Why and How to Use Audio Instead of Written Feedback on Student Writing

(A Powerpoint slide presentation, including video and audio clips from a live lecture, 10/24/17)
Sydney

I don’t usually feel like that... because they’re just marks on paper and you don’t get actual human contact.
Sydney

I don’t usually feel like that... because they’re just marks on paper and you don’t get actual human contact.
Student essay on poem by Sylvia Plath:

Cliff: It doesn't feel like you're just ransacking the thesaurus....
Excerpt from audio comments

Student essay on poem by Sylvia Plath:
When you do the audio comments you tell me exactly why that question mark is there.... it's not just one-dimensional.
Excerpt from audio comments

Student essay on Emily Dickinson's poem “Wild Nights”

Student wrote: “I now believe that when she was saying 'To a heart in port' she meant....”

“Wild Nights”, stanza 2:

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the
Compass -
Done with the Chart!
Excerpt from audio comments

Student essay on Emily Dickinson’s poem “Wild Nights”

Student wrote: “I now believe that when she was saying ‘To a heart in port’ she meant....”

“Wild Nights”, stanza 2:

Futile - the winds -
To a Heart in port -
Done with the Compass -
Done with the Chart!
Sarah

It kind of makes you feel more like an individual....
Sarah

It kind of makes you feel more like an individual....
Excerpt from audio comments

Student essay on Emily Dickinson's poem “I Felt a Funeral in My Brain”

Cliff: Show me how and why you arrived at these conclusions.
Tyler

It’s so much easier to understand what you’re saying.
Tyler

It’s so much easier to understand what you’re saying.
What are the benefits?
What are the benefits?
With the same amount of time/effort on the teacher's part, students get **more**—an average of **five times** the word count of a typical set of written remarks.

Will, this is my commentary for your first paper in English 102.

Well, I'm sorry to tell you that this paper is not a success. That's the bad news. On a number of levels the paper just isn't working. The good news is that when I look past the countless problems in terms of organization of ideas, in terms of writing clear and correct sentences, in terms of logic and support, providing a solid logical case for your claims... when I look past all of these different problems, I do see a lot that is interesting. I think here you are trying here to ask some really interesting and profound questions. You're pursuing some areas of Flannery O'Connor's work that deserve our attention and are complex. So really what this is about is about execution, but what you need to take from this paper and this recording is you've got your work cut out for you. What you were turning out here is a far cry from what is going to work well for you in this class.

So I'm going to take this step by step. I'll start with the writing. The writing here is very badly flawed. Now, you are a very clear and articulate speaker; I never have a problem when you speak up in class understanding you, and I think that goes for your fellow students, but when you put your pen to paper, I think you're being too self-consciously... formal...? although I can't say that because you open the first page with very almost shockingly informal writing. You know, you keep on calling her "dumb," you say that this "magically screwed them over." So formality isn't exactly it, but your writing, Will, is in almost a foreign language in many parts of the essay. You see all the dots in the margins, and these represent very small typos and superficial errors, and as you can see there are quite a few of them, but that's not what is really bothering me here. What is really bothering me here is the breakdown at a number of points in terms of effective communication. You are not being clear, and at some points I was really at a loss to figure out what, exactly, you were trying to say. So your first obligation in the next paper is clarity. I want you to write more in the plain, direct way that you speak. Clear out, of course, the "you knows" and the clichés and the slang, but it needs to have the direct clarity and fluency of your spoken English. That's your first job. If you are not clear, nothing else matters.

The second problem I have here is an organizational one. Your paper feels jumbled to me, and maybe it would feel less jumbled if it were more clearly written, but I believe that you have an organizational problem here, that it's... that you are sort of throwing down..., it feels, as they come into your head, a number of insights. But you are not weaving them together in a unified, clear way that says that this is a single track that I am following, a sense of direction. For example, you hammer and hammer and hammer on this point on the first page until I'm really sick of it: what a moron she is. "She's so dumb. She's stupid." Which, by the way, is really trivial and really superficial. It's not just that the words 'stupid' or 'moron' are inappropriate for a college paper, but simply saying that she is not bright, she has low IQ, she is stupid, is such a simple statement. You say it over and over again but you don't prove it. You don't provide any really solid case to convince me that she has subnormal intelligence in any way. You want me to believe that? Convince me. Provide evidence. Which... I'm going to get to that, alright? But then you kind of abandon that. You more or less leave that behind and move on to different things, and these are equally problematic. So you need to have a clearer sense of a single direction; where are you going with this paper? What are you trying to demonstrate?

Then finally, I have already begun to allude to this, you have a major problem that all through this paper you make assertions that she is "dumb," the Misfit is "vastly intelligent," the violence is necessary, or is a catalyst for truth, etc... etc... And some of these assertions are quite intriguing, but they remain mainly simply that--assertions. You say that this is so, you say that she is dumb, but you don't make a case. You say that he is vastly intelligent but you don't give me any examples that serve as evidence to suggest that you are right, and on and on we go. You need to discipline yourself, Will, to not just make a statement and to expect us to take it on faith. You've got to convince me, unless it is something that is self-evident. But these things you are saying are not. In fact, some of the statements you are making here are really quite subtle and intricate. They need a lot of clarification and justification. Well, this is a lot for you to chew over, so listen carefully to the recording, and follow up with questions if you have them.
Students don’t merely get more quantity, they get a richer message stream.

Tyler:
Students don’t merely get more quantity, they get a richer message stream.

Tyler:

“If it was written on a piece of paper, it’s almost like someone said it in a monotone voice, instead of one with lots of emphasis.”
Click for video

Students don’t merely get more quantity, they get a richer message stream.

Tyler:

“If it was... it’s almost monotone... lots of...
The overwhelming majority of students prefer audio to traditional written feedback

• After having one essay returned w. audio feedback, about ¾ of students opt for audio in subsequent papers, when given the choice.

• They find the comments generally less harsh, more human-feeling.

• Audio remarks are easier to understand.

• They appreciate the typically more individual (less stereotypical) commentary.

[This audio continues to comment on the next slide.]
The audio comments offer **better quality feedback**

- It enables genuine engagement with the content of the student's paper.
- It creates a space for additional teaching moments, instead of just editing/critique.
- It makes it much more possible to give the students substantial positive feedback.
- It provides room for constructive remarks outside the bounds of the essay itself.
Doing audio feedback can make the professor's job easier in some ways.

• It's a huge help when trying to give feedback on particularly complex or nuanced items.

• The ability to more fully explain how the grade was determined takes away one stressor.

• The mere fact of shifting modes—from written to spoken—can provide some relief.
And audio comments can provide instructors with a useful resource for self-reflection.

- Listening to playbacks can improve awareness:
  - Enunciation
  - Verbal tics
  - Areas to improve teaching
Finally, for top students, audio commentary can provide the feedback that they need most:

Paper #1, ENG 102

Michaela

Professor Clifford Jones
English 202/204
February 5, 2017
Word Count: 2362

Topic for the Undertaker: A Biographical Interpretation of “A Good Man is Hard to Find”

The first “lost” character is an elderly woman referred to only as the “grandmother.” The grandmother is a relic of the old south. Like the Misfit, she doesn’t mesh particularly well with her surroundings. Wealth and wealth, she struggles to navigate the modern world. [c. 1950]

through a haze of premonitory promises. The grandmother’s ambivalent circumstances ensure that she remains locked in a spectator-like role for most of the story. She reads about the Misfit in the paper, contemporaries during the drive, and acts as a commentator for the past: all gestures that—seemingly—have very little consequence. At times the grandmother provides vital emotion for different voices, and in more ways than one she challenges the reader’s sense of place, our preconceptions about the past, and her distance from us. The Misfit is a relative of sorts, and she is the narrator’s foil. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that she’s an incredibly resilient woman.

O’Connor’s decision to withhold the grandmother’s given name, as well as the Misfit’s reason for her character is something of an enigma. She exemplifies some colored glasses, pale, see-through glasses, and “Teaanna White.” In many ways, she’s a living incarnation of a bygone era. While taking the role of passive observer, the Misfit seems equally unadaptable. Characterized by a deep and unsatisfied curiosity, she finds her life’s passion in a world that seems to encourage his.

[Click for audio]
Michaela follow up...

The first “lost” character is an elderly woman referred to only as the “grandmother.” The grandmother is a relic of the old south. Like the Misfit, she doesn’t mesh particularly well with her surroundings. Waifish and selfish, she struggles to navigate the modern world [c. 1950] through a haze of lonesome nostalgia. The grandmother’s anachronistic circumstances ensure that she remains locked in a spectator-like role for most of the story. She reads about the Misfit in the paper, commentates during the drive, and acts as a mouthpiece for the past; all passive actions that—seemingly—have very little consequence. At times the grandmother provides vital context for current events, and on more than one occasion she provokes heavy strokes of plot, but moments of clarity come few and far between as she’s repeatedly rebuffed and ignored by her family. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that she’s an incredibly isolated woman. O’Connor’s decision to withhold the grandmother’s given name (as well as the Misfit’s) reduces her character to something of an archetype. She exemplifies rose colored glasses, white-cotton gloves, and “Tennessee Waltz.” In many ways, she’s a living incarnation of a bygone era. While taking a more proactive role, the Misfit seems equally maladapted. Characterized by a deep and unsatisfied curiosity, he feels unfairly demonized by a world that seems to encourage his
Part II.
How to do audio comments on a student essay
How/ technicalities

Click for audio
Textbooks and Required Materials

- A USB flash drive, clearly labeled with name, class & section #.
- 2 folders with pockets (for turning in essays & homework). Color ____
- Examination booklets (a.k.a. ‘greenbooks’) (for paper #3 + final exam)
- 100-150 4”x6” cards
Other Requirements: Include **in a folder (w. pockets)**...

- typed, double-spaced paper (name, etc. in upper corner—no cover page)
- USB flash drive labeled w. your name (this is for voice recorded comments)
- writer’s memo (informal note to your professor about your paper)
- xerox of all *outside* sources (not our textbook) in your works cited list
Hospital Beds

"Get out of my house!" the woman screamed, her voice was shaky and broken. I stood up and began to walk down the dimly lit hall of the hospital. "Get out! This is my house!" she shrieked. I followed the frightened voice. A nurse stood across from the screaming patient who held a straw in her hand. She was holding the straw as if it were a weapon; it was all she had to protect herself. The screaming woman had short, grayish-white hair that complemented her light blue eyes; they sunk into the swollen skin around them. Her tiny black and blue bruised arm shook as she held the straw.

"You're in the hospital," the nurse explained calmly. The woman's face warped into confusion, and then more anger. Her knuckles turned white from gripping the straw so hard.

"The hospital! This is my house! You have no right being in my house!" she yelled. I stood那里 frosen. I didn't want to speak up for fear of being screamed at by the woman but also because I didn't want to undermine the nurse. I figured the nurse knew what she was doing; she had to have dealt with situations similar to this before.

"I have to give you your medicine, you're in the hospital," the nurse tried to explain, with a touch of irritation in her voice.

"I am not taking anything you give me!" screamed the woman. I understood. This woman was used to the white walls and an IV pole...
Boot ‘Audacity’ audio recording software
When done recording, go to File menu: “Export audio”
• Save in (select student’s USB drive)
  • Save as type: mp3
• File name: give file a name (e.g. class & section + assignment designation)
Eject USB drive
"Get out of my house!" the woman screamed, her voice was shaky and broken. I stood up and began to walk down the deserted halls of the hospital. "No! This is my house!" she shouted. I followed the frightened voice. A nurse stood nearby, the mattress she held was

"The hospital? This is my house! You have no right being in my house!" she bellowed. I stood there frozen. I didn't even speak up for fear of being screamed at by the woman who then

"I have to give you my medicine, you are in the hospital." she said, she was the kind of woman who would take control of you.

"No! This is my house!" she shouted, her voice was muffled by the mattress she held.
[From live presentation: walk-through of the above steps.]

• Finished!
Give it a try!

Why not try experimenting with one or two papers the next time you assign a batch?
And the truly adventurous might want to try **video** comments.

If interested, ask me to send you the link for a demo of audio feedback using *Jing* screencasting software.
And the truly adventurous might want to try video comments.

A demonstration by professor and scholar Jeff Sommers of how to use Jing video to comment on student papers:

http://www.screencast.com/t/kh4spCz1a07B
Q&A

Click for audio