Being-in-the-world-of-marking:
New academics' experiences of assessment
& feedback

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Abstract

For a novice academic, the first experience of marking can be as memorable as preparing for and giving the first teaching session. Yet, while academic reflections and narratives abound for the latter, there is a paucity of literature regarding the former. This study begins to address this lack of literature through an exploration of six newly appointed academics' experiences as they mark students' coursework. The concept of being-in-the-world-of-marking demonstrates conceptually their experiences as they began to come to know themselves as markers and academics; not through the learning of facts about marking, but through their understanding and self-interpretation of their own and others' marking practices. The experiences shared in this paper support and further develop previous research findings, highlighting a need for additional training, guidance and reinforcing the necessity to offer newly appointed academics formal and informal mentorship in the theory and practice of assessment.

Keywords

Transition; socialisation; newly appointed academics; assessment and feedback.

Introduction and background

Assessment in higher education is a process that can inform student learning, act as an outcome to certify learning has taken place, and ensure that academic and professional standards are maintained (Leach, Neutze and Zepka, 2001). In the United Kingdom (UK) assessment is a process and a practice takes place within the context of student reviews that are revealing student dissatisfaction with their experiences of assessment and feedback (HEFCE, 2011; NUS, 2012). Price, Handley and Millar, (2011) suggest the repeated low scores in these surveys are leaving academic staff unsure and disillusioned about how to engage students in both the assessment process and feedback. Freeman and Dobbins (2013) further suggest that the presentation of student satisfaction in the UK through league tables summarising average numerical values is preventing an understanding of the complexities that surround students' experiences of assessment and feedback.

The processes and practices of assessment in higher education are underpinned by a wide range of evidence (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Bloxham, 2009; Clouder *et al.,* 2012; Crisp, 2012; Flint and Johnson, 2011; HEA, 2012; QAA, 2011). Literature that reinforces that there is no doubt of the central importance of assessment within the university experience for students and staff or that it consumes considerable time and effort for all concerned (Bloxham, Boyd and Orr, 2011). One of the challenges within assessment practices is that everyone who has been through it 'has picked up approaches to it, by observing what colleagues do' (Koh, 2010:208). Koh's assertion supports Jawitz's (2009) earlier suggestion that assessment practices in higher education encompass tacit knowledge bases that are difficult to define.

Marking, as a key element within the assessment process can be 'the most significant quality event in the lives of students and academics' (Flemming, 1999:83) and one that carries an emotional burden for lecturers as they bring 'a great deal of themselves to the process' (Hand and Clewes,

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2000:12). However, assessment and marking are often regarded as chores (Smith and Coombe, 2006), disliked by both students and teachers (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004), and viewed as a task for completion rather than a learning opportunity.

For a novice academic, the first experience of marking can be as memorable as preparing for and giving their first teaching session. Yet, while academic reflections and narratives abound for the latter, there is a paucity of literature regarding the former. Despite the recurring theme in the professional development of newly appointed academics of the need for support and instruction in the practical aspects of teaching such as marking (Garrow and Tawse, 2009; Jawitz, 2007; LaRocco and Bruns, 2006; McArthur-Rouse, 2008). All newly appointed academics being inducted into higher education in the UK are required to attend an accredited programme to support their transition into higher education. Successful completion of these programmes has become an accepted standard and is often a requirement of probation for all newly appointed novice academics (Comber and Walsh, 2008; Orr-Ewing, Simmons and Taylor, 2008). However, there has been limited exploration of the marking aspects of teaching and learning within these programmes as they often separate teaching and learning from assessment (Stefani, 2004). Therefore, offering little to assist a 'new academic' with the processes of assessment and marking of student coursework.

Through this study I hope to begin to address this lack of literature by sharing the experiences of six newly appointed academics as they begin to mark. The term 'marks' and 'grades' are used interchangeably throughout the paper in recognition of the use of these terms to describe both the act and result of assessment. The aim of the study was the exploration of the lived experience of newly appointed academics within a post 1992 university to gain an insight into the phenomena of being new and marking.

Research Question
- What are the lived experiences of newly appointed academics when they are marking student coursework?
- Are there lived experiences that alter a newly appointed academic's perception of student assessment?

Method
A Heideggerian interpretive phenomenological approach was used for the study in keeping with the aim to explore the lived experience of newly appointed academics. Heidegger's philosophical influence throughout the study ensured that all aspects of the research was a journey rather than a predetermined process (Smythe *et al.*, 2008): a journey that had a function of discovery (Heidegger, 1962). In choosing interpretive phenomenology as the methodological and philosophical influences for this study, I committed to an approach which required a search for an understanding of being involved in marking as a new academic, rather than an understanding of what is known about marking.

Purposive sampling, using set inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured the selection of participants from health and social care disciplines within their first year of appointment who were able to share their experiences of marking as newly appointed academics in Higher Education. Three conversational interviews were undertaken with each of the six participants to facilitate an in-depth exploration of their temporal experiences. These repeated interviews allowed for the exploration of meaning and experience and in-depth exploration of phenomena (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). As the preferred method of data collection within a phenomenological enquiry each interview focused on asking participants to discuss their experiences of being new and involved in assessment and feedback (Norlyk and Harder, 2010).

The University of the West of England's ethics committee granted approval for the study, and each aspect of the study was undertaken with an awareness and respect of accepted ethical principles and guidance (BERA, 2004). The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis guided my data analysis as this gave a flexible structure to approach and re-visit the data. Through each immersion with the data I would read, re-read, listen and re-listen to each of the interviews with an aim to preserve the uniqueness of the participant's experience, while at the same time permitting an understanding of the sense of marking as a new academic. The intention within my analysis was to produce texts which interpreted rich and evocative descriptions of actions, behaviours, intentions, and experiences evoking a '*phenomenological nod*' that might resonate with others (Ajjawi and Higgs, 2007). Therefore, in line with the phenomenological philosophical and methodological influence of the study participants' experiences are shared within this paper through verbatim quotes that are interwoven into the discussions and findings to represent the experiences of being-in-the-world-of-marking.

Findings and discussion

When discussing the practical aspects of marking, the participants would often use the interviews as opportunities to voice their developing understanding and critical observations of their own and others marking practices. During each of the interviews, the allocation and planning of marking was frequently the topic of conversation. This is consistent with an earlier study by Siler and Kleiner (2001), where participants also surprise at the amount of marking that they had been given.

> 'I just think all of the paperwork that has been put in front of me. You want to do this and you need to do that and don't do this and don't do that and. So far I have not been able to achieve half of what people have sort of said to me but I just think it will come. You know it will be done. I got a list of what I need to do, prioritise same as on the ward, you prioritise and that can change from one hour to another you may have to change your priorities. That is how I look at it, if it gets done, it gets done, but sometimes it won't get done and as long as it is not an essential'
>
> (Mary: First Interview).

Alison's reflection on her first year shared how she was still developing ways to manage the fluctuating workloads that she had experienced, as she was not familiar with the assessment timescales of the modules that she was teaching in.

> 'I think one of the things which I still haven't got quite on board. I need to write down the times when the marking is coming. Because I was not aware of when they were. A colleague of mine said the same thing. We had no idea when the marking is because when you go onto a module it is 'oh yes, come onto my module, do this, do that'. But nobody actually if you are new to the whole system, nobody actually says well of course in May and in June or April/May you are going to have all of this marking. You don't realise until a couple of weeks before and well, these are coming in, and that coming in. I have learnt now that I have got to look and write down when I am going to be marking'
>
> (Alison: Third Interview).

When first marking, participants attempted to mark in the offices that they shared with other staff but found this distracting, nevertheless there was a sense of uncertainty about marking off campus or at home. Participants would express a sense of uncertainty about the need to seek permission to mark at home as the level of autonomy in relation to when and where to work was a concept with which they were not familiar with.

'I have been given very clear advice about slotting it in my diary marking days. I am assuming everybody does. But I guess as you get nearer to those days it is very easy to put something else in. And think well the marking will slip …a lot of the marking gets done at home. I mean actually it is good place to do the marking at home because you don't have the same distraction. But I think a lot of the marking gets done in home in personal time at home'
(Fifi: Second Interview).

Participants expressed surprise at the subjective and external factors that they felt could influence their judgements, as this was not an aspect of assessment that they had previously explored or experienced. Marking as a judgement and the role of judgement in markers' decision making receives 'scant attention' despite frequently cited concerns about the reliability of marking (Brooks, 2012). Marking coursework involves more than mere checking for accuracy of content or for achievement against set criteria and learning outcomes. Students' academic and scholarship skills are also under scrutiny to ensure they have the ability to express themselves adequately. This introduces a subjective element which can affect the reliability of assessment as this is dependent on an individual marker's judgement (Quinn, 2000) and may account for Woolf's (2004) description of the assessment of academic performance as closer to an art than a science.

'I am reading these assignments, and I am seeing errors in grammar, errors in sentence construction. Very descriptive assignments and I am thinking I have been very hard. I hadn't actually got to the point of scoring them. I have gone through I have made comments. I have highlighted things but I haven't actually got to the point of scoring them. Because I thought maybe I would need to read several to get a feel for the standard maybe. So that is as far as I have got. I have read five and I have kind of gone through them. I have looked at them and made comments and things. I don't know they are riddled with grammar and grammatical errors and the sentence construction is not good and I am not sure whether that at undergraduate level we make allowance for that or whether we are very you know tough'
(Fifi: First Interview).

Fifi's account of her experience of marking illustrated her recognition of the frustrations caused by poor grammar, syntax, and presentation, highlighting that tacit expectation could influence judgement (Hunter and Dochety, 2011). Fifi's also recognised that whilst the assessment of students' academic skills were included within assessment criteria she noted that she might allow poor academic skills to affect her overall perception of the work being assessed.

Participants referred to the marking criteria used within the faculty as giving a structure and guidance to their judgements. Price (2005) suggests that when using such criteria, the grades awarded by new staff are similar to experienced markers using the same criteria. This similarity may be because novice markers rely on explicit criteria of the marking grids taking a 'rule based' approach using assessment criteria, whereas experienced markers may initially take an intuitive or impressionistic approach using their own implicit criteria (Smith, 2001), then use the criteria to support their judgements. Each of the participants shared experiences of double marking situations where, when they met up with the second marker, they had been reassured by the similarities in the grades both had awarded. However, a similarity of marks between two markers does not necessarily mean that the system is reliable (Rust, 2007) as a lack of confidence may prevent a less experienced marker from questioning a marker who is perceived to have more experience and knowledge (Orr, 2007). The following extract from Alison's second interview captures how she did not feel confident enough in her own judgements to raise a student's mark.

'I feel a bit blind, although I can quite easily see when something is coming in which is totally inadequate. That's fine and I can quite easily understand when somebody hasn't gone looking

at the three different theories and discussing and analysing. I can understand that. It is, when it gets to the passes. The good and the very good, that's difficult for me. I think maybe I am marking too high when I look at some others. But that will come up apparent with the second marker. Because some of the ones that I have thought very good, something on par I was looking at when I did my second marking in the last couple of days, which is much easier of course. Because the person I am working with, that I am second marking with, is very experienced. But then I am looking at what? This sort thing or something like that. I think I would have given higher too, and that we tend to down mark anyway don't we? It seems to me anyway'

(Alison: Second Interview).

Markers can be described as belonging to one of two camps: either 'Hawks' or 'Doves' (Owen, Stefaniak and Corrigan, 2010), or, 'Hard' or 'Soft' (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Crook, Gross and Dymott (2006) report that students hold a perception of biased and subjective marking: that academics can be influenced by how hardworking or lazy they believe students to be, or that staff can give marks for differing qualities such as the quality of presentation, or accuracy, or citations and references. There is limited research evidence to support or challenge these suggestions despite a growing concern amongst students that assessment practices can be unfair (Flint and Johnson, 2011).

Participants often referred to one script within a batch that had produced a wide variance in marks. In the interview halfway through her first year, Marie shared an experience of marking with someone who Marie felt had more experience than her. For Marie this experience highlighted the external and internal influences can occur when marking written work.

'There was one that stuck out; there was one that was a seventy five. They'd given them a forty four. This person has nine years' experience, and I have six months so we had a chat and in the end the person ended up getting quite a high sixty. They went it's been one of those bad days where I just read them, and I wasn't really concentrating, and now that you've pointed this out. I was sat there thinking. What do you mean you're having a bad day! if you were this persons only marker…., that person would have only got forty four'

(Marie: Second Interview).

Helen was not surprised that two academics could come to different grades, but she was surprised at the reaction of the other marker to the different marks. Helen's description of marking as '*making your own personal public'* reflects Hand and Clewes (2000) observation that markers bring a great deal of themselves into the task of marking using their own belief and value systems to assess the quality of a piece of work.

'I think it is very understandable. Because you are what you do aren't you? You know marking on one level. It is a task and is very un-emotive. On the other hand marking is about your judgement, your preferences. You're putting yourself, your stamp of approval and acceptance on something. And you're making your own personal public. So if someone else says 'well actually, I think you are about 20 marks out' that is harsh, it feels harsh to that person. It is the same way if I passed an essay and someone said 'this is fail, what were you thinking?' You know I would be, oh my god, really, show me, show me. But I suppose it is a different reaction isn't 'oh my god show me show me' is quite a different reaction to 'how very dare you question my authority?'

(Helen: Third Interview).

The assumption that internal moderation processes (such as the double marking described by Helen) can ensure consistency and fairness is also challenged within the literature. As these processes remain reliant on the subjective and value based judgements of individuals (Bloxham, 2009; Brooks, 2004; Orr, 2007), and often only focus on what happened at the time of assessment, without considering the entire assessment lifecycle (Smith, 2012).

When awarding students a fail grade Mary struggled, as she wondered if it was something that she had or had not done. Alison similarly expressed unease and concern for the students as she felt her inexperience might let them down and that this would be unfair on the students.

> 'Wouldn't want to under mark someone who had done an excellent piece of work. I have had one in particular which to me is coming across as a really good piece of work. I have tended to mark good as sort of mid 60s. I haven't you know, we will see how that goes and I think I wouldn't want to not give someone the credit that they don't deserve. I wouldn't want to over credit somebody else who you know that's my concern. I feel that if I am not experienced then I am not giving them exactly what I should be giving them'
>
> (Alison: Second Year).

The concern for students as well as the fear and self-doubt that Alison, Mary and Marie expressed in relation to work they felt to be below standard is evident in the literature concerning failing students in practice (Duffy, 2003; Hawe, 2003). Ilott and Murphy (1997) describe failing a student as one of most challenging responsibilities in assessment and one that is rarely '*done lightly or without misgiving'* (Ilott and Murphy, 1997:307). Mary's hesitation to fail a student's work illustrates this.

> 'I am really reluctant to fail someone. I think 40, I will give them 40. Just enough to pass and then I look at the guidelines and I think it clearly says this is the formula that I have got to follow. You have got to stop putting the emotion in there i.e. you want the best for your students. You have got this format, use it as a tool and then you know, I know in my heart that I have got to fail it, but part of me, you know, ohh its awful failing someone. But when I read the guidelines it makes me think, this is the justification I can see the weakness in what they have set out'
>
> (Mary: Second Interview).

Each of the participants in this study repeatedly expressed reduced confidence in their ability to be competent at work as they were learning new ways to build on their existing skills during their probationary period. There was no one experience highlighted as having a significant impact on the confidence of the newly appointed academics. Remmik *et al.* (2011) suggest that the experiences of an academic's socialisation and transition into higher education can influence their identity as academics as well as their concepts of teaching and learning. The fears that Mary expressed when she described 'waiting for a tap on the shoulder' are a common theme in the literature exploring transitions in to higher education, often described or labelled as an 'imposter syndrome' or 'phenomenon' (Forbes and Jessup, 2004). Zorn (2005) suggests five factors within academia contribute to early career academics feeling like an imposter in their role: aggressive competitiveness, scholarly isolation, highly specialised fields of practice, process valued over product and a lack of mentoring. Clemans, Berry and Loughran, (2010) suggest that such feelings of being an imposter are often evident when professionals who held a self-belief and sense of identity as an expert within one field of practice, move to a new field of practice.

Levels of support for the new staff varied. Adam felt supported and knew he could contact his mentor at any time; yet the following quote represents his reluctance to do so as he did not want to feel that he was imposing. This was a common theme amongst participants, as they would often

create their own support networks to supplement the formal systems during their probationary period.

> 'I am sure she would not mind me dropping by and just saying that I have got this question, can you answer it for me? Although I try not to do it too often because it gets a bit irritating, having been that with practice students doing it every morning. There are other people that I can ask quick questions too. But she will also be observing me doing some practice things, that's the sort of agreement that's set down. I suppose there are some people in the department that have been more supportive than others. I mean there are some that you definitely get a feel for who will give you a relative amount of information, but then you feel that you are imposing if you ask too much, so I suppose you get a feel for who is likely to be more helpful'
>
> (Adam: First Interview).

Price (2005) found that module leaders varied in the amount of support and guidance they give to markers, and this is reflected in the experiences of the participants in this study. Only two of the participants experienced structured support and guidance in relation to their marking and feedback from a module leader. Fifi would often refer positively to the module leader who had encouraged her to mark five scripts from a previous cohort, so that she could familiarise herself with the assessment in a simulated context. An experience that made her feel supported, as it encouraged her in thinking about the responsibility of marking in a simulated environment, without the fear of her novice judgements impacting student's degree classification.

The experiences shared and explored in this paper relate to how six newly appointed academics within a higher education context came to know themselves as novice academics not through the learning of facts about marking but through their experiences and understanding and their self-interpretation(s) of assessment practices within higher education. Four common themes emerged from participants experiences confidence, processes, judgments and accountability/responsibility (Figure 1.).

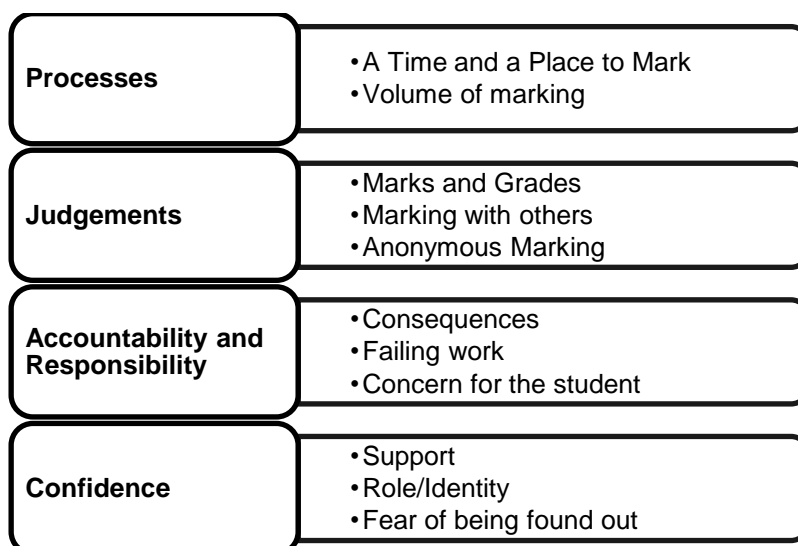| Processes	• A Time and a Place to Mark • Volume of marking
Judgements	• Marks and Grades • Marking with others • Anonymous Marking
Accountability and Responsibility	• Consequences • Failing work • Concern for the student
Confidence	• Support • Role/Identity • Fear of being found out

Figure 1. Themes.

The experiences expressed within these themes often focused on practical considerations that related to developing new skills and using new processes as well as a need for new academic staff to

develop insights into and an awareness of the philosophies and theories that underpin assessment strategies. While there was no one experience that can be stated as altering respondents' perception of student assessment, each participant grew in confidence and repeatedly expressed how their existing confidence in personal ability had been affected. Towards the end of each of the participants' first year, they began to develop their own personal coping strategies.

Implications for future practice
Mentorship is an accepted principle in the support of newly appointed academics as 'mentorship can be the single most influential way to ensure the development and retention of newly appointed academics' (Dunham-Taylor et al., 2008:337). Yet tensions are often reported for both the mentor and mentee such as lack of time (Le Maistre and Paré, 2010); a lack of commitment from the mentor (Billings and Kowalki, 2008) and non-compatible personalities and value sets (Anibas, Brenner and Zorn, 2009). Effective mentoring of newly appointed staff in the workplace is recognised as benefitting both the organisation and the individual mentor/mentee (Barkham, 2005; Davey and Ham, 2010; Remmik *et al.,* 2011; Suplee and Gardner, 2009). Similar to Barlow and Antoniou's (2007) findings, participants in this study felt that the formal induction processes were an exercise that needed completing rather than bespoke learning tools for their development. Although each participant valued the allocation of a probation mentor, they often mentioned that they did not fully use their mentors as they tended to use other informal support mechanisms. The use of informal support mechanisms rather than the allocated probation mentors suggests that the mentorship needs of the newly appointed academic shared within the study were not being met by the current mentorship systems and that as a support mechanism further work is needed to develop and explore the mentorship needs of newly appointed academics.

Conclusion
The findings from the experiences shared in this paper suggest that despite the increased significance of assessment and feedback in response to continued student dissatisfaction, new staff need and want guidance on the theory and practice of assessment. It was evident throughout all of the interviews that it was the experience of being assessed rather than being an assessor that they drew upon, highlighting that learning was temporal and influenced by their previous experience and understanding of assessment and marking. The concept 'being-in-the-world-of-marking' conceptually demonstrates the experiences of these novice academics as they began to come to know themselves as markers and academics; not through the learning of facts about marking, but through understanding and self-interpretation of their own and others' marking practices. The experiences detailed in this paper are consistent with literature that suggests that mentorship is the key to a newly appointed academic's successful induction, transition, and socialisation into higher education. However, it must be noted that the extracts from participants' interviews shared are not intended as representative illustrations of all newly appointed academics; rather they are examples of six newly appointed academics' experiences within a post 1992 university.

Acknowledgements

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