

## **Articulation work: Insights into examiners’ expertise from their remote feedback interactions**

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## Articulation work

### *Insights into examiners' expertise from their remote feedback interactions*

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#### **Abstract**

*This study reports an exploratory reanalysis of data that was collected as part of an earlier project that focused on the remote feedback messages that passed between professional examiners working within an English awarding body<sup>1</sup>. The examiners in this study are contracted by the awarding body to assess the examination performances of students at the end of a two-year course of study that is a precursor to entry to academic courses in UK Universities.*

*This paper takes its title from a play on the word 'articulate', which simultaneously references the notion of 'expressing' and Schmidt's (2011) concept of articulation as the coordination of interconnected work across individuals. In this way, the paper explores evidence that senior examiner feedback to other examiners embodies both codified and tacit elements of expert examiner work.*

*This project, involving 59 examiners from six post-compulsory education subject areas, uses observation, survey and interview methods to gather information about the characteristics of senior examiner feedback. Focusing specifically on senior examiners who generate feedback, analyses suggest that these feedback interactions give insights into overt and hidden functions of examiner work. As a consequence, the analyses carry*

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<sup>1</sup> In England, Wales and Northern Ireland educational qualifications are offered by awarding bodies that are recognised by the national body that regulates qualifications and examinations (the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation [Ofqual]).

*implications for the on-going development of the examiner community and the development of expertise.*

## **Introduction: The context of professional examiner work**

This paper explores the nature of the work carried out by professional examiners as evidenced through the feedback communications that they convey to each other. Professional examiner work centres on the marking of student performances. For this they use a mark scheme that is developed consensually by the most senior examiners in the examiner hierarchy (usually a Principal Examiner and a group of Team Leaders). In the case of this study, once the students have sat their examination (usually in their school), their paper scripts are scanned and circulated to examiners for marking. The examiners work remotely and access the scripts through a secure online marking system until they have completed their marking load, which might comprise of several hundred individual examination scripts. Once the marking process is completed, the awarding body collates the marks centrally and the students are awarded grades accordingly.

The national school examination system in the UK has recently undergone a series of technical changes that make interactions between examiners around their assessment work more transparent. This means that it is timely to focus on the communication work of examiners, as this is an area that has had relatively little attention in assessment research. Such a study allows insights into the complex nature of examiner work, which can be evidenced through their interactions. This exploratory study looks to analyse the characteristics of examiners interactions and the insights they give into the nature of examiner work.

Large awarding bodies in the UK use a hierarchic quality assurance model, where senior examiners use standardisation and monitoring arrangements to ensure that examiners further down the marking hierarchy also hold an established marking standard and apply mark schemes appropriately. To support this process, examiners are organised into teams who work remotely from each other but under the virtual supervision of a senior examiner (team leader). Team leaders occupy a privileged position in the marking process, which makes them an interesting focus for study. Not only do they

participate in the generation of the mark scheme but they also have an important role overseeing the quality of marking of a group of examiners (their examiner team). As part of this role team leaders are expected to give feedback at an individual level to their examiners in order to support their marking consistency.

The idea motivating the study reported in this paper is that the work of team leaders, like other areas of work, involves a dual narrative. On the one hand there is a dominant narrative comprised of the work that is codified (e.g. in the terms and conditions of contracted work). On the other hand there is work that may defy codification, a hidden narrative, which is also important for the fulfillment of tasks and therefore deserves recognition. This work can be evidenced through observation of the everyday and somewhat taken for granted practices of work (Arminen, 2005; Hindmarsh & Heath, 2000; Sellen & Harper, 2002).

Careful analysis of episodes of social interaction can give valuable insights into the way that individuals coordinate their work to accomplish tasks. For example, in pedagogic study, analysis of teachers' dialogue with students can give insights into the way that students are encouraged to participate in the construction of knowledge (Wegerif, Mercer, & Rojas-Drummond, 1999; Rojas-Drummond, Torreblanca, Pedraza, Vélez, & Guzmán, 2013), or how teachers can prevent student participation through their use of questioning strategies (Myhill & Dunkin, 2005; Tienken, Goldberg, & Dirocco, 2009). These insights represent a hidden narrative that resides beneath the surface of work involved in teaching a set curriculum. In the case of this study, feedback is a site of interaction where the nature of team leader work can be evidenced. As a consequence, analytical methods are required that can explore these interactions so that they give insights that get beneath the surface of the work being done.

## **Feedback messages: opening a window on codified and hidden elements of examiners' work practices**

Team leader work and the feedback interactions that they instigate is the focus of this study. Senior examiner work, like work in any other context, might be assumed to involve elements of both codified and tacit knowledge. The highly regulated nature of

the UK school examination system means that some of the codified elements of examiners' work are already documented. For example, the national body that regulates awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, has published a Code of Practice which states that:

*'Following standardisation, senior examiners must check the marked samples of the examiners for whom they are responsible to ensure that the authorised mark schemes are being accurately and consistently applied. A record must be kept of the marks awarded by both examiners and of the feedback given to the initial examiner.'* (Ofqual, 2011, p. 26)

To some extent this codified information represents a technical narrative of the work involved in marking examinations, and is in tune with descriptions of the assessment system that focus on its observable features. This perspective is exemplified in standard accounts of how the examination system functions (e.g. Raban, 2008; Tattersall, Day, James, Gillan, & Spencer, 2003). At the same time it is possible that this technical narrative, although clearly articulated, overlooks hidden elements of work that help the examination system to function. Aubenais' (2011) account of night cleaners suggests that the use of methods to get beneath the surface of work can help to make otherwise hidden practices observable.

As a consequence, the codified elements of senior examiner work may represent only part of the story. Boreham (2004) and Samurçay & Vidal-Gomel (2002) report how experts use their non-codified expertise to make sense of fluctuating and novel situations. This concept also overlaps with the notion of articulation work outlined by Schmidt (2011). Articulation work involves the non-codified acts that a professional recognises must take place to ensure that work across a group of individuals interconnects. For example, a manager may oversee and facilitate positive relations between subordinate co-workers to ensure that collaborative work outcomes are achieved. This suggests that there can be space for experts to act differently from each other even where their professional roles are highly codified.

This study focuses on team leaders' remote feedback interactions to gain insight into the nature of their work. Seen from a technical perspective, feedback is part of a learning

discourse. Research evidence shows that examiner standardisation and feedback processes can help to align examiners' judgements with each other, with feedback given to examiners by more senior examiners reducing the scale of marking differences between them (Shaw, 2002; Meadows & Billington, 2005; Greatorex & Bell, 2008).

Underpinning this technical perspective, theory from the field of linguistic pragmatics suggests that effective communication requires that participants establish common ground with each other (Clark, 1992). Common ground is established where discourse participants steer away from areas of privileged knowledge (i.e. knowledge that pertains only to one participant), and intended and received meanings align. To support this process, participants make judicious linguistic choices that reference features of the shared context. For example, examiners will reference mark scheme documents and agreed definitions of words that have been built up through past interactions. As a consequence, a technical interpretation of team leader work will focus on their use of expertise to craft feedback that avoids break down in common ground building in remote work interactions. Literature from remote communication studies suggests that such break down might centre on participants' perceptions of social isolation (Lea & Spears, 1991), insecure relationship building (Walther, 1992), and fragmented discourse construction (Brennan, 1998; Herring, 1999; Whittaker, 2003).

Whilst a technical approach to feedback study would tend to focus on feedback content, a more nuanced view of expert work would also require that any hidden narrative should also be explored. For example, this might include searching for elements of feedback interactions that stray beyond the boundaries of the immediate task and which perhaps allude to relational elements. Edwards & D'arcy (2004) argue that an experts' 'relational expertise' may be a tacit element of their knowledge that underpins the establishment of successful learning interactions. In this regard, these elements might be context specific influences on how a team leader helps an examiner to 'get a job done', and resist codification.

## Research questions

This paper reports exploratory analyses of data that was collected from team leaders and examiners over a two-year period as part of a larger study reported in (Johnson & Black,

2012a). That research project set out to isolate feedback features that effectively help distributed professional examiners to align their thinking when they work remotely from each other. The analyses reported in this paper explain further exploratory analyses of the study data and look at two things. Firstly, analyses consider how feedback content establishes coherence between the specific ideas within a message (i.e. allowing the examiner to establish common ground with the team leader through seeing how they connect ideas around mark scheme interpretation). Secondly, analyses look to evidence of elements in messages that link with factors that do not appear to relate specifically to the content of a particular feedback message. Consideration of these factors might be important as they represent hidden aspects of the interaction process but which help the participants to make sense of each other's perspective and may ensure that the professional community coheres more broadly.

## Data gathering and analytical methods

Following consultation with the OCR<sup>2</sup> awarding body, seven contexts were chosen for investigation. These contexts were all Advanced General Certificate of Education (GCE)<sup>3</sup> specifications. The project was carried out over two years and adopted a multiple method approach to capture the interactions that take place between team leaders and examiners (Table 1). These methods generated a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. Such an approach enabled a degree of analytical confidence, through triangulation and the identification of common themes and codes across different methodological approaches.

**Table 1: Study Design Overview**

	Observation (Team Leader)		Survey (Team Leader)		Interview (Examiner)		Total
	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	Y1	Y2	
Critical Thinking	2		5		6		13
Chemistry	1	1	5	3			10
Geography	1	1	2	6			10
Mathematics			6				6

<sup>2</sup> OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA) is a large UK-based awarding body.

<sup>3</sup> Advanced General Certificate of Education (GCE) is usually studied over a two year period and is widely recognised in England, Wales and Northern Ireland as being the standard entry qualification for assessing the suitability of applicants for academic courses in UK Universities.

Biology		1		5		3	9
Psychology		1		6		3	10
Economics		1					1
<b>Total</b>	4	5	18	20	6	6	59
		<b>9</b>		<b>38</b>		<b>12</b>	

Over the study period nine team leaders from across six subject areas agreed to work in a research lab during their examiner monitoring and feedback activity. The imbalance in subject representation reflected the logistic challenges of getting team leaders from across all subjects to be able to attend the research lab during the intense examination-marking period. The team leaders were remotely observed using *Morae* usability software (TechSmith, 2011). These observations allowed the team leaders' physical behaviours to be coded (i.e. the things that they attended to during the monitoring task). Following the monitoring session each team leader watched a replay of their activity as a form of stimulated recall (e.g. Gass & Mackey, 2000; Lyle, 2003). This allowed the team leader to talk through the reasoning behind the decisions that they had taken whilst constructing feedback. When placed alongside the team leaders' observed behaviours it was possible to link specific team leader behaviours with their given reasons. This process led to a second, qualitative coding process to identify common patterns of behaviours across the different team leaders. For more in depth information about the coding process please refer to (Johnson & Black, 2012b).

The second data collection phase gained a larger picture of monitoring practices through the use of an online survey of team leaders. The survey content built upon data gathered through the observation sessions. This allowed analyses to consider whether the messages from earlier data gathering episodes were also common to other team leaders in other subject contexts. The surveys were completed by 38 team leaders across six subject areas and included themes that either described team leader monitoring practice or seemed to be a potential influence on such practices. These themes included: 'preparation work'; 'standardisation practices'; 'feedback practices'; 'communication methods'; and 'professional role perceptions'. Where possible the survey used forced response items to gather quantitative data. In some cases the data being gathered were qualitative in nature and these were captured through open response items. Analysis of



the responses generated a number of themes. These were validated through consensus seeking discussion with a representative of the awarding body.

Finally, twelve examiners across three subjects were interviewed to consider the ways that they had experienced feedback. This process had two purposes. Firstly, interview data could be triangulated with the data from the team leader observations and surveys to give an indication of the extent to which team leader practices were common. Secondly, the process allowed qualitative insight into the effects of team leader actions on examiners. In order to do this, examiners were asked to talk through, in chronological order, their interactions with their team leader. This included the nature of the communication and the perceived impact of the interaction on the examiner and their marking practice. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed before being analysed. Analysis considered the reasons for feedback, the qualitative effect of feedback (positive or negative), and the consequent actions that were linked to the feedback. The final analysis stage involved the generation of overarching themes that could be interpreted from within the data. Again, the outcomes of the analysis were validated through discussion with a representative of the awarding body.

The exploratory analysis reported in this paper focused on 123 feedback messages gathered across six of the seven subjects, as well as outcomes from the survey and interview analyses. The components of the feedback corpus are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Feedback Corpus Data Overview**

	Feedback messages		Total
	Y1	Y2	
Critical Thinking	14	-	14
Chemistry	15	23	28
Geography	8	10	18
Mathematics	-	-	-
Biology	-	23	23
Psychology	-	10	10
Economics	-	20	20
	<b>37</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>123</b>

The feedback analyses used a Sociocultural Discourse Analysis approach (c.f. Mercer, 2004; Littleton & Mercer, 2013). This approach involves both generic coding and

concordance analysis methods to investigate the particular and general features of interaction. The first level of analysis was to code the moves that appeared to occur in each feedback interaction to generate emerging themes. These themes included, amongst others: ‘Orientation (the use of linguistic terms to situate the participants with respect to each other)’; ‘Disagreement/Misalignment (the focus of the discussion is around disagreement)’; and ‘Verification (checking the received understanding of a communicated message)’. The second level of analysis involved concordance analyses that looked to the use of words that have previously been associated with learning discourse (Mercer & Wegerif, 1999). Taken together, these combined methods enabled analyses to consider in detail how team leaders constructed feedback messages to establish common ground and build shared knowledge with each other.

## **Findings: methods for establishing and maintaining common ground**

Data gathering and analytical methods allowed insights into the feedback practices that took place between distributed professionals. Drawing on perspectives from linguistic pragmatics, theory suggests that effective communication requires that common ground is established and maintained in discourse.

This section outlines the main study findings that coalesce thematically around common ground. These findings are reported initially at the most general level; considering how the participants use feedback to lay the foundations for maintaining common ground. The findings then go on to explore how participants use language and technology to link particular ideas (a) within, and (b) beyond a particular message. This linking work involved the use of shared objects of attention (e.g. mark schemes), shared tools (e.g. annotations), and shared histories (e.g. past experience of working together). Finally, the paper outlines how examiners use feedback for non-feedback work. These practices relate to the perceived social needs of the examiners as a remote virtual professional community and allude to the articulation work that feedback performs. In ensuring that the examiners complete their marking workload feedback supports the cohesion of the marking system.

### **Using feedback to establish expectations for dialogue**

Analyses suggested that giving feedback was a dynamic social process; with the team leader encouraging the recipient to reflect on their practice, and establishing the basis for dialogue to begin. Analyses of observation data showed that team leaders would use feedback to establish dialogic ground rules to encourage two-way, on-going and iterative communication. These engagement structures enabled participants to establish finely tuned mutual understandings. In many cases this process involved the team leader inviting examiners to contact them, e.g.

*'Any question, please give me a call.'* (Team leader 8; email feedback)

*'Okay, don't hesitate to be in touch with me. You can use my mobile, or through email, yes, absolutely fine and much rather that you just send me messages if you're not sure now and then, you know, resolve all the issues in your mind. So I'm here to help. Thank you very much.'* (Team leader 8; telephone feedback)

Analyses of feedback messages, the interview and the survey data suggested that team leaders were establishing common ground with examiners through using language judiciously to establish coherence between the ideas within the message. This observation could be considered to be a technical approach to feedback, a finding that might have been anticipated in advance of the analyses. Perhaps less expectedly, team leaders also appeared to reference information outside of the immediate message as well as to use feedback for 'non-feedback' work. Each of these latter two themes may be said to represent some of the hidden aspects of expert team leader work.

### **Using feedback to link ideas within the message**

Analyses showed that feedback discourse relied on the use of referencing (the bringing together of concepts) through the judicious use of words, communication mode choices, and annotations. As a consequence, reference making encouraged synchrony; which has been defined as 'the extent to which individuals have a shared focus' (Dennis & Valacich, 1999, p.5).

It was common for team leaders to reference the latent concepts within the mark scheme to performance elements that both the team leader and the examiner could access. These

references often converged on quotes from the marked script which the team leader would then elaborate on, e.g.

*Team leader: '3B, the second point is the standard affordability argument and it's therefore three. "Overtime people have become richer"... tick ... "This means that they can afford"... tick... "to purchase the second home, this puts further pressure on demand," tick.'* (Team leader 3; telephone feedback)

Reference making builds common ground by ensuring that mark scheme concepts are shared across examiners and therefore exist outside of the privileged knowledge of senior examiners. At its most basic level, reference making relies on the participants orientating each other to the focus of the unfolding discourse. In the case of examiners, discourse often begins with a reference to the script and item number or an aspect of the performance at the centre of the discussion, e.g.

*Team leader: 'Okay, [script] 8397... Tell me when you are already on 3B...'*

*Examiner: 'Are we looking at the diagram? Okay I've got 3B looking at me.'* (Team leader 7; telephone feedback)

### **Linking ideas through shared view**

Team leaders explained that using email as a medium for feedback also improved synchrony through capitalising on effective temporal links. In contrast to previous arrangements where team leaders fed back to examiners on a batch of marking that arrived through the post, digital marking now allows team leaders to feedback in real time. A reported consequence was that feedback content was closer to the point in time at which an examiner had made a marking decision. The effect of this was that the examiner could more easily draw upon memories of the marked script, or access a digital copy of the script, to use as a resource against which to relate the feedback. This sentiment is reflected on by examiners, e.g.

*'Being able to submit three scripts and get a response in 24 hours is more appropriate as you can remember the reasoning behind giving/not giving a particular mark.'* (Examiner 12; interview)

*'I do like quick feedback because it helps me to get it straight in my mind quickly. And then I can move on and feel confident in what I'm doing. If I'm the whole time waiting, checking to see if I've got a message, I get a bit of sort of... "Hurry up!".'* (Examiner 3; interview)

Analyses also showed that communication medium could influence the synchrony of feedback through encouraging iterative referencing processes. Examiners suggested that telephone discussion allowed them to quickly check (and cross-check) whether they understood the meaning of feedback. The ability to simultaneously view and discuss scripts with team leaders also allowed them to meaningfully relate the feedback to the script content. Taken together, the affordances of telephone communication could help to facilitate the quick resolution of issues e.g.

*'The fact that you can be talking about a script and a question and have it on screen and be talking on the phone at the same time. I know that is pathetic but I am not used to using technology in this way and I think my marking has improved since we have gone to the electronic version.'* (Examiner 2; interview)

*'If it's something you're really stuck on, and just want someone to sort of talk it through for thirty seconds; [the team leader's] always available to you.'* (Examiner 9; interview)

*'It speeds me up having [the feedback] on the phone because as we go through I have a chance to air further doubts, or further doubts that arise in my mind from what [the team leader has] told me, which would otherwise require an email and then another one back.'* (Examiner 11; interview)

### **Linking ideas through shared annotation**

Annotations were another tool that team leaders used to establish common ground and synchrony. Analyses of team leaders' survey comments suggested that their annotation use fell into two categories; communicating the rationale for marking between team leaders and giving team leaders information about examiners' (mis)aligned thinking.

Team leaders recognised that annotations could act as a resource for helping them to refer back to the origins of marking decisions. Team leaders used annotations to remind

them of earlier marking decisions that were agreed with other senior examiners. This self-regulatory use of annotations allowed team leaders to maintain a consistency of approach in the advice they communicated to examiners, e.g.

*'Of course [making annotations and taking notes is important] because I can explain exactly why the marks were awarded.'* (Team leader 33; survey)

This use of annotations as a reference to the source of a decision was also mirrored in examiner practice. Examiners reported that they annotated their mark schemes as a result of the feedback that they received, with these annotations augmenting their mark scheme and forming an on-going record of the examiners' developing understanding of it, e.g.

*'I annotate [each bit of feedback] in a different colour actually so that I know this is the next feedback... and if I have subsequent feedback I'll do them in another colour so I've got to really look at those next time I'm going through because those are the ones I haven't taken on board before.'* (Examiner 11; interview)

Team leader: *'So your target for that script is 42 plus or minus two.'*  
 Examiner: *'Okay, yes. I'm not doing this as I go along, I'm making notes.'* (Team leader 7; telephone feedback)

Team leaders also used annotations as a basis for checking whether their decisions aligned with those of the examiner. In this way, the annotation was a point of reference for communicating the meaning of a marking decision, e.g.

*'The great thing about annotations is that you can tell in a flash whether it's right or wrong as a team leader.'* (Team leader 22; survey)

### **Using feedback to interact with ideas outside of the message**

Analyses showed that team leaders drew on contextual information about the examiner when crafting feedback. These analyses also showed that the mode of communication could influence the gathering of such contextual information.

**Linking ideas through shared history**

Past experience of working together was an aspect of context that influenced the nature of team leader feedback. Twenty six of the 38 surveyed team leaders reported that their prior knowledge of an examiner influenced their feedback. In many cases this prior knowledge influenced the level of detail or the style of the feedback given, e.g.

*'[Prior knowledge of the examiner] is really important as different examiners respond to feedback in different ways. It doesn't affect the content of the feedback but it will affect such things as the tone of the feedback and whether the advice needs "wrapping around" with a lot of general encouragement or whether I can just make the point directly.'* (Team leader 29; survey)

*'Experienced markers who understand the conventions and standards applied for this paper will not need as detailed explanations as those who are relatively inexperienced.'* (Team leader 34; survey)

In some cases there were concerns expressed that standard (i.e. impersonal) feedback could undermine examiner confidence and reinforce anxieties, particularly for new examiners, e.g.

*'New examiners often feel less confident than experienced ones, and need a little more encouragement.'* (Team leader 37; survey)

Data analyses suggested that the mode of communication influenced the contextual information that team leaders drew on when crafting feedback. Some team leaders suggested that remote communication led to a lack of social cues that made it more difficult to establish positive, professional relationships, e.g.

*'When you're at a meeting and everyone's there; you'll know the ones who fuss... it's the body language that you pick up ... I've never met this examiner but I think I [now] know her quite well because we're both retired and we often phone up and have a chat – but that's taken years and over the table we could probably have communicated that much in the first half hour.'* (Team leader 5; observation)

### Using feedback for ‘non-feedback’ work

Analyses showed that team leaders’ messages contained content that was not obviously feeding back on examiners’ performances. In some ways these aspects of feedback could represent articulation work (Schmidt, 2011), with team leaders using communication to ensure that the work of other examiners interlinked seamlessly.

### Supporting examiner confidence

One focus for team leaders was maintaining examiner confidence during the marking session so that examiners continued to mark to a high quality. For example, one team leader stated,

*‘I see the job as getting people through, if they don’t it’s perhaps down to my advice.’ (Team Leader 2; observation)*

Team leaders were also directly aware of the additional workload consequences for themselves, other examiners, and administrators if examiners resigned and their work needed to be reassigned, e.g.

*‘If you’re speaking to someone on the telephone they can sense that you’re being genuine and trying to give support. The last thing you want...is to send some stropy email saying “You’re out on this one, this one, this one, you’ve got to get this right, we can’t have this, it isn’t good enough blah blah blah”, because they’re as likely as to turn around and say “stuff [it]” and you’re suddenly, as a team leader, lumbered with another 380 papers to mark.’ (Team leader 3; observation)*

### Reinforcing the distributed professional community

Team leader articulation work was evident in the way that they used messages to link examiners with each other across virtual space, helping to potentially reinforce the virtual community that examiners were part of. In some cases this linking was done through relating specific examiner decisions to those of other examiners, e.g.

*Examiner: ‘Yes, that’s the challenge, isn’t it? Deciding whether it’s getting the third one...’*



*Team leader: 'Yes, but I mean, what I would say is that I mean you're not the only person not to give this band two.'*  
(Team leader 7; telephone feedback)

*Team leader: '...You gave four, we only gave two actually, but I can see why you did what you did and I wouldn't condemn you for it.'* (Team leader 3; telephone feedback)

Team leaders also used their messages to reinforce the virtual examiner community through accommodating personal information that helped to encourage social relationship building, e.g.

*'Well, thank you. Thank you for struggling up to the examiner meeting with the long distance and all the things. How is your husband?'* (Team leader 7; telephone feedback)

*'Knowledge of an examiner's problems at home influence the way feedback is given. For example, a member of my team lost his father just before commencing the standardisation process.'* (Team leader 37; survey)

Messages were also opportunities for team leaders to express empathy and support for examiners as they completed their marking tasks, e.g.

*Team leader: 'I try to be positive – it really bothers me that people will get totally dispirited and give up.'*

*Researcher: 'The role has a pastoral quality?'*

*Team leader: 'It does. There's an awful lot about knowing how people work.'* (Team leader 1; observation)

*'I sent an email saying "You're finished, great, thanks for all your hard work, you've done a good job", and she sent an email back saying "Thanks for all your support and helping me to gain in confidence".'* (Team leader 5; observation)

## **Discussion: why might the hidden work of feedback be important?**

The analyses in this paper suggest that the work of team leaders involves a dual narrative, and that this can be evidenced through careful analysis of their feedback interactions with examiners. Through creating communication that aligns examiners' thinking with their own, the team leaders were able to fulfill at least two functions

On the one hand team leaders fulfilled a technical narrative, involving the recognized work that might be anticipated in advance. At the same time the team leaders were also fulfilling a hidden narrative that encompassed less recognized, taken for granted, but socially important work. Taken together, these functions help to maintain cohesion in the marking system through articulating the coordinated work of a group of professionals (Schmidt, 2011).

The data gathering and analytical methods used in this study helped to demonstrate some of the complexities around senior examiner work as evidenced through their feedback communication. In so doing, the research project makes visible some of the hidden elements of team leaders' professional practices that are carried through their feedback messaging.

Analyses of feedback suggested that interactions between team leaders and examiners offered insight into two processes of synchrony (Dennis & Valacich, 1999) that mapped onto their codified and tacit expertise. The first insight is that feedback can evidence the technical narrative of team leader work. In their feedback team leaders used linguistic knowledge to construct common ground with examiners around the ideas carried in the message. In so doing the team leader was helping to transmit the rationales behind their thinking to examiners to establish synchrony and support their marking. In many ways, this use of feedback represents the codified elements of team leader expertise – which centre on the job of making and monitoring consistent judgements. Despite this transmission function, there was also evidence that team leaders used feedback as an opportunity to open up dialogue with examiners. By engaging examiners in two-way communication (through invitations to come back on points raised in feedback) the team leaders were opening themselves up to alternative perspectives.

This point links with the second insight about team leader work that was evidenced through the feedback interactions. A hidden narrative of team leader work appeared to relate to their use of references that existed beyond the confines of a specific message. In this way, feedback appeared to support a social function, allowing participants to increase their synchrony through better understanding each other's perspective. This point links with those made by Adcroft (2011), who argues that feedback is often mythologised as a technical process, which overlooks the fact that it is a social, interpretative act.

The social impact of feedback has been noted elsewhere, with feedback communication being characterised as a genre that often deals with managing negative communication (Yelland, 2011) and having emotive impact on the recipient (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Team leaders' use of prior social knowledge and the inclusion of non-feedback content in messages suggested that they were using such messages to manage relations as well as communicate content. As such, this practice incorporates tacit elements, including the use of discourse features to bridge different interpretations and build common ground. These articulation acts involved the use of 'relational expertise' (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004), defined as the use of communication tools to "...recognise what engrosses others, [and] take their standpoint... so that engagement continues..." (Edwards, 2012, p. 25).

Given recent technological changes in large scale assessment systems, this social dimension to team leader work might represent an increasingly important role with regards to inducting and retaining examiners in a professional work community. Recent developments have enabled increasingly frequent remote interactions to take place between team leaders and examiners, and moves away from occasional, face-to-face (FTF) examiner meetings might adversely influence discourse quality. For example, some communication studies have noted that moves away from FTF communication can lead to interactions that are more task-oriented but less effective at relationship building (Walther, 1992).

There are concerns in research literature that participants in remote communication feel isolated from others in their professional community and tend to agree less with them than when interacting in a FTF environment (Lea & Spears, 1991). Literature suggests

that this is because remote participants can find it difficult to relate to the context in which their discourse partners are located. Reference making in remote communication is awkward and cumbersome in comparison with FTF interactions, where physical gesturing and pointing can draw attention to features of note. Similarly, nuanced meanings can be cued in FTF discourse through extra-linguistic facial expressions that indicate degrees of agreement or anxiety. Time gaps between email communications can interfere with the referencing connections that partners make in their messages (Brennan, 1998; Herring, 1999; Whittaker, 2003). A consequence of this literature is that communication mode shifts can undermine the efficacy of feedback as participants struggle to establish common communicative ground. As a result it is possible that feedback discourse can inadvertently stray into areas of privileged knowledge if the team leader does not reinforce shared meaning through drawing on additional social cues.

Where feedback messages included information that went beyond feeding back on any particular marking performance they were the conduit for other social information that helped to ensure that examiners' work was completed (ultimately so that the marking system could function as smoothly as possible). In this sense, team leaders' management of continuous discourse through remote communication can be seen as articulation work (Schmidt, 2011). The ability to maintain this articulation process requires that team leaders have an overview of the inter-relations between work processes beyond the completion of a specific job. This work process knowledge involves the same type of tacit understandings that influence expert practitioners' individualised practices in other professional domains (Samurçay & Vidal-Gomel, 2002; Boreham, 2004). This knowledge is developed by team leaders as part of their location at the centre of the distributed examiner communication network and is a product of the way that labour is divided. For example, senior examiners will be aware of the additional recruitment workload for administrators in the awarding body if examiners in their team decide to leave the profession, and this can influence their work practices.

There are precedents in literature which help to describe some of the reported and observed characteristics of team leader feedback interactions. It has already been noted

that feedback giving in general may be considered to be a genre that is defined as managing negative information (Yelland, 2011). As a consequence, Lee & Jablin (1995) note that feedback interaction takes place in a potentially deteriorating social situation, where the discourse between participants is potentially fragile and requires some management. One approach to managing this fragility is through the feedback-giver using language to create greater closeness with the feedback recipient. This can be done through managing the style of the interaction, e.g. reducing formality through echoing spoken forms of interaction, or increasing the circumspectiveness of content delivery. These points mirror those noted by Strauss (1985) who has argued that employing a more collaborative interaction style encourages divided labour to work together. In the current study it would appear that the team leaders were drawing on social cues and prior knowledge of other examiners to help them to deliver potentially negative information in a way that would enable it to be received in the intended way whilst maintaining a positive, on-going working relationship. In other words, access to social information supported articulation work.

The exploratory nature of this study needs to be acknowledged, with outcomes being necessarily tentative and requiring additional work to support them. Despite these caveats, it appears that there is enough evidence to suggest that expert examiner feedback carries traces of both overt and tacit elements, which can be conceptualised as representing something of the technical and hidden narratives around assessment. An implication of this is that further work that helps to define the characteristics of examiner feedback can help to raise awareness around the dimensions of feedback. In turn this awareness could help to influence the induction of new examiners into the expert practices of team leaders.

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