USING CONSENSUS MODERATION TO ENSURE APPROPRIATE ACADEMIC STANDARDS WHEN MARKING

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Introduction

One delivery of the capstone course in the Bachelor of Education is via intensive mode with two major assessment items for students. The first is a group assessment task comprising a group essay and presentation; and the second is an individual essay written under exam conditions. This case study describes the impetus for and the consensus moderation processes successfully applied to marking of the group essay. It also describes how a consensus moderation approach was then further applied to ensure quality and consistency of feedback to students on their essays.

Context

The Capstone course 4082 EDN The Engaged Professional is the final course the Bachelor of Education students take in their 4-year degree. On the Gold Coast it is undertaken in an intensive 5-day mode that runs Wednesday, Thursday of the first week and Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the following week of delivery. The course enrolls 170 students and is supported by the Course Convenor and five tutors.

The main purpose of the course is to encourage students to explore contemporary, ethically challenging situations and by reflecting on the ethical frameworks taught in the course, negotiate professional solutions. The assessment component of the 2011 course comprised of exploring 2 main ethical scenarios where students had to apply the ethical frameworks learnt to negotiate a professional and practical resolution. For one scenario the students worked in groups to develop an essay and a presentation, and for the other, the student wrote an essay under exam conditions. The evaluation team for the presentation comprised of the university teaching team and educational leaders from the local community. This combination has worked extremely well for the past 3 years as local school Principals have been involved with not only evaluating students, but also reviewing the scenarios, evaluation tools and even informally influencing the conversations we tend to have with the students.

Reasons for Introducing New Consensus Moderation Process for Marking

In relation to the evaluation of the group essay, a new format was undertaken this year, based on tutor and student feedback from last year. The students wanted more time to work on their presentations during the second week and they wanted more specific feedback going into their exam. The tutors, on the other hand, wanted more collaboration around marking and ‘more hours in the day’ during this intensive course.
Description of Consensus Moderation Process for Marking

What was proposed was that the students handed in their essay on the Monday morning, first thing and proceeded to continue with tutes until 12.30pm. After this time, they could work independently to prepare for their Tuesday presentations for the Principals. While at the same time, all of the 5 tutors were to come together to collectively mark their tute group’s essays. This created a win-win for all involved. The Monday afternoon consensus moderation meeting became an important part of the course, as all of the tutors had 5 group essays to mark. We each brought those essays, our rubric and we sat at the one common table. We all knew the criteria of the rubric well and we all knew the scenario well. What we had to agree on was the alignment of what the students have written for each section of their essays, with the rubric criteria. We had to agree on whether the evidence each essay provided illustrated an excellent, strong, good etc. understanding of the chosen criteria. Where possible, the rubric gave specific quantitative targets, such as, ‘were all four ethical frameworks presented’, ‘were only three frameworks discussed’ etc. In circumstances such as these, the corresponding levels of achievement were easier to designate. However, where the criteria was more qualitative, for example ‘your proposed recommendation is clearly and fully supported and justified by the evidence…’, ‘…is clearly supported and justified…’, ‘…mostly supported…’ etc., as a marking group, we believe we needed to discuss these sections of the essay together.

The process began with all of us agreeing to start at the first criteria point on the rubric and work our way down the rubric. We knew the students had structured their essays in a similar way to the rubric structure – so it would be easy to look at the first marking criteria first. One of the 5 tutors read their group’s response. We all commented around the table where we thought it would fit into the rubric and why. We agreed on a mark for that group’s essay section. We also agreed on what comments that should be written on the essay paper, based on our argument around the table. We agreed the comments written on the student’s papers needed to be consistent. We proceeded to do this for all of the papers for that first section. We then chose the second rubric marking criteria. This was spread over a few pages of the essay – we all read it quietly first and then, again, took turns to read it to one another – all commenting on what position it should be on the rubric, why, and what comments could be written. Ultimately, as the convenor, and as the person who wrote the scenarios, the rubric and the answers, I was looked upon for the final decisions if there were any major discrepancies in our discussions. However, even at that point, I would just introduce what I had thought at the time of writing the scenario or answer and we would discuss the point again.

We continued this way until all the first paper was marked. This took about 1.5 hours. We all commented on how long it took to mark one paper, but were amazed by the end at how in-sync we were – we found we really did not have to discuss many points. We really all just agreed with the person who read their section and said what mark it should be, the reason why, and the comments they would include. We all really deeply understood the evidence students needed to show to be in each category, and the reasons why – particularly for the qualitative categories of the rubric.

We then proceeded to mark our subsequent papers all sitting at the table together – we found that we were able to mark the papers silently, understanding the categories and knowing what comments to write to the students so the feedback would be consistent. We were surprised at how quickly and yet efficiently we could now mark the rest of the papers. If anyone had any questions, they would usually ask me, the convenor, but interestingly, when I was busy, they also asked each other, as we all seemed to understand the system as we had developed it together. When I was eventually brought into any of the conversations the tutors were discussing, each time I agreed with the mark they had allocated and the comments they had written to the students.

Reasons for Introducing New Consensus Moderation Process for Student Feedback

The new course structure had been designed so students received more feedback, and so the Monday afternoon was designed for marking the essay, the Tuesday was for student presentations, and the Wednesday – the last day of the course, was for a tute, so the students could receive their essay feedback, just before they undertook their exam. However, after the majority of the papers had been marked on the Monday afternoon, there was a feeling from the tutors that a few of the marks were a bit low, and the feedback may have been a bit daunting if handed back in the tute on the Wednesday, before students headed directly into their exam.
Description of Consensus Moderation Process for Student Feedback

On the Monday, we discussed the idea of how we would provide the students with feedback as a team, and decided that instead of handing back their essays in that last tute, before their exam, and going through their essay with them as originally planned, that we would each look for things they did well in their essays, with examples, that we wanted to celebrate. We would also look at the essays we marked for the patterns of things students needed to improve upon, and examples, so we could communicate this to them as well. Each tutor then provided me with this information and I then amalgamated this into one document. We then met as a group and discussed how we would all present this information to the students in a consistent manner in their last tute.

We decided to use this document to really celebrate with the students how far they had come in such a short time and to highlight this with the points of the essay the groups had done really well. We showed actual essay examples of these great points, so everyone could see exactly what we were talking about. Each tutor took time to communicate how each point celebrated related to criteria on the rubric, but also, more importantly, why it was important for a practicing teacher to have that particular skill set. The tutors then discussed with their students 3 points highlighted in the essays that need to be strengthened. When we discussed this beforehand as tutors, we decided to only focus on three points, so as to not overwhelm the students, and to focus on the ‘how to’ of improvement, rather than just highlighting the problem. Again, examples were used to show what needed to be strengthened, and many examples of how this could be achieved. The tutors also made links to the rubric and connections were made to its importance as a practicing teacher.

What was Good about the Practice(s)

Undertaking consensus moderation within the Capstone course was significant in many ways as it provided all of the markers with a deeper sense of the evaluation process for not only the essay, but also the course. For together we had developed the foundations of the practical applications of the evaluation systems for the course – we had made it go from paper to a living, useable, integrated system understood by all markers – not just the course convenor. But evaluating students is only one step in a teaching process, especially when teaching 170 or so adults in an intensive program. The main benefit of the consensus moderation process was the forum that allowed open discussions, perspectives and opinions to be shared that led to the re-imagining of how we communicated the assessment item feedback to the students. I believe the students were better served by following the process that resulted from the consensus moderation.