

# *The nature of teachers' qualitative judgements: A matter of context and salience*

## *Part Two: Out-of-context judgements*



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*This second paper also takes up the issue of how teachers make judgements of primary students' writing. Once again, we examine the evidence base used by two teachers in their judgements, using qualitative techniques for mapping the inter-relationships among the indexes that teachers rely on to formulate judgements. Of special interest in this paper is how the teachers enacted judgements of student writing in the absence of knowledge about the institutional and pedagogical settings in which the writing had been produced, and also without knowledge of the student writer. The authors recommend that readers consider the discussion and findings offered in this paper in conjunction with paper one which precedes it.*

The preceding paper discussed how two Year 5 teachers accounted for their judgements of the literate capabilities of students in their own class on the basis of written texts produced by these students. It demonstrated the dynamic and complex nature of this process, clearly exemplifying the indexes that the teachers drew on and combined variously to reach a judgement at a particular point in time. This paper examines how the same two teachers accounted for their judgements of the writing performance of students unknown to them, but from the same year level. For this task, the teachers were asked to judge 25 samples of previously unsighted authentic pieces of student writing drawn from a range of schools in the south-east corner of Queensland. What this meant, in effect, was that the teachers were only able to draw on some of the indexes that were available to them in the previous activity. More specifically, the teachers were constrained in their judgements by not having the same range of knowledges available to them. In what follows we discuss firstly those indexes that were not readily available to the teachers in these out-of-context judgements, and then we consider those indexes that were common to both in-context and out-of-context.

### *Absence of salient indexes*

A range of indexes was still called into play or activated in such a way that they had a point-in-time relevance, but what becomes of interest in

this 'out-of-context' setting is how the teachers arrived at their judgements in the absence of certain knowledges (specifically Index 1 – Community context, Index 5 – Observations of the student, and Index 6 – Knowledge of pedagogy) that they have earlier demonstrated as being integral to judgement processes at a particular point-in-time. There is ample evidence in the data of how the teachers in question tried to either call upon these indexes, or experienced difficulty in arriving at judgements in their absence. A possible explanation for such difficulty may lie in the teachers' reliance, as shown in the following extract discussed in paper one, on their recollected observations of 'the kid' and of how their interactions had a material impact on the student writing:

... but the feeling that you get about the kid, that's influencing what goes into this is all of the other things that you see every day, you know, when you're sitting there watching that kid or when that kid's coming to your table, and he's asking, you know, Does this sentence make sense? Is this sentence right? Then that kid will change that sentence because of some talk that you've had ...

Whereas a kid whose piece of writing you just get there, you've got no idea whether that kid's ever had anything to do with, do you know, the teacher. (Val)

The second teacher also demonstrated the high value she usually gave to having knowledge of the student, raising a further concern about the accuracy of such judgements in the absence of this knowledge:

knowing the student does affect your marking scheme, yes, and knowing them also gives them a more accurate, I think it's more accurate assessment. (Sue)

The following segment of talk clearly exemplifies the shifting nature, rather than static certainty, of judgement processes. In the first instance it again shows the value this teacher places on having knowledge of the student, but also on having regular access to that student so that the writer's intent can be determined. In fact, the teacher states that she would usually put off arriving at her judgement until she had that opportunity. For this teacher at least, judgement is enmeshed in talk with the student and other interactions. Importantly, however, the teacher did arrive at a grading decision, but qualified it by noting that the student in question could be worthy of a different grade on the basis of potential noted by the teacher in the writing, as noted below:

I'd have to ask. I'd be spending time talking with this one ... Okay it's ah, it needs to be, I would be talking a lot to this child and asking them to explain a few things to me that I don't quite understand like the point of why they'd be a bag instead of being something else, it's almost like they've pulled the topic 'Life as a Sack' and then gone and written their own story anyway...

I'd leave it, I wouldn't, I probably wouldn't mark it until after I've talked to the kid because I wouldn't understand enough about it. If I had to give it

some sort of a mark, it, I mean it's got a good amount of content in it ...

It's an SA [sound achievement], but it's got the potential to be a lot better than that too. (Val)

The need for the teachers to 'understand' the writing not only in terms of authorial intent but also in relation to how it had been jointly accomplished by student and teacher (sometimes as co-writer) was a recurring issue in the talk. Throughout, the teachers talked of writing as a social enterprise and on this and other occasions in the out-of-context stage, they were hesitant in judging, making the point that they were ill-equipped to do so because they had not played a part in shaping the script and did not know its history.

### Index 5: (Not) knowing the student – gender

Of further interest in the out-of-context judgements is how the teachers actively searched for traces of the gender of the student in the writing. This feature of the teachers' talk was not apparent in the 'in-context' setting, discussed in the preceding paper, as all the students were 'known' to the teachers. However, it becomes a notable feature of the talk around the 'out-of-context' judgements. In the following extract the teacher initially had difficulty in determining the gender of the student. However, she appeared to be able to resolve this on the basis of the number of 'slang things' in the text, deemed, perhaps to be more a feature of boys' rather than girls' work:

So *he* may as well have written *his* own story, or *her* own story, ah no, I'd say it's a *boy*, um... lots and lots of slang things in here and here *he* kept, not much sentence structure, absolutely no paragraphing, um, I guess, I don't know, need a lot of talking. (Val) (authors' emphasis)

In other instances, the decision on the gender of the student became contingent on the topic, or the way the student handled the topic, for instance:

*he's* been into James Bond, this one. (Sue) (authors' emphasis)

The following extract of talk raises a number of questions round the issue of gender and writing. The teacher has decided that the student in question is a girl, though the topic itself, 'A day in the life of a boot', may not necessarily assist in arriving at this decision. Nonetheless, the teacher is heard calling on her construction of gender as a way of making sense of the task, while also drawing on the already established standard in operation in her own class to reach a decision on a particular piece of work:

... just looking at it, looks like a weak student's because there's not a lot there. There's a lot of trouble with capital letter and actual printing, so this child, looks like *she* is weak just looking at it ... Capital letters and full stops, has no idea, so therefore *her* English skills are way behind. Spelling doesn't

seem to be as bad, the only spelling I can see is a 'aloud' is just a homonym, spelling mistake, (1) can use an apostrophe, that seems unusual when they cannot use capital letters and full stops. (Sue) (authors' emphasis)

Though Sue doesn't state it explicitly, she clearly has a particular standard in mind and reaches the decision that the student in question is not achieving at that standard, noting that *her English skills are way behind*. The apparent discomfort the teachers experienced while judging writing by unknown students was further intensified by an absence of knowledge about the teaching context in which the writing had its origins, a point alluded to earlier.

#### Index 6: (Not) knowing the pedagogical context

A further instance of the teachers' searching for an index that they appeared to routinely draw on (though unavailable in this out-of-context judgement setting) is evidenced in the following excerpt:

I don't know how much the teacher then expects either so, um, whether this has just been a short theme or thing, I'm not sure. Whereas we did it over a long time, over quite a few weeks and our entries were, were longer, so again not knowing the context and how long they had to do this, so if this was only a day's exercises, I'd have to put it up a bit, but then, if it's supposed to be more than that, the exercise, I don't know. (Sue)

Here the teacher is heard to experience difficulty reaching a decision without knowing more information about the pedagogical context in which the task was set. The teacher is looking to find out how long the student had to complete the task, indicating that this information becomes critical in determining the student's competence at the task. She clearly demonstrates, that in the absence of this knowledge, she is applying another way of knowing that is available to her, namely what conditions were at play within the classroom, where she team teaches with Val, when this same topic or theme was covered. She noted that 'their' students had a longer period of time to complete the topic and consequently the students produced longer (diary) entries. Thus, she draws some comparison between this student's work and the expectations operating in her classroom and finally makes a provisional judgement, indicating that it could be changed in the light of further information. Furthermore, this talk also gives some insights into how Sue arrives at judgements on students' work on the basis of the length of the text. She is indicating that there is apparently an inseparability of issues of quality from issues pertaining to the classroom conditions in which the text was produced.

This same teacher further reiterates the difficulty of reaching a judgement in the absence of knowledge about the student writer and the pedagogical context in the following, once again drawing on the existing standard within her own classroom:

I'm judging from what I think my kids can do here, but then every teacher sets work differently so it's very hard to do something out of context. (Sue)

and

what's the expectations of the teacher that gave this work, did they have several days, did they only do it in a day, did they do it in a week? Umm. (Sue)

Though the teachers' interest in trying to read the student in the writing was uppermost in their talk, there were also signs of their discomfort at not knowing the institutional and community context in which the writing was generated.

### **Index 1: (Not) knowing community context**

Within the talk around 'in-context' judgements, the teachers regularly drew on their knowledge of their own classrooms and students and also on their perceptions of the community surrounding the school, particularly its socio-economic status. These perceptions were shown to be important in arriving at the expected standard that was later called upon in making judgements. The effects of the lack of this knowledge in the out-of-context judgement setting can be seen in this excerpt:

I don't know the school either, and the standard of the whole grade, even if you've only got your own class, you, you can see where, from your bottom person to your top person, your range. (Sue)

This same teacher elaborated further:

... alright, say that I was at a lower economic group, um, right, the children have to achieve to whatever they can achieve to right, so therefore you've got to be able to give some high marks so that children can see within their own class okay that's good, that's what I'm aiming for, so therefore, you couldn't mark a whole grade right down low, you've got to have to have some sort of range. (Sue)

What also becomes of interest in this talk is how the explanation that is made for the difficulty in arriving at a judgement of the writing of unknown students also gives us an account of how judgement is undertaken in the teacher's own classroom. Normative judgement practices are at work in the teacher's classroom, with direct inter-student comparisons being used as a basis for judgement. Furthermore, the teacher appears to operate with a notion of a 'minimum' standard rather than an elaborated set of standards.

### ***Using available indexes***

#### **Index 2: Teacher experience**

In the absence of those indexes the teachers had identified in the think-alouds as being particularly salient to them, they most often resorted to

drawing on their experience, first as a teacher with knowledge of curriculum, and second as a teacher with evaluative experience of Year 5 students' work, to assist them in their decision making:

I know that in the grade 5 syllabus there's a good chance that that kid studies something about bushrangers 'cause that's in the grade 5 syllabus, therefore, he's got you know, he's using vocabularies like you know, 'trooper', and 'mounted' and you know 'galloped towards me'. (Val)

Based on this kind of experience, one teacher was able to comment on one child's work as:

Unusual for a grade five child. 'The cool breeze is more like a wind and is pushing at my back and the hair on the back of my head is falling onto my face' - that's very unusual writing for a child in grade five. (Sue)

Drawing on their own experience as teachers to arrive at a judgement about the value of unknown students' writing is further evidenced in the following comments. In the first instance Sue is using her own point of reference on teaching to explain why she has arrived at a particular judgement.

...then that's the way I teach. I teach a social studies thing then I'll do the English skill so the children have some background knowledge to work from, so I'm building up their background first, so they'll have some English genre involved. (Sue)

In the second instance, Val reflects on the fluidity of the judgement process and how she firms up a standard in the course of grading, an experience she captures in the following terms:

Sometimes you have sort of a floaty mark

Um and when you see more of the same sort of pieces then you become more definite on what that particular one was. (Val)

#### **Index 4: Assessment criteria and standards**

Also evidenced in the talk of the two teachers in question as they accounted for how they arrived at judgements of the writing of unknown students is their partial reliance on stated criteria. In the discussion of the judgements made in the 'in-context' setting, it was found that these criteria were drawn into play in complex ways with other knowledge-based indexes available to the teachers. A notable feature of this talk was evidence of how the sense of standard was firmed up in the course of arriving at a judgement, also subject to some variation as the teacher moved from one student's work to another. As discussed, the teachers frequently gave predominance to knowledge of the student derived from first-hand observations of in-class learning rather than adherence to the prescribed set of criteria.

The extracts of talk drawn on here from the 'out-of-context' setting show that stated criteria and (implicit) standards take on more signifi-

cance in the absence of knowledge of the student and the classroom context. Arriving at relevant task criteria, even when judging the work of unknown students, did not pose difficulty for the teachers in question, as they simply applied the same criteria to the unknown students as they did to their own students, knowing them to also be in Year 5:

... it's not difficult to come up with criteria, cause we're going we know what to expect of the children. We seem to have expectations already set in our minds and where we're aiming to get the children at. (Sue)

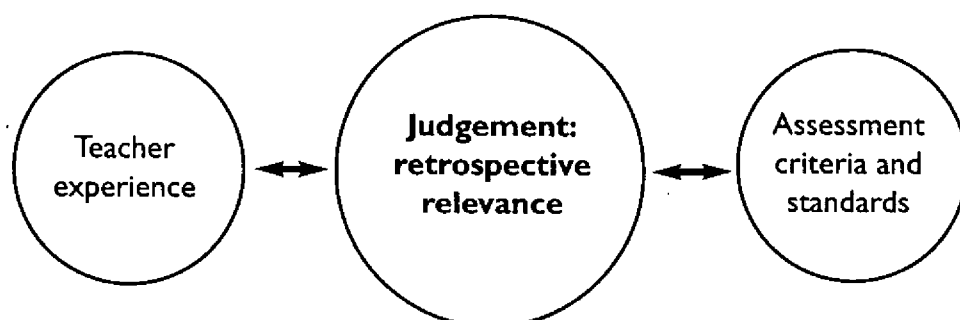
and

I would sort of have to you see here's where I would look at a criteria having to know the purpose of what they're writing for if it's just like an imaginative piece of writing then okay I would think that in terms of imagination and things it's quite good. (Val)

Of particular interest in the out-of-context judgement setting was that in the absence of knowledges, say about pedagogy and the student, the assessment criteria appeared to come more prominently to the fore in the teachers' talk as they judged.

It is worth noting, however, that even though the two teachers had established criteria for judging, even in the out-of-context stage, they were not working with an elaborated set of standards. In short, the features of a grading scale A to E were not defined, with the grid merely serving to report to students imprecise information about performance on each criterion. This is not to suggest any deficiency in the capabilities of the teachers in question in their judgement and reporting practices. Rather it serves to highlight a point made in the previous paper, that, in the absence of any official or endorsed standards and criteria for judging writing performance, teachers relied on their tacit or in-the-head standards and knowledges of how these had local, as distinct from system, relevance. A diagrammatic representation of the two available indexes in the out-of-context judgements appears as Figure 2.

Figure 2. Representing out-of-context judgement



### *Conclusion*

In reaching the conclusion of this paper, we ask readers to consider papers one and two, returning to the notion of indexicality as we apply it to judgement. Specifically, we ask readers to consider the information that teachers have made available in their verbalisations during judgement to understand the judgement process on a text-by-text basis. We contend that such an examination pushes the exploration of the interior dynamics of teacher judgement to a deep and stimulus-specific level. Before proceeding we acknowledge, however, that qualitative depth-analysis of teacher verbalisations is limited to mapping only those aspects of thinking which the teachers were able to consciously access and verbalise during the think-aloud process.

While we acknowledge this limitation, we contend that the in-context talk as discussed in paper one showed different types of configural information processing for the two teachers, ranging from the import of extra information, specific to particular students and texts to more highly complex and convoluted condition reasoning, reflected in various index combinations and trade-offs. Also evident is how readily the teachers could bring the available indexes into (and out of) play as they read and appraised writing quality. It was through the interplay of available indexes that the teachers were able to connect student writing to prior observations of the student and classroom interactions that had shaped how the writing came to be.

In this way, the indexes had a retrospective relevance for the teachers, enabling them to read and value the writing for what it revealed about the student and his/her development as a writer over time and across tasks (see Figure 1, paper one). Further, we have suggested that the judgements had prospective relevance in that they had the potential to carry forward to inform future teacher observations and interactions with students. So, essentially the judgements were taken to be constructive of student identity, as strongly evidenced in the teachers' talk, while also being constructive of how teacher and student interacted and accomplished their relationship (as teacher-and student-of-writing in the classroom).

It is clear that when teachers are assessing the work of their own students, opportunities are maximised for the importation of extra information about the writers and about the writing task itself. When out-of-context writings are judged, as discussed in this paper, other decision processes are called into play, including the occasional desire for information not currently available that the teachers would like to know before rendering judgement. The discussion in this second paper has centred on how the teachers arrived at judgement decisions in the absence of some of the indexes (see Figure 2). Of special interest was that the teachers were able to make judgements, but identified the difficulty of this task when they were unable to use some of those indexes that



they have identified as being critical to how their professional judgement routinely occurred. The teachers' talk indicates that for these teachers at least, their primary purpose for judging student performance was to inform teaching and learning, emphasising the prospective relevance of the identified set of indexes, as raised earlier. The teachers' talk testifies to their understanding of the situatedness of the judgement task and the dynamics of its moment-by-moment and progress over time characteristics.

These findings build on the work of Sadler (1989) and Wyatt-Smith (1999) in several ways. Sadler theorised the benefits for students when they are inducted into knowledge about assessment expectations, making them insiders of this knowledge, able to use it for improvement purposes. Additionally, Sadler made the distinction between manifest and latent criteria, showing that it was important for students to know the expected criteria as well as the ways of applying these. One of his essential insights concerned how it may be potentially self-limiting to adhere strictly to wholly anticipated features, and that in some cases, it may be necessary to call on previously unanticipated features to judge fairly. Wyatt-Smith extended the work of Sadler, showing how the provision of stated standards and criteria in secondary English can inform teacher judgement of writing quality, though such provision of itself does not necessarily wholly regulate how judgement occurs. In short, her research showed that the criteria and standards alone did not fully account for judgement acts.

The pilot discussed in papers one and two similarly reports that even though the two Year 5 teachers had made available statements of criteria and unelaborated standards, such statements of themselves did not fully account for how the teachers arrived at judgements. This situation inevitably meant that the variables that informed judgements were not made public or officially available to students and parents. This is not to suggest that teachers wanted to cloak acts of judgement in secrecy. It is, however, to point to the complex and dynamic nature of acts of judgement, and how teachers themselves do not intuitively map acts of judgement as they occur. This confirms a point made by Phelps (1989) who argued that the deep structures of judgement do not readily lend themselves to examination, even by teachers themselves, without considerable cognitive introspection and training.

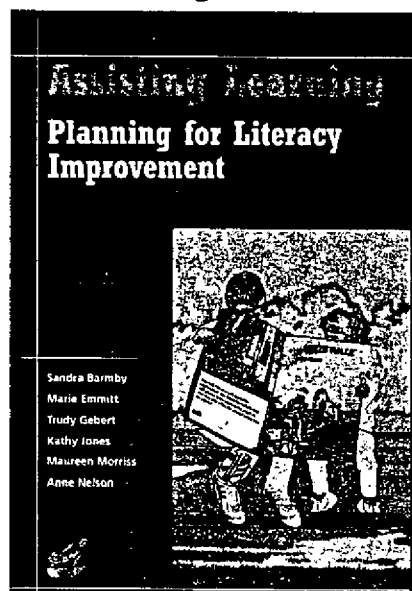
So, to return to the critical issue of understanding the contextualised nature of judgement, we argue that the interior dynamics of judgement, and the principled application of knowledge about those dynamics by teachers in rendering their judgements, are precisely what we need to understand if a truly fair and 'valid' system for assessing student work is to be developed. The think-aloud protocols generated by the two teachers while making their judgements provided ample testament to the fact that there remains much we need to learn about teacher judgement

processes. Further, we want to suggest that the texture of teacher judgement is complex and that forcing 'the judgement problem' into the procrustean bed of simplifying psychometric models, as educational systems are wont to do, runs the very high risk of presenting a false picture of students' literacy achievement in their local context. The key related issues to be explored in the large study remain as: the legitimate influences on teacher judgement and the type/s of validity, system and/or site, that should dominate in any public statements about the written literacy level of students. Only when these issues are addressed can we be serious about characterising 'the teacher as the key person in the assessment process ... [with] teacher judgement at the heart of that process' (Maxwell, 2002, p.13).

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