Talking Results - trialing an audio-visual feedback method for e-submissions.

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Abstract

The importance of good quality, personalised feedback for students in higher education is well documented by authors such as Cottrell (2010). Feedback is regarded as a key indicator of student satisfaction in the National Student Survey, and an important indicator of teaching quality by the Quality Assurance Agency.

The decision to move to an electronic submission system at the University of Derby in the 2011-12 academic year led to a number of academic staff investigating alternative feedback methods. Across the University four different audio feedback methods were tested. This author trialed Jing, an audio-visual feedback tool, on a group of 40 undergraduate students on the BSc Hons Diagnostic Radiography.

The results of the trial were encouraging, after an initial adjustment period scripts were much quicker to mark, and feedback was more detailed and personalised to each student. Student views on the feedback were found to be positive. Drawbacks all related to problems accessing the feedback file. It is hoped to be able to continue using an audio-visual feedback method during 2012-13 academic year to provide richer feedback to students.

Introduction

All students enrolled on programmes of study in higher education should receive regular feedback on their work. Cottrell (2010) emphasises the value of this resource to students, and suggests that students should use their feedback as a basis for reflection and development. In order to do this effectively, she suggests that students should receive feedback that is of a high quality, and personalised to their individual student submission.

Student satisfaction with feedback from tutors is undoubtedly one of the key indicators of satisfaction with a programme of study. As such, it is part of the National Student Survey and an indicator of teaching quality for the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Getting feedback right is therefore a critical task for academics working in higher education.

The 2011-12 academic year saw the start of a process of phased introduction of electronic submission (e-submission) for written assessments at the University of Derby. A number of academic staff were interested in how they could use the opportunity to make their feedback more meaningful, useful and personalised for students, and agreed to trial a number of audio feedback methods for the University.

Audio Feedback Methods

Encouraged by advice that feedback could be given verbally in the academic regulations (University of Derby, 2012) the alternatives to traditional written feedback were considered. A small literature search was conducted, which indicated that other institutions had used audio feedback methods and had a positive outcome. Gould & Day (2012) reported positive feedback from students to their use of audio feedback, as did Lunt & Curran (2010), and Rodway-Dyer et al (2011).

A small group of academics agreed to trial several different forms of audio feedback for the university as part of the e-submission rollout. The group were given four options for providing audio feedback: the use of USB microphones, the use of smartphone / dicta-phones, the use of Jing software, or the use of a Motorola Xoom. All of the options would create an MP3 or MP4 file, which could be distributed to students via the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Blackboard.

This author chose Jing, a free software application, as it had the advantage of capturing both audio & a visual data, often referred to as a screen cast (http://www.techsmith.com/jing.html, accessed 22/11/2012). A screen cast allows tutors to look through a student's work, record their audio feedback, whilst highlighting the area being talked about in the feedback in the video element. It was felt that this would enhance the quality of the feedback, and provide students with much more information about the quality of their work. It was also hoped that by recording a screen cast it would help to avoid the problems encountered by Rodway-Dyer et al (2011) who found students were sometimes unsure whereabouts in their submission the audio feedback was referring too.

Discussion

The author trialed the use of Jing on a group of 40 phase 1 undergraduate students who were completing a 1500 word written assessment. The assessment was a for the 'Working as a Professional' module, part of the BSc (Hons) Diagnostic Radiography.

The initial few scripts marked using Jing took considerably longer than usual to mark, as there was an issue around getting used to both the software and the process of marking on screen. This involved getting used to starting and stopping the recording so that valuable time was not wasted, as the free version of Jing that was being used in the trial only allowed a maximum of 5 minutes per script.

However, the software soon became familiar, and it was quickly evident that scripts were much quicker to mark than using the previous paper-based system. The paper-based system had required a lot of writing, and it was sometimes hard to ensure that feedback was taken in the supportive manner that it was intended. It was noticeable that the audio-visual method allowed far more detailed feedback to be collated far more quickly. This is backed up by Lunt & Curran's study (2010), which calculated that one minute narrating audio feedback was equal to six minutes writing feedback. The ability to annotate & highlight the areas referred to in the feedback so that students knew exactly which part of the submission was being talking about was excellent. This made the feedback far more detailed and personalised than the previous paper-based feedback system. The use of voice

patterns and tone to ensure that comments would be taken as supportive and informative was also particularly effective.

Another advantage of the audio-visual feedback method was that it could be accessed on any device that had an Internet connection. The students in the trial were on a work placement on the date of the feedback release. This meant that they didn't have to make a journey into the university to obtain their feedback; they could access it via the University's VLE whilst on their placement. In their study, Lunt & Curran (2010) also note this advantage of an audio feedback method. However, it should be noted that with the move to e-submission it was also possible to provide written feedback electronically, and distribute it via the VLE.

However, no system is without its limitations, and there were a couple that should be discussed. The free version of the Jing software used in the trial had a maximum of 5 minutes recording time per submission. On occasion this was not long enough, particularly when recording feedback for weaker submissions. These submissions tended to need additional guidance on how the work could have been improved. A further limitation was that if a mistake was made during the recording, for example, an incorrect grade mark for the piece of work, it could not be edited. The whole feedback had to be re-recorded, which was obviously frustrating. However, there is a more powerful version of Jing now available – Snagit, which does allow editing, and has a longer recording time per script, which would remove these problems.

A further limitation was that some students did struggle to access their feedback on placement, and had to wait until they were able to use their own device (computer/tablet/smartphone) to obtain it. This was for several reasons – either lack of internet access on placement, or a lack of access to speakers or headphones to hear the feedback. However, it is worth pointing out that students still got their feedback several days earlier than they would have done if they had had to come into university to collect it (the feedback was released on a Monday, and the students would not have been able to come into the university until their study half day on the Wednesday).

Student Feedback

In order to evaluate student satisfaction with the audio-visual feedback method all 40 students who received it were asked to email their comments about it to the module leader. 10 emails were received about the feedback method, all of which were generally very positive. Students acknowledged the additional level of detail provided in the feedback compared to written feedback they had received for other modules, and said that the ability to highlight areas during the recording was extremely useful. It meant that they were clear about exactly which section of the work was being referred to.

The negative comments all related to problems accessing the feedback on placement. This included one very understandable comment about lack of headphones being an issue, as that particular student did not feel comfortable listening to the feedback through speakers in a work area. One student also commented that they "had to listen all the way through the feedback to get their grade". However, several other students identified that this as a benefit, as it made them pay attention to all of the feedback rather than just focusing on the grade that had been awarded to the piece.

Conclusion

In summary, the use of an audio-visual feedback tool like Jing enabled considerable improvements in the detail and hence quality of the feedback provided to students in the trial. It also enabled the feedback to be tailored so that it was much more personalised to each student and their submission. The visual element showed each student exactly which part of their script was being fed back back about, whilst the audio element discussed the merits or shortcomings of that part. With e-submission being implemented for all modules across the university in 2012-13, it is a tool that warrants continued use to provide richer feedback to students on the quality of their work. The use of the subscription version of Jing, Snagit, would be beneficial so that there is no time limit to recordings, and there is the ability to edit any mistakes.

References

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