# Old wine in new bottles: Utilising audio feedback for summative assessment

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## Abstract

This paper introduces and outlines the concept of audio feedback, set against models of good feedback practice. Various initiatives and projects regarding the use of audio feedback are briefly discussed, as well as related findings and issues. In particular, both the relational and pastoral potential of audio feedback are discussed, with a focus on how its utilisation may improve academic practice – with the inclusion of anonymised comments from students. Various ways of providing audio feedback to students are explored, including the recommendation of guidelines and procedures. A suggested structure to recordings is also included.

## Keywords

Feedback, audio feedback, mp3, assessment, academic improvement

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## Introduction

Despite an established discourse highlighting the importance of feedback to student learning (Price *et al.*, 2010; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004) and even its identification as the most important part of the assessment process (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Race,

1999), the UK higher education sector National Student Survey (NSS) s results consistently show lower satisfaction scores for assessment and feedback than for other aspects of students' learning experience (OFS, 2022; Boud and Molloy, 2013). Some studies highlight both the role and multifarious nature of feedback, emphasising issues of correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, benchmarking and longitudinal development, for example (Price *et al.,* 2010). Others have modelled good feedback practice, stressing the need for clarification, the development of reflection, clear, high-quality information, feeding forward and dialogue (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). More recently, studies have argued for the recognition of the affective nature of feedback and its impact on student motivation and self-esteem, as well as the exploration of notions of feedback literacy (Yang and Carless, 2013; Xu and Carless, 2017). Yet as an academic practice, feedback can be seen as an often under-emphasised component of teaching (Brown *et al.,* 2003), where ''day-to-day effective assessment and feedback practice is rarely reported'' (Hepplestone *et al.,* 2011: 124). This paper outlines both the practical and theoretical implications of one such practice – audio feedback.

Audio feedback can be described as '…the recording and distribution of spoken feedback given on a student's work' (Audio Feedback Toolkit, 2018: np). However, this is nothing new: from the 1980s onwards, researchers suggested that teachers use a tape recorder for recording responses to written work as an alternative to the 'less instructive' comments written in the margin of a paper, arguing that this enabled the instructor to be more supportive, for example (Cryer and Kaikumba, 1987; Olson, 1982). Other studies highlighted how the use of audio tapes allowed for '…more detailed, natural, and informative remarks while increasing teacher-student rapport' (Hyland, 1990: 282), and '…more comprehensive and clearer explanations' (Boswood and Dwyer, 1995: 54). Students were reported to find use of voice motivating (Cryer and Kaikumba, 1987), and, according to Rust (2001: np), did '…not have to try to cope with some of our illegible writing'.

Whereas this latter point is less relevant to modern HE practice of online submission and marking of assignments, the advent of the mp3 has made the process of audio feedback both quicker and easier, to the extent that, as a format, it has been hailed as '…the cassette tape of the 21st century' (Sull and Cavanaugh, 2014: 34). Similarly, numerous virtual learning environments (VLE), learning and assessment platforms

now have embedded or plug-in recording facilities which export files automatically as mp3, a format that Sterne describes as a '…triumph of distribution' (2012: 1), in that its compression enables easy storage, synchronisation and transferability across a range of devices (Sull and Cavanaugh, 2014; Kettle, 2007).

I have been utilising audio feedback in my own professional practice since 2008, when my institution was fortunate to be involved in the JISC-funded *Sounds Good* project (Rotheram, 2009) which explored issues of student preference and time-saving. Recent technological developments have made the provision of audio feedback a straightforward process for even the least technologically confident of practitioners, and this paper will briefly discuss various initiatives and projects regarding audio feedback, as well as findings and issues related to its use. Various ways of providing audio feedback to students will be explored, including the recommendation of guidelines and procedures, as well as a suggested structure to recordings.

## Exploring the context of audio feedback

In the UK, there have been numerous initiatives and projects that have both explored and promoted the use of online assessment and audio feedback. The *Technology, Feedback, Action!* project, based at Sheffield Hallam University (Hepplestone *et al.,* 2009), explored the potential of technology-enabled feedback to improve student learning, and online publication of feedback and grades was found to significantly enhance students' engagement with their feedback (and improve potential for feeding forward). JISC sponsored projects such as *Audio Supported Enhanced Learning* (ASEL) specifically explored ways in which lecturers could use audio technologies to provide formative and summative feedback to students, and where tutors were advised to adapt (rather than change) their practice, in order 'to enhance the learning experience by adding value through personalisation, choice and flexibility' (Stewart, 2008: 3).

Early studies on the use of audio feedback focused on issues of preference and performative measures: for example, the *Sounds Good* project (JISC) found that generally the use of audio feedback both saved staff time and was preferred by both staff and students (Rotheram, 2009). However, more recent studies have identified a myriad range of potential benefits (or affordances) through the utilisation of audio feedback, with literature highlighting how students can find it a more engaging and

authentic medium (Dunne and Rodway-Dyer, 2009; Sull and Cavanaugh, 2014), and gain both a sense of connectivity and presence (Wood and Moscovitz, 2011; Middleton, 2009). The *intermediacy* of voice, through the audio recording, is seen by many students to be a more supportive and inclusive approach to feedback practice (McCullough, 2011; Sweeney 2009), fostering a stronger and more sustainable engagement with the audio file to feed-forward for subsequent assessments (Ferrell and Gray, 2013; Carless, 2013). As such, audio feedback can be seen to have a pastoral *potential* (Rasi and Vuojravi, 2018; Dixon, 2015), where student perceptions of its emotional, relational and dialogic qualities are of particular importance and where '…instructors are increasingly looking for new and more effective techniques to promote a sense of presence among their students' (Olesova and Richardson, 2011: 30).

Such findings have been mirrored in my own research and in comments from students on my courses who have received audio feedback. These anonymised comments not only reflect student perceptions of greater detail, understanding and authenticity:

> "I could sense all of the emotions, the tone of voice and everything, so it was very real for me" (Michael)
> "It was so… I dunno, rich? The tutor really went into detail. It was so much easier to understand and more helpful" (Lily)

but also notions of relational pedagogy and care, which deeply affected student motivation, coupled with a deeper engagement:

> "It felt like they understood my work, it wasn't just another piece in the pile, if you get what I mean. It shows that you understand the people that you mark. There was more sense of care - it felt a lot more personal" (Kate)
>
> "I was so nervous cos I'd failed. I didn't want to listen to it. But I'm so glad I did. He was so nice about it, it was so clear… it really gave me the confidence to stay on the course" (Jina)
>
> "OK, I'll tell you something a bit embarrassing. I was having a really bad day last week so I listened to the feedback again. It really cheered me up" (Lily)

> "I probably listened to it six or seven times. I had it in my ears, cos I had a pen and paper down, but I had it on a screen as well… then listening to it, you could just replay it, and replay it" (Jina)

The following section will give guidance and advice on the procedures for recording and utilising audio feedback.

## Recording audio feedback

Before adopting audio feedback, it is good practice to consult with relevant Programme Leaders and External Examiners to inform them of the changes to procedure. Similarly (and probably more importantly), students should be informed in advance of the assessment, with many advocating giving learners a choice in formats (Fitzgerald, 2011), as advocated by the NUS Charter (NUS, 2015). For summative assessment purposes, it is generally recommended that audio feedback is used in conjunction with the traditional practice of written comments on student work and/or marking grids, but where spoken reference can be made to annotations on scripts (Ferguson, 2011), particularly as research shows students reporting a preference for written words on their work (Emery and Atkinson, 2009; King *et al.,* 2008). As such, audio feedback is best suited to those situations where more detailed and constructive forms of feedback are needed, such as in the final summative comments, what Hatziapostolou and Paraskikis (2010: np) suggest are the '..middle' and 'global' feedback requirements – more 'micro' comments, such as that on grammar, spelling, referencing conventions, etc. –are more suited to written annotations on the student's script (Hatziapostolou and Paraskikis, 2010). Therefore, the first stage of giving audio feedback is to add comments to the script as usual, and, if this is felt necessary, to make a written note of the main summary points you wish to emphasise (Dixon, 2010; Rotheram, 2009).

Before beginning audio feedback, it is obviously good practice to acclimatise yourself with whichever recording device/system you have decided to utilise, particularly as this will help in both speeding up the process and identifying potential technical issues (Dixon, 2010). Choosing how to record is a major decision, and there are a range of options available:

1. An external recording device (e.g. digital Dictaphone, smartphone)

2. Recording software (e.g. Audacity) with microphone
3. Embedded recorders (e.g, Wimba, Poodll, Turnitin, Mote) with microphone

Whilst external recording devices may be familiar to the user and are less likely to cause 'techno-anxiety' (Nortcliffe and Middleton, 2011: 291), there is the caveat of then having to upload the recorded audio files from the device, which can be time-consuming. A similar issue arises with the use of recording software such as Audacity, albeit that the files will already be on the user's computer, and such software easily allows the user to edit the recordings if needed. Many VLEs and learning platforms now have embedded audio recorders available as plug-ins, such as Wimba Voice for Canvas (Wood and Moscovitz, 2011; Macgregor *et al.,* 2011; Reynolds and Russell, 2008), the Poodll plug-in for Moodle (Poodll, 2014; Li, 2014), or more recently, the Mote app on Google Chrome (Weathers, 2020). These may be the preferred option for the more confident user, and they have the added advantage of automatically saving the audio feedback file to the student's assignment. Similarly, the Feedback Studio in Turnitin now also has an embedded voice recording facility for feedback, albeit one that is restricted to three minutes. Whilst this may be suited to shorter assignments (notwithstanding any time pressure the user may feel when recording), the majority of the literature advocates a standard length of four to five minutes for audio feedback, particularly when given with written comments (Martini and DiBattista, 2014; McGarvey and Haxton, 2011; Nortcliffe and Middleton, 2011; Trimigham and Simmons, 2009).

It is not unusual for users to become very self-conscious when first giving audio feedback. The key thing to remember here is that this is not a recording for Radio 4; whilst tone of voice is obviously important, making a mistake or stumbling over words are less so, with general advice being to correct them immediately, as in a conversation (Rotheram, 2009). Interestingly, the literature shows how, to many students, imperfect recordings are seen as 'more real/authentic' and as utilising the dynamics of free speech (Sull and Cavanaugh, 2014: 36; Stewart, 2010: 3). It is always sensible to have the assignment details and assessment criteria to hand whilst recording, and to refer to these explicitly, following good feedback practice (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Whether or not to include the mark within the recording is a personal choice, but it may be prudent to remember that marks may be altered

(through moderation for example), and embedded systems (such as Wimba or Poodll) do not allow for editing – as such, it may be wise not to.

A suggested structure to an audio feedback file is included as an appendix.

## Conclusion

Whilst this paper has focused on the use of audio feedback for summative purposes, it can also be utilised in a formative manner, such as in commenting on chapter drafts for dissertations, for example. Set against the context of consistently lower scores in the annual NSS survey, the literature highlights how students perceive recordings to include a high occurrence of elaboration, exemplification and explanation (Sull and Cavanaugh, 2014; McCullough, 2011), and the use of audio feedback may go some way to alleviating this, as well as attending to feedback's affective dimension and following good feedback practice (Xu and Carless, 2017; Price *et al.*, 2010; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, any view of audio feedback as a universal panacea would be deterministic: not all students prefer the format, and it is the *nature* of the recording which is important, rather than the medium *per se*. Audio feedback is a 'soft' technology, one that 'acknowledge[s] the initiative and flexibility of the person' (Norman, 1999: 232). As such, the nature of the recording will be a reflection the tutor's existing pedagogic practices – it is rather telling that Dunne and Rodway-Dyer claim that its use relates 'far more to issues of pedagogy rather than technology' (2009: 178).

Similarly, student engagement with audio feedback on my own courses has allowed them to look 'past' the technology, and to reflect on audio feedback in pedagogical terms:

> "When you think about it, it's actually quite old-fashioned, it's not that new. I mean it's only someone talking to you… I guess the way it's sent to you is new, and the way you do it is new. But again, it's only someone talking. What's that phrase? Old wine in new bottles?" (Michael)

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# Appendix

## Suggested structure for audio feedback recording

- Introduce yourself to the student in a friendly manner.
- If this is an assignment that is not anonymously marked (eg at Level 4), use the student's name.
- Say which assignment you are giving feedback on, the module code, and the date – e.g, you could begin the recording with:
  'Hello, this is Steve Dixon, giving feedback on Jane Smith's assignment for ESU401 – Introduction to Education Studies, on Wednesday 12th November'.
- Outline the main elements of the comments which you'll be giving.
- Work steadily through the assignment, amplifying and explaining notes added to the script and, especially at the end, making more general points.
- Refer to the assessment criteria.
- Explain your thought processes as you move towards concluding statements.
- Round things off in a friendly way.

(adapted from Dixon, 2010)