Can You Hear Me Now? An Innovative Approach to Assess and Build Connections with Online Learners

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ABSTRACT

Having your "voice" present in an online classroom develops connections and guides learners to take action. Written communication lays flat on the page. When learners hear you, they listen and engage. Voice feedback is a great way to make connections with learners while delivering positive and constructive comments. In the online setting, learners often feel alone and disconnected. An interactive discussion does develop a connection, but a discussion which is focused and directed within the scope of the course. Although, most facilitators agree discussions are the "heart" of an online course, they do not take the place of face-to-face communication with classmates and the instructor. Learners appreciate receiving personalized vocal feedback because of its similarity to a conference, albeit it is one-sided. Research study findings by Merry and Orsmond (2008) indicate that audio feedback can improve the learner's experience in the online classroom, as well as deliver feedback in a more personalized form (King, et al, 2008; Lunt and Curran, 2010). Online university professors and corporate trainers continue to seek strategies to enrich the learner's experience, in addition to reducing attrition. Audio feedback can assist facilitators in developing an engaging relationship with their learners. The utilization of Vocaroo software to deliver voice feedback is the method we explored.

Keywords: Audio Feedback, Building Connections, Communication Methods, Engaging Learners, and Online Learners, Voice Feedback, Two-Way Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leaders in education and corporate America are asking the same question, "How do we engage our online learners to develop effective connections?" No matter what the goals are in an online learning environment, the facilitators must meet the expectations of the learners and keep them engaged to see acceptable results. According to Smith (2016) and Bart (2011), online learning continues to grow in higher education at a constant pace. Online higher education is growing at a rate of 10%, whereas the growth in overall higher education is 2% (Bart, 2011). Additionally, a recent by the Babson Survey Research group noted two findings: growth in online courses has been consistent for 13 years and 25% of students enroll in at least one online course (Smith, 2016). On the corporate side, the eLearning market is on growing consistently with projections of $31 billion in revenue by the end of 2020 (Chang, 2016). It is no surprise that corporations are leveraging the Internet and technological advances to reduce costs, while improving the frequency and quality of internal training. With new generations of learners coming into the workplace accustomed to working online, this modality is positioned to become the new normal.

What is Feedback?
Effective and constructive feedback of a learner's work or performance is probably one of the most critical aspects of learning, yet many learners do not seem to understand how to utilize the feedback. According to Hattie and Timperley (March, 2007), feedback is information offered by an agent (e.g.

teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) related to an individual's performance or understanding. Providing constructive feedback is provide in all aspects of our lives, but it is essential because of the impact feedback plays on learning and achievement. However, simply providing feedback in any form (written or audio) does not guarantee improvement in understanding and performance of a learner. Learners are more likely to increase effort when the intended "goal is clear, when high commitment is secured for it, and when belief in eventual success is high" (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 260). So, it seems key in effective feedback to gain the commitment of the learners to self-adjust, and adapt methods or strategies to complete tasks while developing necessary skillsets.

2. ASSESSMENT VS. FEEDBACK

Diagram: Assessment For Learning: The 5 Key Strategies.
URL:
https://comeniusassessment.wordpress.com/assessment-the-theory/assessment-for-learning-the-5-key-strategies/

There are five key strategies for assessing learning, as follows: sharing learning expectations, eliciting evidence, feedback, self-assessment, and peer assessment. Our focus was on feedback because according to Lunt and Curran (2008), learners were about ten times more likely to listen to audio feedback as compared to reading written feedback."

The issue is the perception of the learners. If they do not understand or feel slighted from the feedback provided, whether it is too general or a canned response, it is the same as not getting any feedback. By providing timely, detailed, and personalized feedback with examples to apply, learners feel a more personal touch and connection with their facilitator. Most facilitators believe feedback is key to the assessment process and learning.

We used Vocaroo to provide our learners with voice feedback on assignments or performance. Here are some of the comments we received:

"The positive feedback I have received from you has been extremely inspirational!"

"I really enjoy the voice feedback you utilize. It adds a whole other level of depth to the feedback process. There is something impersonal (I am a Generation X, so this is subjective) about communication limited to text and email. I look forward to these interactions!"

"I look forward to your messages every week."

"I enjoy hearing your feedback. It ads a very personal touch that sets you apart from others professors."

"Thank you so much for the message; that was a great touch to have the recording. I was very excited and pleased with my grade."

The excitement generated by providing learners personalized feedback were all positive to date— they loved it! While, one requested written feedback when asked, many expressed they felt voice feedback was more meaningful and relevant to their learning experience and building a connection with their professor.

Quality Feedback.
The relevance of feedback in learning is clearly illustrated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010), Feedback Loop.
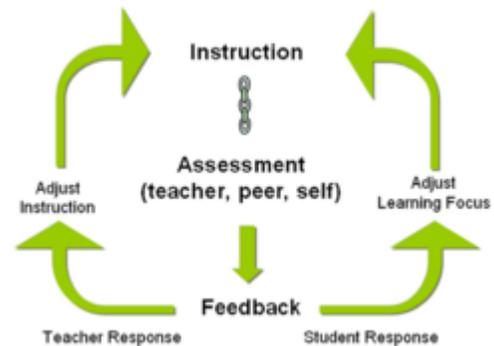
Feedback Loop from Ontario Ministry of Education (2010)

The feedback loop makes accommodations for both the learners and the instructors to adjust and make

changes in the approach to learning to improve the results. Assessment and feedback go hand-in-hand to improve results. In order for feedback to have quality and effectiveness, it must be descriptive. It is important to clearly inform learners of their successes and detail how they may improve their skills. Meaningful feedback helps learners improve while they continue to develop skills and master goals. According to Wiggins (2012), descriptive feedback has key factors to be effective. Descriptive feedback has to be goal directed, achievable, clear, professionally delivered with sensitivity, timely, individualized, and routine (Wiggins, 2012). Therefore, each time an instructor moves through the feedback loop, he or she must make adjustments to assist learners in achieving continuous improvement. By using key factors in descriptive feedback, instructors can provide the information needed in a relevant format to address each individual learner. Assessment and feedback will only assist learners when consistently provided. Assessment for learning must be planned too.

Assessment for Learning.
Cooper (2007) elaborates on the Eight Big Ideas in assessment, as follows:

Big Idea 1: Assessment serves multiple purposes throughout the learning period. It may be used to determine what learners know and what they can do, as well as a strategy to help learners gain a broader depth of subject knowledge (formative assessment). Additionally, it may be used to inform learners and professors as to how much has been learned over time (summative assessment).

Big Idea 2: Assessment needs to be planned and align with course outcomes, objectives, curriculum, lessons, rubrics, and reporting.

Big Idea 3: Assessments must be balanced and flexible, including oral and written performance, with the ultimate goal of improving learning for all learners.

Big Idea 4: Assessment and instruction are inseparable, as effective assessment drives learning.

Big Idea 5: For assessment to be effective, it must provide clarity for learners, indicate what they have done well and where they can improve, as

well as what they need to do to improve in the future.

Big Idea 6: Assessment is often a collaborative process, which is effective when it involves the professor and the student. However, it may be even more effective when it involves a peer.

Big Idea 7: Aligning with predetermined rubrics and standards is essential in order to provide an effective assessment.

Big Idea 8: Perhaps most important to consider is that evaluating student achievement needs to be a caring and sensitive process that requires good judgement.

If we follow the feedback loop discussed earlier, assessment and feedback have a significant influence on learning and achievement. Another significant influence on feedback is the learner's expectations and life experiences.

3. LEARNER'S EXPECTATIONS

A discussion about eLearning cannot be explored without considering the expectation of the learners and the impact it has on learning performance. Today's generations of millennial, Gen Y, and Gen Z learners have grown up with technology integrated into their daily activities, including the use of different modes of technological communications (PC, tablets, smartphones, etc.) (Generational Difference, 2016). The new generation of learners are more sophisticated and expect more from courses in which they engage. It is the dawn of a new world culture and technological changes are the disruptive paradigm-shifts which changes the world-view of these generations.

It may seem trite, but the different characteristics of the generations, such as, moral compass, educational drive, work commitment, and family views impact educational and training achievement. (Generational Difference, 2016) This drives the expectation of the online learner in terms of faculty/facilitator communications prior and during a course, reminders to complete required assignments, response time for emails, and grading results and/or meaningful feedback for key assignments.

Oftentimes, online learners expect special consideration for any of life's interruptions, without regard for course deadlines. Expectations of today's learners are higher, while the learner's commitment is conditional on many other factors (i.e. excuses, work, family, vacations). Given this lack of focus on results and keeping commitments, it seems obvious as to why organizations struggle to achieve results on schedule. The answer may lie in finding ways to embrace the fundamental differences in the Millennials, Gen Y, Gen Z, and Baby Boomers—given the number of Boomers in the world, addressing the issue of learner expectations fall here. Boomers may have the determination and commitment necessary to unite the generational differences. The issues are definitely being explored and discussed daily at the administrative and organizational levels globally. The use of technology and a tool such as Vocaroo may help to bridge some of the differences and build relationships in the classroom, at least with the instructor/facilitator and the learner.

4. VOCAROO

What is Vocaroo?

In order for feedback to be descriptive and meaningful to the learners, it must clearly analyze both what is working and what needs to be worked on. By providing descriptive feedback, a facilitator can drive the learner's efforts. Vocaroo is a voice recording tool that provides multiple modalities and options. A voice recording file can be created directly using an online link without any need to download software. The recorded file can be anonymously stored in the cloud or may be downloaded as an MP3 file. It may also be shared with social media sites or pasted in as a live link with its own file location. Files are stored on the cloud for about three months, so to use such a tool for voice feedback in the class is suitable during the scope of the course. At this point in its development, Vocaroo is only a Flash-based program, so one can record only on a PC (iPads and Mac computers are not supported.) Once the recording is made, it can be reviewed, and then saved (if perfect), or re-recorded (if necessary). The beauty of using Vocaroo is that the user can make as long a recording as necessary.

The following is a YouTube tutorial to learn to use Vocaroo:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yj3zO4-kl48

How can Vocaroo be used?

Vocaroo can be used to add a vocal element anywhere it would be beneficial. In the online or blended classroom, Vocaroo can be used for course announcements and learner feedback. When learners hear their professor's/facilitator's voice, a stronger bond can form.

Benefits and drawbacks to vocal feedback.

Voice feedback helps professors form connections with their learners. Instead of just reading a message, watching a PowerPoint, or listening to a video, the professor can place his or her imprint on the class, as well as set the tone. When learners are comforted by a professor's voice, they are more apt to find the professor approachable. Additionally, they may like the professor more and work harder, so as to please the professor and earn a better grade.

There may be drawbacks to vocal feedback in that not all students are auditory learners, so written and visual methods of providing constructive feedback may be necessary to impact all learners. If the feedback to the learner is detailed and complex, it may be too much to process for a non-auditory learner. A potential solution would be to provide alternatives for learners – voice feedback or a transcript. At the present time, there is no auto transcript feature in Vocaroo. It is possible to ask learners what their preference is – voice or text feedback. In the most recent sample of 60 students, only one student requested written feedback. Still, professors need to be aware that people learn in different ways. If learners are not mastering what is said and delivered via vocal feedback, perhaps a mix of written and vocal feedback would be suitable, or perhaps only written feedback would be required to inform behavior change.

5. THE TRENDS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

So, what do we know for certain? We know that virtual facilitation will continue to grow with our capabilities in technology. The debate about effective feedback is bound to continue on both higher education and corporate America fronts. Technology drives many of the trends we see in eLearning, as an embraced paradigm-shift in global society. This disruption makes the future of learning strategies interesting to explore, so we want to explore research around the following ideas:

(1) Explore virtual training in corporate American and how to increase the effectiveness in performance through feedback.
(2) Explore the future of eLearning in higher education with delivery modes analyzed.
(3) Explore the effectiveness of different methods of feedback on today's learner's achievement and skill set development.
(4) Explore how education and training can be leveraged to increase efficiency of organizational goals.

As online facilitation continues to grow in education and corporate training, developing a connection, building rapport and trust, and engaging the learners will drive the effectiveness of virtual communications. Using an audio recording for feedback on key projects or on-the-job training is another way to make these important connections.

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