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Research

Comparison of audio versus written feedback on writing assignments

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Abstract

Introduction: The primary objective of this article is to evaluate recorded audio feedback compared to written feedback for writing assignments for pharmacy students. Secondary objectives were to assess student perceptions regarding the use of recorded audio feedback.

Methods: Recorded audio feedback from two assignments was randomly selected and compared to a matched set of written feedback from a previous course offering. Feedback was analyzed for quantity and content using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) 2007. Students were surveyed regarding their preference for audio feedback as well as their perceptions regarding acceptance and effectiveness.

Results: Recorded audio feedback provided significantly more feedback compared to the historical control group. Linguistic analysis revealed that audio feedback was less negative and contained more directed feedback. Students generally preferred audio feedback and felt it more personal in nature.

Conclusion: Recorded feedback appears to be an effective alternative for feedback on written assignments.

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Introduction

The 2007 Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards[1] specify that a graduate should possess competent verbal and written interprofessional skills and be able to provide patient/caregiver education. Under the communicator heading, the 2013 Center for the Advancement of Pharmacy Education (CAPE) Outcomes[2] delineate that graduates should be able to create professional documents pertinent to organizational needs. A review of the literature does not quantify the amount of writing assignments in pharmacy education. However, based upon an extrapolation of our own curriculum, the ACPE standards, and CAPE outcomes, it is safe to assume that all colleges and schools of pharmacy require some writing assignments. Grading written assignments is among the most tedious, time-consuming, stressful, and least rewarding endeavors in which faculty participate.[3] Moreover, faculty may be concerned that their feedback is not actually helping students.[4,5] Providing feedback to students is an integral part of a faculty position, and much time and effort is spent providing critique.[6] However, standardized surveys suggest that in some higher education settings, students are not satisfied with the feedback they receive.[7]

Formative assessment in the form of feedback is an important aspect of learning, and recorded audio feedback may be an alternative to traditional written feedback for the

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Millennial generation of students who are comfortable with accessing technology.[8] One of the challenges to overcome in an electronic format is ensuring that students actually review the feedback. One study found that students were 10 times more likely to review audio feedback in comparison to written feedback.[9] There is very little research as it relates to providing recorded audio feedback in health professional education, which has primarily been completed in nursing education.[8,10] Older studies report that problems with recorded audio feedback included file size, e-mail compatibility, and simplicity.[11] Early versions of audio feedback were recorded via audiocassette. However, modern learning management systems and ubiquitous high-speed internet constitute improvements and solutions for these issues by providing a hosting platform and the capabilities to disseminate large files. Furthermore, many schools include computer proficiency training that may also help alleviate these issues. While the health professional education literature suggests that audio feedback is similar to that of written feedback, it is noted that some small studies have shown that nursing students prefer audio feedback over traditional feedback.[8,10] Outside of the health professions, student preference has been mixed. For example, Ice et al.[12] found that in online computer science education, students perceived a combination of audio and written feedback to be the most effective.

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate recorded audio feedback and compare it to written feedback for pharmacy students within an evidence-based practice course offered in the first professional year. Secondary objectives were to assess student perceptions regarding the use of recorded audio feedback and the impact of providing audio versus written feedback on faculty time.

Methods

Informatics and Evidence-Based Practice I is a required three-credit course offered by the corresponding author as the first of a two-part course series on evidence-based practice in the first year of the professional pharmacy program. As an innovation for the latest course offering, the instructor utilized recorded audio feedback instead of written feedback for writing assignments. The course includes five written drug information question and response assignments, spread throughout the semester. These assignments are one page in length, and require a minimum of two primary references. Assignments were submitted electronically through the learning management system (LMS) and the instructor of record provided feedback via electronic audio recording for each of the assignments. The general structure of the feedback was

(1) *Introduction*: Hello (student name) this is (faculty name) reviewing (assignment name).
(2) *Feedback*: Specific location (e.g., in the first sentence of paragraph two) and feedback regarding the assignment.
(3) *Closing*: Thank you followed by accolades (e.g., keep up the good work) or encouragement (e.g., you can do better).

Students were able to listen to this feedback on their college issued laptops. Grades and feedback were accessed through the LMS.

In order to conduct a psychometric linguistic evaluation of the feedback, Random.org's Random Integer Set Generator was used to randomly select a convenience sample of 10 students' recorded audio feedback files from two separate written assignments.[13] Recorded audio feedback was transcribed using Enhanced Dictation in Apple OS X Yosemite into a Microsoft Word 2010 document. The control data of written feedback were identified in the same manner from the same assignments from the previous year when audio feedback was not utilized. Previous feedback was provided via comments in Microsoft Word; these comments were copied into a new file for analysis as a control group. Text files were analyzed for word count and content using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2007 (LIWC 2007). Mean data from the text files were compared utilizing student's *t*-tests with SPSS Statistics Desktop v19. An anonymous, voluntary survey was developed and administered via Survey Monkey in class to assess students' perceptions regarding the use of audio feedback.[14] This study was approved by the Western New England University Institutional Review Board. The instructor hypothesized that providing audio feedback would result in a greater quantity of feedback for assignments as well as more personalized feedback in comparison to written feedback. It was intuitive that speaking naturally would impart additional feedback, and that students would feel that audio feedback was tailored more specifically to their assignment.

Results

Ten audio recordings from two assignments were randomly selected for transcription and comparison to a historical control from a previous year of the same assignment utilizing LIWC 2007. There were no significant differences between mean grades on the selected assignments. Audio feedback was recorded using a web application within our LMS. While native to our system, learning management systems generally allow faculty to upload audio feedback files. Recordings can be made using a multitude of free applications. LIWC was utilized to analyze a word count and a "words in category" linguistic analysis of several psychological processes. Overall, recorded audio provided significantly more (mean = 178.1 versus 21.35 words, $p < 0.01$) feedback in regard to word count (Table 1). It is not surprising that audio feedback was greater in quantity in comparison to written feedback.

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