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ORR, Susan

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‘We kind of try to merge our own experience with the objectivity of the criteria’:

The role of connoisseurship and tacit practice in undergraduate fine art assessment

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Professor Susan Orr

Abstract

This article explores connoisseurship in the context of fine art undergraduate assessment practice. I interviewed twelve fine art lecturers in order to explore and unpack the concept of connoisseurship in relation to subjectivity, objectivity and tacit practice. Building on the work of Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1986) and Shay (2003, 2005), both of whom problematize the view that subjectivity and objectivity are binary opposites, my research illustrates the ways that connoisseurship is underpinned by informed professional judgements located in communities of practice. Within this particular conception of connoisseurship, the lecturers’ expertise is co-constituted in communities of assessors through participation and engagement. Standards reside in communities of practice.

Connoisseurship

In common parlance, a connoisseur is someone who has built up extensive knowledge about something that enables his or her to make expert judgements. The term is often associated with elitism. Arguably, the perceived link between connoisseurship and elitism is strengthened by the tendency for the idea of connoisseurship to be associated with the consumption of expensive wines or other elite products that are of limited availability. In recent years it has become unfashionable to view higher education (HE) assessment as a form of connoisseurship. There are several reasons for this. In HE assessment contexts, the term ‘connoisseurship’ is often conflated with elitism and mystery. For example, from an outcomes-based assessment perspective, connoisseurship has become associated with *not* making the rules clear to students (Ecclestone 1999). If one views the aim of assessment as ‘making things clear’, then the idea of connoisseurship is problematic because this concept rests on the idea that total clarity is an impossible objective (Orr and Blythman 2005). Connoisseurship can appear to clash with the aims of a widening participation agenda that seeks to make explicit the practices of HE to new student groups. In addition, the idea of connoisseurship has been problematized because, within massified HE, there is the view that one can no longer rely on prolonged contact between students and lecturers to allow for the transmission of assessment information (O’Donovan et al. 2002). As a result, in recent years there has been a move away from associating assessment with connoisseurship.

In this study I seek to explore the extent to which connoisseurship might be a useful way to understand fine art assessment practice. In doing so I am attempting to separate the association between connoisseurship and elitism in order to find out whether

connoisseurship offers a useful framing for academic judgement in fine art. My key research question is this: Can fine art assessment be based in connoisseurship and still be rigorous?

Literature overview

This study builds on the assessment research of Sambell and McDowell (1998), Hawe (2002), Wyatt-Smith (1999), Orrell (2003), Shay (2003, 2004, 2005) and Yorke et al. (2000). Collectively, their research offers a textured rendering of tacit practice, hidden criteria and personalized assessment practices. Morgan and Wyatt-Smith (2000: 130) suggest that the experience of carrying out assessment with other colleagues over time enables lecturers to build up a ‘rich store of “insider” or specialist knowledge’ that is not fully available to public scrutiny. Ecclestone’s (2001: 305) research suggests that, as lecturers gain assessment experience, the nature of their judgement-making becomes harder to identify because ‘experts become more intuitive and less deliberative, and are less able to articulate the tacit knowledge on which much of their decision making has come to depend’. Thus, tacit elements of assessment correspond to developing assessment expertise and professional experience (O’Donovan et al. 2004). For Morgan and Wyatt-Smith (2000: 130), one way to understand this is to view the lecturer as a connoisseur who has a tacit understanding of ‘the characteristics of a fine performance’. The expertise of a connoisseur does not readily explicate itself in language, which suggests that tacit practice and connoisseurship are interlinked concepts.

In Sadler's words (2005: 192), 'tacit knowledge refers to the expertise that people carry around with them, mostly in their heads'. Tacit practice has been identified as an important element of assessment practice (Sambell and McDowell 1998). In a study of studio-based dialogic feedback (otherwise known as the Crit), Percy (2004) identified that art and design lecturers use very imprecise language and that they often resort to gestural language when discussing students' artwork. The lecturers in Percy's study wrestle with the challenge of trying to 'name what they know' (Polanyi 1998). Percy argues that an understanding of tacit practice helps to explain the lecturers' inability to explicate their assessment approaches.

The expertise of the connoisseur is situated in communities of knowers, and as such can be understood as a form of guild knowledge (Sadler 1989). Sadler's use of the term 'guild knowledge' stresses the significance of teachers acquiring their expertise through assessing with other teachers over a period of time. Shay (1994: 606 cited in Shay 2005: 667) uses Godwin's term 'professional vision' instead of the term 'connoisseur' and quotes Bourdieu's description (cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 128) of academics who have a 'feel for the game'. Shay (2005) stresses that professional vision is grounded in social contexts.

Theoretical framework

Wenger's research on communities of practice offers a framework with which to understand tacit practice. Wenger uses the term 'participation' to stress the experiential nature of practice. In addition, he refers to reification, which at its simplest means 'making into a thing' (Wenger 2004: 58). In Wenger's (2004: 58) words, 'we project our

meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, having a reality of their own'. Written assessment regulations, learning outcomes and assessment criteria are representative of reification.

I seek to extend a Wengerian analysis by drawing on Shay's (2005) study of an assessment community of engineering lecturers. Shay applies a Bourdieun analysis to her assessment research. For Bourdieu (1977), the subjective is neither random nor incidental; it is framed by habitus. Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to sets of dispositions that generate practices and perceptions that are continually restructured through our encounters in the world. In Reay's words (2004: 435), habitus can be 'viewed as a complex internalized core from which everyday experiences emanate'. For Bourdieu, the subjectivity of assessment is not about bias or error; it can be skilful and careful; however, it cannot be made explicit. Equally, the objective is mediated through the frame of the subjective. In relation to assessment, this means that there is no objectivity that exists 'out there'. Structure and agency are a duality; they are interdependent. When we assess student work we have individual agency, but we are constrained and constructed by wider structural factors that relate to the concept of field (Bourdieu 1977).

Whilst Wenger's reification and participation are not equivalent to Bourdieu's concepts of structure and agency, what these theoretical approaches share is an interest in explaining the ways that meanings are negotiated in the spaces between the person and

their environment. Drawing on Bourdieu, Shay takes the view that assessment is a ‘socially situated interpretive act’ (p. 663). She observes:

Assessors’ interpretative frameworks are constituted, in part, by the objective conditions of the field and of the community of practice. These are objective because they are to a large extent independent of the individual assessor [...]. At the same time these interpretations are constituted by the particular context of the assessment event. This is highly subjective terrain; that is, it is significantly dependant on the assessor (2005: 669).

Research focus

Knight challenges us to research assessment in local contexts because ‘we need to know about the discursive practices from which performances arose and through which the judgements were made’ (Knight 2006: 448). In response to Knight, my research explores the discursive assessment practices within the particular disciplinary context of HE fine art. I research from the perspective that assessment is an artful social practice, concurring with Delandshere’s (2001) view that assessment is concerned with meaning-making in social/cultural/political contexts.

My central research question is this: Can fine art assessment be based in connoisseurship and still be rigorous? To investigate this question, I set out to analyse the assessment approaches (as represented via interview) adopted by fine art lecturers, with a particular

focus on tacit practice and the ways that they understand the terms subjectivity and objectivity.

Methods and analysis

In Orr (2005: 287), I reviewed a range of methodological approaches that have been employed to study HE assessment practice. In this article, I note that interview-based studies can elicit ‘an espoused generalist view of assessment’ that may not relate directly to actual practice. In subsequent work, I responded to this concern by employing studio-based observational approaches to explore assessment practice (Orr 2007). However, more recently I have returned to interview-based approaches. Whilst I am particularly aware that there may be a disjuncture between reported approaches and approaches employed in the field (see, for example, Orrell 2003), my position is that the reported representations are still of value. The purpose of the interviews in this study was not to identify how lecturers ‘really assess’. Lecturers’ accounts of practice may not directly reflect practice, but these accounts have a status of their own (Wengraf 2001). As a result, I encouraged each interviewee to relate to me examples of specific assessment practices (Kvale 1996), because this approach allowed me to access the lecturers’ tacit, cultural knowledge (Wengraf 2001). The ‘assumptions and asides in their story telling’ (Wengraf 2001: 178) enabled me to address my research question. When designing my interview questions, I drew on Yorke et al. (2000) study in which lecturers were asked to describe how they approached marking student work, how they learnt to assess and what factors influenced their decision making. Using semi-structured in-depth interview approaches, I

drew on Kvale's (1996) work on what he calls the InterView to stress the co-constructed nature of meaning-making between interviewer and interviewee.

I interviewed twelve experienced

¹ fine art HE lecturers who worked across six English Russell Group and Post-1992 Universities. This number was selected because I was focusing on depth rather than breadth. I made initial contacts with lecturers via university web-based information. I used opportunity sampling techniques to identify the twelve interviewees.

Embracing Wengraf's (2001) view that analysis is craft-based artistry, my data analysis process could be likened to weaving because, through an iterative process, I worked through the data set in two directions. First, I worked across the whole set of transcripts building up a coding frame that could be applied to all the interviewees' transcripts, and second I selected particular transcripts and coded them individually. In this way I worked through the weft and the warp of the data set. This led to repeated categorization and re-categorization. Congruent with my theoretical perspective in relation to assessment, my approach to validity is situated within the context of interpretive artful practice (Moss 1996). The validity of my research can be assessed by identifying the extent to which I have aligned my theoretical approach, research questions, data collection and analysis.

Discourses of subjectivity

The respondents' transcripts supported assumptions that their assessment practices would be elusive. The extract below appears to illustrate Polanyi's (1998) view that we cannot name all that we know:

You know I think that you can [...] you [...] you kind of in [...] em [...] you get to know a lot of stuff but you don't always know that you know it. (BW. Each respondent is assigned two initials)

Throughout the transcripts, there were numerous examples of lecturers trailing off mid-sentence or offering sentences that were very ambiguous. I offer an extract from one respondent to exemplify this point:

Em, so that's, you know, I find that quite interesting, so the criteria, I mean you know, the criteria for different modules is kind of, em, very specific and we [...], but we found ourselves using [...], I mean I find it odd 'cause we just [...], we have to kind of [...], we use the same language in each level but it has to be slightly less, less of a [...], less of a [...], an excellence or something and I find sometimes there's too much repetition in the way we do that. (MP)

The respondents' sentence fragments illustrate, in a very powerful way that, as Knight (2002) suggests, we do not have conscious access to all that we know when we assess students' work. It is at these points in the transcripts (see extracts below) that I am offered tantalizing glimpses concerning tacit practice:

I was trying to say something[...], trying to form something about the work having a [...] the maker having some sort of genuine relationship to the work, can't quite work out how to say it. (ST)

I remember, you know, just thinking it was all kind of [...], almost like a sort of implicit knowledge that was going on about why something was valuable or good or better than, something better than another thing, em, or better work or art or had more coherence or more something or other. (MP)

These extracts evidence the challenge associated with verbalizing tacit practice.

Arguably, fine art as a discipline is more tolerant of intuitive approaches (Atkinson and Claxton 2000) because the assessment of art is a multi-sensory affair where the eyes apprehend the work, but it can also be touched, smelt or listened to. Thus, in fine art, the non-verbal is recognized as significant. Atkinson and Claxton (2000: 1) discuss the challenges associated with asking teachers to render their intuitive expertise in words, and they stress that intuition is not 'anti-rational or anti-intellectual'. As Brawm (2000) usefully reminds us, intuition comes from the word tuition. As such, it is a learnt social construct. Learnt tacit practice is linked to the unnamable expertise associated with connoisseurship.

Dialogic assessment approaches

In fine art, student artwork is commonly assessed and moderated via lecturer discussion in situ in the studio (Orr 2007). One possible function of studio-based assessment dialogue is identified by Price (2005: 223), who argues that discussion about assessment ‘facilitate[s] tacit knowledge transfer’. Sadler (2005: 192) develops this view: ‘standards based on tacit knowledge commonly exist in unarticulated form but can be shared amongst experts [...] by joint participation in evaluative activity, including moderation of grades’. Several of the respondents in my study commented that tacit approaches become more apparent through dialogue:

And maybe your perceptions of where they are in terms of assessing is different to other people. *Sometimes that comes out in, em, assessments when you’re assessing with other staff*, sometimes we assess as three staff. (PL, emphasis added)

The respondents suggested that individual subjectivity was mitigated by group marking. In the extract below, BW discusses the ways that a single mark emerges from the collective views of the group. He suggests that group marking offers a site for individual markers to ‘take on’ the group’s views, but as well as this, group marking increases his self-awareness about his own ‘take’ on assessment. Marking in a team allows for the development of a shared group approach that underpins a community of practice.

My experience of marking in this department is that those are really useful conversations and that *people take on board these different viewpoints*. Of course, we've got to somehow come to terms with that we may not agree about it but I think we can usually produce a mark from that, that we all think it is a use[...], a good mark, you know it's a useable mark (sic), it's a valid mark for that student. (BW, emphasis added)

Group marking offers a site where meanings are shared, contested and negotiated. In this way, community consensus is established. As JR remarks:

When you're grading, I think that, em, I actually tend to be, em, weirdly kind of quite similar to some of my other colleagues. (JR)

For Bourdieu this would not be so weird. JR's extract stresses the inter-subjectivity of assessment. Thus, JR's apparently subjective individualized assessment approaches are better understood as shared and co-constituted. The concept of inter-subjectivity stresses the social nature of subjectivity (Shay 2005). For Bourdieu (1977), the social world is in the body in the form of habitus. Thus, elements of the lecturers' personal aesthetics are socially produced. In Shay's (2005: 675) words, 'intuitive judgements are internalisations of the objective regularities of the field they inhabit'. By analysing the respondents' representations of subjectivity and objectivity, we come to an understanding of the process through which lecturers come to make assessment judgements based on a

connoisseurship model of knowledge. Thus, one respondent discusses the process by which he has, in his words, become an ‘informed subject’:

There’s a difference between the, em, occasional subjective response and what we might call a *professional subjective response* and a professional subjective response is, you know, one that assumes and expects a much more informed response about what the different territories and critical fields of debate are that exist in [...], in [...], in the specialist school of fine art at the moment [...] *we create a position of being an informed subject.* (ST, emphasis added)

Bourdieu’s conception of subjectivity and objectivity as mutually constitutive and interdependent is underlined when LC refers to an ‘objective opinion’. Opinions are usually considered to be in the realm of the subjective. This underlines the limitations of a dualistic view of subjectivity and objectivity. If I were to analyse the extracts below using a commonsense dualistic view of subjectivity and objectivity, the lecturers’ narratives would appear conflicted and contradictory. However, if we use Shay’s (2005) analysis, the extracts illustrate the ‘iterative movement between different modes of knowledge which comprise the objective and the subjective’ (Shay 2005: 663). In the extract below, the lecturer wrestles with this ‘double truth’.

The subjective thing is being made by highly trained, educated kind of specialists in that subject, so there is a subjective decision being made, but by specialists. So a non-specialist would say “Oh! I like that one [...] I don’t like that one”. We

would be able to say “Why do you like that one? [...] Why don’t you like that one?” It would be an informed judgement, both because of our own standard practice and our own understanding of the student and so on. [...] But there is still space for the art kind of feelings, that’s got a role to play. (DR, emphasis added)

Whilst subjectivity is recognized as central to the lecturers’ response to students’ artwork, it was also presented as problematic. In the extract below, MT stresses that subjectivity is viewed by some as ‘off limits’:

You’re not allowed to sort, you’re not allowed to sort of, you don’t write about, talk about, subjectivity in terms of marking sets. Well it’s, you daren’t, you don’t, because in terms of appeals and things that’s a very dangerous path to even go near. (MT)

Atkinson and Claxton (2000: 37) suggest that ‘unbridled subjectivity’ is seen as something to fear, and in keeping with this view the respondents talked about the difficulties associated with subjectivity. For example, in the extract below PR talks about the centrality of aesthetically informed judgement, but he prefaces this with a sentence that suggests that this is a view that may be censored:

However much people are inclined or required to deny it, there is an extent to which still in art and design education, perhaps particularly in fine art education, a lot of the reality of assessment decisions is located in people’s individual

assessor's versions of what constitutes some kind of aesthetic quality essentially, em, that, that's obviously the first thing that presents difficulties. (PR)

MT hints that his preferred assessment practices might be disallowed when he observes that high-quality student artwork 'just makes you feel' (MT); he goes on to acknowledge that this definition is a problematic concept for an appeal board. MT celebrates an emotional response to student work, but recognizes that there are contexts within which this view is not legitimized. In one of the extracts above, DR states that 'there is still space for the art kind of feelings'. He illustrates this point by defending an affective response to one student's show:

We both wept when we saw the work [...]. When you see that work, you're very moved and it's very powerful, but how do you measure that kind of intellectually? You have to make part of that judgement with your heart if you like, which is what art and stuff is about so there clearly is a role for that and maybe you can't write criteria. (DR)

In addition to group-based assessment approaches, the respondents also explored the extent to which the use of written learning outcomes and assessment criteria serves to promote objectivity. In DR's words, 'it's a subjective thing but it's grounded in these references' (DR).

To conclude this section, subjectivity underpins the lecturers' assessment practices. This subjectivity is best understood as situated within communities of practice. Thus, lecturers, to a certain extent, share a common subjectivity (or inter-subjectivity) that is continually negotiated, contested, agreed and developed in the context of studio-based group marking dialogue.

Discourses of objectivity

The central position of written learning outcomes in today's UK educational assessment regimes reflects the shift to textual explicitness required by a government emphasis on audit and accountability (Orr 2010). Many lecturers introduced learning outcomes in a genuine attempt to make assessment practices less mysterious to students; however, Blythman and I have argued that the resulting proliferation of paperwork has offered a promise of transparency that it fails to deliver (Orr and Blythman 2005). The respondents expressed the popular belief that written learning outcomes 'mitigate the intrusion of personal values, feelings and perceptions' (Leach et al. 2000: 111). Thus, learning outcomes appear to promote objectivity and fairness. Ecclestone (2004: 35) notes that giving student groups the same learning outcomes offers the illusion that all students are on 'equal footing' in respect to the manner in which they are assessed. The respondents viewed learning outcomes as a means to adjudicate in cases of disagreement:

If we find we're [...] we're stuck over a student or a particular [...] or we'd get into arguments and the marks are so varied, we can't sort of resolve it, we will

come back to these, we'll say 'hang on, look, does it do this and this and this?'
[points to learning outcomes document]. (MT)

The written assessment criteria/learning outcomes are reifications that the team can 'point to, refer to, strive for, appeal to, and use or misuse in arguments' (Wenger 2004: 61). Bell (2000: 3) refers to written criteria in design education as having 'the status of small print on an insurance claim – nobody read it until there's a dispute and then at least we can say the criteria was there'.

Whilst the written learning outcomes and assessment criteria were viewed as helpful anchors, respondents in this study (along with respondents in Hand and Clewes 2000) were measured when discussing their usefulness:

You need more than a sentence to be able to extrapolate everything else out of that, em, so, em, I think the assessment criterias (sic) are ways into assessing and doors into it, em, and I think that, that's fine, em, and they're anchors to your assessment. But I don't think, em, you can't literally interpret those and say, 'Oh there it is there', and pick it out [...]. Sometimes it's not as simple as that. (LC)

Returning to the subject of learning outcomes, Shay (2005: 676) argues that they allow students and lecturers to collude in 'the myth of objectivity'. In a paper entitled 'The trouble with learning outcomes', Hussey and Smith (2002) critique the HE sector's increasing emphasis on the use of learning outcomes. In the field of art education there is

further contestation. For Cowdroy and de Graaff (2005: 507), ‘learning outcomes and assessment criteria are ambiguous and confound the enhancement of creative ability that is the primary purpose of higher education’. Equally, Cannatella (2001: 319) argues convincingly that ‘the particular character and activity that goes into the making of art does not sit comfortably in any system of general assessment criteria’.

In earlier research (Orr and Blythman 2005), it has been argued that transparency in assessment has become associated with writing things down and giving this information to students. MP problematizes this approach:

I think often students are a bit vague about how they’re assessed, even though now we [...], we thrust lots of bits of paper at them and stuff and handbooks and [...], and stuff that they, em, yeh, they’re still a bit vague. (MP)

LP wants the documents he writes to deliver transparency, but acknowledges that this is not possible:

I re-wrote the MA because I was so worried that the students didn’t understand the process and even though I thought I had made it as clear as a bell [...] so I mean, so maybe it’s just impossible, but I wanted them to understand. (LP)

MT, DR and PR point out that many lecturers do not refer to the learning outcomes when marking. In MT’s words:

I [have] sat in on moderation meetings in a variety of institutions and what I found was that, interestingly for me, what I found was people rarely have that [learning outcome document] in front of them. (MT)

Lecturers relate to the learning outcomes documentation in different ways. For some, the documents appeared to lose their own history, and thus their authorship could only be inferred. In these cases, the documents were seen as being imposed from the outside. For example, BW says that ‘these things will be written down for us in module outline forms’.

Whilst PR was critical of staff who did not bring the written learning outcomes to assessment meetings, he partly rejects these documents. He expresses the view that these documents are centrally created and do not allow him to mark in the way he wants. This corresponds with Entwistle’s (2005) research, which identified that lecturers find learning outcomes restrictive. Perceived external authorship can lead to dismissal or rejection, for example DR dismisses learning outcomes as the ‘bureaucratic bits’. This would appear to support Wenger’s view that a ‘very large portion of the reification involved in work practices comes from outside the communities of workers’ (Wenger 2004: 60).

However, reification is not always imposed; it is also created by the community of workers. Therefore, LP, in contrast to PR, talks about writing the learning outcomes, and he stresses his agency and sense of authorship. This contrast can be partly explained

because the HE validation documents that set out learning outcomes are usually multi-authored. The documents will be co-written by course leaders, module leaders and quality administrators. The lecturers' sense of authorship in relation to these documents will be dependent on institutional approaches, staff positions in the hierarchy and how recently the course was written. This can lead to a situation where one lecturer can view these documents as externally regulated whilst another may see herself as authoring them.

The extract below exemplifies the contested nature of authorship and how this relates to the lecturers' relationships to the written assessment documents. BW contrasts the language of the documents with the language used amongst the team of assessors:

Well, you see some of those forms we will have written ourselves, but actually you kind of, you walk into that situation, don't you? You can rewrite them and then we'll look at them every now and then but a lot of the time somebody else has written that and even if they haven't, it's written in a particular kind of language which I think we all probably use and then forget about 'cause it's kind of not that useful [...]. We'll, em, so there are those sorts of things and then we might try to describe things using another language that we use amongst ourselves. (BW)

Once written, learning outcomes offer a veneer of objectivity. In my analysis, I seek to stress that 'the objective world is itself a construct of the observer' (Leach et al. 2001: 296). The written documentation is as much part of the social world as the people

authoring it. Learning outcomes and assessment criteria codify cultural and social capital just as so-called subjective readings of student work will (Ecclestone 2004).

The lecturers' views on the ways they use/ignore the learning outcomes and associated documentation offer insight into Bourdieu's concepts of agency and structure. The lecturers' assessment judgements are not dictated by the written learning outcomes, but they are anchored by them. It is the relationship between these documents and the lecturers' assessment experience that enables effective judgement-making. In the words of one lecturer:

So it's kind of, in some ways it's easier, em, and in a lot of ways we do also, because of our experience, we kind of try to merge our own experience with the objectivity of the criteria. (MP)

Conclusion

The centrality of dialogic team-based approaches to marking is related to fine art pedagogy, with its emphasis on studio-based practice (Orr 2007). In text-based subjects, marking is a more private affair where typically only a small sample of texts will be double marked or moderated (Price 2005). My study suggests that opportunities for dialogic group-based assessment approaches should be encouraged and supported in subjects other than fine art.

This article helps to rehabilitate the concept of connoisseurship by offering a rendering of the ways that fine art lecturers move between and across subjective and objective

responses when assessing student artwork. Using Bourdieu's work as a theoretical tool, I have shown an interrelationship and co-dependency between the objective and subjective.

As DR comments:

The subjective thing is being made by highly trained, educated kind of specialists in that subject, so there is a subjective decision being made, but by specialists.

(DR)

This conceptualization of 'informed subjects' (ST) allows us to recognize (and perhaps to an extent celebrate) the inter-subjective elements inherent in fine art assessment. Whilst a lecturer may offer an apparently individualistic, subjective response to student artwork, this response is constructed within a particular social, cultural and political milieu. The assessment response is framed/constrained/enabled by the structural and discursive setting within which it is made. This is the basis of its objectivity. Individual lecturers' assessment responses are constituted collectively. The key point is that subjective and objective responses to students' artwork are not in opposition to each other. In fine art they are both necessary components of an assessment response.

ST's reference to the 'professional subjective response' unpacks the idea of connoisseurship. ST's words illustrate that the concept of connoisseurship accommodates tacit practice because complex informed human judgements cannot be fully explicated in language. As BW points out, 'it would be very hard for me or anyone else to sit down and say, right Susan, now this is how we mark here' (BW). The respondents' transcripts

revealed the difficulty they experienced when they were asked to render their assessment practices in words. Arguably, in HE today, lecturers can be castigated for saying that they ‘can recognise a first when they see it’. Yet, based on my analysis, this is, to an extent, lecturers’ lived experience of making assessment judgements.

The resonance between this study, which is situated within the discipline of fine art, and Shay’s (2005) engineering-based study suggests that my findings may not be exclusive to fine art. Yorke (2008) points out that many disciplines have elements of creativity. This study offers a construction of professional judgement that may have applicability in subjects where criteria are ‘fuzzy and fuzzily shared’ (Yorke 2008: 180).

This study offers a rendering of fine art assessment connoisseurship, but it is essential to point out that this study does not make an argument for making assessment mysterious, unaccountable or elitist. The work of Bloxham and West (2007) and Price et al. (2007) shows that it is possible to recognize tacit practice and develop pedagogic approaches that support students in making sense of university assessment practices.

Positioned, perspectival human judgement is central to fine art assessment, but this is not the same as saying fine art assessment is whimsical, arbitrary or without rigour. My research offers a particular view of rigour as situated within communities of practice. My reconceptualized model of rigour derives from the sustained dialogic encounters within fine art assessment communities that are contingent on, and positioned within, wider

social-cultural contexts. This contrasts with a more positivist view of rigour as being solely concerned with validity, reliability and the absence of bias.

Within this study, rigour is strengthened by the layered, multiple interactions that serve to position lecturers, students and their artworks within communities of practice, within the discipline, within the academy and within the arts arena. Rigour resides within the shared frames of reference in the assessment community that are continually contested and (re)constituted through team-based approaches to assessment.

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Contributor details:

Susan Orr is Chair in Pedagogy in creative practice at York St John University. Susan

is the Deputy Dean in the Faculty of Art. Orr's research focuses on the assessment of creative practice; her doctoral thesis examined fine art assessment practices in higher education. Orr is on the editorial advisory board for the Journal of Writing in Creative Practice. She has presented papers at a number of conferences in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States, and has authored a range of articles, papers and chapters on pedagogies in creative practice.

Contact:

Professor Susan Orr

York St John University

Lord Mayor's Walk

York

YO31 7EX

E-mail: s.orr@yorks.ac.uk

¹ Each lecturer had at least two years of teaching experience.