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towards dialogue: audio feedback on politics essays

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the use of audio feedback on assignments through the case study of a politics course, highlighting a number of pedagogical benefits. In particular, and using student testimonies, it argues that audio feedback provides a more personal feel to feedback; criticism, it appears, is easier to accept in the spoken word – as one student suggests, you know the marker is 'not being harsh' and is 'just trying to help you really'. In addition, the paper notes the chief practical benefit of audio feedback: it reduces the overall time spent by lecturers in providing comments. While this paper is positive in favour of audio feedback throughout, it also discusses some potential challenges including anonymous marking – which affects the relationship between marker and student – and the fact that one size does not fit all, with different students preferring different types of feedback. The paper also attempts to provide practical tips to professionals wishing to use this method of feedback.

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to highlight the positive effects that audio feedback can have on the student experience of learning in higher education and draws in particular on my own use of audio feedback on a politics module at the University of Huddersfield. The article attempts to show that – although audio feedback on students' assignments is in and of itself monological in nature (much like written feedback) – its reception by learners as a more personal form of feedback makes constructive criticism easier to receive and therefore

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makes it ape *some* of the aspects of dialogical feedback. As such, although I do not claim that audio feedback *is* dialogical in nature, I suggest that it moves *towards* dialogue and provides us with a practical, affordable and effective manner of feedback that comprises a halfway house between monologue and dialogue.

The article begins by discussing briefly how dialogue fits into discussions of feedback, and notes that there are two forms of dialogic feedback: a discussion of an essay between a learner and lecturer as best exemplified by the Oxbridge tutorials system (which is the form of dialogue which this paper will concentrate on); and a carefully-designed module with a structured set of formative and summative assignments that lead into one another, where feedback is designed to help improve work and which can be developed upon (as outlined by Carless (2013)). This second form need not involve the kind of discussions outlined in the former.

Having discussed the nature of dialogic feedback, the paper moves onto the more practical elements of audio feedback, and provides an overview of audio feedback as I employ it via the voice-recording function in Turnitin that students access via Blackboard. Here I attempt to show that the technology is user-friendly and intuitive for both lecturer and student, and that no specific skills or technical competencies are necessary over and above those which academics and learners generally already have. I argue that the chief *practical* benefit of audio feedback is that lecturers can provide more feedback in less time. I also discuss the presentation of audio feedback, and suggest that lecturers should not regard recording their feedback as a form of broadcasting but rather as simply talking to their students.

The article then examines some student testimonies regarding my own use of audio feedback. All the students I interviewed reported that what they want the most from feedback is constructive *criticism* that gave them a clear path to improving their work and grades in future. One of the chief benefits of audio feedback, I note, is that students find it easier to accept criticism in the spoken word than in writing; this is because being able to hear the lecturer's tone of voice reassures them that the lecturer is not 'annoyed' with them and so facilitates the *perception* of constructive criticism of their work. I will then go onto promote this as being a push towards dialogue from monologue as well as discussing the other benefits students identified with audio feedback, such as that it was more personal, and made them feel that lecturers were engaging with their work.

This article will conclude by highlighting some of the potential problems with audio feedback such as the fact that not all learners like the same thing in feedback, so audio feedback might not be for everyone. I will also suggest areas for further research, noting from the limited nature of this study that is not necessarily applicable in all places at all times: for example, is the relationship built via audio feedback dependent on the lecturer and the student knowing one another, or can it work with anonymous marking or in situations where a lecturer/seminar tutor cannot mark an entire cohort's work?

MONOLOGUE VERSUS DIALOGUE IN FEEDBACK

A popular form of feedback in higher education involves face-to-face discussion between lecturer and student over work that the student has produced. Feedback, in this

conversation, is immediate and is a dialogue, with questions being asked by the lecturer and answered by the student, and vice versa. This conversation, which is most closely associated with the Oxbridge tutorial system, can be seen as dialogic in nature as there is a conversation in process about a student's work. As Gibbs (2006: 25) puts it 'the tutor and student sit… and explore the subject matter presented in the essay together as a joint scholarly exercise. They 'do anthropology' or 'do history' together.' Due to limitations on resources this form of feedback is rare, as Nichol (2010: 501) points out:

> In the past, when student numbers were smaller, written feedback was part of a larger coordinated system of teacher-student communication that also involved one-to-one discussions and the drafting and redrafting of assignments. Also, the comments themselves would have been provided within the context of earlier assignments that would have been the subject of earlier discussions and feedback. While this feedback system might still be in place in some select universities ...in most institutions, due to the growth in student numbers, written comments have become detached from this supportive context.

An Oxbridge style tutorial system is ruinously expensive, if pedagogically sound, due to the amount of contact time necessary between lecturer and student to make it possible. The problem is the resources and time it takes in the context of increased numbers in the higher educational sector and the competing pressures on academics' time. The norm for feedback on student essays around the country is for written feedback to be put on an essay (often divided into on-script comments, general feedback, and a set of rubrics to mark

progress in certain key areas). Feedback, generally, tends to be monological in nature in that the critique offered is generally the end of the communication, not the beginning of a conversation about the piece of work.

Not only has feedback become detached from this type of tutorial system but academics often get the sense that feedback is not engaged with at all, with students concentrating on the grade on the piece of work and ignoring the feedback which places this in some context. This has led to quite a cottage industry recently on examining the principles of and place of effective feedback in higher education, with volumes dedicated to its study (see, for example, Boud *et al*, 2013).

This type of assessment in the Oxford tutorial system is, as Gibbs (2006: 25) notes – 'all 'formative' and is designed to support learning' as 'assessment for grades is almost entirely separated from learning'. Students are assessed in final year exams and the discussions and feedback in tutorial system is designed to aid learning. This is a different paradigm of education that cannot be imitated simply by replacing written feedback with audio feedback whatever the strengths of that method may be.

Carless (2013: 90) defines dialogical feedback as 'interactive exchanges in which interpretation are shared, meanings negotiated and expectations clarified.' One can see how this type of interactive exchanges could take place within the Oxbridge tutorial system, but of course that is not the only diet of teaching and assessment in which this type of dialogue could flourish. By the use of modules with well structured diets of assessment

using formative, or early low stakes assignments combined with high quality feedback (whether written or audio) aimed at criteria and improving the next piece of work, one can enhance interaction with the feedback. Again this process cannot simply be replaced by making feedback audio rather than written.

So, it is a more modest goal that I aim at in this paper. I wish to show (and the student testimonies support) that audio feedback helps create in learners a sense of personal attention, and allows students to focus on constructive criticism, which they find easier to accept in the spoken word than in writing. I replicate some of the dynamics of a conversation between the marker and the student and act upon the social capital between the two. The discussion is not intended either as a full overhaul of the diet of assessment that could bring about a dialogue structured within a module, nor can it in and of itself separate assessment from feedback (although it is not contradictory to either of these two goals). For this reason I suggest that audio feedback moves us *towards* dialogue from monologue rather than suggesting it *is* a dialogical form of feedback.

This discussion should be prefaced by a working assumption that the medium used for the distribution of feedback is of secondary importance to the content of that feedback – or, to put it another way, bad feedback is bad feedback whether delivered in an Oxbridge tutorial, in written or in audio format. I have suggested that a certain dialogic form of feedback found in an Oxbridge tutorial is an archetype to be aimed at; however I have no doubt that it has housed feedback that is not of much help to the student learning process. This is not the place to discuss the underlying principles of feedback nor the manner in which it is delivered, as this paper is more concerned with its medium; however we should take as

read that if feedback is, say, unhelpful, defensive and over-personal, being delivered in an audio format will not make it good feedback.

WAYS AND MEANS

Technical details

All politics students at the University of Huddersfield upload their essays to Turnitin, which they access via the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) Blackboard (which is branded as UniLearn). Several years ago the decision was taken within the Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences (the department in which the politics courses sit) to not only make the electronic submission of essays and written assignments compulsory, but also to make the marking and feedback of said assignments electronic. Staff would be required to mark and return grades using the software provided for this process by Turnitin. Turnitin provides the facilities firstly for comments to be added to the scripts, secondly for standard rubrics to be added (tracking attainment in key skillsets such as structure, content, writing style and referencing), and thirdly a section where general comments can be added to discuss the assignment as a whole (perhaps it is in this section that the bulk of the marking work is done). Consequently, students are used to receiving the grades for their work and the written feedback associated with them via their standard virtual learning environment, and staff are accustomed to providing electronic feedback there.

It should also be noted that there is no requirement at the University of Huddersfield to anonymously mark assignments, so my experience has always been that I know the name of the student whose work I am marking and that I may have marked previous pieces of work from them. The possibility exists within Turnitin to anonymise assignments and to provide feedback in either a written or audio format to accompany them, but my experience has always been with non-anonymised scripts.

In the section where one can add general comments about the script being marked, Turnitin also allows academics to record an audio file of up to three minutes, which is easily accessible to students when they log onto the VLE and access their essay grades and feedback in the normal manner. When I was considering introducing oral feedback, I started from the fortuitous position that students were already used to receiving electronic feedback, and the standard format by which staff provided feedback had an inbuilt and easily-accessible method to record and distribute oral feedback.

In terms of hardware, all one needs to access the facility within Turnitin is a microphone of some description to be available on the computer being used to access the VLE: this can either be an in built microphone, or a plug-in one that can be purchased at a negligible cost. The iPad Turnitin app makes this process easier still, where users can simply tap the record button and speak into their iPads.

Presenting feedback

Whereas recording feedback in many ways is similar to writing it, it is a permanent record that – once released to a student – in a sense no longer belongs to the marker, and an injudicious phrase in the written word is as bad as one that is spoken. Nevertheless a marker preparing audio feedback will have different, legitimate concerns about the content of what they are to say, and they face practical concerns that perhaps do not arise when they are preparing written feedback. The central *leitmotiv* in preparing audio feedback should always be that this is *you* speaking to the individual student about their piece of work, and that this conversation does not need to be broadcast quality (you are not creating a podcast for general consumption, or being interviewed on the radio). You should not be concerned by the occasional pause, or *umm* or *err*; you should be 'yourself' speaking to the student as if he/she were with you at the time. However the conscientious academic will wish to prepare feedback in the most professional way possible, and there are steps that can be taken to make this happen.

The chief practical consideration here, once the hardware and software is up and running, is to find a quiet space in which to return the feedback. Written feedback can be prepared on the train, or at home with the TV on in the background and/or with children making noise about the house; perhaps not so audio feedback. Indeed, one of the pitfalls of audio feedback is that one needs reasonable (if not absolute) quiet to prepare it and, as many academics juggle marking around their busy lives, this might not be possible, especially if one doesn't have an office of one's own.

With the first few essays I read when intending to give my feedback as audio feedback, I took quite extensive notes to provide structure and to act as an *aide de memoire* when

delivering my feedback. As I got used to the system, I found my need for this decreased, and I simply wrote down a few bullet points around issues I planned to address. So long as the audio feedback is recorded soon after reading the assignment, then extensive notes are not really necessary.

It is not necessary to deliver your feedback in one three-minute chunk. The Turnitin software allows the user to pause the recording, allowing the marker to cough, take a sip of water, consult the essay or simply collect their thoughts before proceeding. This also provides a handy solution if someone knocks on your door or the phone rings. Also, when recorded, if the marker is unhappy for whatever reason with the recording, it can be deleted and you can recommence the process. Nothing is final until the grades and feedback are returned to the student, so the marker has considerable control over the process.

Whereas a marker may have concerns or nerves about recording the first batch of essays, nearly all academics are capable of delivering the feedback and many worries will disappear with familiarity with the system, and practice. Markers should always remember the central *leitmotiv* here; you are not broadcasting here but are talking to the student, and this should put many nerves at rest. That said, many lecturers have reservations about audio recording and these reservations should be taken seriously. As Gould and Day (2013: 564) suggest some aspects of lecturers' reservations 'may be resolved through more practice in the technique', but also that 'agreeing clear and concise guidelines will help to contribute to its success.' If audio feedback is to become more widespread, lecturers need not only to be convinced of its use but also that colleagues are using it in a similar fashion – and this should feature in institution and course-team discussions, and result in shared guidelines.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS

Perhaps the chief practical benefit to the marker of preparing feedback in audio form is that, in a pure *words-per-minute* calculation, one can give more feedback in less time when speaking than when writing. All of us can speak more quickly than we can type and, as a result, there is a pure time-saving associated with audio feedback. The chief cost in terms of time is that of set-up. The first few assignments might take as long, or slightly longer, than when working in the manner you are accustomed to; however, when you are used to the system it is quicker. I do not intend to suggest here that more feedback equals better feedback (what Molloy & Boud (2013) call the 'nostrum' of 'the more the merrier'), as the 'volume of feedback does not necessarily equate to the meaningfulness or usefulness of feedback to learning' (ibid: 13) – merely that there is a time-saving in delivering your feedback. This has been noted elsewhere with Ice *et al* (2007: 19) suggesting that from 'the instructors' perspective, the ability to reduce the time required to provide feedback by approximately 75% was a compelling reason to adopt the technique. This can be seen as a reason in and of itself to introduce audio feedback, aside from the pedagogical benefits, which we will now go on to consider.

STUDENT TESTIMONIALS

After running audio feedback for the first time, I asked for volunteers to be interviewed individually on how the new form of feedback worked for them, together with their

reflections on feedback in general. Four students volunteered. As such, we can regard this as a sample of convenience; the students whose opinions are represented below wanted to be involved in this research and had robust opinions on the role that feedback plays in their learning. This provides us with interesting feedback and points of reflection, but perhaps we should not necessarily assume that their opinions (or indeed interest) are more widespread in the student community.

I began by asking students what they wanted from feedback, and here the students spoke with one voice: what they wanted from feedback was criticism and specific advice on how to turn their next essay into a higher-scoring one. As such, they were quite strategic in their use of feedback, and they understood that criticism was part of this process. 'I don't mind getting criticism', remarked student A, 'I love getting all the good comment and stuff but… there's nothing I can greatly do with it.' This student spoke of an essay which was graded as a 68 per cent but the marker spent all of their feedback praising the essay and offering no criticism – 'so I don't know how I can get from 68 to 70 'cos all I know is I did well'. Good feedback, Student A thought, is guided to this end. Student B likewise suggested that that bad feedback is that which is 'too positive… with no criticism,' as 'if it is just positive and it's not saying where you can actually improve on your work… constructive criticism would be the best kind of feedback you could get.' Student C reflected on the problems with generalities in feedback, especially phrases such as 'be more critical', to which he retorted: '[h]ow do I be more critical?... I didn't know how to practically act on [that].' Student D asked lecturers to 'give me perhaps one or two key points where I can try and move from a 2:1 to a high 2:1 or maybe even a first.' Student D also suggested that he feels as if he has made an investment in higher education, and paying attention to the feedback from

lecturers – whatever its format – is something that he owes himself and sees as his responsibility to make sure he does well: 'I take feedback from the point of view that I'm paying… over nine grand to be here and if I don't do well then I haven't taken the feedback on board which is designed for me to do well' so 'I have to take it seriously if I'm to get the best out of my university education.'

Moving onto students' thoughts on audio feedback: according to Student C, it was 'an improvement' mostly because the kind of criticism that students like on their work as discussed above is better delivered on an audio file:

> It kind of, it gave me confidence because you went in saying all of a sudden the great things that were about the essay, where I'd done good stuff, but then you made me reflect on, and, and, and *knowing your tone of voice* being, you've done the lectures and stuff like that, it was just much *more accessible* I think in that regard so I, I actually knew where I … I, I don't know how to kind of say it, I think it's just a kind of mental thing when…you can accept I think, *accept certain critical views when you, when you're listening to someone* (my italics).

Student C went on to add that, 'although you're not actually providing and different information' in audio feedback as opposed to written feedback, 'you know from the tone of the voice that it's not, you're not being overly critical, you're just stressing that you could implement this.' Student B mentioned a similar theme regarding the way that criticism is

more gently delivered in audio feedback when he stated: 'I think in a written form it's… easy to misinterpret the way the speaker is… giving it to you so it's like misinterpreting sarcasm over a text,' whereas in audio feedback 'you can… kind of see where… the marker might be emphasising with… the criticism he's giving you… you know he's not being harsh… he or she is just… [trying to] help you really.'

Another theme that emerged from the student interviews was that, by hearing the lecturer's voice discuss the work they have completed, it makes the experience more personal for the student, as if the lecturer has really engaged with the work they have prepared. Student A notes that she liked audio feedback:

> [B]ecause it felt more personalised, I should've said sometimes written feedback can be quite sort of, just sort of straight, boring, usual stuff. And I think if it's audio you feel as if well your lecturer's read your piece of work and is speaking to you about your work. Not your lecturer's generically marking pages and pages and pages and they're getting bored. So I think audio showed effort on both parts then. The effort to do it and then the effort that you've got to make to listen to it and commit to that.

Of course, in terms of the attention lecturers pay to scripts, it makes no difference whether the feedback is delivered in an audio or written format. However, Student A made it clear that – to hear the voice of the marker overview the essay – was to gain more of an impression of personal attention, for 'your lecturer… is speaking to you about your

work'. The impression given was that the students gained a greater sense of engagement with their work from their lecturer – that they were being taken seriously, and that their ideas were being taken seriously. The conclusion that Student A drew from this was that it forces students to be more 'active' with their use of feedback. They were forced to listen to a file rather than scan a piece of text and: 'in order to receive your score and feedback you had to listen to the feedback so often I think people do just check their score and that's it... I think audio feedback means that you have to be more active so you genuinely do listen because it's something more different.'

Student B raised an issue that is pertinent to this paper about how audio feedback ranks with regards to written feedback and ideal feedback. When asked how he would ideally like to receive feedback if all options were opened, he made it clear that his preference was for a meeting as this would ensure that he understood the feedback. This would be good, Student B noted, not just to enhance understanding or to gain more feedback but because it would open up the possibility of discussion. He noted:

> I think it'd be good to question certain things and see, like further where you could improve... ask lots of questions and get that kind of feedback catered to you.

Later in the interview, Student B returned to the theme of this ideal form of feedback when appraising audio feedback. Audio feedback is, he thought, a positive development and 'definitely one step above written feedback' – but not as good as a meeting, as it lacked

interaction between lecturer and student. Audio feedback, after all, is still a monologue in its nature:

> It gave… more of a personal feel… I don't think it'd be as good as a meeting because you couldn't ask question to the audio [file] and it wouldn't answer but it definitely taps into more questions that I needed answered rather than written feedback so it was more versatile in the way I'd use it… I think.

So far with these student testimonies I have only discussed the broadly positive responses the students gave to audio feedback, and certainly the vast majority of the discussions were positive. From the interviews, however, there were a couple of concerns raised that we would do well to bear in mind. Student A noted that – whereas she did like audio feedback – 'it doesn't appeal to everyone' and 'it's still useful to have it written… so that you can refer back to without having to get… your headphones on every time.' Written feedback is perhaps more portable as it can be copied and pasted into other documents or printed out; distributing audio feedback via Turnitin does not make it quite as portable. Student D was the most critical of audio feedback, not because he thought it was bad in and of itself, but because 'I prefer personally… the written feedback.' The reason for this, he noted, was that he preferred the visual to the audio in his broader way of learning:

> Well this is only my personal experience but I prefer to mull things over so if I have the written feedback then I can sort of look at it again and again and again and think about it but with the audio feedback I'v found that I tend to

switch off a little bit and it's not that you don't have a wonderful voice it's just… I prefer the visualisation… [Last year a lecturer] did a test where he had no PowerPoints… I lost the flow of the structure of the lecture as a result.

Student D felt that he needed something to look at and reflect upon in his feedback, and that this linked with his need for visual stimulus in lectures. This reminds us that students are not uniform: different students learn in different ways and this is likely to be reflected in their preferences with regards to feedback.

Before continuing to discuss the benefits and limitations of audio feedback, I want to reflect on a methodological point raised by the above testimonies. Aside from the fact it was a limited sample, and one of convenience (the students volunteered to speak to me), we need to avoid generalisations across cohorts. All of the students above gave thoughtful reflections not just on audio feedback but also on how feedback impacts upon their study. They all went onto graduate with very good honours degrees, and three of the four went on to study at a postgraduate level – I am certain that they would have benefited from feedback in any format. The hard-to-reach groups – the students who perhaps do not engage with feedback and do not reflect upon the role feedback plays in their learning – are precisely the types of students who perhaps would benefit the most from innovations in assessment and feedback. These types of students are not represented in the testimonies above, but it is their voices that we, as a profession, need to seek out the most.

PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

Benefits

Lunt and Curran (2010: 766) note in their discussion of audio feedback that students 'enjoy audio feedback,' that they 'do not seem to enjoy collecting feedback in person,' and that 'audio feedback offers significant advantages over the uncollected, written alternative.' From my own experience of using audio feedback, it seems that students do enjoy it over written feedback, even when there is an established VLE-based form of distribution for both written and audio feedback –that is to say, they like it not just because of distribution but also because of content. It is telling that in my use of audio feedback I have never encountered any technical problems with students accessing the feedback, and this should not surprise us greatly given that most of our students are digital natives and used to accessing various media files online. As Prensky (2001: 1) notes, our students 'have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age.' What is technological to us as academics is not particularly new for students, and therefore problems are unlikely to arise in this manner.

Of course we should not assume that students have the necessary IT skills to access their audio feedback; indeed the notion of a generation being digital natives has been problematized, with Margaryan *et al* suggesting that our students may not 'have the characteristics of epitomic global, connected, socially-networked technologically-fluent' that we assume of their generation. (2011: 439) What this means practically is that whenever we use technology of any description 'we should not assume that students fully understand

course requirements in terms of [that] technology' and ensure that time is spent showing how they may access their audio feedback and where help is available if they have difficulties. (Jones *et al*, 2010: 730) Audio feedback, like any other important element of a course, should be fully explained to students.

In a study on audio feedback by Ice *et al* (2007: 14), one student noted that the difference between written feedback and audio feedback was 'that *you* were *saying* them…[w]hen I looked at the transcription there was no stress placed on any of the words or sentences… I wondered if I would have thought that you might have been yelling or something if I would have read it that way (my italics)'. One cannot tell the stress or intonation in the voice in the written word whereas one can in the spoken word. This theme re-emerged in the student testimonials for my own study, and became particularly relevant when coupled with what students said they wanted from feedback. All of the students interviewed for my study said that they wanted *criticism* in their feedback and *guidance* on how to achieve a better grade in the next piece of work. However, when written on the page, such criticism can be intimidating because the students cannot hear the tone of voice of the lecturer. Spoken feedback helps to address this issue.

Another benefit, as brought up by student A in particular, is that audio feedback 'felt more personalised' as it made 'your lecturers read your piece of work.' There seems to be more of a connection between learner and educator using audio feedback: if good teaching is about building good relationships with students, then audio feedback seems to help with this.

Finally, I would suggest the chief benefit of audio feedback is that – although audio feedback is not 'as good as a meeting' to discuss an essay (Student B) – it has 'more of a personal feel' and is 'one-step above written feedback' (Student A). Many lecturers would prefer to talk to students about their essays in an Oxbridge style tutorial manner but they would also baulk at the resources and time involved. Also, although most lecturers may offer office hours in which students can come and talk to markers about their essays (and indeed they may actively encourage students to come and talk about their essays), it is often only the confident few who will actually take up this opportunity. Audio feedback attempts to spread this more personalised feel to all students, even those who would never dream of attending an office hour.

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The student feedback discussed above suggests that: audio feedback is more personal; it increases the relationship between the student and marker; and (perhaps as a result of this) it makes it easier to give and receive constructive feedback. The student can judge the intentions of the marker from the marker's tone of voice in a manner they simply cannot from the written word. However, the testimonials come from students who received audio feedback from the same lecturer who had taught them in lectures and seminars – a relationship had already been built up between the student and the lecturer, and the audio feedback took place within this context. It is not possible (or perhaps even desirable) for all modules in all institutions to be delivered in this manner. For modules taken by large numbers of students, the seminars and lectures might be led by different academics and so

the relationships between the student and the marker might be less self-evident. It might also be possible that, on occasion, students might have assignments marked by staff with whom they have had little or no past relationship, so that they do not already have a bank of social capital or trust upon which to build in the feedback process.

So, a question remains as to whether audio feedback is more personal and a good way to deliver constructive feedback in and of itself, or if it relies upon previous established relationships to provide this. Would students still find it so personal if they had little or no relationship with the marker providing the feedback? I am tempted to suggest that, although they might not find it as personal as the One Lecturer/Tutor/Marker model, they might still find audio feedback more personal than written feedback if it comes from a marker they do not know. More research is needed in this area, as it would put to the test the notion that it is audio feedback – or the already existing relationship – that creates this sense of more personal feedback.

On a related issue, and as noted above, my experience with audio feedback has always been with non-anonymised scripts. This means that I know the student whose work I am marking and I may have previous experience of work they have submitted. (This leaves the possibility open that I can refer in my feedback to an improvement in a certain aspect of their work, or that their is a consistent area for improvement across their work). In addition, I will always address the student by name in my feedback. Bearing in mind that the student testimonials have emphasised the more personal nature of audio feedback, I am not sure how this would play out if there was a University requirement (or personal preference on the part of the lecturer) for anonymous marking. It could be that – if

assignments were anonymised – then students would still find audio feedback to be more personal than written feedback because they could still hear the lecturer's voice; and the issue of the delivery of constructive criticism would still stand on anonymised scripts. The relationship between the marker, student and the audio feedback would, however, be different in an anonymised system. There would be no personal address and no reference to previous work that the marker might have been aware of. How audio feedback would work in an anonymised system of marking is another area for potential research.

Student D's comments in the testimonials is also worth further consideration. He argued that he regards himself as a visual learner and – just as he prefers detailed PowerPoint slides in lectures – he like feedback to be provided in a written format so that he can reflect upon it effectively. One does not necessarily need to be a staunch adherent to the notion of learning styles to accept the notion that different individuals learn in different ways and prefer different types of learning media. Just as some learners prefer audio feedback, others might prefer written; the problem perhaps lies in using one form of feedback consistently throughout a module or course, so that some students will not get what they want. There is no real reason to prioritise written feedback over audio feedback unless it can be shown that the majority of students prefer that; it is far more likely that written feedback is the default option at universities because this has been the tradition rather than for any clear pedagogical reason. One potential way to deal with this problem, and to ensure that students receive the feedback they want, is to offer them the choice of written or audio feedback – rather than just having a *way* of giving students their feedback, we could recognise the strengths and benefits of many different ways. In Turnitin – and using the 'assignment' tab – it is easy to set up two drop boxes in which students can submit their

essay: one drop box for students who would prefer their feedback to be given in an audio file; and another for students who wish to be given audio feedback. It would also make sense to lead a discussion with students about how to submit an essay using this system, and about what types of feedback they can expect. This might help learners to reflect upon how they use feedback in their personal and scholarly development.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to justify – and hopefully to promote – the wider use of audio feedback on politics assignments by suggesting that there are two key pedagogical benefits. Firstly, audio feedback helps to facilitate the type of feedback that students want the most: namely, constructive criticism to help them improve their future academic performance. It appears that criticism is easier to take emotionally in the spoken work than with words on paper. Secondly, audio feedback *appears* to the student as being more personal, and helps conceptually to move feedback towards a monologue towards a dialogue (even though it remains monological in nature). Audio feedback is also user-friendly from the point of view of both lecturer and student, and it has the key practical benefit of saving lecturers' time when marking.

Although all of this looks positive, audio feedback might not suit all people on all occasions. I have noted that not all students prefer feedback to be delivered in the same manner (and, as such, some prefer written to audio), but written feedback is dominant not because of student demand but because it is the norm, and there is no reason to prioritise it over other forms. One of the key benefits of audio feedback is that it builds on the

relationship between marker and student, and so further research is needed on its use within anonymous marking regimes and/or large modules where the marker may not be known to the student. Both of these scenarios will affect the relationship between marker and student (perhaps for entirely justifiable reasons) and so this paper has highlighted the need for further research in this area.

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