



Case study 6: Enhancing the experience of feedback

University of Leicester

What this case study covers

- **Subject, mode and level:** MSc Occupational Psychology delivered via distance learning
- **Assessment topic:** Using audio recording to add value to feedback
- **Technologies:** Audacity® audio recording and editing software; Blackboard®; Dragon® Naturally Speaking® speech-recognition software; Microsoft® Word®; Wimba Voice™ tools for voice discussions, announcements and podcasts

Background

The University of Leicester, with over 7000 distance learners, has devoted significant resources to developing and supporting distance and work-based learning courses. The School of Psychology at Leicester, for example, is one of the very few in the UK to offer an MSc Occupational Psychology course that is delivered entirely via distance learning. Accredited by the British Psychological Society, the two-year course can be studied part time while in employment, enabling knowledge and skills gained from degree-level study to be applied directly to the workplace.

Around 30 students a year enrol on the course. The majority of students are in employment; some join the course as the first step on the route towards qualification as chartered occupational psychologists while others aim to improve their standing in the workplace by studying for a postgraduate qualification.

The MSc Occupational Psychology course is one of three Master's degree programmes at the University of Leicester participating in the Delivering University Curricula: Knowledge, Learning and INnovation Gains (DUCKLING) funded by the JISC Transforming Curriculum Delivery through Technology programme. The DUCKLING project has been led by the Beyond Distance Research Alliance (BDRA), an innovations centre at the University of Leicester which promotes research-informed applications of technology to learning and teaching practice.

Rationale

Attrition rates generally on distance learning courses tend to be higher than on campus-based courses so the MSc Occupational Psychology team at the University of Leicester recognise that all aspects of the course have to function at their best. Learners studying remotely are particularly vulnerable to a sense of isolation when problems arise:

'As there are limited opportunities for face-to-face dialogue with students to sort out any difficulties, it's crucial that everything is right first time.' Tutor, MSc Occupational Psychology, University of Leicester

Delivering feedback in ways that help students to self-correct – one of the original seven REAP¹ principles proposed by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) – acquires even greater significance in this context. Feedback should be the means by which learners – with the assistance of experts and peers, and through their own reflection – forge a deeper understanding of the knowledge and skills associated with a subject discipline. Increasingly, feedback is also seen as a dialogical rather than a one-way process; feedback that enhances learners' capacity to engage in a conversation with their tutors and each other (face-to-face or online) is more likely to be a successful intervention in the cycle of learning (Nicol, 2010). Yet traditional forms of feedback all too often fail to engage learners either

¹ www.reap.ac.uk

cognitively or emotionally: written comments on assignments are often too brief or difficult for the inexperienced learner to interpret, and are frequently overlooked when the next assignment is due.

Transforming assessment practice

To tackle issues relating to learners' engagement with feedback and with 'feed forward' (guidance from tutors on subsequent work), the MSc Occupational Psychology course team has explored the use of audio recording, an inexpensive, widely available technology which presents remarkably few barriers. Once recorded, audio files can be delivered to individual learners as personalised feedback or distributed via the VLE to groups of learners as podcasts² covering, for example, tips and hints for forthcoming assignments. Work-based learners, for whom flexibility of access is important, can access audio files in any location using an MP3 player, a personal or workplace computer.

With support from the BDRA, audio-recorded individual feedback and podcasts of generic feed forward have become rapidly and successfully embedded into the curriculum on the MSc Occupational Psychology course. Tutors have found the process convenient and efficient, even pleasurable: this has proved especially the case when providing feedback on drafts of Master's degree dissertations. Once a lengthy, time-consuming process, giving detailed feedback on dissertation drafts now takes place with less effort and in a shorter time. Commonly occurring issues can be addressed in the generic podcasts and used again in subsequent years:

'A striking feature of this approach has been the increased efficiency for us as course tutors. We like the fact that you develop something once and deliver it often. And it has proved to be less time consuming than writing reports on drafts of the dissertation, which is where we have used audio the most.' Tutor, MSc Occupational Psychology, University of Leicester

Initially working under the guidance of the BDRA, tutors have rapidly become proficient in using the medium. A planning template has helped those new to the medium to break up the content of a podcast into timed sections (podcasts should preferably be about two to five minutes long). Speech recognition software such as Dragon Naturally Speaking is being considered to produce automatic transcripts for students with hearing disabilities; such transcripts can benefit any student who wants to read as well as listen to podcasts.

There is a sense of a journey just begun. Tutors are beginning to experiment with creating audio-recordings of acted-out content covering, for example, a day in the life of an occupational psychologist or a disastrous performance appraisal. Also at the planning stage is the use of a Wimba Voice Board to introduce opportunities for voice dialogue between students and tutors. (A Wimba Voice Board is an audio discussion board where both tutors and students can post recordings which are linked together in discussion threads.)

While as a result of the DUCKLING project there has been a focus on audio recording, a range of complementary technologies have also been brought into play to improve the experience of learning on the MSc Occupational Psychology programme.

When the course was first offered in 2000, delivery and support for students were almost entirely paper based: web links and a discussion forum on Blackboard were the only forms of technology (other than email) used in course delivery and some students completed their degree without recourse to the VLE at any point. Over the past three years, delivery and management of the course has moved entirely online, providing more rapid and equitable access to learning materials and, with online delivery of marked assignments, making feedback more convenient, efficient and timely.

² As defined by the BDRA, a podcast is a digital media file playing both sound and vision that is made available by RSS feed, email or from a website from which it can be downloaded for playback on a computer or portable MP3 player

With each marked assignment, students receive feedback as individualised notes created by adding 'Comments' in Microsoft Word on a document containing the marking criteria for the assignment. With feedback transmitted via email, the process is both cost effective (postage and photocopying costs are removed at a stroke), efficient (an audit trail is created for future reference) and effective (students are less likely to lose their tutors' feedback if it is stored on their computer).

For their part, tutors have found electronic marking more convenient: it is much easier, for example, to modify comments if an issue is resolved later on in the assignment. From the students' point of view, the return of marked assignments by email is prompt and efficient.

Lessons learnt

The MSc Occupational Psychology team has not used audio recordings indiscriminately. Tutors recognise that students may tire of podcasts if the medium is over used, and understand that not all students have found feedback by audio straightforward; a few students have experienced problems with low bandwidth (audio files are weighty) and a small number have lacked the necessary IT skills.

It is often the case that audio-recorded guidance is best used for complementary non-assessed activities or as a free-standing support to feedback or guidance available in other formats. (An example of where audio recordings have worked well is the provision of informal hints and tips on preparing for the dissertation used as an extension to, rather than a replacement of, text-based guidelines.)

When preparing to record, tutors have found that an outline structure is more helpful than a script; self-correction, pausing and repetition are naturally occurring features of voice messages and add a personal quality to feedback. As a result, a polished performance is not necessary – what matters to students are the clarity, immediacy and relevance of the guidance they receive.

Advantages gained

Audio recording enables tutors to include more detailed explanations of the grades they have given and to do so in more meaningful ways – for example, by expanding on salient points, varying the tone, pitch and pace of the voice and adding humour to build rapport and soften the impact of critical comments, thus opening the door to an ongoing dialogue between student and tutor. The MSc Occupational Psychology tutors (albeit a small team) have also found it quicker to speak than write feedback, especially the detailed feedback required by postgraduate students.

Time saved on issuing general feed-forward advice has also had considerable benefits: the 'do it once and deliver it often' advantage of podcasts has established audio recording as a key component of course delivery, providing much of the value of face-to-face tutorials without the demands on time and resources.

While it is difficult to establish that oral feedback has a greater impact on students' cognitive development than written feedback, students on the MSc Occupational Psychology course appear to be more attentive to spoken feedback; most respond positively to the intimacy of the spoken word and perceive tutors' advice as being clearer and more detailed. Audio-recorded feedback is also helping to reduce the isolation of learning remotely; early evidence from course data suggests that there may have been a positive impact on retention rates, although this has yet to be empirically evaluated:

'Podcasts made me feel closer to my tutors and I think they help you to build a relationship with them.'
Student, MSc Occupational Psychology, University of Leicester

Finally, routine submission of assignments via the VLE, coupled with an online marking process, has helped to reduce turnaround times on assignments and has enabled audit trails to be kept more accurately and efficiently.

Key points for effective practice

- Feedback that enables learners to self-correct brings about positive change
- Feed forward by podcast can make challenging tasks more achievable

Learner perspective

'The most interesting thing was hearing someone's voice. I didn't feel quite so distant.' Student, MSc Occupational Psychology programme, University of Leicester

Tutor perspective

'We think that podcasting is a low-cost, high-value technology that can help bridge many gaps in distance education, particularly with regard to improving teacher contact and student support.' Ming Nie, Researcher, DUCKLING project, University of Leicester

'It's amazing how much information you can pack in a three- to five-minute podcast. The material that might take four to five pages to write can be covered in a four- to five-minute podcast. Again, in terms of time-saving, the lecturer may not have five to six hours to write something, but he or she has half an hour to do a podcast.' Tutor, MSc Occupational Psychology programme, University of Leicester

References

- Nicol, D. (2010 in press) 'From monologue to dialogue: improving written feedback in mass higher education', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. (Available by email: d.j.nicol@strath.ac.uk)
- Nicol, D. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) '[Formative assessment and self-regulated learning](#)', *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(2), pp. 199–218

Further reading

- JISC Digital Media, [Creating an audio podcast](#)
- Lee, J & Tynan, B. (2008) 'Podcasts and distance learning' in Salmon, G. & Edirisingha, P. (Eds), *Podcasting for Learning in Universities*, Chapter 9, pp. 92–102, Open University Press

Key words

Podcasting, audio feedback, feed forward, distance learning

Links

- University of Leicester [Beyond Distance Research Alliance](#) (BDRA)
- JISC [Delivering University Curricula: Knowledge, Learning and INnovation Gains](#) (DUCKLING) project
- University of Leicester [Distance Learning Occupational Psychology courses](#)

Reflect and discuss

What are the constituents of high-quality feedback? How might technology enhance students' experience of feedback in your context? Would different students benefit from different approaches?

See also: University of Reading, [ASSET: Moving forward through feedback](#) and a podcast by [Professor Phil Race](#), Leeds Metropolitan University