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Moderation in higher education: Four discourses

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Across the globe, higher education institutions are working in environments of increasing accountability with little sign of this trend abating. This heightened focus on accountability has placed greater demands on institutions to provide evidence of quality and the achievement of standards that assure that quality. Moderation is one quality assurance process that plays a central role in the teaching, learning and assessment cycle in higher education institutions. While there is a growing body of research globally on teaching, learning and, to a lesser degree, assessment in higher education, the process of moderation has received even less attention (Watty, Freeman, Howieson, Hancock, O'Connell, et al. 2013). Until recently, moderation processes in Australian universities have been typically located within individual institutions, with universities given the responsibility for developing their own specific policies and practices. However, in 2009 the Australian Government announced that an independent national quality and regulatory body for higher education institutions would be established. With the introduction of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA), more formalised requirements for moderation of assessment are being mandated. In light of these reforms, the purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and investigate current moderation practices operating within one faculty, the Faculty of Education, in a large urban university in eastern Australia. The findings of this study revealed four discourses of moderation: equity, justification, community building and accountability. These discourses provide a starting point for academics to engage in substantive conversations around assessment and to further critique the processes of moderation.

Keywords: moderation; higher education; assessment

Background

Higher education institutions are working in environments of increasing accountability globally. In these changing environments, higher education institutions have had greater demands placed on them to provide evidence of quality and of the achievement of quality assurance standards (Watty et al., 2013). Institutional accountability in relation to assessment of student work has been a high priority in recent years (Bloxham, 2009). Consequently, assessment and moderation of student performance are key aspects for higher education institutions to review and improve (Kuzich, Groves, O'Hare & Pelliccione, 2010).

Moderation is a quality assurance process that is a critical component of the teaching, learning and assessment cycle in higher education institutions. The process of moderation in higher education is usually governed by university-wide policies and practices. In some countries, such as the United Kingdom, this takes the form of an established practice of external and internal moderation that is part of the quality management process (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2011). 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 (TEQSA, 2013), 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, 2013).

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 formalising of systemic moderation of assessment in Australian universities is likely to upset a culture of practice in which moderation is part of the teaching and learning process but is not explicit. However, there exists a tension between the purpose of moderation to support teaching and learning as well as addressing accountability requirements (Bloxham, 2009; Sadler, 2011).

This paper will describe four discourses of moderation that emerged from a recent review of moderation practices in a Faculty of Education in an Australian University (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2011). It will premise its discussion on an understanding that moderation is not a simple linear process cumulatively built from isolated practices. By presenting moderation as multiple discourses, we will attempt to provide a framework for academics to navigate through the process and to make decisions about practice which will suit their systemic contexts. In particular, for Australian universities working within a new national policy, this requires the explicit declaration of moderation processes for all assessments (TEQSA, 2012).

Literature

Moderation is a critical, yet problematic, component of effective teaching and learning. The purpose of moderation is to ensure that assessment aligns with established criteria, learning outcomes and standards; its processes are equitable, fair and valid; and judgements are consistent, reliable, and based on evidence within the task response (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2011). Effective moderation processes involve discussion of assessment tasks, criteria, standards and judgement decisions to ensure the validity and reliability of assessments, with the aim of improving the quality of the teaching/learning experience. However, Watty et al., (2013) argue that reliability and validity are difficult to attain. Problems relating to validity and reliability of assessment identified in previous studies include: markers not necessarily agreeing with the learning outcomes they are assessing (Baume, Yorke & Coffey, 2004); assessment grading criteria being ignored by markers (Price & Rust, 1999); and differing interpretations of standards and criteria between markers (Price, 2005). While moderation of assessment is important, Bloxham (2009) also argues that developing rigorous moderation procedures add to the workload of academics without necessarily contributing significantly to the accuracy and reliability of marking.

In Australia, the majority of university websites provide assessment guidelines for academic staff outlining the processes and procedures for the moderation of assessments within their institutions. However, investigations into moderation practices in higher education (Sadler, 2010) have revealed problems such as a lack of shared understandings of criteria, standards and the qualities that provide evidence of a standard amongst staff within and across courses. This is not surprising given that there is “not a strong tradition of systematic moderation of assessment and evaluation of performance within Australian universities at undergraduate or postgraduate level either between different markers in the same subject, across subjects, across courses or across institutions” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2002, p. 28). Adding to the problems, there have been multiple interpretations of moderation that range from the view that moderation is a single post-marking event through to a more comprehensive view in which academics are involved in all aspects of assessment design through to substantive conversations beyond marking (Lawson & Yorke, 2009). In this paper and the recent study from which it was drawn (Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2011), moderation is understood to be a practice of engagement in which teaching team members develop a shared understanding of assessment requirements, standards, and the evidence that demonstrates differing qualities of performance.

In addressing these issues, we suggest that it is first necessary to establish the different perspectives from which moderation is being enacted within higher education institutions, as it is from this position that we can then work towards efficient and effective practices that support quality teaching and learning. In Australian universities, we can also respond to the incoming TEQSA requirements in an authentic and considered manner. We contend that by understanding the different discourses of moderation, that is, the different ways that moderation is spoken about and practised, we may provide a framework for academics to review their current practices and to further critique moderation and assessment practices in their institutions.

Methodology

The context for this study is a Faculty of Education at a large urban university in eastern Australia. The research, funded by a faculty Teaching and Learning grant, was designed to investigate and analyse the moderation practices currently operating within the Faculty of Education. 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.

Twenty-five academic teaching staff from a population of 90 full time faculty members participated in the study. The participants were chosen purposefully (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) as the aim of the research was to capture the range of processes and procedures of moderation currently being used in the faculty. The participants included unit coordinators and tutors in core units in the undergraduate and graduate diploma teacher education programs across the faculty. In this context, a unit is a subject of study taken in a semester. Data were collected in this qualitative study through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were designed to engage the participants in discussions about the frequency, nature and topics of moderation meetings in their units and to reflect more deeply on the efficiency and effectiveness of their moderation practices. 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. Some participants discussed more than one unit in the interviews. When categorised by role, the participants were unit coordinators ($n=21$) and tutors ($n=8$) with four participants being both coordinators and tutors. Within the participant group, there were some instances ($n=6$) where individual academics had sole responsibility for teaching, 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 across a number of degree programs.

Table 1: Description of sample

Course representation by unit

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

In our study, we were most interested in 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. We also sought to represent atypical instances, for example, where (i) an integrated assessment item was offered across three units in one course; (ii) units were offered in multiple ways, namely, as core in one course but elective in another; (iii) students from different year levels were enrolled in the one unit; or (iv) units were offered in differing time periods, that is, over a semester or a shorter intensive block.

The interviews were recorded and transcripts were analysed using a content analysis approach whereby common issues and themes were identified. The analysis revealed four separate discourses of moderation. A discussion of these discourses is the main focus of this paper.

Findings and Discussion

Four distinctly different ways that academics approached and understood moderation were revealed in this study. We have termed these as discourses of moderation. In using the term discourse we have adopted a sociocultural positioning that includes the social and cultural contexts and histories that have shaped these practices (Gee, 1996). Foucault (1977, cited in Kenway, 1990) viewed discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak... Discourses are not about objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own intervention” (Kenway, 1990, p. 173). Using this understanding, it is possible to show how practices within organisations respond to different contextual features, differing perceptions and differing desired outcomes while having an outward appearance of compliance.

In our study, we found some participants discussed moderation as an accountability measure while other participants viewed moderation in terms of being a way to support learning. Previous studies (Hughes, 2008) have also identified these two purposes of moderation with moderation for accountability enabling an “official confirmation of assessment quality” (Kuzich, Groves, O’Hare & Pelliccione, 2010, p. 2) and also as a way of improving the consistency and quality of judgments. However, in our study, academics talked about moderation outside of these discourses of learning and accountability. In the following

discussion, we put forward four discourses of moderation alongside the challenges and issues of moderation that participants revealed. We have categorised the four discourses of moderation as equity, justification, community building, and accountability (Adie, Lloyd, & Beutel, 2011; Adie, Lloyd & Beutel, 2013). While some participants held one discourse as dominant, others expressed multiple discourses. We contend that these discourses are interconnected and together provide us with a starting point for academics to engage in substantive conversations around assessment and to further critique the processes of moderation.

Moderation as equity

In moderation as equity, discussions focused around notions of consistency and fairness for students. For example, a coordinator of a large unit stated, that “moderation is for ensuring fairness in marking across a cohort ... the fairness element is for me the biggest point of moderation.” This view of moderation is supported in the literature by Hughes (2008) who identified that one of the purposes of moderation was improvement through consistent and comparable judgments while Bloxham (2009) asserts that “moderation is a process for assuring that an assessment outcome is valid, fair and reliable and that marking criteria have been applied consistently” (p. 212). This view of moderation is prevalent in higher education institutions. For example, the Protocols for Assessment document (QUT, 2011) at Queensland University of Technology state that “moderation is important to assure the consistent use and rigor of standards” (p. 1) and further, in the same document, “moderation aims to regulate the marking of individual assessors to achieve consistency” (p. 15). Similarly, at the University of Tasmania, the guidance provided to academics includes the statement that “the purpose of moderation is to ensure that teachers are making consistent judgments about standards” (para 1) while moderation at Curtin University “concerns quality assurance processes to ensure that every student receives fair treatment with regard to assessment processes” (Curtin University, 2013).

One issue that arose in the discussions of moderation as equity was in the small units in which one person had sole responsibility for the teaching, assessment and marking. As one participant noted, “you need to have someone who can look at your marking to ensure that you are consistent and fair”. Suggested solutions to the issue of assuring equity in these small units included seeking advice from another academic who had no prior experience teaching in the unit but had discipline expertise, while another participant sat down with the previous unit coordinator and said, “right talk me through what you are looking for”. In the large units, those which have multiple tutors and lecturers, moderation as equity was discussed in terms of the consistency of messages being relayed to students about the unit assessment in the early part of the semester as well as consistency of judgment in awarding grades once the assessment had been submitted.

Moderation as justification

The discourse of moderation as justification was evidenced by conversations relating to confidence in making decisions on student work, providing quality feedback and support to respond to student enquiries. In addition to justifying marks and grades to students, moderation as justification provided academics with confidence in the decisions that they had made so that they could justify their decisions to students if queried as well as providing better feedback on the qualities within a student’s work that denoted a standard. As one participant stated,

For me individually it [moderation] is about professional justification.... I need to be able to justify the grades I have given, so if a student comes back to me with a query about it I have a professional justification for why that grade has been given.

In the case of students wanting a review of the grade that had been awarded by the marker, one academic spoke of placing the responsibility back onto the student to justify how they have met the grade they believed should have been awarded. The academic stated,

One of the first things I do as unit coordinator is ask them to justify [the grade] using the criteria sheet, where they think they have been wrongly marked. So it's the same process that I go through as the unit coordinator that they then have to go through to justify their position.

In attempting to justify their grade, the student, albeit after marking, is provided with the opportunity to be introduced to the subjective nature of marking and to a realisation that the application of assessment criteria is a "matter of professional judgment, and not a matter of fact" (Bloxham, 2009, p. 217).

Moderation as community building

Moderation as community building is typified by conversations of collaborative establishment and review of assessment tasks, criteria, standards, learning experiences, and teaching strategies. Where moderation was thought of as a community building experience, academics worked purposefully to involve the entire teaching team in discussions that started with the assessment design and culminated in the marking of the assessment and forward planning to the following semester. Several unit coordinators spoke of developing the assessment task and criteria sheets collaboratively with the teaching team or of meeting with tutors prior to commencement of the semester to develop a shared understanding of the requirements of assessment tasks. Previous studies (Bloxham, 2009; Sadler, 2010) indicate that, through a process of discussion and reflection, the tacit knowledge of markers is revealed and made explicit and shared understandings of the intent of tasks and expectations of quality are reached. Saunders and Davis (1998) argue that a three stage moderation process that includes initial discussions about the meaning of criteria, further discussions after some marking has taken place and a final postmortem after marking has been completed result in greater reliability between markers over time.

One academic in our study explained how she had members of her team mark and moderate a common assessment item before the commencement of the teaching semester. The ensuing discussion involved academics in developing a shared understanding of the standard of work required for this year level cohort, and the qualities that would denote a standard. Developing shared knowledge of standards is understood as being "created through a social process involving dialogue and experience and using artefacts" (Bloxham, 2009, p. 218). Further, Sadler (2011) purports that little consistency is typically found in cases where individual markers are not afforded opportunities to collaborate and moderate with other markers. In moderation as community building, social moderation plays a key role. Central to social moderation is that markers develop a shared understanding of the grading or marking criteria and also a shared agreement about "what constitutes a benchmark or 'anchor product' which exemplifies the criteria" (Watty et al., 2013, p. 8).

Moderation as community building became evident also when academics spoke of mentoring staff who were new to the unit. One unit coordinator spoke about how she spent a whole day mentoring new teaching staff until "we were reaching a shared understanding of what we

were looking for". However, some assessment types posed a particular challenge. For example, in the case of examinations, the turnaround time for submitting marks was very tight and so opportunities for extended discussions were limited. Teaching team size, structure and geographical location also provided challenges. Moderation meetings were difficult to schedule for large teams and particularly when the teaching team was spread across different campuses of the university and when sessional staff were involved. Payment of sessional staff for moderation meetings meant that meetings times needed to be limited which inhibited extended and meaningful conversations around assessment.

Moderation as accountability

The focus of discussions in moderation as accountability was typified by references to distribution of marks; and the unit coordinator as standard setter, final arbiter and expert. As many authors (Bloxham, 2009; Hughes, 2008; Sadler, 2010) have stated, moderation is the institutional mechanism by which we can assure the quality of our assessment processes within higher education. From the perspective of unit coordinators and academics in our study, moderation was a process made necessary by their responsibility for the marks that they awarded students for assessments. This accountability extended, not only to the students but, to the unit coordinator as well. As one academic stated "[moderation] puts me on very solid ground when I come to talking to any student about their result and indeed when it comes to reporting to my supervisor about the result". This sense of accountability became problematic when the emphasis on the grading process moved to a normative representation of performance. This occurred typically when unit coordinators used standard deviation and distribution of marks within and across tutorials 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.

Conclusion

This paper has presented four discourses of moderation which emerged from our recent study of moderation practices in a Faculty of Education in Australia. From this, we note that moderation practice is currently an idiosyncratic mix of beliefs and experience espoused through one or more of the discourses, namely, equity, justification, community building and accountability. No participant in our study spoke to all four discourses. Interesting also was the lack of discussion of teaching and learning in the data. Some linked moderation to outdated performative measures whereby academics distributed grades to fit normal distribution curves. But all were convinced that their way was the best. As new requirements regarding moderation are placed on Australian universities we need to be wary that we are not simply inducting staff into existing practices that are based on one discourse of moderation. While we believe that moderation involving substantive conversations around the quality of work is integral to effective teaching and learning, we warn against viewing moderation in a simplistic or singular way.

These findings highlight the need for ongoing substantive conversations around moderation. With this start, we hope to open up avenues for further critique of the moderation processes in higher education we also hope to have provided academics with a starting point from which to review their current practice before engaging with the new national requirements.

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