

Untangling Strong and Weak Ties in ESOL Blended Assessment in the Corporate Sector

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Abstract

E-assessment is becoming increasingly ubiquitous in higher education (Stödberg, 2011) and further education (Sclater, Conole, Warburton, & Harvey, 2007). However e-assessment remain contentious (Masoumi & Lindström, 2012, p. 32) as it remains in a state of tension with the role of human raters (Eckes, 2009). Additionally, there is the drive to make e-assessment a standardizer (Preda, 2006).

This empirical study seeks to answer how strong and weak ties support or contradict e-assessment. Data were collected at B-Learn (a pseudonym) a medium-sized language school located in France that uses e-assessment. B-Learn’s principal activity is helping learners acquire English as an Other Language. Learners study with a teacher but also autonomously with a machine in what B-Learn terms ‘a blended language-learning method.’

Against the challenge that face-to-face lessons are still considered by many as the ‘gold standard’ in language teaching (Blake, 2011), B-Learn attempts to enrol both teachers and clients in the socio-technical agencement of blended learning claiming that it is an optimized, more time efficient and more effective than more traditional methods.

Methodologically, the research was informed by material semiotics (Law, 2004), Conversation Analysis (ten Have, 2007) and Contractor, Monge and Leonardi’s (Contractor et al. 2011) multidimensional network framework.

This study demonstrates the constant work required by the assessment dyads and triads to e-assessment. Minor conflicts such as disagreements over a learner’s listening ability or major disagreements over a learner’s speaking ability (human-rated, low scores) compared to their reading ability (machine-rated, high scores) can make the performance falter or stop altogether. However, this study shows that there is evidence to suggest that the complex composition of relational ties are sufficient, albeit not necessary to ensure that learners, who are free to leave or drop out of the programme at any time, stay enrolled.

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