A long line of research studies indicates that “the three most important things in online learning are presence, presence and more presence” (Boettcher and Conrad 2010, referencing four previous studies.) To this, Tisha Bender added the importance of responding promptly to student contacts such as email or assignment submissions. (2003) However, presence and responsiveness are not enough. As far back as 1996, Teven and McCroskey’s ground breaking research into faculty-student interactions online identified empathy, understanding and responsiveness as the traits that students valued most in their professors. To students, they found, these three qualities conveyed caring; perceived caring then caused students to rate the teacher and course more positively, to be more willing to take another course with the same instructor and, above all, to report that they learned more. Later, Teven would codify these insights into his Student-Teacher Interpersonal Solidarity Scale (2008)

After adapting Teven’s scale for use in a face-to-face teaching environment, the researcher used it to test student responses to recorded oral feedback to writing assignments in upper division, writing intensive courses at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, USA. In place of written evaluative commentary in the margins and/or at the end of their work, students received two electronic files: the student product with key passages highlighted and a completed scoring rubric at the end, plus an MP3 file narrating the instructor’s commentary and suggestions for improvement. After students had used the recordings to revise their papers, they were surveyed to see whether the audio format had affected their perception of the instructor’s level of caring about them and their work. This presentation details the supporting scholarship, the adapted Solidarity Scale, the research methods and the resulting student impression of this original method of expressing the teacher’s presence in the revision process, responsiveness to individual student writing issues, and empathy for each individual writer.