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**Mark my words: An analysis of HE lecturers' essay marking approaches (0170)**

**Programme number: C4.2**

**Research Domain: Quality Assurance and Assessment**

This study explores the ways that HE lecturers use (or ignore) assessment criteria and marking schemes when they mark student work. Studies to date (for example Hand and Clews 2000 or Howe 2002) suggest that lecturers personalise assessment. In Hand and Clews' words, lecturers bring 'themselves' into their marking (p.12). In this study we employed thinking aloud protocols (Ericsson 1993) to explore the ways that lecturers verbalise their marking. In addition, we conducted interviews to explore lecturers' espoused assessment practices. Twelve lecturers were asked to think aloud while they marked two essays. This was recorded, transcribed and analysed using qualitative thematic approaches (Richie and Lewis 2003). This study grapples with the challenge of investigating and analysing professional judgement.. Through this research we offer lecturers a theorised account of marking practice that may be used as a means to bring greater reflexivity to this area of academic work.

## **Introduction**

The QAA states that 'using clear assessment criteria and, where appropriate, marking schemes, are key factors in assuring that marking is carried out fairly and consistently' (QAA 2006:16, our emphasis ). What do we know about the ways that lecturers use (misuse or ignore) the assessment criteria and marking schemes (henceforth referred to as assessment artifacts) when they make judgements about student work? This is the focus of the study reported here. Yorke (2008:49) points out that there is little research that explores the ways that lecturers make judgements about student work. The research that does exist suggests that the ways assessment artifacts are used is complex. For example, Hand and Clews (2000) observe that lecturers' judgements appear, in some cases to be informed by everything apart from the written artifacts. In an interview based study they were surprised at the extent to which lecturers disregarded written guidelines and the extent to which lecturers brought 'themselves' into the act of assessment (p.12 their emphasis). Hornby (2003) interviewed lecturers asking them to indicate how they marked students' work from a list of three choices:

\_\_Criteria referenced model

2. Holistic

3. Menu marking (mark separate components and aggregate score)

No evidence is offered that lecturers actually utilise the method they selected in interview, and no account is taken of the fact that lecturers might select and use methods from across these choices. Orr (2007:648) 'explores the disjuncture that can exist between written artifacts [...] and the practice of assessment in the academy' (emphasis in the original). Through the observation of moderation meetings, this study supports Hand and Clews' view that the written artifacts are largely absent from

lecturers' marking narratives.

Hand and Clewes (2000) note that interviews are a weak methodological tool with which to study marking practices. They point out that interview data offers lecturers' accounts of their marking rather than studying actual marking practices. Research in other sections of HE suggest a mismatch between espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris 1980) which means we may need to approach interview data with caution.

Hawe (2002) observed assessment practice as part of a large ethnographic study. She found 'discontinuity between rhetoric and standards' (Hawe 2002:93). Like Hands and Clewes (2000) she found that lecturers bring a lot of themselves into the act of assessment which resulted in individualistic approaches:

They [the lecturers] made judgements about student performance according to their personal experiences, feelings and preferences.

(Hawe 2002:99)

Hawe found that little attention was paid to the assessment artifacts when student work was marked; instead lecturers appeared to 'ground their judgement in their own set of "rules"' (p.101).

Orrell (2003) addresses this problem by using thinking aloud protocols where she asked lecturers to talk into an audio recorder while assessing student work. She contrasts the assessment practices this revealed with the lecturers' espoused ideas about their assessment practice as revealed through interview. For example, Orrell notes the innovative approaches that were commented on in interview but which were absent in practice.

#### Research aim

Yorke (2008) suggests that the lack of research into assessment practice relates to the methodological challenges associated with researching what Race (1995:1) refers to as the 'private and intimate affair' of marking. In this study we address these methodological difficulties by building on the foundations of Orrell's (2003) study. We employed thinking aloud protocols (Ericsson 1993) to explore the ways that lecturers verbalise their essay marking. In addition we conducted semi-structured interviews with each lecturer to allow us to explore their espoused practice.

The research sample was drawn from two English universities. Twelve lecturers from a range of arts and humanities based subjects participated in this study. They were asked to think aloud while they marked in real time two first year undergraduate essays of their choosing. This activity was recorded, transcribed and analysed using a qualitative thematic approach (Richie and Lewis 2003). We noted Baume et al's (2004) study in which lecturers blind marked portfolios (that had previously been marked) from a course archive. This study reveals that marks awarded in experimental conditions were lower than the marks awarded for the same pieces of work marked in non-experimental contexts. This poses an ethical challenge. Moreover we are aware that we are researching in a context where lecturers need to 'defend [their] assessment practice from challenges by students, colleagues and external bodies' (Ecclestone and Swann 1999:377). To safeguard against these concerns we researched the marking of first year scripts that do not contribute to students' overall degree

classification. In addition we ensured that lecturers were guaranteed anonymity.

### Analysis

Our preliminary analysis suggests that lecturers are concurrently apprehending a range of surface/textual and deep/compositional features in a non-linear way. Lecturers move seamlessly between noting particular text features:

I've noticed a number of slips

OK - no apostrophe

and then moving to global features concerning overall constructs of quality:

The conclusion is rather hollow

They have identified the play with genre which is good

To arrive at a given mark the lecturers conduct what we refer to as 'self-negotiations' that range from tentative to self assured. These self-negotiations appear to relate to another element of their marking where we note lecturers' keen awareness of the range of marking stakeholders (these include the external examiners, students and programme team).

We identified that judgemental processes and feedback to student processes are interwoven:

She's exhibiting the practical knowledge I think but is not really exhibiting sufficiently [...] so now I'm thinking about what I have got to write

This study grapples with the challenge of investigating and analysing professional judgement. By exploring this terrain we are opening up opportunities to understand lecturers' tacit practice. Through this research we aim to offer lecturers a theorised account of marking practice that may be used as a means to bring greater reflexivity to the practices adopted.