

## **Grading Student Work: the workplace learning of university lecturers in their role as assessors of student coursework (0028)**

This paper is presented in a continuing climate of concern about academic standards and grade inflation where universities and public bodies have a desire to regulate standards in order to: maintain institutional reputations; to protect the value of academic qualifications; and more generally to be accountable to society at large (Sadler, 2011). The expansion in student numbers, student and programme diversity, internationalisation, modularisation, new learning, teaching and assessment methods and the use of technology combine to raise questions about the reliability of standards across a massified sector.

Whilst quality standards may relate to a range of university procedures and resources, there is considerable consensus that the term 'academic standards' refers to the 'output' of programmes, meaning the quality of student coursework and accomplishment in examinations and the award of academic credit (Harvey 2002; QAA 2010; Coates 2010; Alderman, 2009). In practice, the determination of such standards remains firmly located in the act of grading and moderating students' performance. However, our understanding of academic standards and the processes by which they are established, secured and learnt in higher education remains embryonic and much of the quality assurance effort in the sector focuses on teaching and assessment processes rather than on student outputs.

Alderman (2009) argues that historically academic standards were sustained over time by an oral tradition through contact between Universities and subject communities. On the other hand, what may have been referred to as private and implicit knowledge (Brennan 1996) may not only reflect the laissez-faire nature of accountability in the past but also the problematic nature of communicating 'tacit' standards. How staff learn to grade has been theorised (Wolf, 1995; Shay, 2005; Jawitz, 2009) but the amount of empirical research is fairly limited (Reimann *et al.* 2010; Orr, 2007). These studies emphasise the significance of informal learning from others through moderation and debate, with colleagues as important in the process of learning about academic standards. They also identified the need for staff to develop confidence in their assessment knowledge if they are to challenge more senior or experienced staff in grading judgements.

In investigating the ways by which lecturers learn to grade student work this study adopts a sociocultural perspective on professional knowledge and workplace learning. As Blackler (1995) argues professional knowledge should be viewed not as something that individuals or organisations *have* but as something that they *do*. He proposes a view of knowledge as 'knowing' and further considers that knowing to be (Blackler, 1995: 1039):

Mediated: through systems of language, technology, collaboration and control

Situated: located in time and space and specific to particular contexts

Provisional: constructed and constantly developing

Pragmatic: purposive and object-oriented

Contested: subject to debate and different perspectives

Grading therefore includes both a technical assessment process but also a judgement rooted in the subject discipline and the social context of the lecturer (Bloxham et al., 2011; Bloxham & Boyd, 2011). In this way, grading involves the academic literacies of the lecturer as well as of the student, and to some extent the style of writing required for publication in a high status journal within the subject discipline provides a guide to the student writing that will be most highly valued (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Within that broader influence on disciplinary writing however tutors may be more concerned for the student to make personal connections to the subject content (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). In professional fields there may be considerable complexity, centred on notions of 'reflective writing', about what kinds of student writing are required (Rai, 2006).

The study reported here involved a sample of twenty four lecturers in four contrasting domains (humanities, art & design, medicine and teacher education) in three universities (one Russell group and two post 1992) who were interviewed about their marking. The tutors were volunteers, recruited through open advertisement in the relevant departments. Whilst the interviews explored espoused rather than actual practices in grading (Orrell, 2003), it was hoped that as they largely followed directly after a marking episode, the responses would be more likely to be grounded in actual grading experience rather than a more disembodied reporting of espoused behaviour. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a qualitative thematic approach (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), drawing on Blackler's characteristics of professional 'knowing'. Tutors were not specifically asked about learning to mark, rather the analysis identified the themes regarding learning that emerged during discussion about their sense of standards and their approach to marking.

The analysis is in progress but initial findings include the wide ranging and largely informal sources of lecturers' knowledge about, and confidence in, grading. The lecturers did not value formal instruction focused on grading but in its place the analysis emphasised how the learning of standards is mediated through the assessment processes of different universities, particularly second marking and moderation. The local context appears paramount with a stress on the value of team discussions and working with experienced colleagues or mentors to develop appropriate knowledge. The isolated nature of marking was noted and tutors regretted the absence of time for shared discussion particularly regarding grading new types of assessment. Overall, the social and informal nature of learning about standards was reinforced in this study. These perspectives challenge the way that quality assurance approaches within the higher education sector have focused on transparency; the explicit publication and application of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, as a key strategy for maintaining and monitoring academic standards within and between institutions. Whilst the shared activities identified by the respondents reflect the way tacit knowledge is learnt, they also strengthen the centrality of the local context for co-creating academic standards (Orr, 2007). In a context where the power of external examiners to deliver consistent standards across institutions is challenged (QAA 2007), the learning of 'national' standards in any subject discipline must consequently be limited. Greater cross institution sharing of assessment standards may be more effective for this than the current reliance on either external examiners or attempts to codify academic standards in written guidance.

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