Taken out of context: hazards in the interpretation of written assessment comments

Shiphra Ginsburg, Jennifer Kogan, Andrea Gingerich, Meghan Lynch, Chris Watling
Funded by the Medical Council of Canada
Written comments increasingly valued

Watling & Ginsburg, Assessment, feedback and the alchemy of learning. Med Ed 2019
Constructivist Grounded Theory

17 interviews with experienced IM faculty at 4 schools

Interpret and comment on two lists of words

Solid, Good, Reasonable, Expected level, Appropriate level
Met/meets expectations, Improved/improving
Continues/continuing/continued
Responding/responded to feedback
Safe, Competent, Satisfactory, Average, Acceptable,
Adequate, Acclimatizing/adjusting/adapting, Below, Still learning,
Learning curve, Progressing, Fine, Quiet, Needs to,
Sound, Initially/good start, Slow, Satisfactory, Grew, Can't comment,
Difficult to evaluate, Short rotation

Should, Could, Might, Consider, Try, Endeavour, Seek, Needs to,
Improve, Study, Next steps, In the future, Would benefit from,
Will want to, Work on, Advice, Recommend, Suggest,
Remember, Forget, Start, Stop, Continue, Keep, Don't, Less,
More, Increase, Decrease, Change, Modify, Develop, Adjust,
Instead, Rather
Participants struggled to attach meaning to words

The writer
The potential audience(s)
The un/intended purpose(s)
The culture and norms
Considering the writer

“What I consider a red flag may not be what someone else considers a red flag. And I mean, I could write something ... like, ‘This person is functioning completely reasonably and is safe and good.’ And ... your study may show that that is a huge red flag.” (P1)

“To me, the words like good and reasonable and expected, I have to take those at face value to some degree. I can’t - in that context, I don’t think it’s fair to the other faculty member, to the resident, to second guess whether the other faculty member was truly being honest in saying that, right?” (P10)
“I know that the program director is reading it ... If I want to make it ... clear to the PD that we talked about something ... I put something that I think will be interpreted in a certain way. ... But I also know the trainee is reading it so I have to be quite careful how these things are phrased.”

“I had to find constructive ways to put feedback on there that they [residents] may not want to hear.” (P5)
Considering the purpose(s)

“I think there’s a general sense of nobody is exactly sure the multiple uses of the ITER – who will see it and what does it impact? ... I know people are overly – they’re not falsely positive but just hold back some of the more negative stuff, potentially because they’re not sure ... It’s too much of a multi-purpose document. Is it feedback or just pure assessment ... and what is its future impact?”

“I think the lack of comfort about knowing each of those things makes people more vague than they probably would otherwise be.” (P3)
“When I wrote ‘solid’ I meant like ‘Oh they’re doing a really good job!’ But then as I was seeing evaluations and talking to people I learned that solid was more of a negative term... Because they depend on where you’re coming from.” (P16)

“Where I’ve learned the most is in reviewing ... letters of reference ... I think that’s where a lot of these red flag words are probably used ... where people are clearly trying to convey a message to the reader around whether they should take this student into their program or not.” (P1)
Words will always require interpretation: context matters

Assessment or feedback?

Must consider in context of EPAs

Watling & Ginsburg. Assessment, feedback and the alchemy of learning; Govaerts, van der Vleuten, Holmbooe. Managing tensions in assessment; Med Educ 2019
What are our norms around language use?

(How) are they learned

Can we use computers and algorithms to analyze comments more efficiently?

What is the role of competency committees in interpretation?
Attention to context is essential to reduce interpretive uncertainty

@sginsburg1
shiphra.ginsburg@utoronto.ca