Video critiques work for tutors and students

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IT'S the feedback vortex. Academics toil for hours penning detailed feedback on student assignments — something research has identified as crucial to the learning process. "Yet many students simply skip to the grade," says Monash University education lecturer Michael Henderson.

Colleague Michael Phillips said some students wait to be sent their marks, not even bothering to collect their work. "We wanted to find something better than the comments in the margin with a red biro scenario."

The something they've found resonates with students and saves academics hours. And the biggest surprise is that it's been almost completely overlooked by research. "Sometimes the simple ideas fall by the wayside," Dr Phillips said.

Their simple idea — to provide feedback by video rather than red ink — proved astonishingly popular. Up to 92 per cent of the students said it gave them a closer connection with their lecturers, often in unsolicited feedback of their own.

Dr Phillips said the videos were rarely edited and never scripted. The pair record one-take close-ups immediately after reading through assignments, while the details are still fresh. The videos are recorded on webcam and distributed via Monash's Moodle learning management system.

"We're not trying to be Spielberg-esque," Dr Phillips said. "We want video quality good enough to make out face and expressions, with reasonably clear audio. It's the message that's important. I might um and err at different points, but that adds to the authenticity and that's really what we're about."

The pair adopted the strategy in 2008, using video to assess the final assignments of their mostly masters students. Since then they have notched up close to 1000 videos and surveyed over 200 students about the approach, which has garnered an "overwhelmingly positive" reaction.

Dr Phillips said that once academics have accustomed themselves to the technology they can halve the time spent on assessment, because it's much faster to record a five-minute video than to write clear guidance which — if taped — would occupy about a minute's screen time.

He said the approach was better in some ways than face-to-face feedback, because it evens out the teacher-student "power imbalance" and gives recipients the option of replaying the message.

Some students complained that it was hard to match the video commentary to passages of text. Dr Phillips said he had overcome this problem using "combination screen-casting" which captures the assignment on screen and allows him to highlight paragraphs in colour. "There's software that allows you to do that without running multiple cameras or takes. It's really simple."

The pair will report their findings next month in the Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, after a literature review revealed a paucity of research into individualised video feedback. Dr Phillips said the few published studies include a 1980s study in which videos were recorded on VHS cassettes and mailed out.

He said the research hadn't kept pace with the technology. "While people have probably had this idea before, it was always problematic in terms of the amount of time it took for video to render and be transferred from analog to digital. Nowadays everybody's got a camera, so it's a really simple process."

Young people routinely use video communication applications like FaceTime and Snapchat, he said, and teachers should follow suit in their dealings with students. "It's easier, faster, more personalised and perceived as more caring."