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A culture of question writing: How do question writers compose examination questions in an examination paper?

Conference Paper Abstract

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Abstract

Understanding assessment cultures requires the use of methods that can elicit taken for granted elements of practice and answer questions about how things are done in a specific context. At the 2016 AEA-Europe Conference we reported on a project that used observation techniques to study how question writers compose individual examination questions. We noted that although examination question writing practice was ubiquitous, limited research had been carried out on how writers actually draft individual examination questions. A major outcome of the project was that we discovered that writers moved through a three-stage Plan–Write–Review question writing process, and this was subsequently published as a model in Johnson, Constantinou and Crisp (2017).

We wanted to extend the question writing model by considering whether it also described how question writers developed questions when writing a whole examination paper (rather than isolated, individual questions). To explore this issue we observed the question writing practices of six question writers from three different subjects (English, ICT, and Business Studies). These subjects were chosen because initial analyses showed that these examination papers included constrained items (i.e. relatively short items that contain sub-parts that are worth a few marks) and a variety of response types. It was hypothesized that writers who develop questions for such papers may have a mental model that also encompasses other items when they write individual questions.

To capture evidence of question writing we asked each participant to write an examination paper whilst thinking aloud. During this task a researcher sat alongside the writer using a structured observation schedule. The purpose of the schedule was to capture the nature and sequence of elements of the writing activity, and to consider whether the writers were accommodating previous or nascent questions in their concurrent question drafting. Following the observation, the writers were interviewed to explore parts of the examination paper authoring process that were not covered during the observation session.

For our data analysis we adopted a sociocultural approach that encouraged us to take into account both the cognitive and the social dimensions of professional question writing practice. A specific area of interest for analysis was the consideration of how social perspectives are evident within the writing model, and how these may have an important role in quality assurance as the writer seeks to impose their authority on the intended reader (Lotman, 1988).

Our project findings extend the original Plan–Write–Review question writing model whilst also capturing evidence of individual writer preference within the writing process. The project also gives some insight into the lived experience of question writing and overcomes some of the challenges that relate to the articulation of complex professional practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). As a result, the outcomes are helpful for the training of new writers as they are inducted into an established community of professional practice.

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