



## **Is It the Teacher or Is It Memorex?: Responding to Student Essays Using Audio Cassettes**

**Paul Carney**

During the 1994-95 academic year, I examined the use of audio cassettes as an alternative method for responding to student writing. While the primary focus was on writing assessment and student receptivity to instructional feedback, I also gained further insight into my evaluation tendencies. Ultimately, I sought to answer the question: To what extent does audio response to compositions enhance student receptivity to evaluation and thus improve writing skills? I conducted this classroom research project in five sections of freshman composition, with a total of 115 students participating in the project.

After responding to student writing with the traditional pen for fifteen years, I decided to use audio cassettes to record and convey my responses to students. I anticipated that this method of responding to compositions would be more efficient as well as more effective than written feedback.

### **Classroom Assessment Strategy**

At mid-quarter and at quarter's end, students completed self-analysis surveys which assessed their satisfaction level with audio cassette responses to their writing. In order to compare the

effectiveness of the audio response method to the traditional written feedback, I responded to the first batch of essays in writing. Subsequent essays were evaluated using audio cassettes to convey my comments and suggestions.

### **Using Audio Cassettes: Some Procedural Issues**

Prior to submitting their essays, students were asked to place numbers before each sentence so that I could more efficiently and more clearly identify the location of my focal attention (Note: the numbers should appear directly before each sentence, not each line). I also asked students to highlight each number for quicker identification of sentences. The highlighted numbers also served as visual indicators of the writer's sentence pattern habits. Upon submitting their numerically highlighted essays, students also provided a standard size audio cassette with their names and the course number on the label. I then stored the cassettes in a cassette case.

To increase the efficiency of the actual response process, I used a small voice-activated cassette recorder to register my comments. The voice activation feature freed me from having to



fumble with stop/record buttons while reading and "talking through" the essay. The initial sound of my voice triggered the recording device, and when I reached a pause period to gather my thoughts, the recorder deactivated. After sharing my auditory comments, questions, and suggestions with the writer, I ejected the cassette and returned it to the storage case. Once these support procedures (numbered sentences, properly labeled cassettes, storage case, voice-activated recorder) are followed and become routine, the process flows quite smoothly.

#### Assessment Data

Data collected from three quarters of assessment suggest that students prefer and positively respond to audio responses to their writing. A compilation of year-long classroom assessment surveys revealed that most students (96/115) found the audio evaluation method very helpful in aiding them to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their writing. Further, most students (87/115) indicated the method was very helpful in providing guidance to improving their writing.

Given the choice between audio or written evaluation of their work, 96 of 115 students preferred the cassette to the pen. In fact, on assignment due dates, a number of forgetful students who the preferred the audio feedback drove home between classes to retrieve their cassettes.

Finally, students were asked to share their perception of and reaction to the process of reviewing their paper with the cassette rolling. The following comments represent typical responses from the students.

#### Representative Student Attitudes

*"It worked well in that hearing the instructor's voice and his comments*

*about the paper made it more personal than reading an evaluation. I think it's a good idea to verbalize the comments."*

*"I could understand what you were saying. It was more interesting. With the audio you have to look at your paper again because the comments are on tape instead of on paper."*

*"When I can hear my mistakes, like when you read my errors, I can clearly detect my mistakes. When a teacher writes down the mistake beside it, I sometimes have a hard time finding it. But when you read it out loud it was easy for me to detect it."*

*"Using the audio evaluation, the instructor is able to elaborate more when pointing out errors and suggesting ways to make the writing better."*

*"I think it was easier to notice the strengths and weaknesses in the audio evaluation. I got a better explanation of what I was doing wrong and you gave examples and told me how to improve it."*

*"You have to look over your paper again. The message comes across clearly. To me, when teachers write on my papers, they seem to be yelling through their writing."*

*"It worked well just to sit with paper, pen, and cassette listening and revising at the same time, as if in the tutorial session with an instructor."*

*"The audio works better for me because this way I had to write on my own paper about what was wrong by listening to the audio. I understand things better when I actually write it."*

#### Analysis

After compiling the data of the assessment survey, I shared the findings with the students. Perhaps the most significant side effect of the audio response method was that it preserved the visual integrity of the student's paper. According to classroom consensus, written comments, typically in the most efficient abbreviated form, can be confusing, discouraging, even humiliating. Many students expressed the revulsion and defeatism they felt upon receiving essays which appear to be "vandalized" by the instructor's grade-justifying graffiti. The cassette fostered a "kinder, gentler" demeanor as I was able to express more meaningfully complete insights and ideas.

The passage below represents an introductory paragraph which I evaluated with pen in hand. Beneath the passage is a partial transcript from the audio response which addresses the same paragraph. Note the explanatory limitations of the abbreviations as well as the curt tone which they establish. Notice also the shift from written **scrutiny** to spoken **suggestion**. ("d" signifies diction)

#### Excerpt of Written Response

1. In Stephen Dunn's poem "Hard Work," the speaker reveals the <sup>adj.</sup> effects that a job <sup>d?</sup> releases into the human soul. 2. The speaker, after accepting a job in a bottling plant, soon realizes what he may become <sup>awk-</sup> <sup>good intro</sup> <sup>what?</sup> <sup>d?</sup> <sup>is</sup> he continues\* a nobody in the work force <sup>an</sup> his home. Unable to allow <sup>this</sup> <sup>d?</sup>

he quits his job and retreats ~~back~~ to the life that he enjoys.

#### Transcript of Audio Response

"Cathy, your introduction has a sharp focus. In Sentence 1, modify 'effects' for clarity. . . I don't know that we 'release into'. . . release suggests departure, going out. In Sentence 2 I like how you insert 'after accepting the job in the bottling plant' between the subject and the verb. That's sophisticated writing. After 'continues' you may want to omit the semi-colon and use a comma or a dash. Nice dependent clause pattern in Sentence 3. . . check for clutter words.

#### Changes in Strategy

I foresee two basic changes in strategy emerging from this project. First, I would ask students either to write a reflective journal or to provide an annotated copy of their paper which registers interpretation of my verbal comments. This exercise would require students to revisit their work as part of the revision process. In addition, these brief connecting pieces would provide me with visible evidence of how or if my comments are reaching the writer. Second, I would periodically rewind and carefully listen to my taped responses. After soliciting feedback from students, I learned that I need to listen carefully to not only what I say but **how** I say it. Evidently, tone and mood are clearly conveyed when students listen to recorded comments.

#### Reflections

As I voiced my comments into the cassette recorder, I tracked my awareness of several significant changes in my approach to responding to student



writing. First, and perhaps most important, I found myself **talking to the student** rather than grading the paper. Frequently, I visualized the student's face as I recorded my responses. The cassette, unlike the written response, formed a triangular exchange between the teacher, the paper, and the student, thus creating an inclusive dynamic during the transaction. This graphic comparison illustrates the contrast in the interaction between the student, the essay, and the instructor.

Second, I noticed that I was offering more comments and suggestions than criticisms and corrections. With the pen stripped from my hand, I became more of a helpful reader and less of an eagle-eye editor.

Third, global issues suddenly emerged as the focus of my attention, which diminished the score-keeping interference of grammar penalties. Perhaps for the first time in my teaching career, I was both willing and able to discuss with the writer the complex nature of "awk" as well as the slippery cognitive intricacies associated with logic, originality, and imagination. Though non-interactive, the cassette provided me a dynamic similar to a conference with the student. I credit the comment-filled cassette for the apparent improvement in revisions and in subsequent essays.

Further, the cassette method alerted me to counter-productive tendencies inherent in my written evaluations of student compositions. Unexpectedly though refreshingly, the use of audio cassettes has had a profound influence on how I conduct my written evaluations, for it has tamed the predator in my pen.

Finally, the cassette comments are slightly more efficient than the written

reactions. I particularly appreciated the cassette's efficiency during my summary comments and suggestions. Perhaps the greatest time-saving contributions occurred when I noticed the absence of clarification questions following the return of a paper. As the cassette offered the students greater depth and volume, it virtually eliminated the necessity for post-class hallway clarification conferences.

While I celebrate and will continue to use audio cassettes as an alternative to the pen, there are several conditional drawbacks. First, one must find and secure the appropriate space and solitude, preferably a place insulated from noise and interruptions. An island would be ideal. Because the method limits portability, one can no longer respond to essays during eternal committee meetings or while waiting in the doctor's office. Second, the initial gathering, storage, and distribution of the cassettes can be cumbersome; however, these hurdles can be cleared, or at least lowered, by following the aforementioned procedures. Finally, though I have been known to chomp on a pretzel or nibble on a Twizzler while recording my comments, the cassette approach complicates that familiar duet between eating and evaluating.

Just as the students attentively listened to the comments on the cassettes, I must listen to the data in this study. Quite literally, students want to **hear** what I have to say about their writing, and they want to hear **how** I say it.

*Paul Carney has taught composition, literature, and creative writing at Fergus Falls Community College since 1988. He completed his graduate work in English and Sociology at the University of Texas at El Paso.*