

Chapter 9

Using Audio for Giving Feedback to Project Teams: A Useful Complement to Track Changes

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The Problem – Giving Good Feedback

I come to distance learning from two vantage points – as a practitioner and as a researcher. And from both perspectives I look for strategies that won't take too much time, but are appreciated by students. Assignments are probably the top concern of students—that is, what's required and how to do well in class. Feedback on work submitted is probably the next major concern of students. They want a good grade. But just as important, they want to know the instructor's response to their papers and projects, and how they can improve that work. This is especially important for my master's students because they publish their work online as part of a professional portfolio. If there are weaknesses in a paper or project, students want to fix them before putting the paper or project online for the whole world to see.

Over the years, I have used a variety of means for giving feedback, primarily relying on Track Changes in Microsoft Word. The upside of using this type of feedback is the specific attention to fixing the text; the downside is that I fear many students just hit Accept All and don't really learn much from the feedback. Using Track Changes also takes a lot of time on my part. While I've found it is good for the technical details, I have found that it is sometimes not as good at conveying my overall response to a paper. In the following pages, I will briefly describe my experience using audio feedback as a solution to this problem.

The Response – Audio Feedback

Given the previously mentioned problems, I have been experimenting with different ways of giving students good feedback on their papers and projects. The following outlines my latest effort to give quality feedback.

1. **Print out reports.** Because reading on-screen is fatiguing to my aging eyes, I print out major projects and papers, often done in teams by groups of 3-5 students.
2. **Write comments.** I sit down at home or on the bus and write comments on the material. I sometimes fix technical problems, but often just add comments on the margin or at the front or back – as I think of an issue or problem in the report. Every instructor does this in his or her own particular way.
3. **Record spoken feedback.** Once I am get back at my computer, I use Audacity (Mac or PC) or GarageBand (Mac) to record a 1-3 minute audio file responding to the report. I pull out a particular paper, look it over to remind myself of its contents, then hit Record and start talking. I continue talking as I turn pages and go over particular sections. I mention technical/mechanical issues if they were a problem, but usually focus on conceptual or strategic issues. I do all the papers in succession. Most audio files are a single take; once in awhile I start over if I am not happy with my expression.

4. **Enter grade.** I register a grade into the gradebook system, typically within our course-management system (CMS).
5. **Send out grade and feedback.** I then send the audio file via email or post it in the CMS, along with a few written summary comments and notice of grade. I invite response and follow up with students about the work as needed.

For hybrid classes, I return the printed paper or project that has my written comments on it at the next face-to-face session. For fully online classes, if a paper needs special attention, I usually return the paper or project with Track Changes on it; otherwise I depend on oral feedback to address changes needed. Less often, I make a pdf copy of my hand-written comments and return it to the student via email attachment.

Results – Students Really Like It

I have done this in three different classes, and students consistently voice appreciation to me for the audio feedback. Their comments convey the following sentiments:

- Good to hear your personal response to our work – I felt better connected to you
- I could hear you turning pages as you spoke – I could follow along with my own copy
- The grade made better sense after hearing your explanation
- I understand better what I was supposed to do, after doing it, and hearing your comments on my work
- We discussed your comments as a group and could see ways to revise the project for our portfolios

I have come to think of audio feedback as an essential part of my classes, even face-to-face courses (since I do not always have time in class to sit down and discuss each student's work). Audio feedback is another way to establish my "teacher presence" – that feeling students have of being connected to me.

The Research Backs Me Up

There is a line of research showing the value of audio feedback for English instructors, predating the Web (Olson, 1982). Instructors can better convey nuances through spoken feedback and a clearer sense of caring (Mellen & Sommers, 2003). The positive effective has continued into the current generation of web-based courses (Ice, Curtis, Wells, & Phillips, 2007; Kim, 2005; Still, 2006). The technical term for audio feedback seems to be asynchronous audio communication or AAC (Oomen-Early and colleagues, 2008).

Future Plans

I am convinced that students benefit and appreciate the close attention to projects, papers, and reports. Audio feedback helps them understand my qualitative reaction to their work, which can complement or sometimes replace a Track-Changes form of review. My next goal is to try using VoiceThread for giving feedback. VoiceThread allows the audio annotation (or video for that matter) of papers and documents. So students would be able to view the screen and identify the particular part of the paper that I'm referring to. This may be overkill for simple summary feedback. But it may be

very useful for micro-level feedback. For more on this, see Neil Stephenson's blog *Thinking in Mind* (2009, February 20) in the reference list.

References

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Bio

Brent G. Wilson is professor of Information and Learning Technologies at UCD, with research interests around designing good instruction. How can we support teachers in creating powerful learning experiences, and students in using learning tools and resources? Brent consults with schools, districts, and firms about ways to improve their training/education systems, particularly in their use of e-learning flexible-learning resources. Brent has published four books and more than 100 papers on topics in instructional design and learning technologies.