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Two modes of feedback are better than one: Educator experiences of providing audio feedback on student work

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Abstract

The integration of digital teaching and learning practices can contribute to the organisational change required by the higher education digital transformation agenda. One such digital practice, audio feedback, is claimed to be more efficient and engaging than written comments. A substantial body of empirical research in this area evaluates student satisfaction, impact on student performance, and time efficiencies for tutors. What remains to be usefully investigated is tutors' experiences with providing audio feedback and its impact on tutors' pedagogical processes and practices. To address the identified gap in literature, thus, an online tutor, the author of this article, conducted a collaborative practitioner research project with three other online tutors to use an audio feedback function for their module assignment marking. Qualitative data were collected through tutors' reflective journals and a group discussion to gain insights into their experiences. Findings suggest that the production of audio feedback is the culmination of a complex process involving both written and spoken stages and has the potential to address pedagogic concerns and communicate authentically with students, but requires additional time and cognitive processing. Implications for the potential contributions of the practice to the broader digital transformation vision are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The idea of digital transformation (DT) is currently at the forefront of many policy, education and business agendas, it suggests a desire for change and for this change to be achieved with the use of computer technology (Benavides, Arias, Serna, Bedoya, & Burgos, 2020). Digital transformation is presented as an aspirational and ambitious business strategy, it connotes forward thinking, bold and exciting plans, it promises modernity, efficiency, and innovation. See for example, this HEI's vision for DT:

> We will use digital technologies, data and digital approaches effectively, creatively, innovatively and in a research-informed way to enhance our students' learning and experience, to provide and enrich learning opportunities for individuals globally, to enhance our research activity and impact to tackle global challenges, and to improve the University's processes, infrastructure and physical estate. (Institutional documentation from 2021)

This organisational vision, aligns to Jisc's (2020) distinction between digitisation, digitalisation, both concerned with information formats and systems processes, and digital transformation, a deeper cultural and values-based shift. However, it is important to note that within the academic literature currently, the terms digitisation and digitalisation are often used interchangeably with digital transformation, suggesting a move towards a unified understanding of these concepts would be of benefit. Generally, despite the lack of consistency in terminology, the academic literature reflects this cultural shift towards 'Education 4.0' (Oliveira & de Souza, 2022), with studies highlighting the role of digital in achieving organisational efficiencies to remain competitive (Abad-Segura, González-Zamar, Infante-Moro, & García, 2020; Benavides et al., 2020; Jackson, 2019; Mohamed Hashim, Tlemsani, & Matthews, 2022) as well as the role of higher education in preparing future professionals to function effectively in a digital society (Akour & Alenezi, 2022; Bond, Marín, Dolch, Bedenlier, & Zawacki-Richter, 2018). When implemented at the micro level, DT is operationalised through a range of technologically enhanced teaching and learning practices and the literature is extensive in this area, although is often criticised for taking an instrumental approach to the superficial implementation and evaluation of new tools and technologies in the higher education classroom (Facer & Selwyn, 2021). One practice with the potential to move beyond the instrumental to 'use digital technologies, data and digital approaches effectively, creatively, innovatively and in a research-informed way to enhance our students' learning and experience' (Institution, 2021) is the provision of audio feedback on student assignments (Alharbi & Alghammas, 2021). However, the practice remains marginal (Renzella & Cain, 2020). The study reported here investigates the educator perspective of providing audio feedback and originated from a curiosity around the reasons for the lack of widespread transformation of feedback practice given the generally positive reception by students outlined in section 2.1.

The setting for this study is a Distance Learning PGCE[1] (DLPGCE) programme in a post-1992 university. The DLPGCE is a year-long wholly online course, which comprises three modules at Level 7 or Masters level. Students are based in the UK and overseas and are either participating in a school-based Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) training programme or are in-service teachers employed in schools. The programme team views the three consecutive modules as developmental and to this end, for each module assignment we provide detailed written constructive feedback with specific areas for improvement identified. In this way, the module assignments play a dual summative-formative role, and the feedback is intended to provide clear guidance for the student to improve the next module assignment. However, the programme team consistently finds that this well-meaning pedagogical intention rarely has the desired effect; subsequent assignments fail to show evidence of the student having engaged with the suggested improvements, or the engagement is superficial and cursory.

The literature relating to feedback in Higher Education suggests this is not a unique phenomenon. It is often reported that students do not fully engage with written feedback on assignments (Cann, 2014; Evans, 2013; Jonsson, 2012; Pitt & Norton, 2017; Sadler, 2010), with the result that student writing fails to demonstrate improvement from one assignment to the next. In recent years, the ability to provide feedback in the form of audio files has become easier in terms of the technology available and there are a number of good practice guides (see for example, Rotheram, 2009) and empirical studies highlighting the affordances of audio feedback for increasing personalisation and tutor immediacy (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007). The institution in which this research study was conducted, requires that all Level 7 assessment submission and marking takes place within Turnitin[2], which has a built-in voice comments facility

1 Postgraduate Certificate in Education—an initial teacher training academic qualification

2 A commercial software package popular in UK Higher Education facilitating marking, feedback and plagiarism detection of students' work.

making it an ideal opportunity to trial the use of audio feedback. Added to this, practices which increase social and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999) in order to reduce transactional distance (Moore, 1993) in a distance education context are particularly relevant.

The research evidence on audio feedback indicates this mode is preferable for students, who are more likely to listen to a voice comment than read written comments (Lunt & Curran, 2010). However, to date, the majority of research into audio feedback is concerned with the student experience and perspectives (Knauf, 2016) and its impact on student performance (Morris & Chikwa, 2016), less research has examined in any depth, lecturers' experiences of using this facility. That which does, is generally limited to the time-saving potential of audio feedback (Ice et al., 2007; Lunt & Curran, 2010), which is understandable considering the significant increases in student numbers resulting in more of university teachers' time being spent marking students' written work. However, given that feedback is a key element of the teaching and learning experience (Jonsson, 2012) and effective feedback, if engaged with, can have significant impact on students' learning and progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), rather than focussing on the potential to reduce time spent marking, research might usefully investigate how audio feedback transforms tutors' pedagogy in terms of assessment and feedback practices.

It is the intention of this practitioner research project to contribute to our understanding of audio feedback from a tutors' perspective with a particular focus on how the use of voice comments transforms the process and pedagogy of feedback.

The remainder of this paper conceptualises the topic by reviewing relevant literature, then describes the design, implementation and results of the intervention and concludes with some key findings, recommendations for further research and implications for practice.

2. Literature

This section reviews some of the key studies on audio feedback in terms of their findings relating to the student and practitioner experience and the benefits of audio feedback in a distance learning context.

2.1 The student experience of audio feedback

That audio feedback is a more personal experience is consistently highlighted with students reporting that audio comments are more intimate and individualised than written feedback, which is often seen as formal and impersonal (Carruthers et al., 2015; Chew, 2014; Gonzalez & Moore, 2018; Hennessy & Forrester, 2014; Knauf, 2016; McCarthy, 2015). This is attributed to the fact that tone of voice lends a more engaging 'human' quality to the feedback (Chew, 2014). Hearing the tutor's voice can create feelings of proximity (Gonzalez & Moore, 2018; Lunt & Curran, 2010; Munro & Hollingworth, 2014) and convey a more caring attitude on the part of the tutor (Ice et al., 2007). Students also report that audio feedback indicates more appreciation of their work by tutors (Chew, 2014; Gonzalez & Moore, 2018; Hennessy & Forrester, 2014; Knauf, 2016). These findings are echoed by tutors, who, although featuring less prominently in the literature, report that audio feedback helps to build rapport with students (Dagen, Mader, Rinehart, & Ice, 2008); more care is given with regard to choice of language and vocabulary used (King, McGugan, & Bunyan, 2008) and facilitates more individualised feedback (Munro & Hollingworth, 2014).

However, the picture is not wholly positive, and a range of individual preferences are apparent in the literature. With regard to the emotional elements of feedback, Gould and Day (2013) reported that the repeated listening can lead to stress and damaged confidence, a finding echoed by Munro and Hollingworth (2014). Other negative reactions related to the fact that written feedback is customary and conforms to student expectations (Johnson & Cooke, 2016; McCarthy, 2015), while some students expressed a preference for written feedback based on their perceived learning styles (Knauf, 2016; Morris & Chikwa, 2016). Collectively, these studies indicate a need to consider individual needs and, as advocated by Heimbürger and Isomöttönen (2017), Hennessy and Forrester (2014) and Johnson and Cooke (2016), a common-sense approach is to provide feedback in both written and audio formats.

2.2 The practitioner experience of audio feedback

Efficiency features much more prominently in the literature dealing with tutor perspectives and the evidence here is quite conflicting with reports of audio feedback saving time and being more time-consuming appearing in equal measure.

Findings regarding the time-saving potential are mixed with some studies claiming that audio feedback saves

significant amounts of time for tutors compared with written feedback (Ice et al., 2007; Lunt & Curran, 2010; McCarthy, 2015), while conflicting results are reported by Dagen et al. (2008) and King et al. (2008). There are claims that tutor familiarity and competence influence this, particularly in the context of online learning which suggests that tutors familiar with online learning such as those in Ice et al. (2007) may well be more adept at using technologies. Unsurprisingly, studies in which feedback was provided in both written as well as audio formats (Merry & Orsmond, 2008; Rodway-Dyer, Knight, & Dunne, 2011; Voelkel & Mello, 2014) agreed that this was a more time-consuming process than providing a single format. However, these studies indicate that the improved quality of feedback compensated to some degree for the increase in time spent. Cann (2014) and Knauf (2016) both conclude that certain tools have the potential to save time when marking, but only when audio feedback is provided instead of written feedback, not when both are provided thereby failing to address the diversity of formats called for by Johnson and Cooke (2016).

So far, other than potential time-saving benefits, none of the empirical research has explored in any depth the impact of audio feedback on tutors' pedagogy. The facility for expressing nuance verbally is noted as a means to convey richer and more meaningful feedback (Hennessy & Forrester, 2014; Middleton & Nortcliffe, 2010; Munro & Hollingworth, 2014) Some studies hint at changes to how tutors think and act when providing audio comments, for example, Cavanaugh and Song (2015) report that tutors tend to offer extra examples, although this can only be described as more or extended rather than changed practice. Dagen et al. (2008) and Rodway-Dyer et al. (2011) found that greater attention was given to the subject matter of the student's work. However, these examples merely indicate quantitative increases in feedback and shifts in focus.

While the evidence for audio feedback enhancing the student experience is convincing, little is known about its impact on the educators' experience. Here I present a research project which addresses this gap by examining the experiences of educators when providing audio feedback.

2.3 Audio feedback in a distance learning context

It has been found that providing audio feedback has prompted subsequent dialogue between student and tutor (Brearley & Cullen, 2012; Cann, 2014; Hennessy & Forrester, 2014; Macgregor, Spiers, & Taylor, 2011). Rendering feedback more dialogic is more difficult to achieve in distance learning (DL) programmes (Cavanaugh & Song, 2015; Heimbürger & Isomöttönen, 2017) due to logistics across time zones, access to video-conferencing facilities for some students and the fact that DL students are often in work. For these learners, the personal characteristics and feelings of closeness can increase teaching presence (Hennessy & Forrester, 2014; Johnson & Cooke, 2016) and reduce transactional distance thereby compensating for the lack of dialogue between students and instructors in (DL) contexts (Ice et al., 2007; Knauf, 2016). The provision of audio feedback, while not
directly a two-way interaction, can promote interaction by making the instructor appear more present (Dagen et al., 2008).

However, it is worth noting that online instructors may well be more aware of transactional distance and may have developed techniques to improve teaching presence; as Dagen et al. (2008) point out, these positive findings are not necessarily transferable to face to face teaching situations where tutors may be less skilled in the use of audio technologies. Nonetheless, in the DL context of this study, this aspect is particularly relevant. Ice et al. (2007) investigated the affordances of audio feedback for contributing to a sense of community for online learners and their findings indicate that this tool can indeed enhance factors such as instructor immediacy and feelings of involvement and belonging on the part of the student. Ice et al.'s findings are particularly conclusive, with no negative feedback from students at all regarding their experiences of receiving audio feedback. This was also the case for Heimburger and Isomöttönen's (2017) study, also in a DL context.

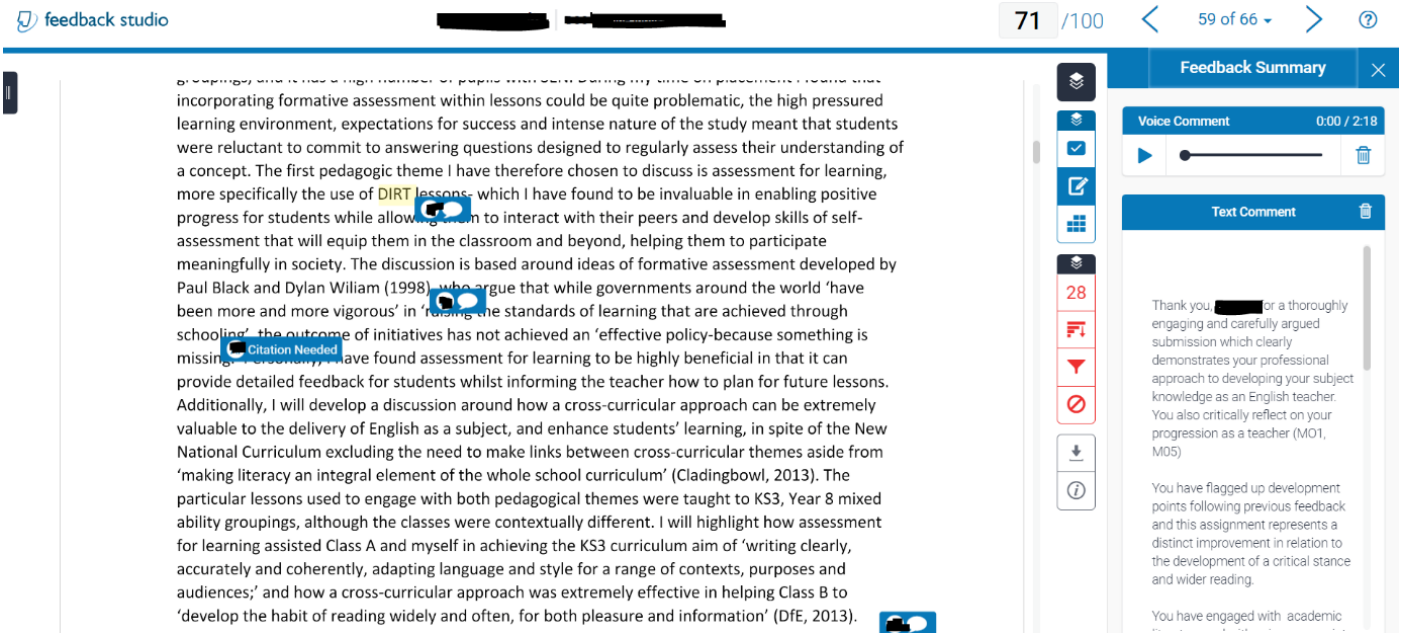
Taken together, these studies highlight that a deeper investigation of practitioner experiences and the pedagogical impacts of audio feedback would contribute to a fuller picture of the value of this strategy.

To this end, the following questions underpin this study:

- RQ 1. How might the use of voice comments transform the experiences of an online teacher education course team when providing feedback on summative assignments in a post-1992 UK university?
- RQ 1.1 What processes do tutors engage in when using voice comments to feedback on student work?
- RQ 1.2 How does the use of voice comments impact the pedagogy underpinning feedback practice?

In order to answer these questions, a practitioner research study was designed and will be discussed next.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Turnitin Feedback Studio



3. Methodology

This study was in the tradition of practitioner research, being centred around a particular setting and team forming a homogenous group (Creswell, 2012). The homogenous group comprised the four members (including myself as practitioner-researcher) of the DLPGCE programme team involved in assessing and feeding back on the chosen module assignment. We collaborated to investigate our assessment and feedback praxis (Carr & Kemmis, 2004, p. 191) through critical self-reflection and evaluation of the voice comment facility embedded within Turnitin to offer audio feedback to students on a summative module assignment. The ultimate goal was to improve the student experience through the provision of more engaging feedback. However, the specific aim of this project was to identify how providing audio feedback might transform the praxis of the course team.

3.1 The intervention

Marking proceeded largely in the usual way, in which the tutor-participants were randomly allocated module assignments submitted to Turnitin, which they then assessed, graded, offered feedback and moderated within Turnitin Feedback Studio. The intervention was to provide audio feedback using the built-in voice comments facility of Turnitin Feedback Studio (see Figure 1).

No further guidance or instructions were offered regarding the length, style or content of the voice comments, nor was it specified whether voice comments were to be used instead of or in addition to written comments.

3.2 Data collection methods

Qualitative data was generated through two methods: individual reflective journals to be completed before, during and after the intervention, followed by a group reflective discussion.

3.2.1 Reflective journals

Tutors' reflections on their experience of and attitudes towards providing audio feedback were recorded before, during and after the intervention in a participant reflective journal. The journals were simple and designed primarily to capture differences between our preconceptions and reasons for non-use of audio feedback prior to the intervention and our actual experiences of using the technology and post-intervention evaluation. It was important to capture these differences in order to begin to analyse the extent to which the new technology transformed our praxis. To this end, the journals, in some ways resembled questionnaires in that they contained prompts and questions, but they were designed to be completed over a period of time with participants coming back to add further observations and reflections as they progressed through the intervention.

3.2.2 Group discussion

Following the intervention, I gathered the four participants together to participate in a group reflective discussion in order to explore in greater depth some of the themes, issues, observations that arose from initial analysis of the journals. While this could have been achieved through individual interviews, I felt that the collaborative nature of the action research aiming to theorise praxis through self-critical enquiry (Carr & Kemmis, 2004), merited this collective data production. The discussion followed a semi-structured design with prompts intended to elicit reflections on beliefs about, approaches to, and experiences of the use of voice comments. The discussion was recorded but not transcribed verbatim, I listened repeatedly to the recording and transcribed relevant extracts. The decision not to fully transcribe the discussion was based on the fact that this project is concerned with general experiences rather than subtle nuances of discourse (Bazeley, 2013).

3.3 Data analysis

When all marking and audio feedback was complete, I collated participants' reflective journals, one participant chose to send me a summary of their reflections rather than completing the journal. Both sets of data were combined for analysis and are reported on in section 4.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted from the institution where the study was carried out. Additionally, the study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines for educational research in that I gained voluntary informed consent from my colleagues, the participants in this study, kept data anonymous and secure and the findings of interest will be disseminated for the benefit of the educational community (British Educational Research Association, 2011).

4. Findings

The findings were categorised into three overarching themes dealing with the reciprocity of written and audio feedback, the ability of audio feedback to resolve tensions between tutors' praxis and regulatory processes and the opportunity for more authentic engagement permitted by audio feedback. These are now presented along with illustrative extracts from the group interview and reflective journal data.

4.1 Written feedback is a necessary precursor to spoken feedback

All four participants used the voice comments in addition to rather than instead of the usual written comments. None were able to record the audio without first having read, annotated and written overall feedback comments, which they then used as a basis or 'script' from which to extract key points for the voice comments:

> T1: It only worked when I'd done the written first because I tried, I tried to just do it straight off and I just couldn't, I got really frustrated.
>
> T4: I had to have some form of script.

In this way, the written feedback functioned as a preliminary step to the audio; the process of writing feedback enabled the tutors to fully engage with the students' work, to identify strengths and areas for improvement and to formulate useful responses, which could then be repurposed into verbal comments. This is an indication of the complexity and high-level cognitive processes involved in assessing and feeding back on student work, such complexity requires extended thinking time to transform reactions, judgements and guidance into an appropriately structured and formulated linguistic output. Only then may this output be reformulated into spoken language.

Furthermore, tutors found it necessary to record the voice comments immediately after the written:

> T4: One of the problems I had, I put it in my reflections is I didn't get round to doing audio feedback for two or three of them but I couldn't go back and do it because I'd forgotten it. So it meant I would have had to read it through again, look at my notes again and I thought no I'm not doing that I probably should have done it but I thought, no, that is my real gut feeling that I'm not going back and doing it. It all has to be done in a what they call hot done. It all has to be done at the time or not at all.
>
> T1: I was the same, the first one I tried going away and, I didn't try, it happened that I went to do it later and it was really hard to do that. It had to be done there and then.

This suggests the existence of a temporary state of mind in which the tutor's impressions and reactions together with the written feedback are more easily accessible and that once this state has dissipated, retrieval requires additional

effort, the value of which is questionable. Again, this points to the high level of cognitive processing required by the feedback process.

Similarly, the stage of rendering or reformulating written language into spoken language was not uncomplicated as it served a different purpose for example to expand on the written:

> T4: what I quite like doing was that I was able to say something like I was able to go to my annotations and say something about, you know we would say that try and be personalised and say for example ... I'd say interesting. I was commenting on my annotations as well. You know if I'd given them something to read for next time or a little bit more thinking to do.

or to summarise the written:

> T2: I didn't match the feedback written entirely. I pulled out some key points like a good you know, one part that was good on one part that was Not as good. And then just went through a kind of summary of the written feedback, you know.

or to present the written comments in an alternative way:

> T2: I used it really just so that they could hear my voice.

However, one participant adopted a different approach and opted to produce audio feedback by reading out what they had written:

> T3: I found that the feedback was quite mechanistic in a way and impersonal. And I think in writing, you can do that because you're at a distance from who you're feeding back to. And I found that then doing the voiceover, em, because I did one, each one at the time of writing, made the writing for the others a bit more personal because I knew I would then be doing the voiceover, reading off what I'd written.

This approach had quite a transformational impact on the style of the written feedback, by anticipating the subsequent 'voiceover' T3 changed the style of the written to render it 'a bit more personal':

> T3: So the approach and the niceties and the sort of motivational engagement type bit in feedback for students I was more conscious, whereas if it's just written feedback, and it's pretty distance, it's like writing an email isn't it, you're not talking to anybody in person […] and it was very much that that distance thing that I found the, the oral feedback changed.

This tutor also observed that producing the voice comments impacted positively on the quality of the written feedback:

> T3: it sort of cemented the quality of the written feedback. Because if you couldn't then vocalise what you'd written and it as you're writing your feedback, you read
>
> it, you mark it, you write something, you had to when you're doing your, your verbal feedback, it sort of had to be looking at it holistically and did the feedback fit with actually the mark and the quality of the assignment and, and actually, sometimes it didn't, and as you were doing the verbal, just a couple of times, I though oh no, that actually is wrong. The written feedback doesn't match this assignment. So I ended up changing the written feedback, just just a few words and tweaks and changes because the verbals sort of made it all come into a whole picture and it just wasn't right so it improved the quality of the written.

This suggests that representing feedback information via multiple modes, has the potential to add more rigor than through a single mode.

4.2 Audio feedback can ease tensions between individual praxis and institutional requirements

During the course of the group discussion in which the team evaluated the intervention we became aware of the existence of certain tensions when considering the purpose and intended audience of feedback. We agreed that the student was central as the focus for feedback and our stated intentions were to acknowledge effort, offer thanks, praise and suggest improvements:

> T3: it's a sort of acknowledgement […] a thank you for the students work they've put in.
>
> T4: I think that thank you is quite important because you are recognising that they've put in effort, there's no reward for effort, is there?

It was also a way to engage authentically with student work:

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> T4: responding to it as a tutor so little things like thank you, I really enjoyed it. I know that sounds a bit flippant, but I think that's still important because it's showing as a teacher that you've read it. Not just read it to mark it, but read it to get an interest out of it yourself.

So these elements of feedback serve a more relational purpose being directed towards the effort and valuable work students have produced, it promotes a professional or collegial relationship between tutor and student.

However, this peer-to-peer relationship can be undermined by the need to assign and justify a grade:

> T2: For me as well, the feedback is that if you're giving them a grade that you think they might not be happy with.

This function requires tutors to align feedback to assessment rubric comprising module learning outcomes and marking criteria:

> T3: It was about making sure that our assessment and topic link back into module outcomes.
>
> T1: The written it's quite formal isn't it and using some of the language from the module outcomes or the rubric to make it aligned and tie it in.

This performative practice of written feedback can have the effect of removing some of the focus from the student to satisfy the audit culture:

> T4: A lot of it is about audit isn't it? Surveillance. We want to write in that way because we want to be seen to be [?] the learning outcomes. So it's a good thing in itself because it means that our judgements are more, erm, not accurate, but more aligned, but actually we want other people to see that we've done it that way.

This diluted focus can be at odds with tutors' pedagogic beliefs:

> T4: I think it is artificial. If I ruled the world, then I wouldn't have assessment, I would have pure dialogue, just have a conversation.

To a certain extent, the use of voice comments redeemed the situation, by allowing the tutors the opportunity to address students directly:

> T2: I think the audio gives you a chance to be a bit more personal. So, I didn't think I must align with rubrics and everything else. It was a chance for me to just let them hear me.
>
> T1: To me that shows the different motives we have. What's been in the back of my mind throughout is that the written feedback, all right, in an ideal world is for the students but really, I know it's for the external. And this pat on the head, that's what we're really about. That's enabled me, the audio enabled me to do that 'This is for you'.

This suggests that the two modes of feedback may serve different purposes and have different audiences in mind. Tensions arising from the knowledge that written feedback will be viewed and evaluated by colleagues in a quality control capacity may be resolved by using the spoken to reaffirm the intended pedagogical purpose of feedback which is to connect with students authentically.

4.3 An alternative channel of communication permits authenticity and individuality

As the previous theme highlighted, connecting with students more directly and in a more personal way was an important part of the intervention. The tutors found that they used more authentic language in the voice comments:

> T1: And I found stuttering [...] I wasn't too bothered about making it all clean.
>
> T4: There were a couple that I did [?] so I gave up and started again. But actually, the ums and ahs.
>
> T3: Leave the ums and ahs in, yeah.
>
> T4: I quite liked the fact that you're almost having that conversation with them [...] It was things like, 'Let me just find where it was', and there'd be a slight delay.
>
> T2: Yeah, I think that was it. There were a few where I said, 'The other point I wanted to make was dah, dah dah, oh, no, sorry, it was, you know, related to this other bit'. That's fine.

This real, natural language is in stark contrast to the 'cold' 'mechanistic' language of written feedback. Tutors discussed using student names, having to search online for accurate pronunciation of some names, and introducing themselves by name. This gave the impression of a conversation with students, a sense of presence and connection:

> T1: I found it as a way to just talk to them, normally […] It was bit more as if there were there.

One tutor even found themselves using body language:

> T3: I was using my hands and I would sit there talking to machine and I'm like waving at people and you're getting like animated at the computer screen.

The tutors found that this sense of proximity enabled them to be more direct and unambiguous when feeding back to students who had failed to meet the required standard:

> T3: I found myself with students both who had failed the assignment or who had a particular need. There was one element they were just getting wrong, really honing the feedback and like pleading with them now being quite emotive and 'You must really [?] you must really get this sorted', and being there quite really homing in on that, whereas generic feedback and the normal written feedback might just it might be just one point of something.
>
> T1: I found the ones that had failed, my, my feedback focused on that immediate, there's no point pussyfooting round. I said, 'Look, unfortunately, you'll notice … and it's because of this', and so that enabled me to really offer that reassurance as well.

It was felt that the spoken format might make the recipient more accepting of negative feedback.

In a similar way, an alternative channel of communication can permit tutors a certain amount of creativity and individuality, which is normally absent when producing the more performative written feedback which demands consistency and standardised formats:

> T3: It does sort of, in a way negate innovation and people doing things in a different way and feel they can't do something outside the box or something that might be a bit more engaging in terms of feedback that we seem to be more and more drawn to it's going to be done in a particular way, because that's what we think is valuable for all for student. And it's becoming very mechanistic or very formulaic.

The general feeling among tutors was that they enjoyed providing audio feedback, mainly as a result of the opportunity to engage meaningfully through a more natural, authentic and direct mode of communication as well as the sense of connection to the students:

> T1: I enjoyed doing it. I thought some of my reflections were that I actually enjoyed it. I felt a bit more motivated. It gave it that different edge.
>
> T2: I did enjoy it because I thought it didn't seem as time-consuming as the written. And it felt like I was giving them something more personal that they could hear the voice of the tutor and feel that connection.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the use of voice comments can transform the educator experience but is a complex process requiring an initial written stage.

5. Discussion

The original research questions guiding this study sought to capture the experiences of tutors providing audio feedback through an investigation of the processes adopted and the pedagogic implications of providing feedback using voice comments.

In general terms, the educator experiences in this study are broadly in agreement with the reviewed literature on student perceptions, particularly in terms of increasing teacher immediacy and presence thereby reducing transactional distance for distance learning students (Hennessy & Forrester, 2014; Johnson & Cooke, 2016). Where students reported impressions of proximity in Dagen et al. (2008), tutors in this study reported similar, 'a way to just talk to them normally … it was as if they were there' (T1). T3, who found herself gesturing indicates the perception of feedback as dialogue when using voice comments.

However, there are further insights to be drawn from this study focussing on the tutor experiences, firstly, the reciprocal relationship between the written and spoken language revealed that the audio feedback can only be one stage of a process comprising both modalities; the written form is a necessary precursor to the voice comments. Therefore, our experience did not reflect the time-savings reported by McCarthy (2015), Ice et al. (2007) and Lunt and Curran (2010) who provided only audio feedback. This dual model of feedback potentially addresses the inclusivity and accessibility issues highlighted by Johnson and Cooke (2016) and Knauf (2016) when providing feedback via a single mode. This need for audio as an 'add-on' rather than as a replacement for written reflects the studies reviewed in the literature section and potentially explains the lack of widespread uptake of the practice. However, the findings of this study go further to offer insights into the processes involved in dual-mode feedback. The educator reflections on

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the need for a preliminary stage of written feedback suggest the nature of the feedback process is too complex to be rendered directly as spoken language. The need for proximity between the preliminary writing stage and subsequent voiced commentary points to the existence of a series of cognitive processes and states of mind. The final output is the culmination of several impermanent states. This suggests that dual-mode feedback has a dual-mode function and is not simply a rendering of one mode to another.

Turning to the pedagogical implications of this dual mode of feedback, the findings suggest that audio feedback can provide practitioners with an alternative channel of communication with students. This can function to alleviate some of the pedagogical contradictions arising from the individual praxis and institutional requirements based on widespread beliefs regarding good practice. This tension does not feature in the literature on audio feedback, or in taxonomies of effective feedback generally. When following these external notions of good feedback practice, the language we use in our written feedback to students, the language of Module Learning Outcomes, assessment criteria and rubrics, serves to distance the students as in Hennessy and Forrester (2014). The use of voice comments as an additional channel, allowed tutors to re-centre the student as the sole recipient of feedback and as such removed the need for formal academic rubric-aligned language. As with the staged process to producing dual-mode feedback, this practice is only achievable when the audio is in addition to the written feedback, which is subject to audit.

Finally, the spoken language used in the voice comments gave tutors a sense of authentic communication and an opportunity to express a degree of individuality, echoing the findings of Munro and Hollingworth (2014). This also relates to the fact that spoken feedback is unlikely to be heard by anyone other than the student. Understandings of good practice often stress the need for consistency; written feedback structured according to a shared framework aligning to rubric and standards can provide this consistency, however, it can have the effect of being 'cold' and 'mechanistic'. The additional spoken feedback can achieve a warmer, more personal feel which reflects tutors' individual personality and style of communication.

These findings are significant in that they present the perspective of the educator, which is often afforded less importance than that of the student and yet educator experiences, perspectives and beliefs are clearly a key driving force behind how student work is assessed and feedback provided.

6. Conclusion

This practitioner research project set out to explore how the use of voice comments might transform the experiences of an online teacher education course team when providing feedback on summative assignments in a post-1992 UK university. The findings reported here suggest that the experience of providing audio feedback is transformative for tutors' feedback practices. It aligns to tutors' individual praxis, but it requires extensive complex cognitive processes and is achievable only as an additional, complementary mode. The study is small scale, with only four participants, it is therefore unlikely that the results will reflect accurately the experiences of other educators, indeed, this was not the intention of this project. What the findings do offer are new insights into a less well-established area – that of educator experiences of producing audio feedback. These insights may provide the starting point for further research to explore in more depth the transformative opportunities offered by the dual mode of feedback.

This study has shown that providing dual mode feedback has the potential to transform both the feedback process as well as the pedagogic affordances. However, the associated additional time and cognitive processing load mean that it is doubtful the practice will have a widespread impact without equivalent institutional workload allowances. Therefore, it is perhaps timely to rethink the whole assessment process, to effect a more comprehensive digital transformation in university teaching and learning in order to render the process more efficient and to engender deeper learning. It is unrealistic to expect transformation to occur by changing just one part of the process, that is the feedback stage, rather we might take our cue from the digital tools we have available to us to reconsider assessment in its entirety. Rather than waiting until the end of a module to assess learning, digital technologies can help us embed dialogic learning throughout a module as an ongoing multi-modal conversation between tutor and learner. This would transform the burdensome end of module time-intensive solitary marking period, into an authentic, co-constructed learning experience. Such a holistic approach would make a greater contribution to the deeper cultural and values-based vision desired and enabled through digital transformation.

Returning to the introductory discussion around digital transformation, this study confirms the need to move beyond micro level, instrumental evaluative research concerning digital tools and technologies, in other words digitisation and digitalisation. Instead research exploring holistic approaches to the integration of digital technologies in

teaching and learning processes, reflecting a shift in mindset at the organisational level, is needed in order to achieve meaningful transformation enabled by the digital age.

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