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**WHO'S IN CONTROL?
CONSIDERING ISSUES OF POWER
AND CONTROL ASSOCIATED
WITH THE USE OF CAA: A
DISCUSSION SESSION**

Colleen McKenna

Who's in control? Considering issues of power and control associated with the use of CAA: a discussion session

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Introduction

Issues of control, authority and autonomy for staff and students are increasingly part of the discourse of higher education, particularly in the contexts of assessment, student-centred learning and the integration of C & IT in the curriculum. All three areas potentially converge within the practice of CAA, and it is the aim of this discussion session to raise questions about control and empowerment with respect to CAA from the perspectives of students, academics, and educationalists.

Issues of assessment and academic identity

As the chief determinant of degree classification and thus students' success, assessment is arguably the most critical activity in which students take part in higher education, yet often the one over which they have least control. Creme (1995) argues that summative examination represents "the most extreme form of teacher control" in which the entire process including content, timing and the environment is dictated by academics. Similarly, Boud (1995) suggests that lecturers assess "too much and too powerfully" without sufficient consideration of the manner in which students experience such power enacted upon them.

With the emergence of a post-Dearing learning and teaching agenda in UK HE, assessment practices and their impact on student learning have come under increased scrutiny. As new, flexible approaches to learning such as self-directed, resource-based, and distance learning are embraced, assessment, particularly CAA, is potentially an area where the locus of control is shifting towards students (Brew 1999).

At the same time, the nature of the academic identity is changing (Henkel, 2000), and it is perceived that traditional areas of authority and responsibility of lecturers are being challenged. Holley and Oliver (2000) argue that increased managerial "involvement" in issues of pedagogy and curriculum design, coupled with moves towards student-centred approaches to learning, have empowered managers and students at the

expense of academics. They also consider the introduction of learning technologies into teaching and suggest that here, too, control of the lecturer (in areas such as presentation, design, learning method, and sometimes even content) can be eroded. While they do not address CAA directly, the topics are closely related, and thus part of the discussion session will involve considering their framework for mapping and analysing the possible shifts in authority of different groups within higher education, with particular reference to CAA.

Academics and CAA

In the case of CAA, issues of control can be considered from the perspective of a range of individuals involved (staff, students, learning technologists, educationalists, etc) in terms of the assessment process as well as assessment content. Academic staff, as suggested above, may find that responsibility in the assessment process is now shared with learning technologists and staff from computer services, who might determine, in part, issues of presentation, design and delivery. Similarly, because the use of CAA often requires new and restricted question formats, academics may share the writing process with educationalists. Additionally, institution-wide regulations and quality assurance procedures, which are often advocated in CAA literature (Stephens et al., 1998, McKenna and Bull, 2000, King, 1997) may impose certain constraints upon the examining process. Thus, while some find the use of automated marking liberating, it is possible that others feel they have lost ownership of aspects of the assessment process.

Students and CAA

Potential issues of control from the student perspective can again be framed in terms of process and content. Lecturers tend to report that students are positive about the practice of CAA, and Holley and Oliver (2000) suggest that learning technologies can act as agents of empowerment for students. However, an issue that could usefully be considered in this context is the perceived rigidity of marking procedures (National Survey, unpublished data). In particular, students have expressed the view that there are reduced opportunities for markers to exercise judgment when partially correct or contested answers are returned. This is largely a function of objective test questions, and the lack of opportunities for students to express themselves in objective formats is an area of control that has been considered elsewhere. Paxton (2000) argues that multi-choice questioning can be disempowering, because all the authority (in terms of meaning, ideas, knowledge, etc) lies with the question writer and no voice is given to the student, who is a passive participant in the activity: "The multiple-choice format... reinforces the idea that someone else already knows the answer to the question so original reinterpretations are not expected." Arguably, CAA can make it harder for students to challenge aspects of the question material, the design and the process itself. By its very nature, the CAA process is perhaps more prescriptive than other, more negotiated, assessment activities, such as posters, presentations, portfolios, etc. On the other hand, students who are using CAA for self-assessment and formative

reasons may feel that they are better able to control the environment of assessment with CAA.

Discussion

The session will attempt to explore relevant issues which are inherent in the content and process of automated assessment, as well as those issues of control which may result from the implementation of a centralised CAA system.

Such a discussion might include the following topics:

- ownership of the test design process
- issues surrounding objective testing
- implications for lecturers and students of a fully automated marking system
- university-wide standards for centrally-managed CAA
- capacity for flexibility and reflection within the CAA process
- the impact of software and hardware development upon academic control of assessment
- aspects of CAA which are empowering

It is intended that the discussion session will be interactive and that issues of control and empowerment associated with the practice of CAA will be considered from a range of perspectives.

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