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Short communication

Reading, listening, feeling – audio feedback as a component of an inclusive learning culture at universities

Abstract

Feedback on student performance is an important part of university assessment procedures. However, effective feedback is hampered by various obstacles. The growing heterogeneity of the student body increases these barriers, particularly with regard to the reception of feedback. One strategy to overcome these obstacles can be to communicate feedback in the form of audio files. The study presented here tested the possibilities of this procedure by giving students feedback, both as an audio file and in writing. The survey shows that some of the students find audio feedback particularly easy to assimilate, while others prefer written feedback. The aim of the study was to go beyond the level of simplistic evaluation (better – worse), and to be able to make more nuanced statements about the strengths and also the weaknesses of audio feedback. All the students stated that they felt the audio feedback was more personal and appreciative than the written feedback. It becomes clear that the different needs of students can best be catered for with a variety of forms of communication. Audio feedback cannot be considered a comprehensive solution to the different problems associated with feedback, but it can contribute to the development of an inclusive university.

Key words

Introduction

The growing heterogeneity of student populations at universities creates new challenges for the organization of academic teaching and learning (Knauf:2013vg; Leichsenring 2011). Students come to university with very different prior experiences, goals, learning speeds and learning preferences. Teaching can respond to this diversity by using a wider range of tasks, seminar settings and forms of communication. In recent years different approaches have emerged in the higher education sector, seeking to establish how universities can organize teaching and study programmes in a way that will do justice to this diversity (z.B. Linde and Auferkorte-Michaelis 2014; Barnett 2011; Hockings et al. 2009; Bosse and Tomberger 2012). To achieve inclusive universities, student diversity needs to be taken into consideration not only in teaching situations, but in processes of assessment and feedback (Basit and Tomlinson 2014; Smith 2014). Ideally, feedback should be a major driving force of students' intellectual development (Hepplestone et al. 2011), and can be a valuable resource for improving performance (Price et al. 2010). This makes it all the more important that the feedback should be comprehensible in content and emotionally acceptable for *all* students.

Feedback gives students direct, individual information about their level of performance, and should ideally offer pointers for improving their learning (Hepplestone et al. 2011). Helpful feedback should be substantial enough to convey useful information; it should be given promptly, expressed in a comprehensible manner, and based on transparent assessment criteria which have been explained to the students in advance (Nicol 2009). Often, however, feedback fails to achieve these objectives. Numerous obstacles to successful and effective feedback have been pointed out in the literature: in particular, the increasing demands on teachers' time are mentioned as a reason why feedback is often very short or offers little useful information (Chalmers et al. 2014; Hepplestone et al. 2011). Giving feedback is seen by many teachers as a time-consuming and burdensome task. At the same time, students also express doubts about its usefulness, sometimes seeing feedback merely as a justification of the mark given, and not as an impetus for personal development (Price et al. 2010). Students also express the criticism that they often have trouble interpreting the message because it is expressed in vague and general terms; in this context Price et al. (ibid.) talk about a lack of 'assessment literacy' – the ability to decipher feedback. For many of the new groups of students aspiring to attend university (e.g. first-generation students, non-traditional students), it is precisely this communication with teachers which constitutes a particular obstacle (Heitzmann and Klein 2012). This problem is becoming more topical because universities

have the duty and the aspiration to become 'inclusive universities' (Knauf 2013), removing barriers and enabling as many students as possible to participate successfully (Wolter 2012).

But what can be done to make feedback on performance easier to understand and thus more effective for all students? One strategy for combatting these deficiencies is verbal feedback in the form of audio files. Existing studies on this topic show that students generally have a very positive attitude to audio feedback, and that teachers can also benefit from it by saving time (Cann 2014; Chalmers et al. 2014; Lunt and Curran 2010).

The studies published on this topic so far have been carried out in Great Britain, however, where there is a much stronger culture of feedback. In Germany students rarely receive any written feedback (or this has been the case up till now): usually written assessments are simply given a mark, and in oral examinations verbal feedback is given (Walzik 2012). The key questions in the present text are: how German students evaluate audio feedback, and whether audio feedback can be part of the creation of an inclusive learning culture. The text is based on a research training project focusing on alternative channels of perception, with the aim of diversifying teaching and learning methods to achieve a more inclusive approach to university teaching. The following paper describes the experiences and findings of this study at a German university.

Methods

The findings presented here were produced in the context of online seminars in a blended learning programme. Two seminar groups were included in the study: one with second-semester students (n=27) and another with sixth-semester students (n= 25). Both seminars were purely online courses in the Department of Social Work. In both courses the students submitted a written assignment which was marked and had feedback added to it. Usually, the students in this programme receive written feedback. In these two seminars, however, the students initially received only audio feedback, in the form of an MP3 file recorded by the teacher. The mark was also given in the audio file. The audio file and the mark were communicated via the virtual learning environment. This is how the written feedback is given in other seminars, so the familiar procedure was retained. The teacher documented both time spent giving audio feedback and time spent on written feedback. Thus a comparison of time investment was possible. All the feedback was given by one person only to ensure a homogeneous approach and style.

The students were then requested to take part in a written online survey, in which they were asked to describe their experiences with the audio feedback. The survey was integrated into the virtual learning environment familiar to the students. The questionnaire comprised seven questions with closed sets of answers (with opportunities to give comments in each case), and one open question. Out of the total of 52 students in the two seminars, 48 took part in this first survey.

14 days later, all the students also received written feedback in the usual way. Again they were asked to fill in an online questionnaire. This was also integrated into the virtual learning environment, and consisted of four closed questions (with an opportunity to give comments) and one open question. 40 out of 52 students took part in this second survey.

The quantitative data were analysed with descriptive statistical methods, and the qualitative answers were categorized and summarized using open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

Findings and discussion

Accessibility and comprehensibility were achieved

Overall, the students surveyed have a positive attitude to the audio feedback and welcome the integration of non-written channels of communication (45 out of 48 students). Formal obstacles to the accessibility of the audio feedback did not play a significant role: only a few of the respondents had minor technical problems. For nearly all the respondents (with one exception), the language used in the audio feedback was easy to understand, and all stated that they could easily take in and understand the core information.

The informative value of the audio feedback was also rated highly by the respondents. As shown in Figure 1, the students were able to both understand the content ('strengths and weaknesses of my performance'); this meets a basic demand for inclusivity. In addition, the students discern an appreciative attitude towards their performance.

[Fig. 1 near here]

Greatest strength: the relational level

A particularly important argument for audio feedback which is cited by the students surveyed is the fact that it strengthens the personal relationship between students and teachers: 'I found the quality of the audio feedback very convincing. I liked the lecturer's voice and the atmosphere of the setting.' Linked with this is the frequently expressed wish to be able to respond to the audio feedback: 'With this form of feedback [I] felt even more of a need to explain myself and my work (approach, reason for my choice of form, topic etc.), i.e. to respond to the feedback. In short, there were moments when I would have liked to reply to you.' Perhaps audio feedback offers more starting points for a dialogue than written feedback. Cann (2014) observes that this kind of dialogue is needed to make feedback more productive. It is also necessary, however, to create spaces in which teachers and students can discuss learning progress in this way.

One strength of audio feedback, in the eyes of nearly all the students surveyed, is that it is felt to be much more personal than written feedback. Thus, for example one student in the survey writes: 'The audio feedback is much more appreciative, in that the positive aspects of the assignment are mentioned at the beginning. As I see it, more appreciation is conveyed by hearing the voice than through the text.' Another student writes: 'Since this kind of audio feedback requires more work, I felt that my performance was being appreciated more, in the sense that someone had really taken the time to appraise my work.' This relational level is expressed repeatedly in many variations. Many students feel that reinforcing the relational level is especially necessary in online seminars, because the lack of personal contact increases the distance between teachers and students (Cann 2014). This relational level is especially important, and not just in virtual contexts of teaching and learning. Higgins et al. (2001) argue that the feedback process is very much determined by emotional factors: 'The student makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some 'return' on that investment' (ibid., 272). This combination of factors – the students' desire to have their performance acknowledged and their progress noticed, but also anxieties and power relations between teachers and students – makes it clear that this kind of feedback is about far more than just the communication of information. Evidently students have some important, little-acknowledged needs which are better catered to by the auditory form of feedback than by the written form.

Individual perceptual preferences determine how beneficial feedback is

A further positive effect described by some students is that they can remember the audio feedback much better: 'I noticed something: with the previous written feedback I'd read it and just accepted it. When talking to others I couldn't really repeat what my strengths and weaknesses had been. With the audio feedback, though, I was able to retain it really well.' In contrast, other students see a significant disadvantage at precisely this point, since they can absorb the information from the written feedback more easily than from the verbal feedback. The explanation given is that it is easier to read a passage several times: 'To me, the written feedback seems more compact and concise. Can be reread several times'; 'It seems to me that the written feedback is more precise and more detailed.' The connection between channel of communication and retention of content cannot be definitively analysed on the basis of this study. Further research could examine this relationship.

Many students report that verbal and written feedback complement each other well: 'Things that are written down are easier for me to understand, but the audio feedback supported this well'; 'Without the audio feedback I would have had to read the written feedback several times in order to understand the content as clearly'; 'A good idea. But it needs to be in addition to written feedback. Audio feedback on its own wouldn't be enough for me personally.'

The students' views here cover a broad spectrum. Some students found the audio feedback very convincing, and perceived it as easier to understand, as the following comment demonstrates: 'I think it would be great if this were continued. The feedback is so much easier to understand than in the written form.' Others, on the other hand, are critical, and mention various disadvantages, most prominently their own perceived lack of ability to process information aurally: 'I definitely prefer the written version, as I can generally absorb information better when I read it.' Nonetheless, a clear majority of respondents see their own capacity to assimilate audio feedback as just as good as or better than their capacity to assimilate written feedback (Fig. 2).

[Fig. 2 near here]

Overall, it is clear that the students prefer different forms of feedback. Thus Figure 3 shows that half of the students surveyed would prefer audio feedback if they had to choose between the two forms. However, 14 out of 40 prefer written feedback.

[Fig. 3 near here]

This finding is supported by the respondents' general approval for a greater variety of communication formats and channels of communication, with 37 of the 48 students surveyed agreeing with the statement: 'I think it's good when other forms of communication than writing are used.' It is possible that the students' positive attitude towards audio feedback is not so much related to this specific form of feedback, but more to the diversification which it represents. Here greater variety is seen as enriching. Furthermore, this diversification is a fundamental part of a more inclusive learning environment in higher education.

Moderate time saving for teachers

Audio feedback does save time. Written feedback requires at least 30 minutes per student, while the audio feedback in the experiment described here took 12 to 15 minutes per student. The audio file itself is only 2 to 3 minutes long, but before the text can be recorded it is necessary to make notes, so that the spoken text will be systematic and comprehensive. The time spent may decrease as the procedure becomes more routine, and it may differ depending on the disciplinary culture (since dictation is more common in some disciplines than others).

It should also be borne in mind that it is not only students who have different perceptual preferences: teachers also have different communicative preferences and abilities, and some teachers will find it easier to speak, others to write. The difference estimated by Lunt and Curran (2010), of 5 minutes for an item of audio feedback compared to 30 minutes for an item of written feedback, cannot be confirmed by this study.

Conclusion

The findings of the study show that the students have a fundamentally open and positive attitude towards audio feedback. This German study thus concurs with research findings from the United Kingdom (Hepplestone et al. 2011). However, the support for this form of feedback is not as clear and unreserved as that which has been reported in other studies. Instead what emerges is that the students fall into two groups: while one group prefers audio feedback, the other sees written feedback as more useful. There are various reasons for this difference. Firstly, the different preferences reflect the different channels of communication preferred by the students. While some of the students have a high degree of affinity for

written information, others prefer auditory channels of information. Secondly, nearly all the students (including those who find written material easier to assimilate) perceive the audio feedback as more personal, while the written form is seen as more businesslike and matter-of-fact. In light of this finding, the differing preferences can also be interpreted to mean that the personal level is especially important to some of the students.

One important insight gained from this study is the high level of significance ascribed to personal and appreciative feedback from teachers. While looking for a way to give feedback that makes economic use of time and is sensitive to diversity, the study has shown what many students perceive as a key deficit in current feedback processes. Perhaps the issue is not actually one of audio versus written feedback, but of students wanting to feel some individual and personal connection with their teachers.

The hope that audio feedback may ease demands on teachers' time will not be fulfilled unless this is the only type of feedback given. If both verbal and written feedback are given, a wish expressed by many students in the survey, this effect cannot take place (in fact the opposite would occur). However, it might be possible to give students the choice of written *or* audio feedback, in order to better respond to individual needs.

Audio feedback is not a magical solution to students' often low levels of 'assessment literacy'. Instead, the study indicates that it is important to use a wider range of formats – be it in feedback or in other elements of university teaching. Different channels of communication correspond to the variety of perceptual and learning preferences, and can thus help to break down barriers for all students. As one of a number of possible forms of feedback, audio feedback can increase the variety of channels of communication used, and help pave the way towards an inclusive, diversity-sensitive university.

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