A critical reflection on audio feedback for undergraduate students as a care-full and compassionate performance of emotional labour

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Samantha Wilkinson
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

Abstract
This critical reflection, structured using Gibbs' reflective cycle, focuses on my experience, as a Senior Lecturer in a higher education Institution in the UK, of trialling providing audio summative feedback to undergraduate students for the first time. In this paper, I articulate the worries and anxieties I experienced providing audio feedback, related to the emotional labour required in performing the 'correct' tone; saying appropriate words; and creating an appropriate environment and atmosphere for delivering audio feedback. I argue that making visible the emotional labour involved in providing audio feedback has important implications for assisting in elevating the status of audio feedback beyond being considered a mere administrative task. Further, I contend that making this emotional labour visible may enable students to see the compassion that goes into the process of providing 'care-full' feedback. This paper concludes with recommendations to support colleagues and students to get the most out of audio feedback.

Introduction

This critical reflection takes a practice-based approach to my professional development, focusing on feedback, which can be defined as a process in which students make sense of information from various sources, building on it to enhance their work (Carless and Boud, 2018). Herein, I critically reflect on my experiences of trialling providing audio summative feedback to university students at a higher education Institution in the UK, arguing that audio feedback is a form of emotional labour (Spaeth, 2018). By 'emotional labour', to draw on Hochshild's (1983) definition in the context of service caring work, I mean the ways in which I introduce or suppress emotions to portray myself in a certain light that consequently produces a desired state of mind in others. In line with Brookfield's (2009) understanding of a critical reflection, herein I uncover power dynamics framing practice, and challenge assumptions often embraced as being in our best interest, specifically the emphasis in academic practice on written feedback being the norm (Kirwan et al., 2023).

My critical reflection is structured using Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle. I appreciate the flow between different elements of this cycle, and the emphasis Gibbs (1988) places on 'feelings', which aligns with my reflective focus on audio assessment as a form of emotional labour. First, I detail the trigger for this focus, and 'describe' the experience of undertaking audio feedback for assessment, paying attention to ethical considerations. I then go on to explore my 'feelings' when delivering audio feedback. Following this, I adapt Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle to simultaneously 'evaluate' and 'analyse' the experience, highlighting opportunities and drawbacks. Whilst doing so, I reflect both 'in' and 'on' action (Schön, 1983). Finally, I conclude, highlighting both implications for practice, and recommendations to support the use of audio feedback by higher education colleagues. I argue that making visible the emotional labour involved in providing audio feedback has important implications, because it can assist in elevating the status of audio feedback beyond being considered a mere administrative task. Awareness of this may have knock-on implications for workload allocations for such feedback. Moreover, I contend that making visible the emotionally laborious task of providing audio feedback may be a means of enabling students to recognise the process of providing feedback as a care-full, compassionate exercise.

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Trigger and description of activity

In this section, drawing on Gibbs (1988), I describe the activity I have chosen and articulate my rationale. This critical reflection focuses on my experience, as a Senior Lecturer, of providing audio feedback on an undergraduate degree programme at a University in North West England. I provided this audio feedback via student summative assignment submissions on the Virtual Learning Environment via Turnitin. The assignment I provided audio feedback on was a scrapbook assignment, worth 25% of the unit grade. This programme has not used audio feedback previously. This programme received a slightly lower score in the 2023 National Student Survey for perception of fairness, when compared to other elements of assessment and feedback. The idea of trialling audio feedback was suggested at a Programme level in our National Student Survey action plan. I perceive that audio feedback may help to communicate the tone of feedback (Hennessy and Forrester, 2014), which may help students to consider their mark and feedback to be 'fair'.

This focus on trialling a new feedback mode is important, and much needed, because feedback has been heralded the most significant single influence on student learning and achievement (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004). Hounsell (2003) has argued that feedback plays an important role in learning and development. When a student knows how they are doing, and what they need to do in order to develop further, they are able to learn more effectively. Despite this, students critique feedback for being unfit for purpose (Price et al., 2010), considering that it does not help them clarify things they do not understand (Voelkel and Mello, 2014). Written feedback is the most common form of feedback in Higher Education. It is an example of what Brookfield (2009) may consider an assumption of how things should work, and what is considered appropriate. It is often assumed that 'this is the way things are' and it is unquestioningly accepted. Brookfield (2009) states that when an assumption has been identified, its accuracy needs to be assessed, as I now do.

Despite written feedback being the norm, the literature highlights the benefit of audio feedback, from the student and assessor perspective. For instance, King et al. (2008) contend that audio feedback is often evaluated by students as being 'richer' than other forms of feedback. Similarly, Gould and Day (2012) note that students value the ability of audio feedback to provide intonation and emphasis on words, and consider that audio feedback is more detailed. Whilst there is a growing body of literature evaluating audio feedback from the perspective of students, the experiences of academics providing audio feedback have been explored less (Ekinsmyth, 2010). Gould and Day (2012) and Sarcona et al. (2020) are notable exceptions, exploring the instructor perspective, albeit briefly. Both papers share how some lecturers in their study found it quick and easy to provide audio feedback, and that they valued the ability to indicate the tone of their feedback. Other lecturers, however, stated how they had to type the notes first to remember what they wanted to say, and then record it for the audio feedback, and thus were doing twice as much work (Gould and Day, 2020; Sarcona et al., 2020). Having made sense of the situation by taking different perspectives of assessors and students in the literature, my informed action is the provision of audio feedback, in place of written feedback, for the aforementioned assessment.

Whilst the affectual impact feedback has on students has been well documented in the literature (e.g., McFarlane and Wakeman, 2011), there is little in the academic literature on the affectual impact of the feedback process on markers (Henderson-Brooks. 2021). Whilst not specifically related to audio feedback, Spaeth (2018) is an exception, articulating that emotional labour is a performance when educators seek to balance the promotion of student learning (care) with the pressures for efficiency and quality control (time). Spaeth (2018) contends that there is a lack of attention directed towards the emotional investment on the part of colleagues when providing feedback. My critical reflection contributes my voice to this less explored side by exploring audio feedback as a performance of emotional labour.

Ethical Considerations

Whilst this paper is based on self-reflection, relational ethics is an important consideration (Ellis, 2007). This is because, through my everyday interactions with colleagues and students, other characters may be present in some way in my narrative. As the emphasis of this account is on my own emotional and embodied experiences of providing audio feedback, I diverge from the focus on informed consent in traditional research ethics, by not asking for consent from others for their involvement in my self-reflection (Isreal and Hay, 2006). However, to ensure confidentiality, the name of the programme I undertook this self-reflection based on is not identified, and no identifying characteristics of individual students or colleagues are noted, thereby protecting their anonymity.

Feelings

Moving on to the next stage in Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, I bring to the fore my feelings when providing audio feedback. We know from the literature and experience that, for students, assessment is 'deeply personal', and can create strong feelings (Henderson-Brooks, 2021:111). Henderson-Brooks' (2021:111) focus was restricted to feedback provided on paper or electronically on student assignments to justify the reason for grades, and to guide students to improve their skills, but did not include "newer feedback modes, such as the use of audio…feedback". Herein, I build on Henderson-Brooks' (2021) account of the emotional labour of providing feedback from the perspective of myself: the teacher, in the context of audio assessment.

It is important to reflect on my positionality, since "each marker brings their own lived experiences to marking, including personality; age; academic philosophy, and their previous student identity" (Henderson-Brooks, 2021:116). I am a fairly 'young' (34 years old), female, Senior Lecturer, with a chronic illness. I still recall my experiences of receiving feedback at University, of sometimes not understanding why I was awarded a particular grade; or being disappointed with the quantity and/or quality of feedback; or not considering the feedback conveyed enough positivity when I had done well. This feeds into my desire to provide detailed and thorough feedback / developmental feed forward (Goldsmith, 2007), and to emphasise enthusiasm when students have done well, and offer support when students may be disappointed with their mark.

Despite my desire to introduce audio feedback to challenge the norm of written feedback and to benefit students through a more personalised and empathetic feedback style (Ekinsmyth, 2010), I must be honest and say that the thought of providing audio feedback did fill me with 'dread' (as Henderson-Brooks (2021:114) discusses of providing feedback more generally), as I wrote in my reflective diary:

> I am really having to psych myself up to providing audio feedback which I have designated to doing this evening.
>
> (Reflective diary).

Above, I reflect on the impending sense of dread I felt knowing I had to provide audio feedback, which was predominantly due to the fear of the unknown and my unfamiliarity with this mode of feedback. I work on compressed hours, working longer hours Monday-Thursday. Working in this way, I have always undertaken feedback outside of core hours, in the evening, due to the relative flexibility of providing feedback (in comparison to needing to be in person at specific times for teaching). I typically have no issue with this. However, providing audio feedback requires a different environment in comparison to providing written feedback, as I reflect below:

> Providing audio feedback in the evenings when my husband is trying to get our two children to sleep, and with two dogs excitedly scampering around is stressful. I take myself off to the bedroom and sit in bed with my dressing gown on, for comfort. Then I suddenly think how

> horrified students may be if they knew this was the reality of providing audio feedback. I feel like I should be sat at my desk in a suit! I know they can't see me when providing audio feedback, but I feel how I dress may be perceived to reflect how seriously I am taking it.
>
> (Reflective diary).

It is of note that, at my institution, I work in an open plan office, with only a few private and non-soundproof pods, so providing audio feedback in the workspace is not viable. Discussing her 'marking life', Henderson-Brooks (2021:113) notes the need to get the perfect environment to mark in: "so, I get the chocolates (carrots nowadays), sharpen the pens (warm the screen nowadays), and warn my friends and relatives (no change nowadays) – it is marking time". Related to this, I would always have a cup of tea (and Diet Coke) to hand, along with chocolate and crisps, to 'treat' myself, and make the experience more enjoyable.

When providing feedback, I felt pressure to not only say the right kind of comments, but also in the 'correct' tone, as I reflect below:

> I feel a need to be constantly 100% enthusiastic. I am worried if I sound tired students may think I was not concentrating enough marking their assessment; if I sound low mood that I am disappointed with them; or sounding too positive that it does not match their mark.
>
> (Reflective diary).

As can be seen through the above, I found it emotionally exhausting having to perform the perfect degree of enthusiasm, which I individually tailored to each student and their mark. This is confounded by the fact that I have an autoimmune disease and associated chronic fatigue, which means I get very tired and have very little energy. Consequently, performing my words / voice / tone is particularly onerous, as is sitting for long periods of time when providing feedback. Similarly, Ekinsmyth (2010) asserts that colleagues in her study felt a need to be careful about the words used, and the tone of, audio feedback. This was exemplified when a student had done particularly well, or had not passed the assignment. As the above indicates, there is a significant emotional labour involved in providing audio feedback. However, this means audio feedback has potential to offer a care-full and compassionate mode of feedback, from the student perspective.

Evaluation and Analysis

I now simultaneously evaluate and analyse (Gibbs' 1988) my experience of providing audio feedback, highlighting opportunities and drawbacks. When providing audio feedback, I felt more confident in the mark and feedback I awarded students, when compared to written feedback, because, as Kirwan et al. (2023) note, I felt my feedback was less likely to be misinterpreted. This is because, when providing audio feedback, I simultaneously scrolled down the script, using it as an oral catalyst. Supporting McFarlane and Wakeman's (2011) findings, I considered my audio feedback included more examples than conventional written feedback to illustrate points I made. This overcomes some perceived weaknesses of written feedback: that it is detached from the students work (McFarlane and Wakeman, 2011).

The audio function on Turnitin has a three-minute time-limit, which I found useful for ensuring consistency between markers. Three minutes of audio is equivalent to approximately 375-450 words. Consequently, I found audio feedback enabled me to provide more detailed feedback than I typically would in writing, which would more likely be 250 words maximum. Agreeing with Kirwan et al. (2023), I found audio feedback was more holistic and nuanced, due to the scope to expand and elaborate on points made. It felt more conversational in tone, and due to this there was a sense of connectivity between myself and students (Kirwan et al., 2023). After the feedback was released to students, I held 1:1 sign up tutorials for students who wished to discuss their feedback. I was disappointed that less

people signed up for these 1:1s than typically the case. However, this may be because the audio feedback I provided was richer and more insightful, along with being more individual and personalised (Ekinsmyth, 2010). It would have been useful to have explored this further, asking students if this was the case.

In terms of my perceived drawbacks of audio feedback, whilst some academics have found audio feedback to be quicker to produce than written feedback (Lunt and Curran, 2010), in line with Ribchester et al. (2008), I found audio feedback was more time-consuming than traditional means; a mistake in the middle of a recording meant the whole recording had to be redone. I toyed with the idea of keeping mistakes in, thinking they would make me appear more human. However, I decided to restart the recording to appear professional. This desire to craft a performance of professionalism may be related to my positionality as a fairly young, female, academic with feelings of imposter syndrome (Wilkinson, 2019).

Another potential drawback of audio feedback, is that when I provide written feedback, I read over it again, adapting and revising it. However, with audio feedback, I did not wish to listen to my voice again, and thus did not undertake this additional layer of quality control. It is of note that during the second marking process, there were no suggested changes to marks awarded. This may be seen as positive, perceiving that the thorough audio feedback provided a good justification for the mark awarded. However, second markers and moderators may perceivably be less likely to suggest an alternative grade, because this would mean the tone / wording of the audio feedback may need to be changed to reflect this, which would mean a re-recording of the audio feedback, which would be time-consuming for first markers. This differs from written feedback, where it may just mean editing a few words to reflect the tone associated with a changed mark / grade boundary.

Conclusion

I opened this critical reflection by highlighting that one of the Programmes I teach on had slightly lower NSS 2023 scores for the perception of fairness, when compared to other elements of assessment and feedback. Feedback on this programme has traditionally been provided in written form. This is an example of what Brookfield (2009) may consider an assumption of how things should work, and what is considered appropriate. My adoption of audio feedback challenged this norm. Audio feedback has been heralded for being able to assist in communicating the tone of feedback (Hennessy and Forrester, 2014), which I considered may help students in considering their grade and feedback to be ‘fair’. In the extant literature, the focus has hitherto largely been on student’s perceptions of audio feedback, whilst the assessor perspective has been less explored. Likewise, the affectual impact feedback has on students has been well documented in the literature (e.g., McFarlane and Wakeman, 2011), yet there is little written about the affectual impact of the feedback process on markers, particularly in the context of audio feedback (Henderson-Brooks, 2021; Spaeth, 2018).

I used Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle, and applied Hochchild’s (1983) concept of emotional labour, to critically reflect on the process of providing audio feedback. Through this candid account, I highlighted that emotions are key to the often-considered mundane task of providing assignment feedback to students (Henderson-Brooks, 2021). Throughout, I have articulated the worries and anxieties related to providing audio feedback, related to the emotional labour required in performing the ‘correct’ tone; saying appropriate words; and creating an appropriate environment and atmosphere for delivering audio feedback. With this paper, I have promoted the novel use of the theory of emotional labour (Hochchild, 1983) in the context of higher education research, as a lens through which practitioner researchers can engage with audio feedback.

Implications:

I argue that making visible the emotional labour involved in providing audio feedback has implications because it can assist in elevating the status of audio feedback beyond being considered a mere administrative task. Doing so, has potential to influence the workload allocations given to academics for providing assignment feedback, which has hitherto been considered a significant barrier to the provision of high-quality assignment feedback for students (Norton et al., 2012). It may also enable students to see the care and compassion that goes into providing feedback. This has potential to reflect positively in student evaluations of assignment feedback. For instance, a key question asked in the National Student Survey, regards student perceptions of the 'fairness' of assignment marking and feedback.

Recommendations:

Moving on to the final stage in Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle, I articulate an action plan for myself, which doubles-up as recommendations for other higher education colleagues, based on my reflections of providing audio feedback:

1. Publicise to students the purpose of audio feedback so they are more familiar with what to expect and how to get the most out of this mode of feedback (Ekinsymyth, 2010). This may alleviate some of the worries of colleagues regarding how to perform for students when providing audio feedback.
2. Deliver a workshop to colleagues with tips on how to successfully provide audio feedback. This may reduce the worries of colleagues who are unfamiliar with this mode of feedback.
3. Undertake further research on the embodied, emotional and affective experiences of academics providing audio feedback, to bring to the fore the underexplored voices of a wider variety of assessors, and assist in elevating the status of feedback beyond an administrative task.

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