

SIMPLE TOOLS THAT CAN REVOLUTIONISE FEEDBACK WE PROVIDE

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of technology in feedback. In particular, it focuses on the use of screen capture software (SCS) to provide an innovative way of providing feedback to students. The idea has created substantial interest in the educational community with articles in the UK national press (Stannard, 2006), inclusion in a report submitted to the UK government (NSF, 2009) and even coverage on television in France, however, there has been little research into the possibilities of this idea or the impact it can have on teaching and learning.

What Is Screen Capture Software?

SCS is a piece of software that allows you to record the screen of your computer as if you had a video camera pointing at it. Everything you do on the screen, every window you open, any picture you show, text you write or highlight you mark, will come out in the video. If you attach a microphone to your computer, then it will also record your voice. It is commonly used for computer training. Trainers can record themselves creating a blog, a wiki or a podcast and then save the video and send it to students/trainees. The trainees/students can watch the video and listen to the comments and learn exactly how to make a blog or wiki by watching the video. It is both visual and oral and is very popular as a form of training on the Internet. In the world of education, www.teachertrainingvideos.com has literally hundreds of videos that take you through a whole range of educational technologies.

This same software can be used to provide feedback to students. If a student submits his/her work, the teacher can open it onto the screen, turn on the SCS and then record himself/herself correcting the student's work. Any comments, any writing, any highlights or underlining, etc., will all come out in the video. The video can then be sent to the student. Students receive "live" videos where they can see their paper being corrected and listen to the comments of their teacher. A very simple example of a resulting video can be accessed at: <http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/luFeedback/index.html>

Why Use Screen Capture Feedback?

The early work undertaken in the area of screen capture feedback (Stannard, 2007) suggests the following possible advances to such an approach. Many of the findings have been mirrored in studies involving just audio feedback through podcasting (McFarlane & Wakeman, 2010).

1. Teaching and learning has also become far more inclusive with emphasis on multiple learning styles, often referred to as multimodal learning within ICT. There has been a shift away from text and a heavy reliance on reading as the key form in which information is conveyed and presented to learners. The same shift has not taken place in the area of feedback, which is still predominately text based and summative. What SCS feedback can offer is a chance for a more multimodal approach to feedback that includes both sound and visual input.
2. The research and tests that have been run in this area have also suggested that much more feedback can be provided. A 5-minute video is likely to contain around 500 to 600 words of commentary, which is far more than most tutors would provide in the written form.
3. It has been suggested that more multimodal forms of feedback might be more appropriate to students who are regularly exposed to a much larger amount of visual and sound media than 10 years ago (Rotherham, 2008, p 4).
4. The Open University and other distance organisations have picked up on the possibilities of using screen capture software for distance learning courses as it provides a much more “-personal” type of feedback for students. Remember tutors often don’t meet their students on distance courses and so this may be the only time the students ever hear the tutor’s voice! (Stannard, 2012).
5. Students have pointed out how important the “voice” is in the screen capture feedback. They feel it conveys important information that is lost with simple textual feedback.
6. Organisations who work with dyslexic students have also commented on the usefulness of this approach since students receive visual and oral information that is not highly text based.
7. Many students like the oral and visual feedback. Many students feel that it is the next best thing to actually having the tutor sitting in the room with them.

Interestingly, recent observations of SCS feedback have noted a stylistic feature that wasn’t noted when the initial trials took place. When correcting an essay in the traditional way, it is quite common to see comments like “good,” “well done,” etc., without any additional information. This type of feedback is almost non-existent in SCS feedback, where any such comments are always elaborated on with an explanation of why it is good. The fact that the tutor can use his/her voice means that every comment or word that is underlined tends to be supported by comments.

Students’ comments were overwhelmingly positive but very little can be drawn from these. “It was like having you sitting next to me”, has been quite a common comment from the three groups of students that I finally worked with on the original idea. Some students felt that the videos were examples of “authentic learning material” as the students were learning English and felt

there was the additional benefit from the fact they had to listen and watch the videos. Clarity came through as a key point in nearly all the studies. Students felt that the voice made it much easier to follow the feedback and to understand more clearly what the tutor was trying to convey. Instead of simple comments in the margins, tutors are able to expand and elaborate their points and this seems to be key.

Initial Problems With the Idea

The early work has created more questions than it has answers. For example, some of the students complained that there was too much feedback and indeed there is a temptation to cover far too much ground when suddenly the voice rather than the pen becomes the main source of feedback. An approach to the feedback needs to be thought through. Is it best to correct directly onto the paper as the teacher goes through it or number the points and elaborate on them at the end? Should there be a limit to the number of points raised? In the early examples, which were based around language students on an ELT course, the corrections all focused on the grammar. However it would seem that the most effective use of the idea is when the teacher needs to elaborate and develop a point. In other words focus on content and organisation may have made better use of the idea since most grammar corrections are quite simplistic and require little explanation. Indeed it may even be that SCS feedback is more effective in other areas of the curriculum. So, for example, providing feedback on an essay about politics or history, where the tutor wants to elaborate and develop a point, may make far better use of this medium of feedback than the simple correction of surface errors on a language paper.

One of the biggest dangers is that teacher makes far greater use of their voice than they do the visual elements on the screen. The temptation is to use the cursor to point to mistakes and then use the voice to elaborate on the point. This can result in an approach that is little different from providing feedback through audio. It is vital that the teacher makes use of the visual elements. Remember any highlights, anything written, anything underlined, etc., will all come out in the video and add to the visual experience, which some students greatly benefit from.

Other problems have focused around the stage of the feedback. To get the greatest use of the videos, it is best if the videos are used formatively rather than for summative feedback. The approach on the early work was to highlight students' grammar mistakes and provides clues as to what corrections to make but to actually leave the students to work out their own corrections. By doing this the students had to watch the video, think about the corrections, make the corrections and then send the new draft to the teacher.

A whole range of other considerations has to also be taken into account when dealing with an area of the curriculum that is of interest to so many stakeholders. What do we do about the institution? Is this method sufficient for the external examiners, quality assurance bodies and indeed for internal administration purposes? Does it have to be supplemented by more traditional approaches to feedback? Does this meet the student's expectations? These are all questions that have yet to be directly addressed. In the now many

presentations of this idea, the overwhelming majority of questions are always based around the way other stakeholders perceive this SCS feedback, rather than the underlying pedagogic value of it is revealing in itself.

Flexibility of Screen Capture Feedback

The early work with screen capture looked at the idea of producing videos that provided feedback on student's written work. However, since screen capture simply records the actions on the screen, a whole range of approaches could be taken. Here are some other possible approaches that have been used by the author with some success.

1. The teachers could take notes as they work through the students' work and then simply open up the screen capture software, open the notes onto the screen and record themselves talking through the problems/observations on a point by point basis.
2. Teachers may produce just one video that provides general feedback to the whole class on their performance in say a written piece or a presentation. Teachers often use up valuable class time going over general observations about a piece of course work and this is one possible way of dealing with this and saving valuable class time. The teacher writes down some key points regarding the students' overall performance in a Word document, then turns on the SCS and records himself/herself going over the key points.
3. A teacher could use SCS to provide a model answer to a question. So, for example, the teacher could open up a Word document, write down all the key points that should have been raised in the answer to a question and then comment on each of the points using SCS. The video could then be sent to the students, who could use it to reflect on their own pieces of work (i.e., they could compare the model answer to the actual written piece that they did and think about elements they missed out or what they could have done to improve their essay).

Current Research-Student Reflection

The real flexibility of this technology is when the technology is passed to the students for the students to use. Many SCS tools are free and very easy to use. If the students are shown how to use SCS, then the possibilities of its use in assessment and feedback multiply.

Currently I am looking into the potential of using SCS as a way of developing and supporting student reflection. Here are two possible scenarios.

Scenario one.

You are supervising a group of students on an MA or PhD programme. The students are abroad and so it is difficult to meet with them. You need some way of keeping track of their progress and thought processes but are not keen to ask them to keep a blog or diary as this means additional writing and workload.

Instead you provide the students with questionnaires at different stages of the dissertation. The students open up the questions onto the computer screen, turn on SCS and record themselves answering the questions and reflecting on their progress. They then send the resulting video to their supervisor. This process can take place at various stages through the dissertation process. The resulting videos can be used in place of a reflective journal. The videos can also be used as the basis for further meetings (perhaps via SKYPE if the student is not in the country), which means the meetings can be more focused and based on the content of the video. They could be used as part of the evaluation of the student and can be useful material for an external examiner. For example, a questionnaire based around the literature review stage might deal with the following areas.

1. What areas have you decided to cover in your literature review?
2. What articles have you found particularly interesting and relevant? Can you explain why?
3. What further reading do you need to do?
4. Has your literature review impacted on your actual research question? Do you feel you need to change it or change the focus? If yes, explain why.
5. How do you feel you are progressing?

Scenario two.

You are a teacher trainer on a course where you observe your trainees once a month giving a practice lesson. After the practice lesson, you usually sit down with the trainees and go through their lesson so they can reflect on their work. However, this is not always possible since you have to observe five teachers in one day. Some trainees are also nervous immediately after their lesson and prefer to go over the lesson at a later stage. Instead the trainee is provided with a list of questions that they need to consider. The trainee goes home, opens up the questions onto the screen, and then turns on the SCS and records themselves going over the questions and reflecting on their lesson. They can write on the screen, highlight points and, of course, comment as they deal with the questions one by one. They then send the resulting video to the trainer who can listen to the reflections and use the video as the basis for a subsequent meeting or as part of a portfolio. A typical set of questions might be the following.

1. What were you most pleased with about today's lesson?
2. What do you feel you could have improved in today's lesson?
3. What do you think your students learnt into today's lesson?
4. What things will you take from today's experience when you plan your next lesson?
5. Overall, how do you feel about the lesson you taught today? Do you feel you made progress from your last practice class?

Although both of these exercises could be done as written reflections, there may be quite significant advantage to doing them as SCS recordings. Firstly, students may feel more comfortable doing the reflections orally since they can say much more in a shorter space of time. It may be a more natural approach for some students too. Students may resent the added work of doing written reflections on top of the workload of the dissertations. From the teacher's point of view, they are likely to get much more input from the students and can use this as the basis for evaluations. The voice may also become a key element in the students' reflections. Initial feedback from students does suggest that they like the approach and feel less resentful about taking on the added task over and above the dissertation itself.

Conclusions

There are many practical obstacles to overcome regarding SC feedback. However it does provide a quite innovative and realistic way of providing feedback to students. What is more it is based on some of the emerging principles that underpin our current thoughts on teaching and learning. It offers a multimodal approach to feedback, greater amounts of feedback and has potential benefits for a whole variety of teaching contexts. By shifting the use of the tool to the students, it also provides an interesting medium for reflection and review.

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