Interpretation and application of assessment criteria in a large soft skills module: The role of relationships in communities of practice (0627)

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Abstract:
The consistent interpretation and application of assessment criteria, especially in large modules with multiple markers, is a challenging process. Some argue for a more focused attention on clarity and preciseness but others, social constructivists, see this as a self-defeating exercise. Instead, they point to 'communities of practice' as the place where assessment criteria take shape and meaning. Following a social learning approach, we explore specific social dynamics involved in the interpretation and application of assessment criteria within the community around a large, soft skills module, taught to Electronic Engineering and Computer Science students in a UK University. Our analysis contributes to the social constructivist view by illustrating the importance of the relational dynamics unfolding within the module community, prior and after releasing coursework grades. More specifically, while prior to submission interpretive efforts are led by the teaching team, after grades release the students take over.

Keywords: assessment, consistency, community, social learning, soft skills

Introduction and background

Criterion-referenced assessment is the assessment of student performance against specified measures or statements of expectation (Shay, 2008); a rather challenging task, especially within large modules involving multiple markers. The main issue with criterion-referenced assessment is that 'criterion' is open to interpretation and it might mean different things to different people (Sadler, 2005; Woolf, 2004). This interpretive flexibility links to issues of consistency in applying assessment criteria (Reed et al, 2003; Shay 2005).

Researchers from the positivist tradition suggest that module designers should always try to produce clear and precise criteria that could be easily understood by students, but also tutors, other staff and external examiners (Woolf, 2004). Social constructivists, however, argue that the above would be pointless because assessment criteria will never be precise enough (O'Donovan et al, 2004). What this approach proposes instead is that meaningful understanding and application of assessment criteria emerges within an 'interpretive community' or 'community of practice' (ibid). The focus then shifts from the module designer and their efforts towards clarity and preciseness to a participatory process of co-construction and application of meaningful assessment criteria (O'Donovan et al, 2004; Rust et al, 2005).

In this paper we aim to explore such interpretive processes in depth. Following a social learning perspective, which sees learning – and therefore assessment – as a social activity taking place through participation within a group (Denscombe, 2008), we ask: *What are the specific social dynamics involved in the interpretation and application of assessment criteria within a practice community?*

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We perceive the democratic and inclusive participation of both students and teaching team as the essence of the notion of community of practice (Biesta 2015, 2013). We argue that students should not to be seen as objects to be molded, disciplined through assessment but as subjects of action and responsibility that use assessment to inform and build their learning.

Research Context and Methods
We follow a case-study approach (Yin, 2002) of research design. The unit of analysis, is a practice community formed around a large professional and soft skills module in a Russell Group University in the UK. The module is offered to 1ˢᵗ year Computer Science and Electronic Engineering students and aims to develop basic online research skills (find and evaluate online resources); presentation and teamwork skills; and finally, writing skills. There are 3 main assessments, a note taking/research exercise, a group presentation and a writing portfolio. Members of the immediate teaching team include 1 lecturer, 14 TAs and is taken by about 350 students each year. We conceptualise the module as being the centre of a practice community because over a period of 6 years it has drawn the attention and efforts of a series of higher education professionals, such as lecturers, learning development experts, teaching assistants, administrative staff, facilities and estates professionals, audio-visual experts, e-learning experts, IT services staff, and of course several cohorts of students.

Mixed methods allow us to collect and use data from a variety of sources, namely, interviews with students and teaching staff, module evaluation questionnaires, and ethnographic participant observation. These cover the period of 4 years, although the analysis tends to focus more on the last two. The authors of this paper are also active members of the practice community in question, however, with respect to mixed methods research there is no clear distinction between practitioners and researchers. "The practice is the research; the research is the practice" (Denscombe, 2008: 277). In educational research therefore we reject the view that there should be a clear distinction between practitioners (teachers) and researchers (academics) (Denscombe, 2008).

Empirical Findings and Discussion
The specific module evolved in its current version through a long series of iterations. In general, the School sees this as quite a problematic module because it is difficult to convince students of its importance (professional and soft skills are seen by students as not important or secondary to technical skills such as programming). The large size of the module adds to this problem and difficulties to recruit TAs with the appropriate skill set (good communicators, good in writing, organizational skills etc) pose additional challenges, especially in relation to consistency in the delivery method but also in the application of assessment criteria.

In its most recent iteration, module organisers with advise from Learning Development (LD) professionals redesigned assessment and delivery methods in a conscious effort to empower TAs but also to encourage more meaningful interactions between TAs and students. This could be interpreted as a move from a more positivist approach to a constructivist one. To achieve this, lab sessions were restructured into interactive group tutorials (15 students & 1 TA per group) and targeted TA training sessions were introduced to ensure consistency in assessment.

Within these formal structures, we observe specific types of relations forming: Lecturers-TAs, TAs-students (own and others), students-students, learning development experts (LD) – lecturers and LD-TAs. It is within these relationships where interpretation and application of assessment criteria takes place. We observe, however, that these relationships are equally active in interpreting assessment criteria after submission marks and feedback are released to the students. Although prior to submission the interpretive community of practice is led by the module organisers, after submission the dynamic shifts towards the students, with TAs keeping an important mediating role in both cases. Specific mechanisms for interpretation and application of assessment criteria include:

1. Cycle of emotional pressures: Students pressure friendly TAs to change marks, in turn TAs pressure lecturer and so on. During this cycle, assessment criteria are re-interpreted by all parties in various ways.

2. Comparisons: students compare their performance to that other students or to their own in other modules. In discussions of specific assessments, they compare themselves to that of others and this way expose inconsistent application of marking criteria.

3. "Feedback shopping": some students not satisfied with their mark and feedback tend to ask other TAs their in search of more positive feedback in order to build a case they could take to the lecturer.

The above are not simply 'complaints' but a meaningful engagement with assessment criteria.

In conclusion, our analysis contributes to the social constructivist view by illustrating the importance of the relational dynamics unfolding within a community of practice, prior and after assessment takes place. We propose that instead of focusing on achieving clarity and preciseness at the outset, module organisers should embrace community dialogue around assessment criteria beyond grades release, when students are most engaged. We see this as a way towards the development of an emancipatory and agentic dialogue that Biesta regards as part of a democratic and inclusive education.

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