Audio Comments as a Tool in the Teaching of Writing  
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2008-2009

Introduction
Research in rhetoric and composition has documented the benefits of audio comments for students and instructors alike, including greater comprehension of teacher comments (Anson), improved student-teacher relations (Mellen and Sommers), student preference (Sipple and Sommers), and grading efficiency (Warnock). To bring these benefits to Penn State Berks, the investigator collaborated with the Center for Teaching and Learning to develop a method for embedding audio comments within students’ papers through the use of Adobe Acrobat software.

Project Design
The investigator piloted Adobe Acrobat comments in two courses: English 30T: Honors Composition (Fall 2008) and English 232W: American Literature from 1865 (Spring 2009). Students in both courses participated in a study designed to assess students’ attitudes toward audio comments. The study asked students to take a 10-question survey administered at the midpoint of the semester and a 14-question survey, which included discursive questions, administered at the end of the semester. In English 30T, 9 of the 19 students completed the study (with several declining because they were not yet 18 years of age); in English 232W, 9 of the 14 students completed the study.

Learning Outcomes
Given the small sample size, survey results are not statistically significant. The following tables reflect findings of particular interest; the complete survey data, including discursive comments, can be found in the Appendix.

Figure 1: English 30T End of Semester Survey Results (Fall 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response*</th>
<th>Audio comments were easy to understand.</th>
<th>Audio comments helped me to revise my papers.</th>
<th>Audio comments are conducive to my learning style.</th>
<th>Audio comments promote learning among college students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentiles reflect the total number of responses to each question and exclude “I don’t know” answers.
Figure 2: English 232W End of Semester Survey Results (Spring 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response*</th>
<th>Audio comments were easy to understand.</th>
<th>Audio comments helped me to revise my papers.</th>
<th>Audio comments are conducive to my learning style.</th>
<th>Audio comments promote learning among college students.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percentiles reflect the total number of responses to each question and exclude “I don’t know” answers.

As indicated, students in English 30T show a more consistent preference for audio comments. This disparity likely derives from the difference in course objectives and student population. Enrollment in English 30T requires a qualifying placement score and tends to attract highly motivated honors students who are committed to their development as writers. A survey of American Literature with an upper-level writing component, English 232W enrolls students at all class years. It satisfies requirements in many majors, including American Studies and Professional Writing; it also attracts students who simply need to fulfill their W requirement.

Scholarly Outcomes

National Conference Presentations

Regional Conference Presentations

Publication
**Recommendations**

Based on project findings, the investigator makes the following recommendations to instructors considering the use of audio comments.

1. Consider using audio comments with groups of students who are invested in their development as writers, such as honors students or students enrolled in upper-level courses in their chosen field of study.

2. Maximize the use of audio comments for formative rather than summative comments. Students are more likely to listen to comments if they must synthesize and apply them to subsequent revisions; anecdotally, several students reported that they did not listen to comments on graded papers.

3. Treat audio comments as one tool among many, which may be implemented at the instructor’s discretion. Because the process is not particularly portable and because faculty members at Penn State Berks share offices, recording audio comments can become logistically difficult.

4. Remain mindful of students’ technological resources and technological literacies. Students may need some coaching as to how to retrieve comments from the Angel site and how to activate comments.

**Conclusion**

Consistent with previous scholarship on audio comments, this study shows that audio comments have strong potential for fostering student learning at Penn State Berks. Like any instructor feedback, however, audio feedback is most effective when it is part of an integrated learning process in which students either apply that feedback to subsequent assignments or view it as part of their ongoing intellectual development.

**Acknowledgements**

The investigator gratefully acknowledges John Shank and the staff of the Center for Teaching and Learning and Mary Lou D’Allegro and the Office of Planning, Research, and Assessment for their extensive contributions to this project.
Works Cited

