

Audio Feedback versus Written Feedback: Instructors' and Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

Providing feedback to students on their writing represents perhaps the most important task of a composition instructor and also possibly the most time-consuming task. In online composition classes, this task becomes more daunting, as there are no opportunities for face-to-face conversations with students. Typically, online instructors provide comments to students in text form. The use of audio comments through MP3 files has become an alternative. The purpose of this case study was to examine students' and instructors' perceptions of audio feedback and written feedback for student papers in online composition classes. Data were collected through surveys and interviews. The results show that instructors had mixed feelings about the use of audio, while students tended to have positive feelings toward it. The findings also reveal that teachers tended to give more global commentary when using audio comments and more local commentary when using written comments. Finally, the findings indicate that students' methods of revising their papers based on the feedback they receive may impact their preference for one modality over the other. Implications for further research are discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: online writing instruction, audio feedback, written feedback, composition classes

Introduction

When composition instructors teach writing classes, one of the most significant challenges they face is how to provide feedback to their students on writing assignments. Offering feedback on student papers is perhaps the most valuable teaching activity of a composition instructor (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981). Researchers have noted that feedback on student writing represents important formative assessment information, especially when students revise drafts based on the comments given (Bardine, 1999; Mulcahy, 1993; Stern & Solomon, 2006). As a result of this formative assessment and revision, students become questioning readers of their own writing and improve their ability to communicate to an audience (Dohrer, 1991; Silva, 2012; Sommers, 1982).

However, giving comments to students on their papers is probably the most time-consuming task of a writing instructor (Bardine, Bardine, & Deegan, 2000; Ferris, 2007; Sommers, 1982; Winter, Neal, & Waner, 1996). In addition, the challenge of how to give adequate and timely feedback to students on their writing becomes more acute in online writing classes. Written comments that most instructors use in face-to-face (F2F) classes may not necessarily be adequate in online classes because the platform of teaching online usually does not allow for student conferences with the teacher and F2F explanations of

problems in a paper. Several studies have been conducted on alternative formats for providing comments on student papers in online classes, such as audio feedback, to address the concerns with written comments mentioned above. This exploratory qualitative case study was conducted in preparation for a dissertation study. The purpose of this study was to analyze both students' and instructors' perceptions of audio feedback and written feedback to student papers in online composition classes.

Literature Review

When writing instructors give comments to their students on writing assignments, they typically give the comments in text form (Silva, 2012). However, in the past several decades, instructors have begun to experiment with giving students comments in audio form. In addition, different instructional formats have resulted in changes in feedback styles in writing classes.

Studies on Audio Feedback in F2F Courses

Analyses of the use of audio feedback were conducted as early as the 1970s when instructors experimented with giving audio comments to students using cassette tapes (Anson, 1997; Huang, 2000; Klammer, 1973; Pearce & Ackley, 1995; Sommers, 1989). With the emergence of digital technology in the 1990s, additional studies have been conducted analyzing the use of digital audio in providing feedback to student work. Swan Dagen, Matter, Rinehart, and Ice (2008) found that feedback was richer in audio format, with more adjectives used in audio than in written commentary; that students perceived they had received more feedback when given audio commentary than in written commentary; and that instructors perceived they had given more detailed feedback in audio commentary than in written commentary. Merry and Orsmond (2008) report that students found audio commentary more in depth in offering strategies in improvement, while they also note that tutors discerned that they had offered more examples and a higher quality of feedback through audio than through written commentary. Sipple (2007) notes that developmental writers found audio comments, even for problematic papers, made students more confident in their writing because they "provided more genuine and frequent praise" (p. 24).

Distinctions in Feedback Patterns between F2F and Online Courses

Another trend that has influenced research on feedback in general, and audio feedback in particular, has been the development of online classes. The dynamics of providing feedback to students in a writing class online are significantly different from those in a F2F class. The F2F instructor can provide written feedback to a student on a paper and know that he or she could dialogue with the student about the paper in class if necessary. However, the online instructor has little or no opportunity for such meetings (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Wolsey, 2008). Moreover, while certain synchronous communication tools, such as live chat, have become available, little is known about their use among online instructors (Skylar, 2009). Wolsey reports that "online education currently privileges text-based communication. Further, the Internet affords immediacy for some types of communication; however, feedback rarely occurs in real time" in online classes (p. 312). Applications that an online instructor uses in providing feedback to a student usually involve *asynchronous* electronic means (Parsad & Lewis, 2008; "Professors' Use of Technology," 2010). Online writing classes typically feature feedback to students in text form (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, & Su, 2005; Wolsey, 2008). For this reason, the use of audio feedback in an online class represents a significant change in modality from what has typically been applied in online classes.

Studies on Audio Feedback in Online Courses

Several studies have been conducted that have examined the use of audio feedback in online classes. Ice, Curtis, Phillips, and Wells (2007) conducted a study of online graduate courses in which instructors embedded audio comments into the students' documents using Adobe Acrobat Pro. The findings indicated that students were able to detect nuance more effectively, understand content more thoroughly, and engage with the instructor at a more personal level through audio feedback than through written feedback. Moreover, Ice, Swan, Diaz, Kupczynski, and Swan Dagen (2010) conducted a study in which 196 students in graduate level education courses in three different universities were given both audio and written feedback in Portable Document Format (PDF). They found that students preferred audio feedback over written feedback at global levels of commentary (i.e., for overall quality, structure, and organization), while students tended to prefer written feedback over audio feedback for more specific commentary on issues such as arguments supported or grammatical and mechanical issues

that had emerged. In addition, in a study of 156 undergraduate and graduate students conducted by [Oomen-Early, Bold, Wiginton, Gallien, and Anderson \(2008\)](#), feedback was given in both MP3 audio format as well as embedded audio feedback in [Adobe Acrobat Professional](#) along with feedback in written form. Their findings showed that 52.6% of the students "disagreed or strongly disagreed with using only audio" (p. 270), with 84.6% preferring a blend of audio and written comments. However, the findings corroborated with those of other studies, showing that the majority of students felt that the audio comments helped them understand content and improved their relationships with their instructors.

However, it should be noted that it was not clear in the studies described above if students were asked to revise their papers using the feedback they were given, whether in audio form, written form, or in combination, and to submit revised drafts of the papers. The commentary in all of these studies consisted of summative feedback given to graded papers.

Other studies have been conducted in online courses using various methods of audio feedback but emphasize different audiences and methodologies than this study analyzed. In a graduate photochemistry class taught at the [Open University of the Netherlands](#), [Kirschner, van den Brink, and Meester \(1991\)](#) compared audio feedback through cassette tapes to written feedback and concluded that students rated audio feedback as "more personal, more pleasant, and more lucid than the written feedback" (p. 193). [Olesova, Richardson, Weasenforth, and Meloni \(2011\)](#) found that English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students both felt that written feedback was more effective in providing feedback because of the visual aspect that written comments provided. Nonetheless, the ESL/EFL students in the study found audio comments "made them more involved in the course than written comments did" (p. 39). Again, however, in neither study was it clear that students were asked to revise papers based on the feedback given, whether in audio or written form.

One study that did involve revision of student work was conducted by [Wood, Moskovitz, and Valiga \(2011\)](#). In this study of 48 students in two sections of online nursing classes, the results indicated that 70% of the students felt they understood the instructor's comments more effectively with audio comments than they had with written comments, 67% felt more involved with the course with audio comments than with written comments, and 80% found audio comments to be more personal than written comments (p. 541). They also found, as did [Olesova et al. \(2011\)](#), that visual learners in particular preferred written comments because audio comments "make it harder to match particular comments with the text" (p. 542).

Such studies have rendered invaluable contributions to the research on the use of audio in giving feedback to students in online environments. However, there is a lack of studies in the literature that have analyzed the use of audio feedback and written feedback in an *online* writing class for undergraduate students, have included student revision of the paper being commented on as a part of the study, and have used audio in purely MP3 file format.

Studies on Written Feedback to Student Writing

Studies on written commentary show that written feedback on papers in composition classes can often be unclear and confusing to students. Researchers have noted that students may not act on the advice given in written comments ([Norton & Norton, 2001](#); [Ziv, 1982](#)), that written comments are often "undecipherable" to students ([LaFontana, 1996](#), p. 71), that their importance is often unknown by students ([Bardine, 1999](#)), and that students have an "uncanny *persistence*" in misunderstanding written responses on their compositions ([Sperling & Freedman, 1987](#), p. 344, emphasis in original). The research that has been conducted on audio comments in the composition classroom has shown that audio comments are usually more extensive, more thorough, and more helpful in the content delivered to students than written comments are ([Johanson, 1999](#); [Sipple, 2007](#); [Sweeney, 1999](#)). Instructors could "speak" to each student "as though he or she were in a face-to-face conference" when giving audio comments as opposed to having to condense their comments in one sentence in the margin when providing written comments ([Johanson, 1999](#), p. 33).

Much has been written about teachers' experiences with written and audio comments, and much has been recorded about student perceptions of feedback in general. However, additional empirical research on student and teacher response to audio comments compared to student and teacher response to written comments on papers in online undergraduate writing courses is needed. The purpose of this study was twofold. First, the study collected data on student responses to and attitudes toward audio

feedback in digital MP3 form in comparison to student responses to and attitudes toward written feedback in an online writing course in which students were asked to use the feedback to revise their drafts. Second, the study examined faculty attitudes toward both the audio approach and the written approach.

Method

The study examined student perceptions of the two forms of feedback in the areas of grammar, organization, and content as well as their overall impressions of the two forms of feedback. In addition, the study examined teacher satisfaction with both methods of commenting, gathering data on the time spent producing and uploading comments with both methods and gathering qualitative feedback from instructors on their experiences using both methods. Finally, the study examined the types of comments given in both written and audio form to see if differences emerged in the types of comments given in both formats. The research findings were qualitative in nature.

Participants

Five faculty members at a large accredited university on the east coast of the United States that offers programs mostly online volunteered to participate in the study. They each had been scheduled to teach one section of the same undergraduate online composition course. They were each asked if they would like to participate in a research study that would involve a comparison of audio comments to student papers and written comments to student papers. All five faculty members agreed to participate.

Following the faculty members' acceptance to participate, students from each of the five sections were randomly selected and contacted by email for participation in the study. In all, 57 students were selected and contacted, and 12 students accepted the invitation. Of the 12 students, four did not complete the necessary work in the class, and one had to withdraw from the study for personal reasons. In the end, seven students and four instructors completed the study (one instructor was removed from the study because he had no student participating in the study).

The first instructor, Susan, had one student agree to participate from her section. The second instructor, Mary, had three students agree to participate in her section. The third instructor, Mark, had one student agree to participate in his section. The fourth instructor, Amy, had two students agree to participate in her section.

Of the students who participated, three were male and four were female. Among the instructors, three were female and one was male. They each had over 15 years of composition instruction experience.

Data Sources and Analysis

The class involved three major writing assignments. The instructors were asked to select any two of the three major writing assignments in the class for the study. For these two writing assignments, the instructors were asked to provide only written comments to the draft of one paper and to provide only audio comments in MP3 file to the draft of the other paper from each participating student. The students then revised the drafts and submitted final copies for grading. Instructors were allowed to produce their MP3 files with any software program they chose to use. No particular software program was prescribed for the study.

Two surveys (Appendices A and B) were sent to students for them to complete after they had submitted final copies of their papers that had been revised based on the comments that they had received. The surveys featured nine Likert-scale items and one open-ended item asking them to rate their experience with the two types of comments. A phone interview was conducted with each student participant. The interview questions represented follow-up questions from the survey (Appendix C). In addition, the four faculty members completed two surveys (Appendices D and E). One survey asked about their experiences in giving audio comments, and the other asked about their experiences in giving written comments.

Content analysis was conducted on the interview data. The interview data were coded, categorized, and then compared among the participants to identify themes from the data among the participants (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Discussion

Several major themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis. Those themes are described in the subsections below.

Technological Challenges for Instructors versus Students

None of the four instructors had had experience using audio in an online class, and none had created MP3 files for use in their classes before the study. This lack of experience created challenges for all of them. They all had to perform some level of navigation through the technology application they used to create the MP3 file. Mary wrote in the survey, *"Sometimes I would forget to reduce the size of the file, so I would have to go back to reformat it."* Amy found that one of her MP3 files was too large and had to divide it into two files. Mark and Susan both contacted the researcher midway through the study to receive more help with the creation of or the extraction of MP3 files. These challenges delayed the use of audio as feedback to a particular paper for one instructor.

However, the students experienced essentially no technological problems with the audio files from their instructors. One student indicated on her survey that she had had some problems with the audio comments. However, the follow-up interview with her indicated that the problems she was indicating were more directed at the instructor. The instructor had had challenges in producing the audio file, so the comments came later than expected for the student.

As stated earlier, few studies have analyzed the use of digital audio files in MP3 form in an entirely online class. At a brick-and-mortar institution that teaches F2F classes, faculty members may be able to physically attend a training session offered by the technology service unit of the institution on the production and use of audio files and may be able to make return visits to such a service unit on campus to receive answers to follow-up questions. However, in a program in which the majority of classes are taught online and in which the majority of instructors live outside of the local site from which the institution delivers its classes, such F2F training is not provided. For this reason, online programs should ensure that faculty members receive effective online training and become comfortable with the production and use of audio files. The need for faculty training becomes more acute in a distance education program that features faculty around the country and around the world.

The Tone of the Instructor in Audio Commentary

Students in the study noted that the instructor's tone was quite favorable when receiving audio comments. They found this in contrast to the tone communicated in written format.

Tony said about the audio comments from his instructor, Mark: *"He was even more reassuring, and where he tried to give counsel and suggest some areas of opportunity, it didn't sound quite as harsh as it might have in the written format where you don't have that quality and character."* Sharon, who was Amy's student, noted, *"It was fun to put a voice with a name. She was very pleasant and offered suggestions with her comments."* Moreover, Roger observed after receiving audio comments from his instructor that, in a positive way, *audio comments were more direct than written comments were: "her remarks really hit home to me more in the audio. Like it was more directed. I mean I wasn't insulted, but it's like, 'Wow, she said that to me?' than saying it on a piece of paper."*

Finally, Teri, who was also in Amy's class and preferred written comments, pointed out that the audio commentary added a more personal touch to the feedback, describing the audio as *"friendly"* and *"nice."*

This finding corroborates with the findings of other studies. Moreover, this finding is extremely pivotal for online classes involving undergraduate students. If a student in a F2F class finds the tone of an instructor's comment unappealing, there is at least the opportunity for the instructor to present a friendlier face in class and cushion the student's impressions. In an online class, such opportunities do not arise. The student's impression of the instructor is often formed by the commentary on his or her work. The text-based nature of the online class may only reinforce this impression as the class continues. If audio commentary provides a more favorable tone in an online class, such a dynamic may be important for student satisfaction and retention in online composition classes as more writing classes are offered to undergraduates in online format.

Media Impact on Comments

The study indicated that, in some cases, the types of comments given in audio and in written format were different. The audio feedback from instructors tended to be more general and refer to global issues

(topic of the paper, overall organization, structure, thesis, etc.) in the paper, while the written feedback from instructors tended to focus on micro-level issues (grammar, punctuation, word choice, and spelling) more often than the audio feedback did.

For example, in listening to Susan's MP3 file to her student, Laura, it was found that almost all of the comments involved cautioning Laura against ending a paragraph with quoted information or paraphrased information without summarizing the relevance of the quote or paraphrase, directing the student to use the correct citation style, recommending that the student use more sources for certain sections of the paper, and explaining to the student the need for a stronger conclusion to the paper. In addition, in the audio comments, Susan complimented the student's introduction, her use of rhetorical questions, and her overall organization. Nonetheless, no grammatical comments were apparent. On the other hand, when giving written comments, Susan dominated her comments with points on grammar, as more than half of the comments were directed toward grammatical items. Other comments included inserting a question mark at an awkward point, asking questions about some of the wording, and pointing out second-person point of view.

This pattern in commenting may explain why Laura wrote in her evaluation, *"The only thing I preferred with the written comments over the oral comments was it pointed out simple grammatical errors ... on the oral, things like that weren't caught and it did cause a few points deducted for the grammatical errors."* It was observed that when she received the audio comments, Laura did not receive grammatical suggestions or corrections.

A similar pattern is found when listening to Amy's comments to Teri. Amy posted a 5-minute audio clip to Teri that gave specific advice on the introductory paragraph, including adding a sentence; advice on some of the body paragraph, including questioning what the main points of some of the paragraphs were; and advice on making sure the paper, which was a persuasive paper, took a strong stand on the issue. Nonetheless, grammatical suggestions or corrections were not apparent in the audio comments. In her follow-up interview, Teri contrasted this pattern with what she had received in written format:

"In papers when she provided written feedback, some areas she would say, I forget what they were called, modifiers? In areas where she would correct the grammar, where it was, I wouldn't say obvious, but easily understood. But in other areas, she would say, 'You're using a dangling modifier. Look this up in the book.' So I had to go back and look it up in the book, which was really good, because I was able to learn."

William's experience with his instructor, Mary, was similar in that he simply received more comments in the written method than he did through the audio method. William commented in his follow-up interview:

"The audio comments were related to the final research essay. And she basically said that the thesis was good, the organization was good, ... she didn't really have any, other than a few grammatical errors there. But on the written, if I can recall back to the first couple of outlines and essays for the first two exercises, she had quite a bit to say about organization, you know, and I basically took all of that and, you know, revised it accordingly. I understood, her comments were meaningful and, you know, but she did have quite a few suggestions on organization."

William received written comments on a paper that required significant revision. However, he received audio comments on a paper that required little revision. This situation affected his ratings of the audio comments in his surveys. In fact, he wrote in the narrative section of his survey, *"the prolific nature of written comments helps to provide a clearer understanding through specific examples and annotations."* His description of the written comments as "prolific" corroborates with the types of comments he received in both written and audio form. The written comments were more robust, and the audio comments were more general.

The results from this study indicated that some of the audio comments had little to no grammatical content in them, while written comments from the same instructors had extensive grammatical content in them. Though the content of these two types of comments was different, students have different preferences for the two formats for different reasons. Four out of seven students preferred the audio commentary to their papers. While their surveys indicated a wider range of scores for the audio comments than for the written comments, their narrative sections on the surveys as well as their follow-up interviews did indicate a preference for audio commentary.

In the literature, the effectiveness of the use of audio comments to provide feedback on micro-level areas (e.g., grammar, punctuation, spelling, and citation format) is mixed. Some instructors have found,

for example, that reading a run-on sentence out loud to a student can be more effective than simply writing "ROS" after a sentence in text form (Sull & Cavanaugh, 2011). Kim (2004) found that students did not prefer written feedback to audio feedback for low-level problems in their writing. [Syncox \(2003\)](#) found that non-native speakers of English benefited from audio comments on micro-level areas because of the ability of audio comments to explain how and when issues of grammar and punctuation should be addressed. [Merry and Orsmond \(2008\)](#) found that 13 of the 15 students studied "were unconcerned by the absence of written comments" (Results section, para. 5). Included in the comments they received in audio form were comments that identified and corrected errors and demonstrated correct practice. [Ice et al. \(2010\)](#) found that students prefer written commentary to micro-level areas, with only 6.7 percent of the students preferring exclusively audio commentary on such issues in their papers. However, they caution that this result may have occurred because students may not perceive they are receiving micro-level feedback in audio form when in fact they are. Students may be "less likely to recognize when such feedback is provided, especially in instances when such feedback manifests itself more subtly (as when general comments include noting that the word 'environment' is consistently misspelled throughout the document)" (p. 126).

While in general the literature has shown that written feedback is preferred to audio feedback for micro-level concerns, some studies have shown that audio comments are effective in helping students address such concerns, and some studies have shown inconclusive results on this point. The findings from this study showed that some instructors did not tend to provide as much feedback to micro-level issues when they gave audio feedback as when they gave written feedback. It is possible that some instructors find it challenging to explain grammatical and punctuation issues in audio form while others find that the audio format allows them more freedom to explain micro-level concept or even to read grammatically problematic sentences as part of the feedback. Differences in instructor preference may explain why students prefer written feedback for micro-level issues in some situations. More research is needed on the use of audio feedback for micro-level issues. The results of this study confirm this need.

Differences in Instructors' and Students' Preferences

It is interesting to note that, among the four students who noted that they preferred audio commentary to typed commentary, three of them had teachers who did not prefer to give audio commentary. In addition, even though many audio comments given by instructors may have been dominated by global rather than local concerns, four out of seven students still preferred the audio feedback to the written feedback. The contrast between instructor hesitation about the use of audio and student preference for the use of audio was striking.

Susan, an instructor, wrote in her survey that she felt her voice was rather *"soft and young sounding"* and that it lacked an authoritative quality. However, her student Laura did not concur. In her interview, Laura noted that she enjoyed the audio critique *"because it gave the professor a chance to be more specific on the corrections that needed to be made."* Laura wrote in her survey about the audio comments, *"It gave a chance to explain why it was getting critiqued, not just what is getting critiqued."* Even though the audio comments lacked specific grammatical suggestions, Laura found the paragraph-by-paragraph and section-by-section analysis of the audio more effective for her than the written feedback. In discussing her ability to improve her writing and her overall experience in getting comments, she remarked in the interview:

"She just explained it a lot better in the audio than in the written ... in the written, it was really vague, and she didn't go into detail as to why something was incorrect or wrong ... My overall experience, I thought the audio was more positive. It gave me a better understanding of what she was looking for and what she was expecting of us. So I thought that was really helpful. The written was very effective also. The written just didn't go too well for me. I didn't like the feedback in the written too much only because, well, afterwards you could go into a conference and ask 'What did you mean by ...' But as far as the audio [sic], she really went into detail."

In addition, Mary, another instructor, indicated in her surveys that she was concerned about the level of clarity she was giving in audio comments. She also pointed out technological challenges with the use of audio commentary. However, her student Roger found audio comments a more valuable tool for feedback than written comments. He explained this in his survey:

"I liked the audio format better because I was able to gather other cues like that from her voice for example, that would not have come through in a written format. I think I tended to pay closer attention as well, rather than skimming through a reading, which probably helped me more."

Roger's interview answers indicated more reasons for his preference for audio:

"I thought at first the audio would be a little bit, not so much harder to understand, but that I would only maybe have a chance to listen to it once and then that would be it. But when I could just kind of just keep playing the MP3 file, to listen to it for what did she say at that point or take more stuff out of it and go back to it, it was, uh, I thought it was just as valuable – maybe even more valuable because with the audio I could understand the tone of the instructor's voice."

Furthermore, Amy, another instructor, wrote in her survey, *"I have a concern that it may not be as easy for students to refer back to specific comments in audio format."* However, her student Sharon found audio comments to be more helpful than written comments. In her survey, she wrote the following in describing her experience with written comments.

"Sometimes, I find that the written comments are a little hard to follow. By this I mean when one ... comment applies to a sentence or word, their placement in blue on the side of the margin confuses me sometimes. This is the only concern I would have in general about the written comments."

In her follow-up interview, she provided more details about why audio seemed to connect with her learning needs: *"it was just easier ... when you speak to somebody, I just find it easier to hear their tone of voice and I just found it was easier for me to understand where she wanted me to go with my paper."* She also indicated that suggestions and examples from the instructor were more helpful with the audio format: *"Because, again, there was examples and things that she said verbally, versus just the basic, you know, 'You need to watch out for this.'"* Moreover, the audio may have personalized the distance learning experience for her and created a more F2F-like environment, as she pointed out later in the interview: *"hearing the audio, you're like sitting in class and you're listening, you're more attentive as to what they're trying to ask you to do."*

Actually, Tony and Mark represent the only student–teacher combination in which both clearly preferred audio comments to written comments. While Mark rated the use of audio very highly in his survey, his student Tony contributed his own Likert-scale analysis: *"on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the best and 1 being the worst, I would rate it [the audio form of commenting] a 5 and I would rate the written [form of commenting] a 4."* Most of the points Tony made when mentioning the value of audio comments were about the tone of the professor and how it was affected positively through the use of audio.

The literature has shown that teacher personality and tone of voice can affect an instructor's commenting style when giving audio feedback (Kim, 2004; Wood et al., 2011). In addition, Swan Dagen et al. (2008) notes that both instructors in their study experienced challenges with the technology in producing audio comments. This study confirms the need to ensure that faculty members receive adequate training and are able to become comfortable with using the technology required to provide audio feedback, both to overcome any technological hurdles as well as to become comfortable with the rhythm of audio commenting.

Furthermore, the fact that students found audio comments clearer than written comments is significant because, for online composition classes, the need for clarity in meaning is more acute than that for F2F composition classes. If a student in a F2F class does not understand a comment, he or she can approach the instructor during a break in the class, after class, or during office hours and ask for clarification. No such opportunities exist for online students. Again, at an institution in which classes are taught online and the majority of instructors reside outside the geographical region of the institution, and a significant percentage of the students do as well, the need for clarity in comments on student papers is great.

Influence of Students' Methods of Revising Papers on Their Preferences

The method a student uses, and even the direction a student is looking for in receiving comments on a paper, may influence his or her preferences for either written or audio feedback. A good example of this is Jane, a student in Mary's class. Jane preferred written comments to audio comments on her papers. In the survey, she wrote that with written comments she was able to see the text written by her instructor, she *"made the corrections,"* and then she deleted the comments. She would *"work through the changes until I addressed all of the corrections and suggestions my professor made."* However, she was unable to follow this procedure when she received audio comments. When she received audio comments, Jane wrote down the comments while hearing them. This method caused her to have to play

the file over and over again, and her explanation indicated that her method of listening and writing down may have become an obstacle to her using the comments to help her revise the paper.

Sipple (2007) found in her action research study that the seven students who preferred handwritten feedback desired this method more than audio feedback because written feedback facilitated their ability to locate mistakes in their papers and correct them. In this study, Jane's explanation of her experience in receiving audio and written feedback seems to corroborate with that of Sipple's students. In the audio comments that Mary gave Jane on her paper, Mary gave content and support suggestions first and gave a few grammatical and mechanical suggestions last. The comments did not cover the paper from beginning to end. Rather, the comments were given in chunks, with global issues mentioned first and then specific grammar or citation issues mentioned last. Jane's systematic way of revising the paper from beginning to end by making the changes suggested by the instructor in a sort of "checklist" fashion rendered written comments a more user-friendly system for her.

Limitations of the Study

Instructors provided audio comments on one essay and written comments to a different essay. However, one cannot assume that both essays featured the same level of rigor or the same challenges in writing to the student. This feature represents a limitation of the study in that the authors cannot produce a comparison of two assignments of equal level of difficulty. Second, as stated earlier, the instructors did not receive training in the production and use of audio files. It was later realized that such training would have made some instructors' experiences with audio more positive. Third, the low number of students who participated limits the application of the findings from this study to a broader context.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study imply that several issues are worth noting when instructors provide audio feedback on student papers. Additional research on student responses to audio and written forms of feedback may shed light on some of the issues this small study exposes.

First, the need for teacher training to overcome technical hurdles in audio file creation should be taken into account and perhaps factored into a study. If instructors are frustrated with the process of how to make an audio file, if a microphone does not seem to work, or if a file is too large, the instructor's experience will be affected. It is possible that even if the students enjoy this method of feedback the instructor may not. As stated earlier, such training is especially important in online programs in which instructors are at a distance.

Second, teachers' methods of audio creation should be considered as future studies are conducted. In this study, one instructor wrote out her comments first and then recorded them. This method would defeat one purpose of using audio comments, which is to save time. In addition, this method may be brutally time consuming if audio comments were to be given to twenty-plus students on their papers. In general, perhaps instructors should be given practice on becoming comfortable with speaking their comments into a microphone as they embark on a study of this nature. The lack of exposure to the audio method of commenting on papers can affect an instructor's style and comfort level with the delivery of audio.

Third, the content of teacher comments in audio and written format represents a potentially fascinating area of study. The tendency in this study was for instructors to make global suggestions when giving audio comments but to make more micro-level and editing suggestions and even corrections when giving written comments. This division is not purely predictable – written comments in this study did feature instructors providing significant organizational and content suggestions. In addition, other studies have shown that audio comments can be effective for some students and instructors for micro-level concerns. It is possible that teachers tend to default toward a conversational approach in talking to the student about the paper when giving audio feedback but to lean toward a word- or sentence-level approach when giving written feedback. This dynamic may cause the types of issues that are commented on to change from one format to the other.

Finally, student expectations in receiving comments on their paper should be considered as further analysis is conducted in this area. Sipple (2007) found in her study that some students who preferred handwritten feedback desired this method more than audio feedback because written feedback helped them locate mistakes in their papers and correct them. In this study, Jane expressed these sentiments as well. However, it must be asked whether a systematic "correct-and-move-on" approach to revising a

paper is what is desired in students. It is possible that, if students see comments as purely editing suggestions or corrections, they will prefer written comments to audio comments. This is not to say that written commentary cannot be preferred for other reasons. For example, William noted in his survey that one can print out written comments and look at them later, a feature that presents advantages over an audio file. However, when conducting a study of this nature, students who indicate preferences in a Likert-scale format should be given the opportunity to expand on and explain their preferences. It may be that what they expect from teacher feedback significantly affects what method of feedback they desire. The written commentary in the surveys in this study and the follow-up interviews provided rich content and further explanations that helped explain the other data. It may be that their preferences for one form of comments over another form reveal some other patterns in their writing and revision processes that may be worth considering in future studies.

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Appendix A: Student Survey – Written Comments

Please consider the paper for which you received written comments. Please answer the following questions by checking the appropriate box.

Please rate your understanding of your instructor's comments on the following areas:					
	Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1) Grammatical issues in your paper					
2) Organizational issues in your paper					
3) Content issues in your paper					
Please rate your ability to correct/address or improve problems in the following areas:					
	Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
4) Grammar					
5) Organization					
6) Content issues					
7) Your writing ability overall as a result of teacher's comments on your first draft					
8) Your overall experience in receiving feedback on this paper					

- 9) Please rate how challenging the technology was in obtaining your comments to your papers. Please circle one number.

1	2	3	4	5
I had many technological problems	I had some technological problems	I had few technological problems	I had very few technological problems that were easily resolved	I had no technological problems

- 10) Please comment on your overall satisfaction with the *written comments* you received on your paper in this class. Feel free to write freely about any concerns or points you want to raise. You may use additional paper in answering this question.

Appendix B: Student Survey – Audio Comments

Please consider the paper for which you received audio comments. Please answer the following questions by checking the appropriate box.

Please rate your understanding of your instructor's comments on the following areas:					
	Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1) Grammatical issues in your paper					
2) Organizational issues in your paper					
3) Content issues in your paper					
Please rate your ability to correct/address or improve problems in the following areas:					
	Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
4) Grammar					
5) Organization					
6) Content issues					
7) Your writing ability overall as a result of teacher's comments on your first draft					
8) Your overall experience in receiving feedback on this paper					

- 9) Please rate how challenging the technology was in obtaining your comments to your papers. Please circle one number.

1	2	3	4	5
I had many technological problems	I had some technological problems	I had few technological problems	I had very few technological problems that were easily resolved	I had no technological problems

- 10) Please comment on your overall satisfaction with the *audio comments* you received on your paper in this class. Feel free to write freely about any concerns or points you want to raise. You may use additional paper in answering this question.

Appendix C: Questions Used for Student Interview Conducted as a Follow-Up to Survey

- 1) How well did you understand your instructor's comments to grammatical issues in your paper when receiving audio comments? Please explain.
- 2) How well did you understand your instructor's comments to grammatical issues in your paper when receiving written comments? Please explain.
- 3) How well did you understand your instructor's comments to organizational issues in your paper when receiving audio comments? Please explain.

- 4) How well did you understand your instructor's comments to organizational issues in your paper when receiving written comments? Please explain.
- 5) How well did you understand your instructor's comments to content issues in your paper when receiving audio comments? Please explain.
- 6) How well did you understand your instructor's comments to content issues in your paper when receiving written comments? Please explain.
- 7) Please discuss your ability to correct or address grammatical problems in your first draft of your paper when receiving audio comments.
- 8) Please discuss your ability to correct or address grammatical problems in your first draft of your paper when receiving written comments.
- 9) Please discuss your ability to correct or address organizational problems in your first draft of your paper when receiving audio comments.
- 10) Please discuss your ability to correct or address organizational problems in your first draft of your paper when receiving written comments.
- 11) Please discuss your ability to correct or address content problems in your first drafts of your paper when receiving audio comments.
- 12) Please discuss your ability to correct or address content problems in your first drafts of your paper when receiving written comments.
- 13) How well you were able to improve your writing as a result of the comments you received to the first draft of your paper when receiving audio comments?
- 14) How well you were able to improve your writing as a result of the comments you received to the first draft of your paper when receiving written comments?
- 15) Please comment on your overall experience in receiving feedback on your paper in this class when receiving audio comments
- 16) Please comment on your overall experience in receiving feedback on your paper in this class when receiving written comments
- 17) Please comment on how challenging the technology was in obtaining your comments to your papers when receiving audio comments.
- 18) Please comment on how challenging the technology was in obtaining your comments to your papers when receiving written comments.
- 19) Please comment on your overall satisfaction with the comments you received on your paper in this class for which you received audio comments.
- 20) Please comment on your overall satisfaction with the comments you received on your paper in this class for which you received written comments.

Appendix D: Instructor Survey I

Please answer the following questions for the essays to which you gave typed comments.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Adequately	Well	Very clearly
1) How well do you think you were you able to explain your points to your students in your comments to their papers?					
2) Based on their final drafts, how well did you find your students understood your comments to their drafts?					

3) How well were you able to explain grammatical problems to students?					
4) How well were you able to explain organizational problems to students?					
5) How well were you able to explain content problems to students?					

- 6) How would you rate the "likability" of this way of giving comments to student papers by typing text? In other words, how much did you enjoy giving comments to student papers in this way?

1	2	3	4	5
I did not like it at all	I found it occasionally frustrating	I usually found it satisfying	I enjoyed it	I loved it

- 7) If you were to teach this class again, how would you rate your desire to use the text-based method of commenting on student papers again?

1	2	3	4	5
I have no desire to use this method again	I have reservations about using this method again	I have some desire to use this method again	I am quite enthusiastic about using this method	I am sold on this method. I want to use it again.

- 8) Please comment on your overall satisfaction with the typed method of commenting on student papers in this class. Please write freely about any concerns or points you want to raise – pedagogical issues, technological issues, time issues, etc.

Please answer the following questions for the essays to which you gave audio comments.

	Not at all	Somewhat	Adequately	Well	Very clearly
9) How well do you think you were you able to explain your points to your students in your comments to their papers?					
10) Based on their final drafts, how well did you find your students understood your comments to their drafts?					
11) How well were you able to explain grammatical problems to students?					
12) How well were you able to explain organizational problems to students?					

13) How well were you able to explain content problems to students?					
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- 14) How would you rate the "likability" of this way of giving comments to student papers by using audio? In other words, how much did you enjoy giving comments to student papers in this way?

1	2	3	4	5
I did not like it at all	I found it occasionally frustrating	I usually found it satisfying	I enjoyed it	I loved it

- 15) If you were to teach this class again, how would you rate your desire to use the audio method of commenting on student papers again?

1	2	3	4	5
I have no desire to use this method again	I have reservations about using this method again	I have some desire to use this method again	I am quite enthusiastic about using this method	I am sold on this method. I want to use it again.

- 16) Please comment on your overall satisfaction with the audio method of commenting on student papers in this class. Please write freely about any concerns or points you want to raise – pedagogical issues, technological issues, time issues, etc.

Appendix E: Instructor Survey II

Please answer the following questions by circling one number.

- 1) Please consider your experience commenting on the first draft of each of the two assignments that pertain to this study. How much time did you spend on average in commenting on the first drafts? Please include the time you spent reading the paper and the time you spent giving comments to the paper. *Do not include any time spent uploading the comments to the online class.*

	0-15 minutes	16-30 minutes	31-45 minutes	46-60 minutes	Over 60 minutes
a) For my students to whom I gave audio comments					
b) For my students to whom I gave typed comments					

- 2) How much time did you spend *on average* in uploading the comments to a student paper in this class?

	0-30 seconds	31-60 seconds	1-2 minutes	2-3 minutes	Over 3 minutes
a) For my students to whom I gave audio comments					
b) For my students to whom I gave typed comments					

3) How would you compare the use of audio comments with the use of written comments?

	I prefer giving audio comments	I prefer giving written comments
a) Ability to explain my points clearly		
b) Ability to be thorough in my comments		
c) Ability to save time in commenting on papers		
d) Enjoyment of giving comments		
e) Ability to explain grammatical problems clearly		
f) Ability to explain organizational problems clearly		
g) Ability to explain content problems clearly		

4) Please comment on your overall experience with the two methods of commenting – typed and audio – with regard to the amount of time it took to comment and post the comments to the students.



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