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'From clones to heretics?': an investigation of how new academic staff come to understand and participate in the assessment practices of a UK Business School

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Background

'Knowers come in a range of types, from clones to heretics'
(Lave & Wenger, 1991, p116)

The skillful assessment of students' work is critical for summative accreditation purposes as well as to support student learning. But far from being a formulaic procedure, the assessment process is complex and multi-faceted: explicit documentation by itself is rarely sufficient to ensure competence. Assessment involves skillful judgement by members of a disciplinary community who share similar conceptions of criteria and standards, as well as a shared repertoire of marking, moderation and feedback tools and procedures. The reliance on tacit understandings means that staff who join higher education institutions from other organisations and communities often negotiate lengthy transitional processes as they 'come to know' the local assessment culture.

The need for a shared sense of judgement is especially important in higher education where large student numbers have led to the growth of 'team teaching' (where teaching staff also share the assessment load), with associated problems of marking consistency. In the literature on the development of human judgement, processes of 'socialisation' and compliance to social norms are sometimes cited (e.g. Parsons, 1962), although more recently, attention has shifted towards the various ways in which individuals challenge (or resist) the norms and values of the communities of practice in which they participate (e.g. see Contu & Willmott, 2003). However, whilst there is general acknowledgement in the literature of the 'tacit' dimension to social practice (Polanyi, 1983), the specific ways in which academic staff develop a tacit understanding of assessment practice is not sufficiently understood. This limitation is especially problematic when one considers the changing nature of the labour market in academia.

Research Questions

Taking a situated learning perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991) on the social practice of assessment, this study compared three groups of academic staff (n=9) who had recently joined a Business School in a post-1992 UK university, and investigated their transitional experiences of coming to know the local assessment regime. The newcomers broadly reflected three categories in the academic labour-force: contract, hourly-paid lecturers; full-time academics which teaching experience joining from other HEIs; and PhD students who also do contract teaching. All staff taught and assessed students.

Methods

The nine staff who participated were asked to submit regular audio or written diaries, over the period of one semester, on their experiences and reflections on assessment practice. Four participants created diaries, and five asked to be interviewed which was done using a semi-structured question protocol. Participants were encouraged to comment on both formal and informal experiences of assessment practice, such as conversations with colleagues and students, module team meetings and written documentation. Recordings of diaries and interviews were transcribed. In a second research phase, several months later, five participants attended a workshop created as an opportunity for them to exchange experiences with colleagues also new to the Business School, contributing further to their understanding of assessment practice. All data (from diaries, interviews and workshop) were analysed using data management support from AtlasTI, a computer-based qualitative data

analysis package. In addition, the research team regularly met to read transcripts and discuss interpretations.

Frame

The study elicited newcomers' descriptions of their assessment experiences, and conducted a conceptual analysis of their perceptions of self-identity, their different conceptions of the activity of assessment, and their forms of participation in the academic community. By 'activity', we use the term as developed by Leont'ev (a student of Vygotsky; see Wertsch, 1981), and referred to in Situated Learning to mean a person's sense of the purpose and objectives of their work and the actions required to achieve those objectives. This sense of purpose is important because it guides a person's motivation and attention: their sense of what they will pay attention to or ignore, and what will guide their decision-making (see also Wenger, 1998, p165). Following Lave & Wenger, (1991), we focus on the 'person-in-the-world' (p52), and suggest that a person's sense of identity and their concept of activity influence the way they negotiate a range of opportunities to participate in meaningful ways in a community of practice. With this emphasis, the study sought to move beyond a linear notion of 'participation' whereby individuals observe and then merely imitate a routine pattern of behaviours. The latter interpretation implies compliant socialisation but this was not intended by Lave and Wenger. Instead, they emphasised the agential aspects of persons-in-the-world and the range of choices open to them, as well as the power relations in the community which might close the doors to participatory opportunities and development of a person's identity and practice.

Research findings

Our study supports the findings of other research in this area (e.g. Price, 2005): that explicit documentation is insufficient to assure a common interpretation of assessment criteria and standards. However, the three categories of staff differed in their approach to trying to develop tacit understandings of assessment practice, and their experiences of participation (or exclusion) from the local assessment community. These differences will be examined in the conference paper.

An example of differences between staff was how they viewed the 'activity' of assessment. Some focused narrowly on the summative aspect of marking, but overlooked the broader reach of assessment processes such as the need to comprehend criteria and standards early enough to be in a position to formatively guide students in the initial weeks of a module. Others had a wider view of assessment which encompassed students' need to understand assessment practices. This different conception of the activity of assessment influenced staff sense of identity, how they approached colleagues and particularly module leaders, the questions they asked, and their sense of responsibility for assessment processes and student outcomes. Furthermore, the contractual status of staff influenced their access and relationships with others. These and other findings will be discussed in the paper, together with recommendations for staff development and involvement in their local assessment practice.