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Articulation Work: How do senior examiners construct feedback to encourage both examiner alignment and examiner development?

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Introduction

This is a study of the marking feedback given to a group of examiners by their Team Leaders (more senior examiners who oversee and monitor the quality of examiner marking in their team). This feedback has an important quality assurance (QA) function but also has a developmental dimension, allowing less senior examiners to gain insights into the thinking of more senior ones. When looked at from this perspective, marking feedback supports a form of examiner professional learning.

This study set out to look at this area of examiner practice in detail. To do this, I captured and analysed a set of feedback interactions involving 30 examiners across three General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A Level) subjects. For my analysis, I used a mixture of learning theory and sociological theory to explore how the feedback was being used and how it attained its dual goals of examiner monitoring and examiner development.

UK awarding bodies commonly use specialist marking software to distribute digital copies of students' examination scripts to examiners for marking. This allows Team Leaders to monitor the marking quality of the examiners under their supervision throughout the marking period. As part of this monitoring activity, Team Leaders are also required to give examiners feedback on their marking. This monitoring and remediation function is an important component of an awarding body's QA arrangements that ensure that the marking process results in fair and equitable assessment outcomes. An interesting characteristic of recent examiner feedback communication is that it is not generally carried out in face-to-face situations. Feedback is generally given through the software messaging function (i.e., e-feedback), or via telephone communication.

As well as having a crucial QA function, previous work has suggested that feedback can also be conceptualised as having an expansive developmental potential for the less senior examiners (Johnson & Black,

2012). Expansiveness is a concept that describes how some contexts help new participants in a professional community to gain access to the important knowledge and values that then allow them to go on to become more independent participants in an activity (Fuller & Unwin, 2003). I argue, in line with Beighton, Poma, and Leonard (2015); Dennen (2004), and some situated learning theorists, that this concept of expansion has important links to learning, since a development in the understanding of professional practice in an area is synonymous with *learning to be a professional*. This expansiveness includes the type and extent of knowledge transfer, the quality of emotional and practical support for participants, and the appropriate alignment of individual objectives.

Rationale for the study

The acknowledged role that Team Leader feedback has in marking QA processes means that examiner communication is an important area of study. This is particularly the case because of its role in the alignment of Team Leader and examiner thinking which forms the basis of common mark scheme application.

Despite this acknowledged importance, the study of examiner feedback practice is, at present, a relatively under-researched area. This lack of research is the result of a number of specific factors. One factor is that e-feedback practice is still an emerging area of communication, with professional behaviours being inevitably linked to the affordances of the digital marking environments that have recently been adopted across the assessment sector. Another factor links to the challenges of capturing and analysing information that is distributed between individuals across a diverse set of communication channels.

Theory

Learning and communication research suggests a number of potential issues that make the careful study of feedback practice very pertinent.

Previous literature suggests that communication context has implications for communication quality, and that this in turn has an influence on the potential quality of professional learning and development. For example, some research has shown that the ability to provide information in various formats (such as simultaneous verbal and non-verbal forms) helps to convey content that is more nuanced, and enhances participants' development of a shared view (see, for example, Münzer & Holmer, 2009).

The notion of a shared view is important as it is a component of the expansiveness (mentioned earlier) that supports both the alignment of perspectives and the learning that comprises professional development. It is possible that a lack of alignment is related to the way that the affordances of a communication mode influences the transactional distance between examiners. Transactional distance describes the psychological and communicative space of potential misunderstandings that can exist between participants (see, for example, Murphy & Rodriguez, 2008).

Two sets of theory are relevant for exploring how feedback supports alignment and examiner development: *Intermental activity* (Vygotsky, 1978), and *Articulation work* (Strauss, 1985). Although emerging from different disciplines, the former from education psychology and the latter from workplace sociology, both share a common focus on the way that social interaction influences individual thinking and action. In this way, these theories relate to models of learning which consider education to be both "…an interpersonal and intrapersonal process" (Mercer, Littleton, & Wegerif, 2004, p.203).

Looking first at Intermental activity, this notion is underpinned by a belief that the quality of an individual's learning and development is related to the quality of interpersonal communication during learning, for example, the quality of teacher, and learner or peer learner communication (Johnson, 2016; Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999). A growing body of research evidence now suggests that productive learning communication (i.e., communication that attains its learning purpose) relies on the participants developing and maintaining common ground through their discourse (see, for example, Edwards & Mercer, 1987).

In the specific context of examiner feedback, the concept of Intermental activity anticipates that examiners develop their understanding of a mark scheme through sharing their (sometimes contrasting) perspectives about how to mark a particular candidate response with their Team Leader. In developing this shared view, examiners draw on shared resources (such as mark scheme documents or candidates' exam scripts) that invoke concepts that they believe to reside within the cognition of each other.

A consequence of this theory is that where common ground in feedback communication is weak, it is possible that communication will break down, that examiners will fail to establish shared understandings, and that less senior examiners will not become full participants in the professional examiner community.

The second area of relevant theory that I draw on links to the notion of Articulation work (Strauss, 1985). This concept describes how communication helps to coordinate individuals whose work is professionally interconnected. This form of work is carried out by managers to ensure that those around them complete their own tasks, and thus ensure that mutually important strategic goals are attained. This theory has implications for research methods because it draws attention to the importance of evidencing the minutiae of the professional behaviours that participants carry out, and which often go unnoticed as they are generally taken for granted.

Bringing together the two areas of theory, my study considers the articulation work that Team Leaders carry out through their feedback communication as they build and maintain common ground with the examiners in their team.

Method

My study focused on three GCE A Level subjects (Chemistry, Economics and Geography). These subjects were chosen because they included scripts that incorporated subjective items. These items tend to invite performances that require higher order skills, and inevitably involve intricate decision-making on the part of an examiner when applying the mark scheme. Such items are considered to be the most complex item type, and they tend to result in lower levels of examiner agreement

Figure 1: Integrated methodological approach for feedback analysis (from Johnson, 2017)

(Bramley, 2008; Massey & Raikes, 2006), so I anticipated that they would produce rich between-examiner feedback interactions.

In my study, I captured all of the feedback messages that were given by three Team Leaders to the examiners with whom they worked in their respective marking teams over two different examination sessions. There were 27 examiners in total. The feedback data included all of the email messages that were conveyed through the examiners' digital marking system, as well as any messages that were communicated by telephone. This data comprised 991 messages. In addition to the raw message data, I was also able to observe and interview all of the Team Leaders during the feedback-giving process, as well as interviewing a sample of 13 examiners. This allowed the participants to reflect on the rationales behind, and their reactions to, particular feedback practices.

To analyse the feedback data content, I employed methods that drew from three different methodological approaches to discourse analysis: *Thematic Content Analysis*, *Conversation Analysis*, and *Corpus Linguistics*. The rationale for this integrated approach was to enable my analysis to capture evidence of the global, generic elements of language use as well as the particular, contextualised aspects of language use. This approach also allowed me to integrate a qualitative dimension to my analysis, using a framework to consider why humans tend to interact in certain ways at specific times, as well as to employ specialist software to overcome some of the limitations that pertain to human analysts (e.g., the challenges of identifying patterns across a large dataset). Figure 1 outlines the areas of methodological overlap that I sought to exploit through this combined analysis (for more on the details of this analysis, see Johnson, 2017).

In practice, this analysis meant that each element of feedback would be analysed to consider (1) the content and intended purpose of each element; (2) the interplay of the message elements with any previous communication; (3) the impact of the information content and intention around the turns of interaction handovers; and (4) the presence and role of any frequently used words.

A final benefit of the adoption of this methodological approach was that it enabled me to capture both the transactional and the interactional dimensions of feedback discourse (Brown & Yule, 1983). Transactional dimensions include the actual content of feedback, whilst the interactional dimensions include stylistic choices around the ways that such content is presented and the intentions behind these choices.

Outcomes

Content and agreement[1]

One of the principal outcomes of my analysis was to be able to identify the types of content that were included in feedback messages. Figure 2 outlines the five types of information that were most commonly found (in descending order of prevalence):

Whilst these findings allow insight into what information contributes to the alignment of examiners' thinking (e.g., shared information about where and why marking credit is found in a performance, or how examiners are expected to use the specific marking software), this data is only one part of an interesting story.

An important point to consider is that feedback information is generally shared within the broader context of explicitly or implicitly stated disagreement between the participants. Analysis was carried out to measure the relative balance of agreement or disagreement

Content	Definition	Example
Locating credit	Pointing out that there is a difference without a rationale (the examiner needs to fill the missing information)	`We gave the 'explanation' mark here`
Rationalising credit	A rationale for a mark decision is given, making the Team Leader thinking explicit	`We gave the 'explanation' mark here because...`
General	Non-specific/non-concept related information	`Your marking is good`
Technical	Conveying system-level information	`Annotations: remember to put N/R to all questions not answered`
State mark	Number only statements	`Q1 is 1 mark`

Figure 2: Common information types found in feedback messages

information within each feedback message. This analysis showed that disagreement was conveyed in around 88 per cent of all of the feedback messages, and that it accounted for the major part of around 70 per cent of the messages in total (Table 1).

Table 1: The relative levels of agreement and disagreement in feedback messages

	Messages (n)	Messages (%)
Disagreement is greater than agreement	693	69.9
Agreement is greater than disagreement	178	18.0
No agreement or disagreement indicated	120	12.1
Total	**991**	**100.0**

For theorists who have studied interaction at a fine level, it is possible that this skew towards negative discourse could have implications for the professional relationships that are being developed and maintained through these interactions. For example, according to Goffman (1967) and Morand (2000), negative information represents a challenge for maintaining productive discourse. This is because the presence of negative information in social interaction embroils issues of *face management*. Face management is, for some theorists, a component of communication competence, and describes how people manage their communication to protect their (and others') public and/or professional image (e.g., to avoid social embarrassment or undermine professional status).

Negative information is a challenge for maintaining ongoing communication: it can undermine participation in social interaction (Yelland, 2011), it can increase transactional distance (Ackerman & Gross, 2010), and it can create problems for ongoing relationship maintenance (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2015). As a result, Chur-Hansen & McLean (2006) note that providing negative feedback is a demanding skill which requires the consideration of interpersonal issues when drafting feedback messages.

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1. For all of the reported significance tests, I used a Mann–Whitney U test. This is a nonparametric test of the null hypothesis that it is equally likely that a randomly selected value (i.e., feedback word count) from one sample will be less than or greater than a randomly selected value from a second sample. I have reported the findings where word count is significantly different at or below the 5% significance level, suggesting that the differences cannot be explained by random chance.

Examiner familiarity and experience

My analyses showed that the characteristics of examiner prior experience and familiarity had an impact on the types of feedback given. These outcomes suggest that content and relationship management were entangled in the process of feedback giving.

Using word count as an indication of content, I found that there was significantly more feedback communicated between Team Leaders and new examiners than between Team Leaders and experienced examiners. Messages to new examiners contained on average 116 words, whilst messages to experienced examiners contained on average 75 words.

In addition, and although the groups were highly overlapping, there was significantly more feedback communicated between Team Leaders and unfamiliar examiners than between Team Leaders and with familiar examiners. Unfamiliar examiners were those who had not previously worked with the Team Leader. Messages to unfamiliar examiners contained on average 101 words, whilst messages to familiar examiners contained on average 80 words.

These analyses suggested that Team Leaders were targeting and adapting their communication to the needs of their examiners in different ways, with new and unfamiliar examiners receiving more feedback than other examiners.

Distancing strategies

To make sense of these discrepancies, I analysed any differences in the nature of the information that was being conveyed between these different groups of examiners. The clearest difference was in the way that Team Leaders employed *distancing strategies* with new and unfamiliar examiners (compared with other examiners).

In my study, distancing strategies refer to the deployment of politeness in discourse. It has already been noted that the presence of negative information in social interaction, such as criticism, disagreement, and interruption, embroils issues of face management. Importantly, it has been observed that politeness can minimise *face threat* (Goffman, 1967; Morand, 2000), and has been found to be used in professional contexts where bad news needs to be delivered (Sussman & Sproull, 1999).

Theorists also observe that politeness may be of a positive or a negative variety, with each affording the user the opportunity to either increase or reduce the perceived social distance in interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive politeness reduces the threat to the recipient's positive face by accentuating empathy and common ground between the participants, therefore acting as a kind of social accelerator. These positive politeness tactics include admiration (e.g., "I like that way that you approached that problem") and the use of 'in-group' speech forms (e.g., the use of ellipsis and the inclusive pronoun form "we"). On the other hand, negative politeness avoids imposition on the recipient's negative face (i.e., the desire to act unimpeded) by creating a respectful distance between the participants. Negative politeness tactics act as a form of *social brake* (Culpeper, 1996) through the judicious use of words to construct messages that include apology, verbal hedging, and honorific term use.

My analyses showed that distancing strategies were used more frequently with new examiners and with unfamiliar examiners. Over the course of their feedback discourse, on average, new and/or unfamiliar examiners' messages contained around 27–33 distancing strategies, compared with a range of 21–26 distancing strategies for experienced and/or familiar examiners' messages.

Careful analysis of the feedback discourse showed that distancing strategies were deployed in a number of ways across the feedback corpus. These included the personalisation of messages, the use of apology, and the use of modal forms.

Greetings and closings

Nearly all of the feedback messages included a greeting and a farewell statement. Analyses suggest that the participants used these openings and closings in a purpose driven way so as to achieve particular effects. For example, one Team Leader, (*Roy*)[2] explained how in general he preferred concise, targeted message writing: "I don't need to waste [words], the potency of the message goes in the more words you use in my opinion". At the same time, he rationalised how the effort expended on personalising messages, including elements such as informal greetings and closings (Figure 3), may have a motivating impact on this particular examiner.

```
Hi Eric, This is out by quite a bit again but I can see the
calls you have made (except for one mistake). Can you please
carefully review the below?
...
[A list of five detailed marking points to consider]
...
Thanks, Roy
```

Figure 3: Personalised greeting and closing

When discussing this feedback message, the Team Leader reported:

I have been at the other end of this and you really just want to know where you have gone wrong… I honestly don't want to dishearten [Eric]. *To be fair the message was "You are out". There is a human interaction here. Whereas actually when you are giving just very straightforward feedback "This is right, this is wrong", you don't need as much as that, but you need to be a bit softer [here] I guess.*

Apologies

The use of apology is a strategy for manipulating the perceived social distance in interaction. The feedback extract in Figure 4 shows how apology is used by an examiner (*Teresa*) to preserve the negative face of the Team Leader (*Serena*) and to reduce intrusion into their professional space.

```
Sorry Serena another question, Q8 p10 - is this enough for
L3B2? - thanks Teresa
```

Figure 4: Apology use in written feedback

This pattern is also noticeable in the telephone extract in Figure 5, where a Team Leader (*Ben*) has to inform an examiner (*Gerry*) that he has to send some standardisation scripts back to the examiner for reconsideration.

In this feedback Ben manages engagement through underplaying the seriousness of the disagreement (line 005: "little bit"). The use of apology also reinforces the dispreference related to giving bad news (lines 003, 004, 008, 010: "sorry", "unfortunately", "afraid"). Ben then shifts the focus of the conversation (line 013), emphasising (now) before Gerry can dwell on the disagreement. This is a shift towards positive help following the delivery of negative news.

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2. All names have been changed to preserve participant anonymity.
3. The Conversation Analysis conventions used in this transcription are adapted from Jefferson (2004): . Short pause; :: Long pause; ? High rise; [] Overlapping talk; Now Emphasis.

```
001   Ben      Hi. Gerry?³
002   Gerry    Yes speaking
003   Ben      Ben. Hi. I'm s:: I'm sorry I had to send you
004            back another set of scripts but erm unfortunately
005            with the first batch being a little bit over
006            the [limit
007   Gerry       [I was a bit yeah]
008   Ben                         Yah], I'm afraid I've got to
009            send them back so you'll have to do another set
010            I'm afraid? And then submit those before we
011            can [be]
012   Gerry       [Yeah]
013   Ben      Up and running. Now is there anything in
014            particular?
```

Figure 5: Apology use in telephone feedback

A closer look at the use of apology also gives insights into how the participants maintained order and ongoing professional interaction in a context where face threat was present. Log-likelihood ratio analyses that identify keywords (i.e., words that are used significantly more frequently than others in a discourse) showed that the word 'please' was used more by Team Leaders than by examiners. In addition, a search of the whole corpus using the search terms [sorry] [apol*] located 142 instances of apologetic utterance. Most of these apologies (n=125) took used negative politeness forms (e.g., "Sorry this feedback is a bit lengthy").

Modals

At times Team Leaders were seen to soften the definitiveness of their judgement through the use of modal forms (e.g., could, may, might). Phrases that use these types of words are sometimes called *hedges* and they express tentativeness and avoid strong statements that may be construed as being confrontational (Lakoff, 1973).

In the feedback extract in Figure 6, the Team Leader (*Ben*) responds to a message from an examiner (*Tony*) by embedding his comments in the original email wording (indicated in red font). Tony has alerted the Team Leader to an apparent mixed message in the mark scheme (lines 005–008), and then asks for clarification on a marking point (lines 012–013). In his response, Ben's disagreement is weakly stated (line 014). Ben also softens the definitive nature of the responses through the use of modals on lines 010, 011, ("may", "if"), which reduces the implication that the examiner is completely incorrect.

```
001   Hi Tony
002   Thank you for the feedback, I have amended the 2 you
003   sent back to me.
004   2 queries:
005   [Script] ID 649581302 - Q1 g ii - MS says 'it' should be
006   assumed to mean cyclohexane. Do they still need to have
007   written cyclohexane somewhere in their answer to get the
008   mark? I accepted 'It burns more effectively'.
009   I cannot find the comment re: "assumed to be cyclohexane"
010   in the mark scheme - it may have appeared in the practice
011   scripts by the sound of it, and was incorrect if it did.
012   [Script] ID 649661411 - Q2b - do they get the mark even
013   though 'curly' arrow is almost straight?
014   I am afraid so - possibly a little generous.
015   I will look through the other 5 and send over.
016   Thanks.
017   Ben
```

Figure 6: Modal use in feedback

Discussion

Through my close analysis of Team Leader and examiner feedback discourse, I have been able to gain insight into the nature of the communication that supports distributed marking processes. Analysis of feedback content shows that examiners are given important information that steers their practice. This communication content helps examiners to refine their interpretations of mark schemes and helps to reduce any marking discrepancies between examiners and more senior examiners/Team Leaders. This content can be interpreted as being a component of an expansive learning environment since it gives new examiners access to the important knowledge and values, that then allows them to go on to become more independent markers.

This analysis also draws attention to the intermental nature of professional development, with examiners developing their understanding of a mark scheme through receiving (sometimes contrasting) perspectives from their Team Leaders on a shared marking performance. Feedback content frequently focused on the location of, and the rationalisations for, marking credit. Drawing on learning communication literature, this content can be interpreted as providing the foundation for the Team Leaders and the examiners to develop a shared view. According to this perspective, productive learning communication relies on the participants developing and maintaining common ground through their discourse.

As well as providing empirical evidence of the transactional content of feedback information, my analyses also give insight into the allied interactional dimension of communication. My analyses show that Team Leaders deploy politeness in their feedback communication in a targeted way. I then explain, using theory, why the common ground that is established through feedback interaction, and the expansiveness that is derived from it, is potentially threatened by the prevalence of negative information (marking disagreement) within the communication. Analysis suggests that the structure of Team Leader feedback communication is influenced by the nature of the information conveyed within the messages. Moreover, interview data showed that this structuring is to some extent conscious and purpose driven on the part of the Team Leaders. Feedback information that conveys disagreement is a negative basis for establishing productive, ongoing relations. Team Leaders appear to structure negative feedback messages in ways that attempted to maintain productive engagement through reinforcing an examiner's sense of professionalism. This is most clearly demonstrated in the prevailing use of negative politeness strategies in such messages. This is particularly the case with new and/or unfamiliar examiners, with whom Team Leaders would be expected to have the weakest common ground.

Drawing on sociological theory, this form of relationship management through feedback can be interpreted as a form of *Articulation work*. This is a form of 'taken for granted' coordination work that ensures that mutually important strategic goals are attained. Team Leaders use feedback to communicate important content to examiners whilst also mitigating the threats to common ground building that pertains to the negative information that the messages sometimes need to convey. The use of negative politeness helps the participants to maintain a respectful professional distance, and a corollary of this is that marking work is maintained (and not curtailed prematurely due to a lack of *examiner will* rather than *examiner skill*). Having an ongoing feedback interaction over time allows a virtuous cycle of examiner development to be constructed. Ongoing marking experience leads to attendant feedback, a process of

examiner reflection, and the consolidation of examiner thinking that is reinforced by a Team Leader's perspective.

The insights from this study set out the complexity of the feedback-giving task, and how it interacts with the nature of professional examiner development. It also gives insights into the nature of the relationships that foster professional development, and the importance of the forms of communication that lay the foundations for both examiner learning and the completion of marking tasks to a high standard. My analyses illuminate the way that Team Leaders manipulate the perceived social distance within their remote feedback communication so as to attend to the dual functions of (a) monitoring the standard of examiner marking, and (b) giving examiners information that supports their ongoing development. These insights could be used to inform any future training that is given to Team Leaders in preparation for feedback-giving practices.

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