

# “CAN I JUST SAY IT?”: A CASE FOR SPOKEN REFLECTION IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

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From middle school to senior capstone courses, teachers push students to reflect on their writing: “Explain two specific ways you could narrow your thesis statement on your rough draft.” “Discuss three ways you responded to naysayers.” “Evaluate how you’ll improve one part of your writing process this week.”

Whether in written narrative reflections following essay submissions or short question responses about the writing process, teachers regularly rely on metacognitive exercises to build student efficacy in drafting and revision stages. The “extra” work is time well spent: improved metacognition has a host of benefits especially for the most at-risk writers. Metacognitive skills can help students master course content (Joseph), improve self-assessment skills (Nielsen), and focus their thinking (Hogue Smith).

For basic writers, the students assigned to remedial classes that straddle high school and college content, metacognition is particularly important. Metacognitive assignments can help basic writers adopt the writing dispositions needed to improve revision and handle the inevitable failures and rejections that writing brings (Hogue Smith). As new college students, they are fighting to see themselves as belonging in college while they tackle increasingly difficult skills. The same struggles that barely daunt the accomplished writer could nudge a struggling writer toward quitting (Blau). Cheryl Hogue Smith, whose writing instruction includes remedial writing courses on the community-college level, points out that even small failures may catapult basic writers into self-doubt about their ability or be interpreted as a sign of a “deficiency in themselves” (671). While more accomplished writers can shrug off an error and focus on overall growth, struggling

writers tend to overemphasize the product. This, Hogue Smith emphasizes, is exactly why metacognitive exercises are so essential for at-risk writers: they turn the focus “from the product to the process, from performance goals to learning goals” (672).

Metacognition bridges the gap between a student’s focus on the immediate writing task and the teacher’s hope that the student will transfer skills to future writing needs (Nielsen; Skeffington) including navigating transitions that may demand new and varied writing skills (Joseph). Whether from course to course or assignment to assignment, an emphasis on metacognitive reflection can bolster performance.

### **Multimodal Metacognition**

In most classes, the majority of independent metacognitive exercises are in written form. This reflective writing, most teachers reason, slows students down enough to consider their learning process. While some students benefit, others find writing a tedious distraction. The writer who nervously approaches the page and winces at the awkward prose may find that the mode—writing—can compromise the goal of reflection. Their self-consciousness as writers compromises the reflective work they are capable of doing.

Fear of mistakes can mean students become “obsessed with fragments or run-ons or commas and focus so intently on sounding right and avoiding errors that they render themselves incapable of developing any extended idea or thinking about the shape and directions of a whole essay” (Hogue Smith 671). Multimodal reflection options open metacognitive opportunities to more students. When writing isn’t the only option, fearful writers can engage rather than shrink away from complex expressions.

In an investigation into multimodal literature responses and reflections in elementary classrooms, Kathy Short, Gloria Kauffman, and Leslie Kahn make the case that a variety of response modes can help children “to think more broadly, to consider other ideas, to connect to memories, and to think through feelings” (170). In addition to the performance benefits, the move away from standard written reflections may be just what some students need. Short et al. describe

a student leaving a class read-aloud who proclaimed, “Oh, I just *need* to draw” (160).

While our college students might not yearn for colored pencils, they express similar desires to show their thinking and reflection in a variety of ways—especially in spoken word. “*Can I just tell you?*” one student in our remedial writing class repeatedly asked. In the last several years, our classroom practices and research have focused on making metacognition more accessible. In this article, we focus on our work with first-year college students in remedial composition courses at a rural, two-year college.

## **A Case for Audio Reflection**

Most teachers assign reflective work primarily for its metacognitive benefits. Often the written mode is just a way to reach that goal. But for some students, writing may shift the cognitive load from reflection to the writing itself. After all, students may not find it helpful to reflect on writing *in writing* if writing is what has them stressed in the first place.

If the main goal is to reflect, letting students speak may serve as an alternative for the more traditional written metacognitive assignments, especially for struggling writers. Audio reflection—when students record their spoken responses to specific reflection prompts—offers students the chance to focus their cognitive energy on reflection instead of potentially tricky writing moves. The choice to use audio reflection as a supplement to writing or a replacement depends on the teacher’s priorities.

This article features the audio work of three students in the same remedial writing course. Fourteen students completed weekly, independently-recorded reflections, all following the same prompts. Building off the three categories of feedback recommended in *Thanks for the Feedback*, by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen of the Harvard Negotiation Project, we asked students to respond to the following three prompts in any order:

- Describe your successes this week.
- Describe what you did, heard, understood, or practiced this week to contribute to your success.
- Explain what you will keep doing or change in order to meet your goals next week.

As researchers we independently listened to the collective data set of 207 audio reflections recorded by fourteen students over the course of a semester. On average, each student submitted thirteen recordings, each ranging from 1:30 to 6:00 minutes long. After individually listening for trends within cases and across cases (Merriam), we sought respondent validation (Maxwell) through conversations with these same students in semi-structured interviews and focus group settings as well as classroom observations and interactions.

We selected the three students whose work we feature in this article—Jake, Genesis, and Reilly—because their audio work includes the following characteristics: (1) A metacognitive feature we repeatedly recognize within their individual recording sets and (2) A metacognitive trend we find salient across other students' audio reflections.

In this sense, even this small sampling exemplifies representative benefits of audio work as a metacognitive mode. Used as a metacognitive practice, audio reflection offers opportunities for more nuanced accounts of learning, a less intimidating place to experiment with new vocabulary and skills, and space for student voice unencumbered by textual errors.

When we use audio reflection, we try to access the same kind of thinking that we would ask for in writing. The goals are the same, but the form is different. Following metacognitive prompts, students use an electronic device (phone, iPad, or whatever is available) to record their reflection. Of course, we teach students how to record the first time, but quite quickly students can manage the process on their own. The audio file is submitted just as an electronic file would be uploaded to a course management system or emailed directly to the teacher. Like any metacognitive assignment, scheduling is up to the teacher's discretion. After the initial technological hurdles, the weekly audio reflections we've adapted take very little teacher

direction. The logistics are certainly different from a quick-write on loose-leaf paper, but twenty-first-century IT makes recording and sharing of audio files easier than ever.

Using recorded audio for metacognition purposes is still in experimental stages, but writing teachers have long relied on the spoken word to support the drafting and writing process. Research suggests that getting students to talk about their writing improves writing ability and builds metacognition (Baxa; Diltz; Harris, “Talking”; Harris, *Teaching*; McDonald; Murray, “Teaching”). Conference literature emphasizes the importance of student speech to accompany a writing text (Harris, *Teaching*; Murray, “Listening,” Straub). The change in mode may also offer teachers additional information. In a study with ninth and tenth graders, Sarah Beck et al. used the Think-Aloud-Protocol (TAP) which asks students to talk about their thinking and writing choices as they draft and a teacher observes. The process, although time consuming when used fully, uses student talk as a way to focus attention to the writing process rather than just the result (Beck et al. 679).

Recorded reflection functions as a spoken version of the metacognitive practice already used in many writing classrooms, but it may offer slightly different benefits for students—especially those intimidated by writing in the first place.

Audio reflections can target the same skills, the same assignments, and even use the same prompts but in a mode that may eliminate some residual roadblocks. As basic writers like the ones in our classes approach the page, most are keenly aware that their writing is littered with errors (Hogue Smith). Even in classrooms where proofreading or grammar are never mentioned in tandem with written metacognitive assignments, concern for surface-level missteps can distract from the more important reflective work. Adding audio reflection to the toolkit is one strategy for increasing metacognitive access for students at every writing level.

## **More Nuanced Accounts of Learning**

Just as in written metacognitive assignments, student audio reflections vary in length, depth, and detail. Some students charge

through three minutes of writing discussion with surprising agility while others linger over their thoughts and give themselves slow, careful advice. Students self-correct, restate, and congratulate themselves as they record. The result—reflection wholly in a student’s own voice—is a delight to hear and an energizing alternative to the traditional written reflection.

Across a wide variety of reflection styles, we’re amazed at how much students are able to do in just one recording session. Perhaps the fact that most can speak much faster than they can write simply produces more content, or perhaps they are just more comfortable when they aren’t worried about written errors.

For research purposes, we’ve transcribed hours of student audio reflections. Students never see our transcriptions nor do we use them in class, but transcriptions make it easier to share audio reflection work in traditional print publications. While transcriptions make it easier to share research in journals, they catapult us back into the rhetorical complexities that audio reflection helps students avoid. For example, in one audio reflection, the student changes her pitch as though she is echoing her teacher’s advice: “*summarize what you said.*” As transcribers we must choose whether to include quotation marks or risk an outside reader missing her reference to the teacher voice. Fortunately, audio recording allows the students themselves to focus solely on their metacognitive work. Students also interrupt themselves or rely on phrases like “*I mean*” which might be distracting in the transcriptions but is generally workable in spoken form. For our students’ sake, we hope you will imagine them speaking.

In this first example (Figure 1), Jake is reflecting on a personal narrative assignment with an emphasis on descriptive details, or “showing” strategies such as concrete nouns, sensory details, and active verbs. The assignment required a rough draft and peer feedback before the final submission. He moves with relative ease between discussing his final draft, his writing process, where he was struggling, and when he was “rolling.” In written form, the same student often produced two to three sentences in a similar amount of time.

Like all writing teachers, we would love to see more specific evidence in this audio reflection. We, too, cringe when a student says

Well, I did really good for Week 10. When we did the—I don't know what we did—it was with the chronological order—whatever that was—I did really good I think. I did good showing everything the teacher asked for. So, I think I did really good this week. I mean, rough draft, I was a little rusty because, I mean, I didn't really know what I was doing. And then after Wednesday, after we went over our rough drafts—I just wrote whatever- but after Wednesday when we went over our rough drafts I knew exactly what to do, I knew everything. And then I was just rolling Thursday before we had to turn it in Friday before our final.

But yeah, I did a lot of good showing. I did a lot of good, uh, I actually looked over my essay. I found some mistakes. I think I corrected pretty much all of them from revising and editing. Like I said, I did really good showing. I think I killed it this week on showing.

What I gotta look forward to is getting my rough draft how I want it- like I want my rough draft to be done- and not have to do *so* much to my draft because this past week, Week 10, I did, I changed my rough draft. My final draft was totally different than my rough draft. I changed so much.

So I need to work on that—have my rough draft be almost my final draft but with a few fixes so I can make it my final. But yeah, that's it, alright, goodnight.

Figure 1: Jake's Transcribed Audio Reflection

they don't know what they're working on, but Jake's reflection on his misunderstanding does inform his reflection on process. He eventually “killed it” on the final draft but acknowledges that it took him most of the week to get “rolling” since he didn't know what to do on the rough draft. In sharp contrast to a myopic focus on mistakes in a writing product (Hogue Smith), Jake's writing goals are clearly connected to more purposeful drafting.

Audio reflection as a metacognitive practice needs more research, but the possibilities of freeing students up to talk about their writing without the distraction of the writing itself is exciting. We've seen students like Jake elaborate, expand, and give so much more detail when they can speak rather than write their reflection. “Just saying it” seems to be a good metacognitive entrance point for improving writing.

While our students independently record their audio reflections after writing, other research has focused on how “talk alouds” during the composing process offer more detail about the thoughts and

challenges writers face as they write. Beck and her colleagues' work with TAP (Think-Aloud Protocol) isn't audio recorded since teachers are present, but it offers insight into how students use talking to their advantage during the writing process. When the researchers listened to students' think alouds, they noted that students included details that didn't appear in their writing. One of the teachers Beck interviewed found that her students talked about their arguments with a "consciousness of audience" not yet apparent in their writing. Such information, once leveraged, can support decision-making about kinds of evidence to include in an essay (78). In this sense, students are able to *do* more once verbal reflection accompanies other types of metacognitive work.

In the conference setting, Muriel Harris notes a similar dynamic when students reflect on their papers. Students verbalize editorial changes and speculate on changes. Here is how Harris describes such conferences:

As some writers read aloud, they tend to editorialize ('*That sentence was too long,*' '*That's not exactly what I meant there,*' and so on), to note grammatical errors or usage problems ... and sometimes to note possibilities for revision ('*This paragraph wasn't too clear. I should add something more about why I was so unhappy*'). (*Teaching* 45)

We, too, find students simultaneously reflecting on their writing and making revision plans when they record their reflections. For example, one of our students, Genesis, described her introduction to a short informative essay that explained possible careers connected to her major. The assignment emphasizes the importance of a clear, organized introduction. Genesis starts in positive terms: "*My introduction was good: I used a stable context and disruption, thesis statement and I clearly stated the three things that I was going to talk about.*" But she paired it with a specific critique of how she introduced an athletic trainer's use of MRIs: "*I would tell myself to ask questions such as, for example, my MRI: I could have used it [the definition of an MRI] as an appositive instead of a separate sentence.*" Although we can imagine

that Genesis might have commented on both issues if this reflection assignment were in written form, it's a sophisticated writing skill to position oneself in an editorial role, especially with a specific example. A struggling writer, for example, might avoid quoting themselves altogether because the attributive phrase, quotation, and commentary add up to a complicated sentence structure. In audio, Genesis could talk about the things she wants to change without worrying about how to write them correctly.

Even advanced writers say they can do more in spoken form. Teachers who give audio feedback on students' papers report increased detail when they speak as compared to when they write their comments (Edgington; Bauer; Kates). If teachers find audio recording helpful, perhaps it can be a useful tool for our students as well.

## **A Space to Try New Language and Skills**

For some students audio reflection may offer a more inviting space to experiment with new vocabulary and skills. Students who fear the teacher's red pen or cringe at feedback that seems to discount the stories beneath writing errors may find that speaking about writing offers a temporary respite where ideas can shine and grammar only matters if it impedes the audience's understanding.

Reilly, the student writer whose partial audio reflection appears in Figure 2, plots a narrative that works perfectly in spoken prose but might not even make it to the page if she shies away from the writing complexity. This audio recording took place after a research paper with multiple sources. The grading criteria included a conclusion with a call to action or an illustration of what's at stake. Verbally, she nails the metacognitive goal: to analyze her learning process.

Reilly's reasoning, which she divides into two numbered phrases, sounds natural when spoken but may have tripped her up if she worried about the correctness of writing out the number or how to punctuate it. Of course we can't claim for certain how Reilly would have responded in writing, but after years of reading written reflections that default to simplicity, the clarity and complexity offered by recorded voice is a breath of fresh air.

Perhaps some students can sound more like themselves in audio

What we did was, I was always bad at writing conclusions. And with the conclusion worksheet we had in our handout, I think that helped me to write my conclusion because in high school we were always taught to summarize: “summarize what you said.” It was a little bit of a struggle for me because one, that was the easy way out and two, it was the way I was taught.

Figure 2: An Excerpt from Reilly’s Transcribed Audio Reflection

reflection because the stakes are lower. After all, spoken word makes it easier to group terms in ways that are difficult to do on the written page. For example, one student used each of the following terms to describe her work on external transitions: *flowed*, *connected*, *transitioned*, *related*, *told the reader*. Maybe it doesn’t seem necessary that she repeated the same idea several times, but we wonder if her language play gave her a chance to try out different understandings or somehow made her more comfortable.

Even students who can find their voice in narrative assignments can still struggle to project their personality into discussions about writing itself. The next excerpt, another audio reflection from Jake, showcases style in ways we rarely observed in his written metacognitive work (see Figure 3). The transcription doesn’t capture his drawn out words, range of volume, and varied tones. He is reflecting on a newly-submitted research paper which required third-person pronoun use and at least three cited sources. The assignment and grading rubric emphasized the importance of transitions that show the reader how ideas and paragraphs connect.

As teachers, we read so many papers that the simple change in mode is already refreshing. As we toggle back and forth between Jake’s recording and this transcription, we’re amazed at the breadth of emotion he is able to convey in speech. Although it may seem harsh in written form, Jake changes his voice to high-pitched and silly when he says, “*Oh, no, I don’t get it, but I just have to throw another comma in there and confuse everybody!*” His voice rings clear in ways we don’t see when he writes about writing. Even as his writing teachers, we struggle with how he could convey the same emotion in writing. To adopt the good-humored self-criticism of a voice change is a sophisticated writing skill.

Well, um, I thought I really improved from last week's paper. I did a lot better on my mechanical errors, which I had a lot on my last paper because I didn't look over my paper last week a couple of times. And I actually looked over my paper this week. Uh, I think I did pretty well. I got a fifty-seven out of sixty. So I did pretty solid. I did a pretty solid job. But what I do need to do is get a little better on the *very* small things. Like in my citation, I had a little extra comma. Oh, no, I don't get it, but I just have to throw another comma in there and confuse everybody!

Of course third-person screws me over again. Just like last week. I don't know what it is about me but I just keep on just getting that four [points out of five] on third-person. I added *one*, I added, like, *one* "you." Mmmm, it's whatever . . . What I am going to do to get better for next week is, honestly, I need to hammer that third-person point of view thing. I need to get rid of that "you." That "you" is really driving me nuts, you know.

Ah, I do need to work on my external [transitions]. I did not ask how to do it. And I did not know how to do it. I do not know why I didn't ask. I *should* have just asked. But you know, it's whatever. So I need to get better on my external.

I need to work on my external which I'm pretty sure I'll get that done by next week. It's not that hard after [the teacher] talked to me about it.

Figure 3: Jake's Transcribed Audio Reflection

Students' ability to pause, backup, emphasize, celebrate, and vary tone in audio reflections is a delightful reminder of who our students are when they are unencumbered by written errors. Clearly our goal is that they can write with the clarity and complexity with which they speak. But for now, as they gain writing skill and confidence, audio reflection might be a helpful scaffold.

## A New Classroom Practice

Like any new classroom practice, integrating recorded metacognition exercises takes some logistical consideration. From recording and submission protocols to IT capacity and teacher responses, audio reflection does include a shift from the ease of pen and paper. Still, most of the extra work is upfront. We think exploring the benefit of broader metacognitive access is worth the extra planning.

In whatever form we use, metacognition in the writing classroom shares the same goals. As Donald Murray puts it, we're "really teaching [our] students to react to their own work in such a way that they

write increasingly effective drafts” (“Listening” 16). Given its particular importance for struggling writers, multiple modes of metacognition deserve our attention. We need more research and practice that probes the edges of audio recordings’ usefulness. As long as our students keep asking to “just talk about it,” it’s an idea worth exploring.

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