

An evaluation of the use of screencasting and video for assessment feedback in online higher education

Introduction and context

At the Open University (OU) approximately 7000 tutors provide feedback for 200,000 students' assignments each year (OU, 2014). Many students only communicate with their tutor via assignments and they rely on the written feedback to make progress (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Almost all assignments are delivered and marked electronically and the university continues to strive to improve the quality of feedback (MacDonald, 2013). Although individual tutors have used video as a feedback method (Honeyman, 2014) only one faculty has taken part in a formal study (Harper et al, 2012). The underlying proposition of this evaluation is that more multimodal feedback strategies could improve student retention and sense of community but asks whether this approach would be feasible.

Overview:

This evaluation is specifically concerned with the pedagogical innovation of using screencasting and/or video (SCV) to provide students with formative feedback on their assessments. In most of the studies considered SCV is presented to the student alongside written feedback (Crook et al, 2012; Edwards et al, 2012; Harper et al, 2012).

Screencasting is the use of video to record activities carried out on a computer screen, it will often show mouse movements, can follow typing, highlighting or any software specific activity like work in a graphical environment. In the education context a screencast will often be accompanied by narration (Educause, 2006). Video, in contrast to screencasting, presents the tutor on the screen often having been filmed with a webcam (Henderson & Phillips, 2014).

The two main contributions that SCV may be able to make to formative feedback on assessment are firstly to better enable students to learn more deeply, not only about the subject they are studying and the skills they need for success, but also to become more able to self-assess and self-regulate. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2004) defined seven principles for teachers delivering formative feedback in order to support learners and then developed these further to take into consideration behaviour of students in their first year of graduate study (Nicol, 2006). This evaluation will use these principles to describe how SCV might add to written feedback and also to compare screencasting to video feedback. It will also look at some of the issues of using SCV and also some of the solutions. The second contribution is to help distance students feel more part of the community (Mathieson, 2012) by making feedback more engaging, letting them get to know their tutors better by allowing them to experience the tutor's tone of voice and other audio visual cues when video is used (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Edwards et al, 2012; Henderson & Phillips, 2014).

Innovative?

Combining the use of SCV with providing feedback is innovative because it provides tutors with an additional means to create a higher quantity of quality feedback and thereby improve relationships,

motivate and increase their students chance of success (Gibbs et al, 2003). As more technological innovations become available these new technologies also need to be evaluated for educational use. Collaaj, for example, which provides screencasting including a webcam feed, looks like a promising alternative to Jing® which has been one of the most evaluated solutions thus far (Collaaj, 2012).

Students perceive “the assessment process as deeply personal and their work submitted for assessment as an extension of themselves. They wished teachers to appreciate this perspective and demonstrate sensitivity in the process.” (Crossman, 2007). SCV coupled with a feedback methodology could help tutors to do this and also enable students to engage more deeply with feedback, via reviewing and revisiting it (Henderson & Phillips, 2014). SCV is also a way to produce timely feedback because it is possible to produce more detailed and more constructive feedback in a shorter amount of time than with written feedback (Hope, 2011; Edwards et al, 2012). SCV could support the feedback principles outlined by Nicol (2006) and enable applying more of the principles at the same time than is possible within the same time scale when only providing written feedback (see Figure 1 and Appendix B).

Feedback Principles (Nicol, 2006)	Screencasting (Edwards et al, 2012; Harper et al, 2012, Hope, 2011)	Video (Henderson & Phillips, 2014; Crook et al, 2010)
Help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria and standards).	The tutor can highlight the objectives, criteria and standards and address them throughout the feedback, pointing out on the document where they are met or could have been met.	Can mention these and state where met. This is a primary function of generic feedback videos.

Figure 1: Extract from “Comparison of how screencasting and video might satisfy principles for quality feedback” (Appendix A)

Background:

Assessment and feedback responses from the UK National Student Survey (NSS), despite significant improvement since 2009, continue to demonstrate more dissatisfaction with this area of their university experience than any other (HEFCE, 2014a). This data is only gathered from students who complete their degrees and therefore omits those students who cannot be retained beyond the first year. Good quality feedback has been identified as critical for this group and will affect whether they continue in higher education beyond their first year of study (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Nicol 2006; Dobbyn & Chetwynd, 2014; Butler & Winne, 1995). Although the OU has received comparatively good responses from the assessment and feedback section of the NSS survey (see Fig 2), retention rates are significantly poorer than traditional universities (HEFCE, 2014b; Simpson, 2013).

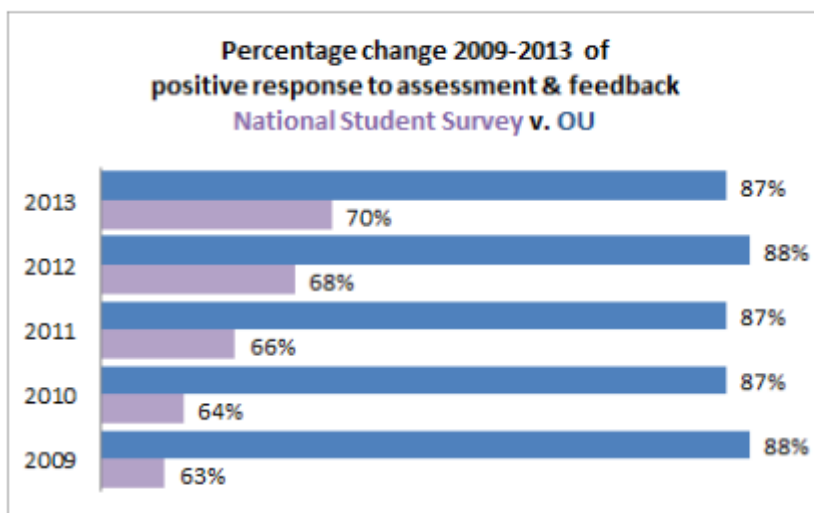


Figure 2: Data extrapolated from NSS results and trends analysis data (HEFCE, 2014; OU, 2014b)

Gibbs and Simpson (2004) have set a benchmark for how we have come to understand the importance of formative feedback in distance higher education and also the need to ensure that students engage with the learning task that forms the assessment as well as the feedback that ensues. They point out; assessment feedback may often be the only way that the student has any contact with the tutor. At the OU this may furthermore be the only contact the student has with the university. They stress the need to provide feedback of a quality that positively affects behaviour towards learning, for example providing a way to correct errors and misunderstandings that can be applied in the future.

There have been several large scale projects undertaken across the higher education landscape focussing on improving feedback and assessment, particularly those funded and coordinated through the Higher Education Academy and JISC. Both these organisations sought to transform feedback and assessment and report varying levels of success (Ferrell, 2013; Ball et al, 2012).

Despite “video feedback emerging as a prospective exponent of deeper, richer and more significant commentary” (Turner & West, 2013) several papers state that there have been few studies carried out which show that SCV feedback would improve learning (Henderson & Phillips, 2014; Harper et al, 2012) yet others use studies on audio feedback as confirmation that students prefer feedback delivered this way and justification for further research on video as a delivery mechanism (Mathieson, 2012; Turner & West, 2013). Although there is some evidence that SCV simply used as a cognitive tool does not support learning as much as might be expected (Lee et al, 2008) nevertheless most researchers posit that SCV feedback enables better quality in-depth responses additionally creating a rapport between tutor and student and an increased sense of supportiveness (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Henderson & Phillips, 2014; Crooks, 2012; Harper et al, 2012). This may go some way to mitigate the distance problem in online courses by bringing the tutors closer to the students thereby creating a sense of community (Mathieson, 2012; Simpson, 2013).

Outcomes and impact:

ASSET was a project carried out at Reading University funded by JISC in 2009-2010. Its aim was to develop a resource in order to improve staff delivery of and student engagement with feedback. The resource consisted of a password protected video “dropbox”, a set of support videos, a set of module

specific videos and a way for students to create a playlist of their favourites. The major drawback of this research was its emphasis on generic feedback in order to ensure staff “involvement with the pilot project wasn’t too onerous” (Crook et al, 2012). The researchers report that staff are continuing to use video for feedback, however the decision to focus efforts on creation of a new video resource seem out of step as other resources, like Collaaj, become widely available.

Using Jing® has proved a popular option for screencasts (Hope, 2011; Edwards, 2012; Mathisen, 2012; Thompson & Lee, 2012; Mathieson, 2012). The latter, an action research study carried out during delivery of an online program, used a crossover methodology in order to achieve objectivity; all the students received both written only feedback and text plus SCV feedback during different halves of their course. Most students favoured the text plus SCV method and given the option in the future, would choose that. They also stated that it was more engaging, personal and enabled them to feel more connected to the tutor. Despite being a small project, the methodology employed gives weight to the results. Another similar study also used crossover methodology and produced similar results (Edwards et al, 2012).

Jing® feedback screencasts were also evaluated in language modules at the OU and these produced equally positive responses from staff and students and the suggestion that there is “compelling impact on the effectiveness of the feedback” (Harper et al, 2012). Here the feedback was individually created by nine tutors across different languages and levels to a minimum of fifty-four students. Tutors felt that they were able to “provide feedback at a greater depth than traditional written comments”. There was a smaller response from students however those that did found Jing® feedback motivating, clearer and easier to understand as well as making them feel that their work was valued.

Turner and West (2013) elicited a total of 90 responses to two questionnaires given to students participating in their SCV feedback study using Camtasia software. These students were enrolled on a Bachelor of Education course and it is possible that their engagement with education itself could explain their overwhelmingly positive response to SCV feedback: 75% spent more time on review, 92% believed it would enhance future work, 92% believing it was more valuable than written feedback and 87% finally preferring video feedback.

Henderson and Phillips (2014) have yet to publish their extensive and ongoing study into multimodal feedback. However, they do already hint at yet more positive student reaction to SCV feedback: “more personalised than text; increased clarity; more supportive and caring; prompting reflection; constructive and useful”. Their study includes development of a structure for the construction of feedback for the video environment including a salutation, relational work (acknowledging the student as an individual), evaluative summary, textual issues, feedforward using the assessment content, valediction and an invitation to reply. They were keen to explore the simplicity and speed of the SCV approach and generally used video, keeping the time to less than five minutes. They did not test written feedback alongside the video feedback over work concerns for university lecturers, though further evaluation is continuing (Henderson, 2014).

Issues:

Training and quality assurance

Training in how to use the equipment and software and the need to support in developing their practice of delivering feedback using SCV are both required. One student astutely commented that “In

the same way as some lecturers have poor handwriting, some may produce poor quality recordings.” (Hope, 2011). Many studies discussed the effect on student’s perception of feedback when hearing the tutor’s tone of voice; commenting that it deepened the student’s connection with the tutor (Mathisen, 2012; Thompson & Lee, 2012; West et al, 2013), however, it is likely to take practice and confidence for tutors to speak naturally, fluently and calmly as Hope suggests is required.

Tutor time

Language tutors, though already used to producing audio feedback, spent between 15 and 30 minutes preparing and producing feedback (Harper et al, 2012). However Mathison (2012) reports that teachers became aware that the digital feedback they were giving was “time-cost efficient”, that it was “easier than writing everything down” and that “we save an enormous amount of time!”.

Software, file type and file size

Two categories of software exist: those that require downloading and installing (Jing[®], Camtasia,) and those that are internet based (Screencast-O-Matic, Collaaj). Beyond consideration of choice of software is the file type produced, the ensuing file size and ease of access by the student. The benefit of using Jing[®] is that it is time limited, can be downloaded and emailed or stored on institutional servers and that it is very quick to learn. If screencasting is not required then, as Henderson and Phillips (2014) discuss, video can be produced anywhere using any recording device even a mobile phone.

Hosting

Projects have shared the videos with students via their LMS (Henderson & Phillips, 2014; West et al, 2013; Mathisen, 2012). Others have distributed via email (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Edwards et al, 2012). Files sizes are substantial, though keeping the videos short and using a highly compressed file type, like MP4, helps. For privacy reasons none of the studies used public systems like YouTube.

Privacy

Non-generic feedback SCV needs to be private between the tutor and student. There are different levels of privacy connected with hosting arrangements. For example, Collaaj provides institutional paid for versions that offer increased security and privacy.

Next steps:

There remain several questions about this innovation that future empirical research should attempt to answer (Mathieson, 2012; Harper et al, 2012).

1. The effect of feeding back using video and screencasting together?
2. Do all students need individualised feedback in order to make progress? Might some gain enough from a generic recording? Would it be useful to use in the first year only?
3. Would tutors be willing to spend more time producing feedback? Or would they end up producing less written feedback knowing that they could speak more quickly than write thereby equalising effort?
4. Will tutors be able to use guidelines for producing SCV effectively?
5. What is the optimum length; would two minutes feedback, for example, still fulfil enough of the feedback principles to make it worthwhile?

6. How can privacy issues be addressed using online software options?
7. Is there a measurable positive effect on student performance or retention through quantitatively more feedback?
8. Would some disciplines benefit more than others from using this approach?

Though it is clear that students and staff have reacted very well to a multimodal approach to feedback, many authors warn that some of the positive reaction may be due to the “wow” or novelty factor. (Henderson, 2014; Crook et al, 2012; Hope, 2011; Cullen, 2010; Edwards & Williams, 2012; Turner & West, 2013; Cann, 2007). However, it also impossible to disagree with Sally Brown (2007) “concentrating on giving students detailed and developmental formative feedback is the single most useful thing we can do for our students” so therefore we should use any means at our disposal to achieve this.

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Appendix A

Comparison of how screencasting and video might satisfy principles for quality feedback.

Feedback Principles (Nicol, 2006)	Screencasting (Edwards et al, 2012; Harper et al, 2012, Hope, 2011)	Video (Henderson & Phillips, 2014; Crook et al, 2010)
Help clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards).	The tutor can highlight the objectives, criteria and standards and address them throughout the feedback, pointing out on the document where they are met or could have been met.	Can mention these and state where met. This is a primary function of generic feedback videos.
Encourage 'time and effort' on challenging learning tasks.	Offer students opportunity to engage deeply with feedback and option to return to the feedback repeatedly.	Same
Deliver high quality feedback information that helps learners self-correct.	Highlight objects and discuss aspects of the assessment task in great detail discussing or demonstrating how students could change the material in the future.	Similar, though student may need reference in the text to position the feedback accurately.
Encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.	Tutor can provide encouragement and praise at any point via audio track.	Tutor can provide encouragement and praise looking directly into the camera and therefore at the student.
Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning (peer and teacher-student).	Tutor can ask questions or set up a conversation on specific points of the task. The dialogue would be an internal one for the student, though could also be externalised via other technologies like email .	When asking a question, tutor can "look" directly at the student. Student needs reference in text.
Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning.	A conversational approach including in-depth reflection by the tutor may help student to reflect further.	Same, but student needs reference in text.
Support the development of learning communities	Listening to the tutor's voice making personalised comments to the student helps to deepen the relationships between them.	When the tutor speaks directly to the camera, and personalises the response, this would deepen the relationship, even though the student cannot answer back immediately.
Help teachers adapt teaching to student needs	All students may not need this level of interaction and feedback.	Generic feedback can be used.

Appendix B

Subject: Your work on video/screencasting feedback
From: Michael Henderson <michael.henderson@monash.edu>
To: "M.Honeyman" <m.honeyman@open.ac.uk>
Date: 21 August 2014 22:09

Hi Mandy,

Yes one of our concerns is how much the response to video feedback is due to a wow factor. However, our current work in a secondary school is helping us to understand this (students are getting multiple video feedback from various teachers over a semester). The results look to be (analysis still underway) positive but perhaps not as dramatic as previous study.

We haven't purposely explored video feedback as a secondary feedback mechanism alongside traditional/conventional written comments simply because we originally argued it would make the process unsustainable in terms of workload for university lecturers. However, again our secondary school study has this element in it and we are about to interview the teachers to find out about their work process.

Good luck with your paper!

Cheers

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