Problems in Abstract Reviewing: a proxy for highlighting problems in assessment

Where next?

Personal experiences

Tensions in reviewing

Tensions in assessment
Personal Experiences?

• Doubts about fairness
  – Abstract rejected (no feedback)
  – Abstract re-submitted 1 year later (same conference group)
    • Abstract content identical; different title
  – Abstract accepted
    • Different reviewer?
    • Same or different reviewer; liked title?
    • Need for more abstracts at conference?
Personal Experiences

• Reading an abstract title (or the abstract) and attending a disappointing presentation
  – And feeling ‘short-changed’
  – Particularly so if a ‘name’ or institution of high standing is involved
Experiences as a Reviewer

• 1980 – 2000
  – Pass/Fail (maybe some feedback comments to conference organisers)

• 2000 –
  – Growth of systematic peer review and increasing use of guidance for reviewers including defining criteria (rubric; level descriptors); feedback to authors
Tensions in Assessment

EXAMINATIONS
SUMMATIVE
INDIVIDUAL
MASTERY
RECALL
TUTOR ASSESSOR

VALIDITY
RELIABILITY
COURSEWORK
PEER ASSESSOR

CREATIVITY
ORIGINALITY
GROUP
HOLISTIC
ATOMISTIC

FORMATIVE
Some tensions in reviewing

Holistic <-> Atomistic (Analytical)

Summative <-> Formative

‘Seen’ <-> Anonymous Blind x2
Holistic vs Atomistic assessment
Holistic reviewing: ‘in the blink of an eye’

• Select 6 of the conference abstracts to ‘review’
  – For at least 3 of these you should have attended the presentation
  – Read each quickly;
  – Score: Accept/Reject or Maybe

• This should take no more than 6-9 minutes. Discuss with a colleague.

Analytical reviewing: Abstract criteria

1. The content of the paper is relevant to the conference.
2. The paper sounds interesting.
3. The paper sounds grounded in theory/relevant literature.
4. The abstract is well-written.
5. The paper makes a contribution to scholarship and/or practice.

1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = agree strongly, N/A = not applicable
Abstract reviewing criteria

1. Is the paper suitable for presentation at our symposium? (Yes/No)
2. If so, what presentation type would be most suitable?
   - Round table discussion
   - Formal paper presentation
3. Comments to the author/s regarding possible clarification, etc:
4. Comments to the conference organiser:
**Correlation of reviews for some conference abstracts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>Meets Criteria</th>
<th>Attended presentation</th>
<th>Presentation met expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
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<td>#2</td>
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</table>

Discuss with your same colleague; then join up with another pair; formulate a comment or question to share with the whole group.
Summative vs Formative assessment or reviews
### Does feedback help?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scores'</th>
<th>Rev 1</th>
<th>Rev 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>The content of the paper is relevant to the conference</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>The paper sounds interesting</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>The paper sounds grounded in theory/relevant literature</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>The abstract is well-written</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>The paper makes a contribution to scholarship and/or practice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y/N</td>
<td>Is the paper suitable for presentation at our symposium?</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F/R</td>
<td>If so, what presentation type would be most suitable?</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y/N</td>
<td>Comments to author</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comments to conference organisers</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It's not clear that this is formal research – it sounds more anecdotal, but would still be worthwhile hearing about. It would be especially useful to have the paper give lots of details about what has evolved and how, and how this helps students.
Anonymous vs ‘seen’ assessment
What if the author for all 6 of your chosen abstracts was John Hattie (or Joe Bloggs)?

• **Blink**
  – Rapid cognition
  – ‘thin slicing’ (cf Biology: Quantitative stereology)
  – Intuition
  – A ‘gut feel’

• When ‘blink’ is not good enough
  Gladwell (2005), *Conclusion. Listening with your eyes: the lessons of blink*, pp245-254

• Also: seeing/reading with your ears
Some key questions

• Have you ever been asked to review conference abstracts previously? Was this your first time?
• Have you reviewed abstracts for conferences previously, but not for the conference for which you have just received the current request?
• What was your reaction – wow, why me? Am I impressed, or not? Why have I been chosen right now?
• Ok, let’s say I agree, what do I have to do for the set of abstracts I am being sent?
• Are there any guidelines about how to approach the reviewing process?
• Is there enough information to allow me to just do it (preferably quickly) and send off my judgements?
Some (more) key questions

- Are quantitative scores as well as qualitative comments required?
- Are the criteria descriptors helpful?
- Will the authors be given the feedback?
- Can the feedback be used formatively to help authors to refine their paper or abstract?
- What happens if two reviewers differ in their decision about whether an abstract or paper should be accepted?
- What can we learn from scrutiny of feedback and judgements made by different reviewers?
What next?

1 The ‘purist stuff’

- Necessary, but not sufficient:
  - Philosophy
  - Guidance: criteria – exact use; use of qualitative comments; formative, summative or both?

- Also, exemplars?
  - Accepted
  - Accepted with amendments (before/after versions)
  - Rejected

- Collaboration between reviewers?
- Mentor?
2 The ‘other stuff’ *(no less important)*

- Sufficient; and what’s not necessary:
  - Attending conferences without giving a ‘reviewed’ paper
  - Setting and maintaining standards for abstracts (fewer and higher quality?)
  - Abstracts are ‘abstracted’ from a finalised paper (which is reviewed)
  - Use fewer, but trained and skilled reviewers (pay them if necessary!)
  - Develop next generation of reviewers through support and coaching
Further possibilities

• What could/should we do as a community to lead further development of reviewing practice?
  – Research study of reviewing practice on conference abstract data?
  – Ethical approval and clearance from authors and reviewers?
  – Ensure guidance is followed, fully?
  – Training?