When guidance sounds good

It is not long since we were introduced to email guidance. It contributed to providing flexible and accessible services. But it proved difficult to type an email response to a query such as a CV review within the 15-minute slot that was allocated for a one to one appointment.

Earlier this year I attended a multimedia Show and Tell at my institution, organised by the Centre for Learning Technology (CLT) and intended for academics, to showcase best practice and innovation. I felt inspired by the potential of the media demonstrated and explored these more with a focus on the use of audio feedback.

English for Career Success, a joint venture between Careers and Languages was in the planning stages with several hurdles to overcome. Students would be from different courses presenting timetabling issues and room space would be problematic. Whilst written skills would be assessed, the focus would probably be on oral skills, pronunciation, use of careers related terminology and increased confidence through practice. Audio feedback would enable the tutors to record feedback on assignments addressing the oral skills, with students able to play it back and review it. The students would also record themselves for the introductions, presentations and interview modules to practice their oral skills, hear themselves back and receive audio feedback from the tutors.

There are two technical to be addressed with using audio; making the recordings and delivering them. I tried two recording methods Wimba Voice tools and Jing. The Wimba Voice tools are built into the LSE's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle and are widely used in UK universities but there is a significant license cost. There are much cheaper alternatives; it is possible to use a digital voice recorder (approx. £80) and the free Audacity software to create the recordings. Jing is an example of screen capture software which records both audio and whatever happens on the screen. It is a free on-line service. Other similar tools include Screen Toaster and Screenr. I also used two methods of delivering the audio files to the students: email and the VLE. One of the drawbacks with audio and even more so with screen captures is the size of the files. Sending large files to students' inboxes is not ideal so there can be an advantage to using the VLE.

How did I go about it? If I take a CV as an example I found that it was easiest to just simulate a one to one and to not re-record if I stumbled, paused or corrected myself, much as would happen in reality. I tried 3 different options all of which take around 15 minutes with practice:

1. Audio only: I read through printed CV putting a note here and there as a prompt. Then I recorded my feedback.

2. Audio plus Word document: I annotated the word document and then recorded my feedback before sending both to the student with instructions to open the word document and then play the audio

3. Screen capture: I recorded both the screen and audio using Jing. This allowed me to comment on aspects of the CV as I highlighted them on the screen.   It looked impressive but required more dexterity and the file sizes were problematic as 5 minutes worked out at around 3.5 MB!
Informal feedback from students upon receiving the audio has been positive.

How did I find it? I felt I gave the students better feedback than via email as there was less ambiguity about the meaning of my words and I could emphasise points of importance. I also found that I could say more than I could have written in the equivalent time. It allowed me to spend more time explaining a concept and also more time acknowledging the well-written sections giving more balanced feedback. This fitted with the research by the "Sounds Good" project at Leeds Metropolitan University. The research, based on 1200 students, found that 90% preferred audio to traditional feedback with the "personal" aspect particularly valued. Studies from Sheffield Hallam University, UCLAN, Staffordshire University and Chester University drew similar conclusions.

So far, so good. But what are the drawbacks?   Quiet space to record feedback can be difficult to find. The files sizes of the recordings can be a challenge when it comes to delivering them to students. Feedback from fellow AGCAS members has been around the difficulty of archiving the audio within existing student records. Also not being able to review the feedback as quickly as scanning a written document prior to seeing a student could be problematic.

For me the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages and this term's pilot of E4CS will see if that is also true for the students involved. The audio guidance side of the course will be evaluated through a focus group in December run by a member of CLT at the end of term and considered in detail before running a second course in the following term.

Judith Baines, October 2009
(Featured in Phoenix January 2010)

Aspects of this article were first presented as Reaching a Wider Audience, Baines, J and Lingard, M, AGCAS Technology in Careers Work Conference, Reading, 8 July 2009:
http://www.agcas.org.uk/events/278-Technology-in-Careers-Work-Conference-Reading

The JISC-funded Sounds Good Project, Leeds Metropolitan University, can be found here: http://sites.google.com/site/soundsgooduk/

Wimba Voice Tools: http://www.wimba.com/products/wimba_voice/

Jing: http://www.jingproject.com/

Screen Toaster: http://www.screentoaster.com/

Screenr: http://screenr.com/