Reading between the lines: exploring the characteristics of feedback that support examiners' professional knowledge building
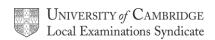
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Abstract

This study continues a line of work which aims to increase understanding of the influence of the introduction of digital marking technologies on large scale assessment systems. A feature of some current assessment systems which involve human markers is a move towards remote standardisation for examiners. One challenge for this model is that examiners have to align their marking judgements on candidate responses with those of more senior examiners in the absence of any face-to-face interaction.

Feedback messages that pass from more to less senior examiners are an important part of the way that examiners learn to apply a mark scheme. Despite there being a stipulation from the national examination regulator that feedback is an expected element of examiner monitoring, implying acceptance that feedback helps to improve the reliability of examiners' marking, there is little empirical research to support such practice. Pilot observations for the current study suggest that examiner feedback messages are a particular form of extended learning discourse, and that this has implications for analytical methods chosen to explore it.

The current project involved 20 examiners from across three subject areas in a UK-based examination board. Transcripts of all of the remote feedback messages that passed between the examiners (n=562) were captured and analysed using an innovative approach. The chosen approach integrated elements of Conversation Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and Corpus Linguistics methods, and conforms to a model of Sociocultural Discourse Analysis (SDA) (Mercer, 2004). SDA is an iterative approach and investigates the particular and general features of interaction in both top-down and bottom-up ways.

The study outcomes provide evidence of the way that the examiners use linguistic features to construct common ground with each other and use this as a basis for constructing mutual understanding in their interaction. The outcomes of the analyses outline some of the characteristics of feedback that support professional knowledge building between examiners in the absence of face-to-face contact. The study also considers some of the theoretical and technological challenges to professional knowledge building in remote interaction. In so doing, the study seeks to identify the features of between-examiner feedback that are considered to be most (and least) effective; the influence of between-examiner feedback on examiners' professional learning; and the role that such feedback potentially has on remote professional examiner community building.

Mercer, N. (2004). Sociocultural discourse analysis: analysing classroom talk as a social mode of thinking. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(2), 137–168.