

Reconceptualising Subjectivity in Assessment (0200)

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Marking in higher education is under-researched and from a poststructuralist perspective is a largely subjective process based on professional judgement grounded in assumptions of mutual understanding of disciplinary standards (Bloxham, 2009). However, within academic development, such mutual understanding may be difficult to achieve as many academic developers have different '*...prior disciplinary identities and knowledge... and implicit assumptions about the nature of academic work*' (Manathunga 2007, 32). If academic developers do not '*own their own disciplinary domain*' (Brew, 2003: 170) and the underlying values and traditions are contested, what ramifications might this have for marking? The findings of this empirical research based on semi-structured interviews, illuminates some of the implicit values and beliefs of academic developers that shape how marking is undertaken. The results indicate that subjectivity, rather than compromising the integrity of the grade, has the potential to be used as a tool for illuminating why mismatches between markers occur.

Academic Development and Marking

In an article focusing on the theoretical and philosophical context of assessment, Orr (2007) considers assessment research from both the traditional positivist and the emerging poststructuralist perspectives. Researchers with a positivist perspective believe that assessment can be objective, transparent and reliable, often considering mismatches between markers to result from an 'error of measurement'. Researchers with a poststructuralist perspective believe that assessment is '*...co-constructed in communities of practice and standards are socially constructed, relative, provisional and contested*' (Orr, 2007: 647). Sadler (2009) appears to adopt a positivist view of assessment. For instance, in his article on the importance of the integrity of grades as representations of academic achievement, he argues that the influence of assessors' '*personal 'standards', tastes and preferences*' (p809) should be barred from the marking process in order to avoid '*a wide variety of sub-optimal practices*' (p824).

In contrast, Bloxham (2009) appears to adopt a poststructuralist perspective, pointing out that the issue of marking in higher education is under-researched and a largely subjective process grounded in assumptions of mutual understandings of disciplinary standards. In essence, one's understanding of what constitutes a 'good' piece of work '*...remains essentially an individual construct, heavily influenced by traditions in the subject discipline*' (Bloxham, 2009: 218). Despite Macdonald's (2003: 1) call for academic development to '*...receive recognition as an academic tribe with its own territory*', the issue of whether it may be considered a discipline in its own right continues to be debated. This is not least due to what Becher and Trowler (2001) describe as the mutability of boundaries between the categories/dimensions developed in an attempt to conceptualise the notion of the subject discipline (e.g. Lodahl & Gordon, 1972; Biglan, 1973; Kolb, 1985; Smeby, 1996; Donald, 2002).

Whilst Brew (2003) acknowledges growing recognition of academic development as ‘a scholarly endeavour’, she concludes that academic developers ‘do not own their own disciplinary domain’ (p.170). This sentiment is echoed by Manathunga (2007, 32) who points out that many academic developers ‘...have migrated from other disciplines, bringing with [them] prior disciplinary identities and knowledge...and implicit assumptions about the nature of academic work’. Therefore, if the underlying values or traditions of academic development are contested, what ramifications might this have for marking? Furthermore, rather than dismissing mismatches between markers as indicative of a weakening of the ‘intrinsic value’ (Sadler, 2009: 808) of the grade, this research will investigate the subjectivities that inform these mismatches as a means of providing insight into this under-researched aspect of academic practice. A poststructuralist perspective therefore frames this research, which posits that discussion of the often implicit ‘personal standards, tastes and preferences’ of markers within the same team merits further consideration.

Methodology

This research was exploratory and used Stake’s (2000) Intrinsic Case Study approach, which Basse (1999: 27) describes as being ‘firmly within the interpretive paradigm’. The case under study is bounded in the sense that it will focus on a particular piece of coursework produced for a programme offered by an academic development unit. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview regarding how each research participant marked the same piece of coursework, a 3000 word assignment. The interview focused on the processes involved in marking in relation to the assignment and more generally. The example assignment was produced by a new lecturer who had successfully completed a qualification offered by the unit and was chosen in view of the disagreement amongst the original markers with regard to the mark it should receive.

The research participants formed part of a team of academic staff working within an academic development unit, who were chosen in view of the call by their external examiners for greater consistency between first and second markers.

A total of 6 interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed. Cohen et al. (2007: 254) note that ‘it is important in case studies for events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves’. With this in mind an open thematic qualitative analysis was used as a means of analysing the data.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to illuminate some of the values and beliefs that shape the professional judgement informing the way marking is undertaken by academic developers as a means of exploring why mismatches between markers in the same team occur. Analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in two master themes that focused on participants’ perceptions of the field of academic development and perceptions of the manner in which marking is undertaken.

Participants’ comments indicated the nebulous nature of academic development as a ‘discipline’, if indeed it can be described as such. This may be attributable, in part, to the

diversity of views concerning the underlying values and traditions of academic developers, who often hail from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. However, differences in perspective were also believed to have a positive impact, often encouraging the articulation of personal values and beliefs and leading to the development of increasing self-awareness and a greater level of shared understanding amongst a team.

It is acknowledged that a large proportion of disagreement between markers can be problematic and result, as the external examiners commented, in increasing time being invested in marking. However, this research also indicated that the outcome of this disagreement can be highly useful in initiating discussions surrounding the personal values and beliefs that shape the manner in which one marks. Mismatches between markers can, therefore, be rewarded with an insight into the subjectivity that implicitly pervades the discourse of assessment. In other words, rather than the traditionally positivist perspective of the role of subjectivity in the assessment system as somehow compromising the integrity of the mark, it could instead be viewed as a tool for clarifying why mismatches between markers occurs. This could alleviate some of the anxiety that inhibits discussions surrounding the often implicit factors that '*are at the foundation of our awards*' (Price, 2005: 216). When marking is viewed through this lens, subjectivity may then be reconceptualised as a potentially useful tool in developing greater levels of coherence between teams of markers.

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