equivalent experience to face-to-face delivery:

Yes, it helps to support the distance relationship being built with the tutor, it helps to make it feel personal and to build in some of the verbal communication that would be there on an attendance programme (Participant 6)

The impact of audio feedback on participants' own development

The following extracts identify what from the experience of the participants were the most satisfying and useful aspects of receiving audio feedback:

Audio feedback is a useful and efficient way of getting your points to a student. In fact it is so useful I have even considered utilising it myself! ... (Participant 1)

The suggestions were extremely clear and concise and provided accurate, specific feedback to the necessary areas of improvement. (Participant 2)

Audio feedback was very valuable for the understanding of assignment requirements. The spoken word has been very useful to understand not only the content of the feedback but the general impression your work has had upon my tutors – and has been particularly so considering the DE Mode of Learning. (Participant 4)

It was a challenge to separate the medium from the message in that what the participants appeared to be describing was what is generally seen to be best practice for giving formative feedback. This raises the question that for some perhaps their previous experiences of receiving written feedback had been underwhelming and if so what feedback practices were they adopting for their students.

Reflecting further on what role modelling academics and those supporting learning are exposed to in their daily practice the following quote appears especially significant:

It felt like I was important to you as a person rather than commenting on what I produce as an end product. (Participant 6)

Impact can also be measured in terms of a concrete outcome:

It must have worked because I was guided to successful completion! (Participant 2)

The literature on formative feedback (Jawah, 2004; Boud, 2010; Price at al., 2012) argues that there is a correlation between students engaging with formative

feedback and successful assessment outcomes. All the participants interviewed passed the two summative assessments that prior to they had received formative audio feedback for. It might be argued that if this had not been the case would they have evaluated the experience so positively or alternatively and as earlier quotes suggest effective audio feedback makes it clear that participants need to act on the feedback.

The impact of audio feedback on participants' own teaching practice

Of interest was whether any of the participants would consider using audio feedback for their own students and there were a range of responses expressed:

I do not have the authority to change the structure of (the delivery of) our summative feedback, but I could do something similar with formative submissions and will do so in the future if I ever manage to get round to it. (Participant 1)

This highlights the reality of academic life which hints that time pressures means that despite good intentions traditional customs and practices are continued. While others consider the possibility of introducing the audio feedback initiative with his masters students in the next academic year:

It will be interesting to see how the MSc students interpret it this year. I pride myself on being particularly clear on my feedback when it is written because I know how easily 'text' can be misinterpreted ... I still have students request face-to-face time regardless of written clarity. Perhaps audio feedback can assist with this issue in future... (Participant 2)

Do these comments imply that feedback is a problem and it needs to be de-codified? This would correlate with the assessment literacy literature (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Price at al., 2012), which claims that a bigger problem is the language used which is unfamiliar and mysterious to students.

Another saw audio feedback as requiring a particular skill set:

I feel you have to perhaps think a bit more outside the box when delivering audio feedback. How to deliver short, well presented and appropriate audio feedback may not as simple as it sounds. I would be rerecording this a number of times to be sure I said the right thing so presumably this has happened to you guys in previous times. (Participant 5)

However, felt there were things she had learnt from the experience of receiving audio feedback which could be introduced into her practice and that of others:

I think I will still annotate (the script) but leave short messages of encouragement because I so love that personal touch. I may encourage my tutors who are perceived in not quite so warm a manner to do otherwise. (Participant 5)

The emphasis on the warmth of manner implies that engaging participants with feedback is dependent not only what is said but how it is said.

Recommendations for best practice for audio feedback

For many lecturers and educational developers giving audio feedback can be a step into the unknown. Giving audio feedback does require particular expertise and skills but these skills can be learnt and developed.

- Plan what you want to say in advance and write it down not necessarily word for word, although you may opt to do this initially to give you confidence, but key points you want to talk to.
- Don't focus on too many points and be really specific, giving examples from the work to illustrate.
- Have the participants' work in front of you when you are recording the feedback.
- Give audio feedback when you have developed trust and credibility with them through discussion boards and related activities. We generally found approximately three months into the one year programme was a good time to start giving formative feedback.
- Keep it no longer than 10 minutes and in the initial stages as short as 3 minutes.
- Remember you can edit out pauses and parts where you say the wrong thing or re-record parts if needed.
- Check in advance whether any participants have hearing problems which would make audio feedback inappropriate.
- Imagine when you are recording that they are there in the room with you and you are talking to them in a purposeful yet conversational tone. So start off by saying something like "Hello XXXX, it's Carole here and I would like to give you feedback on your project proposal" and ending with "I hope this has been helpful. Anything you're not clear about do get in touch and we can talk some more. In the meanwhile go well!"
- Remember that on a PG Cert HE or equivalent by distance education audio feedback can be the first step in creating a professional dialogue with the participants.

Conclusion

Audio feedback has become a regular feature on our PG Cert HE by distance learning. Giving audio feedback does require particular expertise and skills but these skills can be learnt and developed.

This small case study demonstrated how audio feedback can enable us to make connections remotely across time and space rendering the experience of distance education study less lonely. It has the potential to engage, motivate and nurture busy academics who are frequently completing this programme while holding down significant responsibilities in and outside of work. We will continue to use it and would encourage others delivering distance education programmes where it is practical and appropriate, to do the same.

The skills and knowledge needed in this context lie in simultaneously supporting and challenging those who have reasonable levels of experience, influence and professional maturity in their discipline and subject area. We have developed strong

relationships with many such academics, based on mutual respect and openness that enhances both our professional learning and practices.

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