

Sounds Good: Quicker, better assessment using audio feedback

Introduction

Sounds Good is a small project exploring the use of digital audio to give students feedback on their assessed work. Most people can speak faster than they can write. Also, speech contains non-verbal communication, such as tone of voice. *Sounds Good* is testing the hypothesis that giving feedback by recorded digital audio can enable assessors to save time AND provide a richer experience for learners.

Running from January to July 2008 and funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), the project is based at Leeds Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom and led by Bob Rotheram, National Teaching Fellow. Fifteen staff, teaching a wide range of modules/courses at various educational levels, are giving their students feedback on coursework via digital audio, rather than in writing. The recordings are made in several ways, including with:

- hand-held MP3 recorders;
- cheap microphones and free software (Audacity and the LAME encoder);
- 'WIMBA' voice tools in the university's virtual learning environment.

The recordings are sent to students by email or by uploading them to the university's virtual learning environment.

Progress so far

Data are still being received and the project report will not be written before late July. Therefore firm findings are not yet available. However, the clear impression is that audio feedback is popular with students and staff. Here are two typical quotations from *students* about it:

- "Very, very helpful as I felt like we were face to face. Really good."
- "Better because the tone of the person's voice helps put emphasis on the areas they thought most important, whereas this can be lost in written feedback."

And two from *staff*:

- "I think with practice this will get quicker as I get more used to things."
- "I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was able to increase both the quantity and depth of feedback. I now plan to roll this out across all of the modules that I lead next year and to involve my team members in provision of audio feedback."

Draft practice guidelines

Sounds Good will publish a set of practice guidelines for the use of digital audio to give feedback to students. At present, the drafting has only just begun. Here are some tentative pieces of advice for staff.

Saving time

- You may not 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. 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.
- If you normally only check some boxes and write a few words of feedback, you probably won't save time by using audio. However, audio may allow you to give noticeably more feedback without spending much longer on the task.
- 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 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.

Technical matters

- 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.
- Make your audio files as small as possible, so they can be sent quickly and stored economically.
- MP3 is a very useful 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 many devices, including the portable music players which many students have.
- 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.
- 64kbps, or even 32kbps, mono may be good enough for giving individual feedback to a student. Stereo (bigger file) is probably unnecessary for this.
- Check whether your students will be able to receive the audio files. Do they have email accounts? What is the maximum permissible size of a message? Will attachments be blocked by firewalls or spam filters? If there are problems, how will you overcome them?

Administration

- 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.
- Back up your files. Copy them all to at least one other device.
- Make sure key administrative and quality-assurance staff are OK about you giving audio rather than written feedback. It's usually easy to convince them – as with paper, you can produce the original file, if necessary.

Bob Rotheram's practice

Here is what I currently do 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. I want mine to be clear and easy to follow. Also, I'm aiming to come across as approachable, definitely not pompous or overbearing.

The general structure is usually along the lines of:

- Introduce myself to the student in a friendly manner.
- Say which assignment I'm giving feedback on.
- Outline the main elements of the comments which I'll be giving (see below).
- Work steadily through the assignment, amplifying and explaining notes I've put in the margins and, especially at the end, making more general points.
- Refer to the assessment criteria.
- Explain my thought processes as I move towards allocating a mark.
- Give the mark.
- 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.

For a typical undergraduate assignment, I usually try to keep the length under five minutes. It might be more if detailed comments are expected or needed.

Links

- Project website: www.soundsgood.org.uk
- Audacity and the LAME encoder (free software for audio recording, editing and production of MP3 files) can be obtained from: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>.

Contact

Bob Rotheram, National Teaching Fellow, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK.
Email: b.rotheram@leedsmet.ac.uk