

Institutionen för pedagogik, kommunikation och lärande

Assessing writers, assessing writing:  
A dialogical study of grade delivery in  
Swedish higher education

av

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## Abstract

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Assessment feedback has been discussed as an important resource for providing students with a sense of their current performance relative to institutional expectations and with the information needed to close apparent gaps. Pointing out that this involves complex sense-making processes, recent research has stressed the need to change the nature of assessment feedback from teacher telling to student/teacher/peer dialogues. However, there is still very little empirical research that has explored the sense-making processes that become evident in such feedback dialogues in situ.

This dissertation approaches assessment feedback as a unique type of communication and illuminates the issues that become relevant as participants make sense of an assignment and its institutional assessment in the context of face-to-face grade delivery in Swedish higher education. The empirical focus is on the grade conference, a specific type of assessment activity that here involved a student and his or her former supervisor. The analytical work of this dissertation is based on a corpus of ten video- and audio-recorded grade conferences from a graduate module on environmental sustainability assessment where grade delivery was connected to a student-written scientific report. In three separate studies, these recordings were approached from sociocultural and dialogical perspectives, with a particular focus on the ways in which feedback communication was situated in different streams of sociocultural activity and achieved in instances of coordinated communicative action.

The findings suggest that assessment feedback, as a type of communication, involves complex forms of sense-making on two interconnected planes: in the first place, participants in the ten grade conferences made sense of their communicative roles and responsibilities in the current feedback activity. Here, teachers were found to take on a particularly pivotal role, providing guidance for student participation in each meeting. Secondly, participants also made sense of the situated meaning of the performance grade that was being delivered and on the written report on which it was based. This involved intricate negotiations of accountabilities – as student, author, assessor and supervisor – that suggest that this type of assessment feedback provides room for broader, disciplinary, discussions of what it means to be a writer, a student and a supervisor in (Swedish) higher education. These findings give support to recent calls in the literature for more dialogue in feedback, but also suggest that such dialogical feedback activities need to be designed in a way that permits disagreement and questioning of institutional reasoning, as it needs these instances of uncertainty for participants to lay open and make sense of the many assumptions that underpin the assessment of student writing – as knowledge production and knowledge display – in higher education.