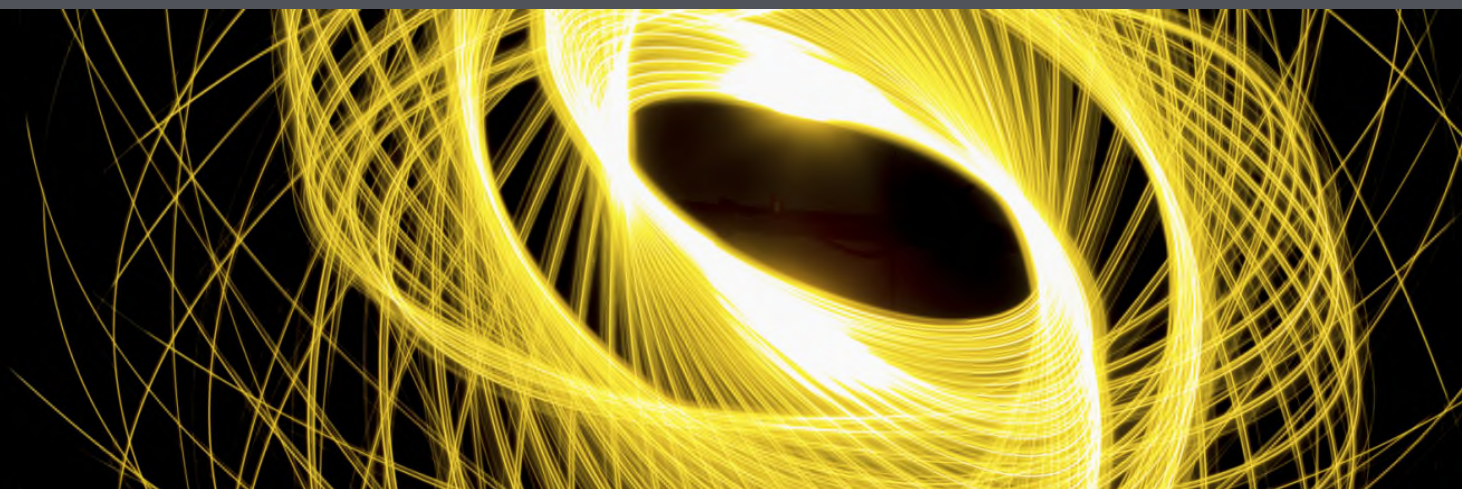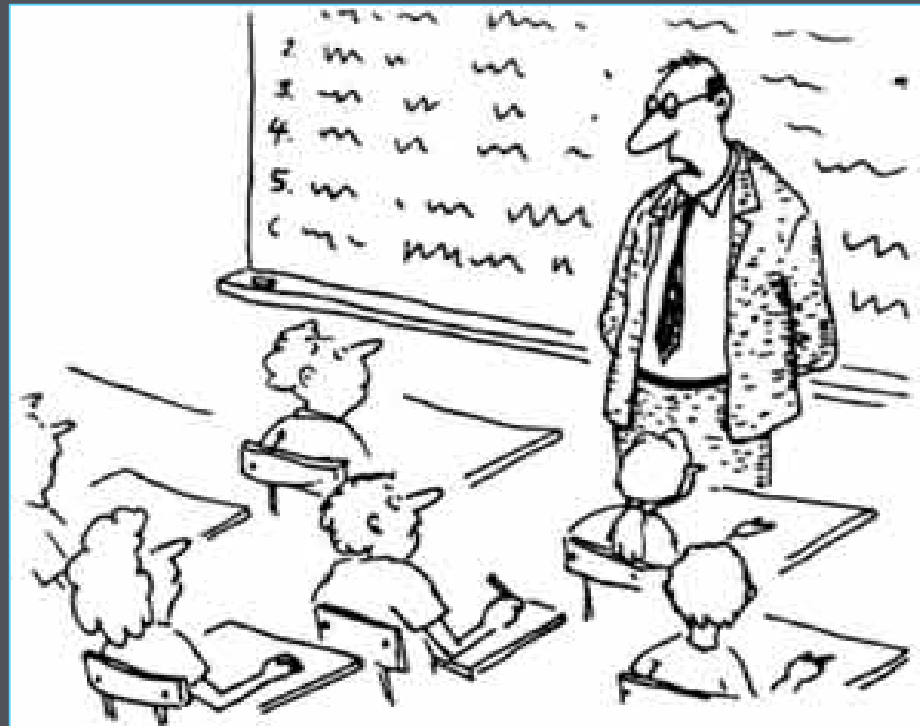University of **Reading**

Involving students in the assessment of their writing: The use (and misuse) of assessment criteria in EAP

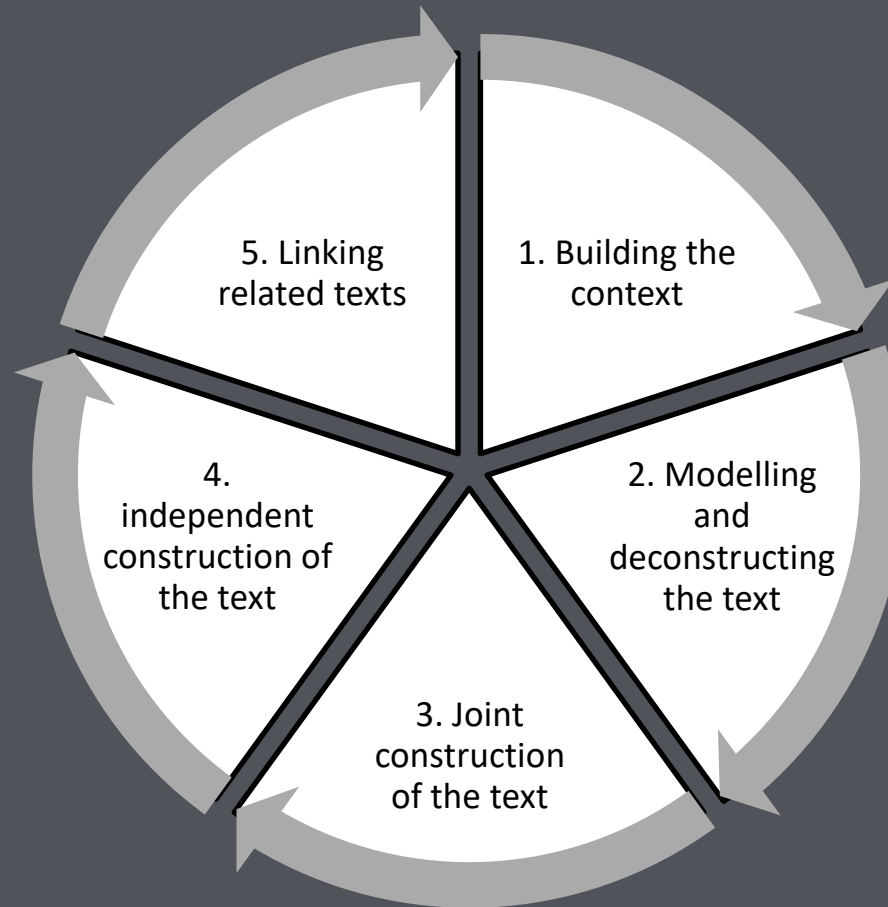Dr. Phil Smyth

University of Reading

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"I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"

Genre approaches

Teachers feel a genre-based approach gives "an imposed rather than a responsive notion of text" (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998, pg. 311).

There is nothing inherently prescriptive or conforming in a genre approach (Hyland, 2018)

5. Linking related texts

1. Building the context

2. Modelling and deconstructing the text

3. Joint construction of the text

4. independent construction of the text

(Feez, 1998)

Assessment?
Competing paradigms?

Assessment criteria

"criteria compliance in pursuit of grades" (p. 286) and could "weaken rather than strengthen the development of learner autonomy" (p. 291).

Torrance (2007)

There is a danger with too much teacher guidance that students develop dependency and their learning strategies are reduced to "chasing what the tutor wants"

(Orsmond & Merry, 2013, p. 748).

Misuse of assessment criteria?

Theorising how teachers manage the use of exemplars: towards mediated learning from exemplars

Philip Smyth & David Carless

One view…

- Criteria viewed as fully determinate and explicit
- Criteria are non-negotiable
- An attempt to map criteria to the learning (tight correspondence between exemplar and criteria)
- Could result in students becoming instrumental in their approach to learning?
- Could result in a focus on features not standards?

Examples

(Anika – interview) once the assessment criteria change, I need to change the exemplar

(Anika) so if we're looking for the exemplar, those exemplars should correspond to the assessment needs and the requirements

(Carl) They (students) prefer a more prescriptive approach…

(Carl) If it's prescriptive the students can just sit and listen and accept everything you say…

Another view…

- Criteria avoided altogether
- Seen as overly prescriptive
- Students should discover what is required
- Are students capable of discovering learning beyond surface features?
- Little guidance other than what the teacher reveals?

Examples

(Janet) I'm afraid showing the criteria too early will be too prescriptive

(Gwen) Referring back to the assessment criteria is something I should do more often. But I have the feeling that if I refer to the criteria when examining the sample, then there may seem to be only one way to achieve the criteria, which certainly is not true.

Issues with both approaches

- **Criteria** seen as determinate (tacit knowledge not considered) (borrowed from language testing?)
- **Criteria use** (or lack of use) does not involve students directly

A lack of mediation and dialogue around criteria

A better use?

Theoretical perspectives

- **Dialogism** (Bakhtin) - knowledge is seen as "emerging from the interaction of voices" and is concerned with "transformation of understandings"

- **Tacit knowledge** – (Polanyi) - "We know more than we can tell."

- **Mediated Learning Experience** – (Feuerstein) – "A goal of education is… to assist in the process of self-organization - to modify individuals' capacity to modify themselves."

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Acquiring tacit knowledge takes place through activities, such as observation, imitation, participation and dialogue (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010).

When students are able to develop tacit knowledge which corresponds broadly with that of the teacher, they are positioned to make sense of the teacher's judgement and its rationale (Sadler 2010).

Criteria and criteria use for participation and dialogue

- **Criteria seen as fuzzy**
- **Knowledge is conceptualized as both explicit and tacit**
- **Assessment viewed as holistic rather than overly atomistic**
- **Students have the possibility to interrogate the criteria**
- **Exemplars and criteria are shared after writing is done**

Tasks that engage students in using criteria (both tacit and explicit)

- Grading exercise (4 samples, students rank order and grade then discuss)

- Feedback exercise (grade yourself before receiving feedback)

- Peer comparisons (what were the most important differences between your and your peers' work?)

Do-Compare-Make explicit (Nicol, 2020,2021)

Three essential requirements for the deliberate and productive generation of internal feedback

1. Students must engage in a learning task or produce some work
2. Teacher must make reference material available for comparisons
3. Students need to engage purposefully in the comparison process and the results need to be made explicit (e.g. writing).

An example: Students wrote an essay and then compared to three peer essays (two random and one strong from the year before). Then answered 3 questions:

1. What are the most *important* differences between your essay and the exemplars?
2. What did you learn from these differences?
3. Which essay was the best - explain why?

Recommendations for practice

- Use several exemplars demonstrating a range of quality during the course
- Use the pre-set criteria as late as possible in the teaching sequence, after students have drafted their assignment and worked with exemplars/peer work
- Develop skills in teacher-led discussion. Aim to elicit and critique students' understandings of quality through peer and whole class dialogue
- Encourage co-construction of meaning with students. Push students beyond criteria that focus only on surface features of quality

Difficulties in managing criteria

- Time for effective work with criteria
- Teacher knowledge and practice of assessment
- Knowledge of possible exemplar processes and skills in mediating dialogue
- Professional confidence of the teacher

There is no better way to avoid instrumentalism than to foster a culture of collaboration and negotiation in the higher education.

(Dysthe et al., 2008, pg. 129)

Questions?

"Wait! Wait! Listen to me! . . . We don't HAVE to be just sheep!"