USING CONSENSUS MODERATION TO ENSURE APPROPRIATE ACADEMIC STANDARDS OVER TIME

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Introduction

Pre-marking calibration is a prior to marking consensus moderation process that addresses the problem of achieving marker consistency across sessional, part time and full time academic staff marking across several campus cohorts. The process requires several sets of resources developed over time:

(i) annotated exemplars of students’ assignments/answers on similar types of assessment items selected because they exemplify different standards of demonstrated factual, conceptual and procedural knowledge, skills in application of knowledge, critical reasoning and problem solving, and communication skills.

(ii) a data-base of evidence-based, feedback comments related to each criterion and five standards of achievement according to which similar assessment items have been marked in previous years.

Ideally the process takes place prior to teaching and then again prior to marking. In addition to (i) and (ii) above, essential resources include: assessment item task sheets, criteria and standards rubrics and when conducted just prior to marking an assessment item, copies of a few current students’ scripts or products.

Collection of the necessary resources is made easy when Safe Assignment, Grade Centre and electronic comments have been used in previous years.

Context

These resources and practices were developed because it seemed impossible to achieve consistency of markers’ judgements despite the fact that markers had had pre-marking discussions of criteria and standards, had developed a marking guide as an adjunct to assessment rubrics, and seemed to have reached agreement about what they wanted to see in student’s work. Consensus seemed to evaporate at the interface between the marker and individual student’s scripts. The course in question had 150
students on one campus, tutored and assessed by two sessional tutors and 100 students on another campus tutored by another sessional tutor. Noticeable inconsistency in standards at which students were graded (e.g., the average mark out of 40 within one campus cohort was 38, on the other campus it was 26) required that all students' work had to be re-marked to ensure the reliability of the grades.

Pre-Marking Calibration Processes

The aim of these processes is to ensure intra-marker and inter-marker consistency. Markers' interpretations of criteria and standards statements must be the same but more important during marking is that they recognise the same evidence in student work and they attribute the same value to this evidence when making decisions about marks and standards of achievement. These skills and consensus that will deliver marking consistency and reliability are developed by considering examples of what might be counted as evidence of achievement at different standards within students' work. Ideally the examples include both clean copies and annotated student work and graded and un-graded examples.

Stage 1

Using annotated exemplars of students' assignments/answers on similar types of assessment items, discuss identified examples of the types of evidence that will count as demonstrations of key criteria and the distinguishing features of work at different standards. Key criteria usually include: knowledge of facts, theories, models, concepts, procedures studied in the course, critical reasoning, problem solving, communication skills etc.

The example of a Satisfactory demonstration of knowledge of a key concept within the discipline and course might require that the student correctly selects and accurately defines the concept and its applications but demonstrates only minimal application of knowledge of the concept in problem solving or evaluation; the example of a High Standard might show that the student can select, define, and apply the concept to solve a problem in a way that is reasonably productive or to analyse how a problem has been solved via the use of the concept; the example of a Very High Standard would show that the student can select, define, and very productively apply the concept to solve a problem or to analyse how a problem has been solved via the use of the concept,

Stage 2

Clean copy exemplars are considered and markers are asked to identify and discuss evidence of one criterion and features that will distinguish work at A, B, C, D, F standards on that criterion. For this activity, markers also have access to the comments database for the criterion under consideration. Comments on the comments database are written so that the required evidence and the distinguishing features at different standards are clearly identified.

Stage 3

Markers consider all criteria and allocate a mark/grade to one (unseen) example of student work (same assignment and rubric). The group then discuss and justify the mark/grade they have given. They are asked to provide justifications with close reference to specific criteria and standards and the evidence in the student's work.

To complete these processes, it may take up to four hours depending on the number of markers in the group.

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1 What will count as evidence of processes required of students e.g., “accurately define”, “apply”, “productively apply”, etc. are clearly identified and discussed, and how they will be marked must be clarified. For instance, how will text book definitions inserted without elaboration or appropriate exemplification be marked? Will that count as an accurate definition?
These same processes and resources may enhance marker consistency and the application of quality and standards *over time* as markers use, review and reflect on a variety of assessment instruments that assess the same knowledge, skills and processes using the same criteria and standards rubrics and comments data base. Because they are asked to consider marked assessment items and to mark assignments from previous years using the relevant task sheet and criteria and standards rubric, consistency of standards are more likely to be maintained from year to year. This process includes practice and reflection.

Following the marking of each assignment, the levels of consistency are established and discrepancies discussed and 'resolved'. This process is repeated, points of inconsistency are identified for each marker and this provides a guide for them to self-check their marking and for reference at end of marking moderation. This practice is made easy when *Safe Assignment* has been used in previous years.

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