

**0062**

## **Towards an understanding of the impact of annotations on returned examination scripts.**

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### **Background**

For the past few years qualifications awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have been obliged to allow schools/colleges and candidates to request to see their examination scripts once they have been marked.

Returned scripts often include information from examiners about the performance being assessed. As well as the total score given for the performance, additional information is carried in the form of the annotations left on the script by the marking examiner. As far as we know there has been no research into how this information is used by schools/colleges or candidates and whether it has any influence on future teaching and learning.

### **Research Questions**

The project had a number of areas of enquiry:

- How do teachers and schools/colleges use annotations?
- What is the scale of such use?
- What importance is attached to the annotations?
- What factors might influence the interpretation of the annotations?

The issue of whether annotations are used validly or invalidly is then explored in the conclusion of the paper.

### **Methods**

Given the lack of literature related to the interpretation of examiners' annotations a two-stage research method was adopted. The initial exploratory phase involved semi-structured interviews and focused discussion group sessions with a small group of teachers who shared an in depth understanding of the script request procedure.

Identification of this group of teachers involved an analysis of archived script request data from a large UK awarding body. To identify centres with the greatest use of the script request service a 'measure' was calculated that took into consideration whether a centre had appeared amongst the ten centres that had requested the most scripts following each examination session over a period of three years.

Five centres with a rich experience of script request procedures were identified through this analysis, of which four were able to be involved in the initial qualitative interview phase of the project. This phase involved two English Department heads and two History Department heads from two different schools being interviewed using a semi structured interview schedule. Furthermore, three psychology teachers, including two heads of department, from two schools took part in a focus group interview.

During these meetings the teachers were shown a variety of borderline archived scripts from their own school/college and asked about how they might review such performances if requested and how the annotations on the script might inform these views. The teachers were then asked to assess a script that had been cleaned of all annotations. Following this assessment the examiner annotations

were revealed and the teachers were encouraged to discuss whether their views on the performance were different in light of this additional information.

For the second research stage researchers reviewed the transcripts and notes taken at the interview sessions and elicited the main themes that appeared to emerge from the discussions. These themes led to the construction of a survey which aimed to explore the scale of the issues that were identified during the interview and focus group sessions.

These issues included questions about teachers' levels of assessment experience, their script request practices and views on annotations on scripts. 5000 surveys were then distributed to schools/colleges who requested script returns following a live examination session, with this number representing roughly one survey for every six script requests for the awarding body in total.

## **Frame**

Sociocultural learning perspectives (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991) consider language to be a central mediating tool for both individual and group understanding. Communities that assemble around shared activity develop particular linguistic forms that have specific characteristics and codes. These linguistic forms are important tools for communication within the community and support coherence. Importantly, these linguistic forms can involve elements (e.g. phrases or words) that are relatively meaningless to those outside of the community.

This sociocultural analysis coheres with an Activity Theoretical perspective (c.f. Engeström, 2001) which seeks to explain the problems that can arise between individuals engaged around a shared activity. Activity Theory suggests that tensions, such as misaligned interpretations, can emerge due to individuals having different roles from each other, each with incumbent purposes, leading them to have different expectations of the tools of the activity.

## **Research findings**

We argue in this paper that the use of socio-cultural theory allows the development of a deeper understanding of how individuals interact around examination scripts. More particularly, we argue that it allows insight into how different perspectives can influence how the information carried on examinations scripts might be interpreted. This insight is possible because socio-cultural theories focus on aspects of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and multiple perspectives around common activities. In one sense such a focus can highlight the dynamics that can lead to dissonant interpretations about common objects, e.g. the annotations carried on examination scripts. On the other hand, this theoretical perspective can help to illuminate how areas of common practice across different Communities of Practice might support common interpretations of such objects. Activity Theory helps to highlight areas of practice where overlapping spheres of experience support common frames of interpretation. The theory suggests that boundary zones between different Communities of Practice are important sites where sophisticated interpretative frameworks might be built.

This analysis has consequences for professional development processes. Teachers who become examiners and move into the boundary zone between the examining and teaching communities, in essence moving towards the centre of the examining Community of Practice, can benefit from more insightful interpretative frameworks when encountering annotations as a result of this shift.