eFeedback Gets Personal

Does this seem familiar? You feel that you do all you should to give good feedback. Yet some students comment that the marker s annotations were "unfair . On looking at the "offending comments in one of our large 1st year biology classes, we just couldn t see why. Then a hypothesis formed: perhaps comments were misconstrued, rather as emails sometimes are, by the curt nature of written feedback and the lack of other cues, which normally dispel offence. But how to solve it?

Our attention was drawn to work by Russell Stannard (Westminster) on using Camtasia Screen Capture software to give feedback in English as a Second Language. Screen capture is most commonly employed for help on using software, providing a movie and a voice-over to take someone through which menus to open and which buttons to click. However correcting grammar and spelling is easier to do in this way than, for example, to assess in one take an Honours Biology Dissertation, which would be impossibly stressful. Nevertheless, an overall summary of work is better suited to continuous speech, particularly once the evidence has been marshalled. Thus we wanted to have a blended approach in which comments were made in writing on the body of the essay, as normal, employing the video at the end to give the summary of the work as a whole. This is where the quality normally comes, addressing what was good (and crucially why), less good and why, and what the student should do to improve. With both oral and visual cues, the student might be less likely to misinterpret remarks when they could hear the marker s tone of voice, and could see exactly which part of the work was being referenced.

We integrated control of screen capture into a menu in Microsoft Word, shielding the marker for having to know anything other than "Start/Stop/Pause . It was tried in the next run of the large first year class. To obtain their video, students click a link to see their essay at the same resolution as the marker saw it as s/he takes them through the work, summarising, highlighting and explaining. The video version was very well received, remarkably so as we had no precedents on how to do this sort of feedback. Interestingly the number of words delivered by video was equivalent to typing an A4 page in two minutes (150 wpm). One might argue that a conversational tone packs out the total word count with "verbiage , but perhaps this is precisely the element that is missing in written feedback that leads students to misconstrue.

A reality check. Is this just technology for its own sake? Wouldn t it be better just to meet the students face to face? No! Apart from the logistics, the quality of feedback, made at the time is so much better, when the marker s mind is really in the zone, a place almost impossible to regain afterwards. In addition students have to engage with the feedback to find out its content. Remarkably they don t perceive this as a burden (in fact some said they even took notes from it!), in contrast to much research that says that in general many students don t read feedback. We have now extended such feedback to other forms of work. Think, for example, about how you would give feedback on a website with paper and pen?

What of the future? To scale these ideas, the hurdles are not the marking software itself but how to more easily manage the flow of "paper". One would like to replicate the ways journals/grant awarding bodies send work to reviewers (markers/second markers, in our case) and control its return flow towards editors (moderators/externals) and back to authors (students). Unfortunately such proprietary software is hideously expensive. But it would not take much skill to write a database with a web interface to do this, to the benefit of many areas of HE.

Finally, does all of this save time? Of course not! Technology rarely does   but it helps us do a better, more professional job. The questions are " are we prepared to let other things go in courses to make time for better feedback? and "are we training students best to appreciate and act on our considerable (and costly) input to their learning?

Further Reading

Kerr, W. and McLaughlin, P. (2008) *The Benefit of Screen Recorded Summaries in Feedback for Work Submitted Electronically.* CAA Conference. www.caaconference.co.uk/pastConferences/2008/proceedings/Kerr_W_McLaughlin_P_formatted_b1.pdf

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New Lecturers Folder   Updated

The New Lecturers Folder has been updated for 2009/2010. The Folder is designed for staff new to teaching (experienced lecturers may find it useful too) and is intended to complement the largely-generic information delivered in staff development courses. It is produced so you can supplement the information with documents you find useful, so with time you will have a personalised resource of information.

For more information and to order your copy visit www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/resourcepack.aspx

Travel Bursaries

We are pleased to announce we are now offering travel bursaries of up to £150. The funding will be available to help colleagues attend UK Centre for Bioscience Professional Development Events and Regional Forums. There will be up to two bursaries available per event. The funding is intended only for individuals who do not have access to other travel or development funds. Visit www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/funding/travel.aspx for more information.