Practice tips on using digital audio for assessment feedback

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Background

The Sounds Good project explored using digital audio to give feedback on students' assessed coursework. The main aim was to test the hypothesis that using digital audio for feedback can benefit staff *and* students by:

- saving assessors' time (speaking the feedback may be quicker than writing it)

and

- providing richer feedback to students (speech is a richer medium than written text).

In the 12 months from February 2008, 38 lecturers at Leeds Met and three other higher education institutions gave audio feedback to over 1,200 students. The hypothesis about saving time *and* providing richer feedback was substantiated *in some circumstances*. For details, please see the project report in the Downloads section of the Sounds Good website (www.soundsgood.org.uk).

Most importantly, the project showed that students and staff like audio feedback. Students frequently remarked approvingly about its personal nature and the detail provided, evidence that the lecturer had carefully considered their work. Some staff did manage to save time by speaking rather than writing their feedback. But whether or not staff saved time, the great majority were pleased with the experience and noted that students received more, and higher-quality, feedback than they otherwise would have done. Sounds Good concluded that most UK teachers in higher education would find it worth giving audio feedback an extended trial with at least with some of their assessment work.

Here are some practice tips on using digital audio for assessment feedback, based on experience from Sounds Good. They are gathered under four headings: saving time; technical matters; administration; feedback structure.

Saving time

- Don't expect to save time immediately by giving audio feedback rather than writing it. As with most new skills, it takes a while to become competent and longer to become expert. Some persistence will be required. Even so, you may feel fairly comfortable after 10-20 attempts.
- How much time you eventually save will depend on various factors, including how much feedback you give and how quickly you write or type. If you normally only check some boxes and write a few words of feedback, you probably won't save time by using audio. However, after some practice, audio may allow you to give noticeably more feedback without spending much longer on the task.
- Consider accepting a longer pay-back period. Experiment with spending more time in the short term, using audio to give your students more extensive advice and richer feedback. It may save you and your colleagues work in the long term.
- A 'one-to-many' communication – such as audio feedback to a whole group after marking a batch of assignments – may be an easy timesaver in both the short and long term.
- Don't waste time re-recording, unless you really must. Students accept that you aren't a professional broadcaster. If you stumble with your words or notice immediately that you have made a mistake, correct yourself and carry on. If you realise later that you have made minor errors and omissions, do a separate recording and send both to the student.
- Don't risk having an audio file 'bounced' or blocked when emailing it to a student, and then having to spend time looking for a workaround. Check early what's needed to make things work well enough – see 'Technical matters' below.

Technical matters

- MP3 is a very useful audio format: compact and widely-playable. An MP3 file is typically less than 10% of the size of a WAV file of similar quality and can be played on a broad range of devices, including the portable music players owned by many students.
- Record direct to MP3 rather than going to the trouble of converting the file format.
- You can make MP3 recordings with a cheap microphone and a computer equipped with free software such as 'Audacity' (http://audacity.sourceforge.net). (Remember to download the 'LAME' encoder as well as Audacity.) However:
    - a handheld digital audio recorder will probably be more convenient than using a microphone connected to a computer.
- If you're buying a handheld recorder, make sure it:
    - can record direct to MP3 (many can't);
    - has a USB port, for easy upload to a computer.
- When recording, aim for the minimum acceptable sound quality for the particular purpose. Speaking to an individual student will probably not require as high quality as a podcast on a public website.
- Bearing in mind the purpose(s), make your audio files as small as possible, so they can be sent quickly and stored economically.
- Mono recording – giving files typically half the size of stereo – is likely to be adequate if only one person is speaking.
- 32kbps MP3 – better than phone quality and translating to about four minutes per megabyte – will probably be good enough for giving individual feedback to a student.
- Make sure your recordings are loud enough to be heard easily on a variety of equipment. The general advice is to set the recorder's input level as high as possible without introducing distortion. Some experimentation may help.
- Check that your students can receive audio files. They will need access to a computer equipped with a sound card, speakers or headphones, and suitable software (e.g. Windows Media Player or QuickTime). Other potential obstacles include: firewalls (blocking certain types of file or email attachments); file size limits; full email inboxes; spam filters.
- Try uploading a test file for each student before you attempt to give them real feedback. Ask for help if you meet problems you can't solve.
- To avoid some obstacles, upload the audio files to a place from where they can be retrieved easily. The most convenient place, for staff and students, may be the institution's virtual learning environment (VLE).
- Take care to ensure that the files can only be accessed by the appropriate person/people, e.g. by using Blackboard's 'selective release' facility.
- If the VLE is not the most suitable place, put the files in some other online store. Then send links, not the files, to students.
- On the basis of your experimentation, give students further guidance (perhaps in writing) on how to receive and listen to audio feedback.
- Back up your files! Data isn't safe until it's in at least two places. Copy all your files to at least one other device.

Administration

- Make sure key administrative and quality-assurance staff accept that you are giving audio rather than written feedback. Letting people listen to a few examples usually helps to convince them of the educational value. As for the audit trail, you can produce the original file and related correspondence, if necessary.
- Ensure that only the intended student(s) can access the feedback file. This will require care and effort.
- Keep track of your audio files. You may need to rename them from the default name given by the recorder, e.g. to contain the student's name or ID. Keep a list of the changes and which file is sent to which student.
- Advise students to have a copy of their written work with them when listening to the audio feedback.

Feedback structure

- Before you start recording audio feedback, decide whether a mark is to be included. If it is 'summative', i.e. for credit, a mark will be required at some stage. However, some assessors prefer to withhold the mark from audio feedback, for at least two reasons. First, it can engage the student more if they are required to listen to the feedback and then, separately, receive their mark. Second, moderation of marks may be easier if they are kept out of the audio recording.

- Keep the files short – don't 'overdo it'. Too much guidance or feedback can be counterproductive. For a typical undergraduate assignment, three or four minutes may be plenty. There needs to be a good reason for going beyond five minutes, for example postgraduate work (perhaps carrying higher expectations) or an assignment which has failed and where advice on resubmission would be helpful.

Bearing this in mind, here is an outline of my most recent practice when commenting on a typical essay or report via an MP3 recording.

- Have the assignment details and assessment criteria with me.
- Read the assignment, making written comments on it as I go along. If it's on paper, I jot things in the margin. If it's in an electronic format (e.g. Word), I use the 'Track changes' facility to annotate the document.
- Read it again, more quickly this time, perhaps making a few more comments along the way.
- Jot down (on scrap paper) the main summary points I wish to make. (See below for a general structure.)
- Start the MP3 recorder.
- Build the feedback in chunks, making frequent use of the pause button.
- Don't bother to erase and re-record 'misspeaks'; just correct them immediately, as in conversation.
- When complete, review the recording. Is it clear and easy to follow? Do I sound approachable?

The following general structure may be useful in a variety of circumstances:

- Introduce yourself to the student in a friendly manner.
- Say which assignment you're giving feedback on.
- Outline the main elements of the comments which you'll be giving (see below).
- Work steadily through the assignment, amplifying and explaining notes you've put in the margins and, especially at the end, making more general points.
- Refer to the assessment criteria.
- Explain your thought processes as you move towards allocating a mark.
- Give the mark (perhaps – see above remarks on student engagement and moderation).
- Offer a few, reasonably attainable, suggestions for improvement, even if the work is excellent.
- Invite comments back from the student, including on the method of giving feedback.
- Round things off in a friendly way.

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31 March 2009
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