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Moderation practices in a faculty of education: The four discourse model

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Abstract

Moderation of student assessment is a critical component of teaching and learning in contemporary universities. In Australia, moderation is mandated through university policies and through the new national university accreditation authority, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency which began operations in late January 2012 (TEQSA, 2012). The TEQSA requirement to declare details of moderation and any other arrangements used to support consistency and reliability of assessment and grading across each subject in the course of study is a radical step intended to move toward heightened accountability and greater transparency in the tertiary sector as well as entrenching evidence-based practice in the management of Australian academic programs. In light of this reform, the purpose of this project was to investigate and analyse current moderation practices operating within a faculty of education at a large urban university in Queensland, Australia. This qualitative study involved interviews with the unit coordinators (n=21) and tutors (n=8) of core undergraduate education units and graduate diploma units within the faculty. Four distinct discourses of moderation that academics drew on to discuss their practices were identified in the study. These were: equity, justification, community building, and accountability. These discourses, together with recommendations for changes to moderation practices are discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, moderation processes in higher education have been typically located within individual institutions with universities given the responsibility for developing their own specific policies and practices. However, with the introduction of the new national university accreditation authority, TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority) (TEQSA, 2012) radical changes to moderation processes are being mandated. Under these new arrangements, universities will be required to declare ‘details of moderation and any other arrangements that will be used to support consistency and reliability of assessment and grading across each subject in the course of study, noting any differences in these processes across delivery methods, delivery sites, and/or student cohorts’ (TEQSA, 2012, p. 30). This reform is intended to move towards heightened accountability and greater transparency in the tertiary sector, as well as entrenching evidence-based practice in the management of Australian academic programs.

This paper provides a brief overview of the literature regarding moderation in higher education drawing principally from the Australian and UK contexts. It then provides an overview of the research project and discusses the findings with the aim of contributing to the discussion of embedding moderation within the assessment culture of Australian universities.

LITERATURE

An investigation of university websites will undoubtedly reveal assessment policies and guidelines that include those for the practice of the moderation of assessments. It could be assumed given the plethora of information on moderation that this is an enculturated and rigorous practice within Australian universities. Yet, university guidelines on the principles and processes of moderation belie the problems identified in the literature such a lack of shared understanding of standards within and across courses (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Sadler, 2010; Sanderson & Yeo, 2011). This is not helped by the apparent disagreement in the literature over the value of assessment criteria. For example, Van der Schaaf, Baartman and Prins (2011) found through an analysis of six teachers’ collaborative judgement processes over two years, that when assessment criteria were available,

consistency increased and uncritical acceptance of others' decisions decreased. However, Bloxham, Boyd and Orr (2011) found that experienced markers use criteria as a post-hoc validation for their holistic judgements. Added to these are issues involving workload, limited assessment choices, slowed feedback time and limited increase in reliability (Bloxham, 2009; Elliott, Pearce & King, 2011).

An emergent theme appears to be the tension between the purpose of moderation (and assessment) to support teaching and learning practices and the systemic requirements for increasingly detailed layers of accountability (Bloxham, 2009; Sadler, 2010). For example, a study by Goos and Hughes (2010) found, through an online survey of 380 academics, that managerial accountability inhibited assessment practices with academics choosing to stay within safe and easily managed modes of assessment. However, Sadler (2011a) contends that both learning and accountability are needed to ensure integrity of grades.

Not surprisingly, Sanderson and Yeo (2011) noted the tension between institutions in differing countries arising from fundamental differences in beliefs about teaching and learning. In this paper, we explore the different understandings of moderation within one faculty in one country. While Sanderson and Yeo noted these differences across countries, it was evident in our study that a range of interpretations of teaching, learning and assessment exist within one faculty and result in different understandings of moderation as enacted practice rather than the neatness suggested in policy guidelines. What appears to be a simple process of validation of judgement decisions involves in effect, considerable complexity.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study was conducted within a Faculty of Education at a large university in eastern Australia. Funded by a university Faculty Teaching and Learning grant, the research was designed to investigate and analyse the moderation practices currently operating within the Faculty. The specific aim was to determine the different practices, processes and procedures of moderation that were being used, and to inform next steps in promoting efficient and effective moderation practices. The study was designed and conducted prior to the release of the new TEQSA requirement for moderation to be made explicit in university course documentation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 academic teaching staff from a potential of 90 full time faculty members. The interviews included questions about the frequency, nature and topics of moderation discussions. Further interview questions focused on how criterion-referenced assessment was used to inform the moderation process and on how consistency and comparability of assessment judgements could be improved within units in education courses. The participants included unit coordinators in core units in the undergraduate and graduate diploma teacher education programs as well as tutors and sessional academics. Some participants adopted differing roles and discussed more than one unit (a semester program of study) in the interviews. When categorised by role, the participants were unit coordinators (n=21) and tutors (n=8, including two sessional academic staff). Further, within the sample interviewed, there were some instances (n=6) where individual academics had sole responsibility for assessment and moderation within units. Details of the sample are provided in the table below. It is important to note that some units are offered in multiple courses.

Table 1: Description of sample: Course representation by unit

Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)	Bachelor of Education (Primary)	Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)	Graduate Diploma in Education			
			Early Years	Primary	Middle Years	Senior Years
11	9	8	2	3	2	5

As the aim of the research was to collect, collate and analyse a range of processes and procedures of moderation currently being used within the Faculty, the interview subjects were selected purposefully (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) across a broad range of courses (here, a specialised degree) and units and to a lesser extent, across assessment types. Included in the sample are differing instances of moderation, that is, where a unit coordinator worked with a number of tutors across campuses, where students from differing courses were enrolled, and where an individual had sole responsibility for the assessment and moderation within a unit.

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed later by each researcher independently. The data were analysed iteratively with broad themes emerging after repeated readings of the data. This process brought inter-rater reliability to the findings.

UNDERSTANDINGS OF MODERATION

While we found that moderation in the Faculty was, in most cases a systematic process being planned in advance, appearing to be robust, and defensible, we also identified that moderation was discussed within four distinct underlying discourses that revealed the nuances within this understanding. We identified these discourses as those of equity, justification, community building and accountability. Moderation as equity was evident within conversations of consistency and fairness for students. Lecturers perceived moderation as ensuring that judgement decisions were reliable. When lecturers spoke of moderation as justification, they described a process in which the conversations gave them confidence in their judgement decisions; these decisions were defensible. These lecturers also spoke about moderation discussions as enabling them to provide quality feedback to students, and the support to respond to student queries. Conversations of the collaborative establishment and review of assessment tasks, criteria, standards, learning experiences, and teaching strategies between all members of a teaching team was viewed as a community building discourse. Finally, moderation as accountability was evidenced when the lecturers spoke of the distribution of marks; and when they referred to the unit coordinator as the standard setter, the final arbiter and expert.

We found that certain practices led to instances of shared understanding of the required standard between unit coordinators and the teaching team. This was typically through formal and consistent practices that were planned and put in place across a whole semester or teaching period and involved collaboration and negotiation between all teaching team members. Understandings appeared more closely aligned in units when there was: a stable teaching team where understandings had been built over time and through interrogation in differing circumstances; strategic sequencing of assessment discussions so that understanding had been built during the teaching period; and the purposeful induction of new teaching staff usually achieved through the teaming with a more experienced buddy/mentor and/or the provision of clear written guidelines and exemplars.

However, we also noted, that there was a mismatch of understandings between unit coordinators and tutors when:

- assessment criteria and standard descriptors were ambiguous, insufficiently discrete or not provided in a timely manner;

- assessment tasks lacked clarity or connection to unit/course learning outcomes;
- the emphasis was on the distribution of grades to fit a bell curve rather than on the quality of work presented;
- different understandings of the process, content and roles were evident;
- differing perspectives, experiences and personal philosophies existed;
- allowances were given based on cohort profiles; and
- uneven emphasis was placed on differing aspects of a unit by different tutors.

INFORMING THE PRACTICE OF MODERATION

From our analysis of the discourses and also from the silences, omissions or contradictions in the data, we identified a number of areas to inform the practice of moderation. These included the need for a greater focus on the constructive alignment of learning outcomes and assessment. This was noted in the silences, with only a few participants referring to moderation as ensuring that the unit or course outcomes were met without prompting. Moderation was viewed mostly in terms of consistency for one assessment task rather than consistency of assessment standards across a unit or across a course. A focus on a specific assessment item rather than the quality represented across a unit of study also appeared to lead to final grades being determined by numeric calculations rather than an on-balance, holistic judgement in relation to unit outcomes.

When definitions of moderation and descriptions of the practice appeared overly concerned with marks/grades, there was invariably an emphasis in the discussion on normative and performative outcomes. References to a “bell curve” or marking to a grade distribution were typically associated with conversations of not wanting to be called to justify results, particularly awarding “too many” grades of distinction. Unit coordinators used standard deviations and the distribution of marks within and across tutorial groups to call for adjustments of student grades. While the distribution of marks can provide insight into the standard being applied to marking by a tutor, it is important that this information is understood as only part of the story, and that other factors must be considered before grades are adjusted. Grades must be viewed in terms of the quality of work, and opportunities for success provided by the tutor. The influence of elements beyond the unit learning outcomes or the assessment criteria also led to variations in the determination of grades and created an ad hoc system of assessment, particularly when this occurred within the larger units.

A number of difficulties faced by unit coordinators to conduct moderation as an aspect of building professional practice and identity were identified. These included the time required for quality moderation discussions of higher education assessments and matters relating to the teaching team. The employment and payment of sessional staff for moderation meetings meant that meeting times needed to be limited. Gathering large numbers of staff together and changes to the teaching team required much more time and effort on the part of unit coordinators to develop shared understandings of assessment and standards. Inexperienced team members required induction into the culture of university assessment as well as the unit assessment and standards. Communication with staff located at different campuses or with sessional staff who were not often on campus required thoughtful organisation as did the occasions when the unit tutors and the assessment markers were different people. Markers who were not involved in the establishment of shared understandings of assessment and standards throughout the semester needed much more detailed guidance to ensure consistency of standards was achieved.

Finally, when moderation was understood by the teaching team as occurring throughout all stages of the teaching/learning cycle, this then raised questions relating to equity amid consideration of various aspects of the teaching practice. For example, how is the assessment introduced to the students? How is the assessment scaffolded in tutorials? What does it mean if opportunities to learn/complete assessment are different for different groups of students? Moderation, though neatly described in policy documents and assessment guidelines was identified as a complex process in

which none of the four discourses was sufficient on its own. Each discourse led to further questions. Our recommendations drew on the four discourses as an integrated system with each providing a partial solution but together providing a holistic response to the different dilemmas that were exposed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To establish a culture of assessment that informs a deep understanding of the standards required at different stages of higher education requires that moderation is understood as a part of the conversations that occur before, during and after assessment. Effective moderation discussions can ensure that quality feedback based on evidence is provided to students; and the active use of feed forward strategies are utilised to improve assessment tasks, criteria and teaching in future course iterations. Viewing moderation as capacity building would lead to an expectation of shared practice and the development of a culture of assessment and moderation, rather than the expertise of the standards being held solely by the unit coordinator. While unit coordinators need to be leaders who support the consistency of practice, they also need to be involved in activities that promote the development of shared understandings of assessment standards and the qualities that denote those standards amongst their teaching team.

Moderation, understood as a holistic process embedded in each part of the teaching/learning process can be supported through the development of resources such as comprehensive and clear guidelines for teaching staff and students, and well-constructed criteria sheets, annotated samples, exemplars, and marking guides for exams. A moderation plan as part of a unit's outline will make specific reference to how moderation will be conducted across campuses, and how it will be applied to performance items such as presentations. Moderation thus becomes part of the conversations that occur between students and lecturers. The development of a culture of assessment and moderation would involve focussed questions to guide the moderation conversations that relate to student and staff learning as well as to plans for improved assessment, criteria, feedback, alignment with learning outcomes, and teaching strategies. Such actions also relate to transparency of processes and procedures, and address accountability expectations. Within these recommendations, the discourses of equity, justification, community building, and accountability interweave and blend together to build a community of practice focussed on learning of staff and students while working within the heightened accountability and greater transparency required within the tertiary sector.

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