COULD THIS REVOLUTIONISE STUDENT FEEDBACK

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Imagine you videoed yourself every time you marked a piece of students' work. Imagine you could open up a student's essay on your computer screen, press a button and from that moment on everything you said and any corrections you made on the work were all recorded in a video. So if you highlighted something, underlined a spelling mistake or talked about the organisation of the essay, it would all be recorded. Then you simply clicked a button and emailed the video to the student. They could then play it back and listen and watch as you commented on their essays. You could for example get them to watch the video and then redraft their essay. What's more it wouldn't require any fancy pieces of software; just standard screen recorder software that works with literally one click of the mouse.

Such work is taking place at the University of Westminster. Students are receiving live video recordings of the teacher correcting their essays. The videos are produced and then sent back to the students who have to watch their videos and redraft their essays. Early results are very encouraging. Students are taking a much more interest in the feedback they receive because the amount of information that can be provided by the teacher is much greater and students feel it is the nearest thing to a one to one feedback session. What's more with the recent discussions in improving feedback in higher education, this may be an innovation that Universities are looking for. Powerful but yet incredibly simplistic. Having documented proof of feedback may also become key factor in its adoption.

So how does the technology work? The students email their essays in Word files to the tutor. The tutor then opens up Word files and turns on the software. Everything that the tutor now does on the screen is recorded as a video. All the mouse moves, underlining, and corrections whatever the tutor does is recorded. More amazingly if the tutor has a microphone plugged in then any comments the tutor makes are also recorded. Once the feedback has been completed the video is compressed into a format that the students can view on their computer and then send back to them. Of course it doesn't have to be a Word file. The screen capture software simply records the screen, it doesn't matter what programmes you happen to be running at the time.

This research is at an early stage but it causing widespread interest. Most lecturers add notes to the margins of their students' essays which are normally around 5 to 6 words long however because the tutor can talk as they correct the work much more detail and complete feedback can be given. In the research that is taking place at Westminster University, based around an English for Academic Purposes course the students are told where the problem is, and how it might have come about but are left to actually correct the mistakes themselves. This forces them to watch the videos and then redraft their essays. Whereas the total number of comments on a 'normal' feedback system might amount to a quarter of a page if the comments were written down from the video then they would often amount to more than a whole page of writing. For example, 'traditional' grammar correction of an essay might include a few notes about the type of mistake that has been made by the student whereas with the video correction the teacher is able to explain where the mistake may have come from what grammar to think about to correct it etc.

The power of the software is in its simplicity. There is a small time factor because the videos have to be compressed before being sent to the student but apart from this it really is a 'live' recording of your
feedback session. What more because the software simply records the screen then any tools you use when correcting on the screen will also come out on the video. So for example if you use the “highlighter” in Word to point out a mistake or underline a particular word it then all comes out in the video too. This makes the feedback both oral and visual and benefits the different learning styles of students.

Tests so far have been for correcting student essays on an English for Academic purposes course and clearly there is a strong fit between using the technology and language teaching as the video feedback can include information about syntax, grammar mistakes, spellings and use of vocabulary. However other ideas have also emerged. On an ICT course essays on the topic of using “Interactive Whiteboards” were marked in the “normal” way. After the tutor opened up a Word file turned on the screen recorder and began to produce a “general feedback video” where he talked through some of the general mistakes in organisation of the essays. Good points that were made by some of the students etc. He then produced an essay plan explaining how he would have organised the answer. The video was then compressed and sent back to all the students. These general class feedback videos are particularly useful as they are quick to make and can cover a lot of material. As student Ingbjørg Siglurrdóttir a teacher in Iceland and student on Russell’s ICT course said “These videos are a real innovation. It is nearly like having a one to one session with the tutor and the amount of information that they provide you with is excellent.” Really like the fact that they are both visual and oral. Recently for example in an EAP course the tutor realised there were several students make a particularly grammar mistake. He therefore produced a “feedback video” that was more like a grammar lesson providing information about the grammar point writing up examples and then sending a “live” recording to all the students. Of course these ideas are not limited to higher education in any course at any level it could easily have an application. Students work on any secondary level education course will greatly benefit from such feedback videos.

Many teachers and lecturers are also citing the possibilities for distance learning. Dr Michael Thomas an Associate Professor of English as a Foreign Language in Japan who has been exploring Russell’s work with his own university students believes the idea could be invaluable for distance learning courses. Many distance learning courses would really benefit from this idea as they often lack personal contact with the tutors. It could add a whole new dimension to student/teacher feedback as the technology can be used with a minimum of knowledge by students and teachers alike.

Russell Stannard is into the 3rd stage of his research which is being funded by the Education Initiative Centre First he had to decide on the technology. There are a number of Screen recorder software packages around. Screen recorder by Matchware is very easy to use literally just a click of a button to start recording your screen and can be very effective. Camtasia and Captivate allow greater editing facilities and compression options. Russell chose Camtasia as the latest versions of Camtasia even allow you to include a small video of yourself in the corner of the screen so that the students not only see your computer screen hear your voice but can even see you as you mark their work.

The second stage was to look at feedback itself. It is best to provide direct correction of the mistakes within the videos or better to simply highlight mistakes but get the students to actually correct the work themselves. The research findings are rather contradictory but it was decided that the most effective way of getting the students to use the videos was not to actually correct the mistakes but rather to point out where they were and what might be the cause of them and then to leave it up to the students to do the corrections in the re-draft. This way it forces the students to work with the videos and extract the information provided in them.

Companies that produce the screen corder software
Matchware produce a very simple to use and effective tool called Screencorder.
http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp
Camtasia also produce an excellent tool that offers powerful editing capabilities.

Of course the software doesn’t only have to be used for feedback. Screen recorder software can be
used to teach all sorts of things. For example you can open up a software package like Adobe Flash and turn on the screen recorder software and start working with Flash talking and commenting as you do so and then save these as video tutorials for your students. This has turned out to be very popular with students and Russell. Adobe Director course is supported by a whole array of such videos. Will Whitlock EIC. I was impressed with Russell’s original idea of producing teaching videos for Director and Flash courses. These are so simple to make and the EII’s funding more work in this area to develop videos for teaching the staff to use Blackboard. However this new idea of using the screen capture software for feedback is a complete innovation.

Now Russell is just beginning to do some comparative studies. Are the videos effective learning tools? Do they result in improved drafts against traditional methods and what do the students feel about them? Does it make the whole process of feedback more interesting? Russell hopes to have some answers to these questions by early 2007.

Russell Stannard is a principal lecturer at the University of Westminster department of Computer Science Harrow. He is also a member of the writing team of “New Standard English.” The book which has recently been covered in the press for selling more than a 100 million units in China. He writes a regular column about technology in the magazine English Teaching Professional called “Webwatcher.”

You can view examples of some of the feedback Russell has produced on your tube. Unfortunately they cannot be viewed at full screen size.

An example of grammar feedback
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZ1y4t6ggGs
An example of essay feedback
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzI5KVOvHds
An example of teaching Adobe Director
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzMN4sij53k