COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO MODERATION OF ASSESSMENT IN TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Transnational education (TNE) teaching and professional teams conduct assessment work across organisational, national and cultural boundaries. Achieving a shared set of principles and understandings, and through that, fair assessment processes within and across programs, is a complex task that requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration between all members of the teaching team. Collaborative approaches facilitate development of a community of practice in transnational programs with input of all staff involved in the teaching team. Our research, from a two-year study into moderation of assessment in TNE, has revealed a number of challenges to collaboration amongst transnational teaching teams undertaking moderation of assessment including issues of trust and control, communication and cultural differences. Our research has also identified many examples of good practice in developing a community of practice and aspirations in working towards developing and maintaining collegial relationships and sharing power.

Key Words: Transnational education, communities of practice, moderation of assessment.

Introduction

This paper is an outcome of research undertaken in the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project entitled 'Moderation for fair assessment in transnational learning and teaching'. Partner institutions in the two-year project ending October 2010 are University of South Australia, Taylor's University (Malaysia), Southern Cross University and Curtin University. The research focuses on how notions of 'equivalence' and 'comparability' play out in the design, implementation, and post hoc moderation of assessment in transnational education (TNE).

The post-structuralist view of assessment sees it as "co-constructed in communities of practice" (Orr, 2007). Communities of practice have shared concerns (Wenger et al., 2002) and shared knowledge (Price, 2005, Kortelainen and Rasinkangas, 2007, Wenger, 2000). TNE sites are often 'remote outposts' when it comes to practices and processes associated with learning and teaching (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007). As a result, variability in expectations, decision-making and the meeting of different academic and host country cultures can affect both the interpretation and implementation of guidelines (Coleman, 2003, Wimshurst et al., 2006). Students' notions of assessment as 'fair' include assessment representing reasonable demands and rewarding genuine effort (Sambell et al., 1997), assessment being relevant and balanced with consistency in marking (Flint, 2007). Achieving a shared set of principles and understandings, and through that, fair assessment processes within and across TNE programs, is a complex task that requires ongoing dialogue and collaboration between all members of the teaching team (Dunn and Wallace, 2008). This type of dialogic interaction also serves as a capacity building academic development activity for all staff, which has been identified as good practice in TNE and quality regimes (Connelly et al., 2006, Leask et al., 2005, Dunn and Wallace, 2006).

This paper explores the challenges in developing collaborative approaches to moderation of assessment in TNE and suggests a way forward based on identified good practices.

Research Study

The Project involved an extensive literature review, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 85 academic and professional staff at three Australian and five TNE partner institutions and 103 responses to an online survey with these and other Australian universities distributed through ALTC networks. This paper reports on the interview data, which was collected in Australia and overseas between February and November 2009. Interviewees were asked about their conceptions of moderation, comparability and equivalence, their experiences teaching in or administering a transnational program and their practices in moderation. NVivo8 was used to categorise the data, which was analysed thematically.

Research Findings

Our research revealed that, in developing a community of practice around TNE moderation of assessment, not only is fairness to students an issue but also fairness to TNE partner institution staff.

We have previously reported on the tension between the need for TNE partner academic staff to be trusted by their Australian colleagues and the quality imperative for control by the Australian institution in the transnational relationship (Wallace et al., 2009) and further analysis of interview data confirms this. Post-hoc scaling by Australian academics of offshore marking was still a prevalent practice and delays in moderation feedback from the subject co-ordinator in Australia to the TNE partner institution academic caused concern. Student concerns (reported by academic staff) included the impact of being 'marked down' in moderation processes or attaining a final grade that was commensurate with much lower overall marks than expected. Delays in moderation feedback to the partner institution caused delays in return of assignments, which impacted on preparation for subsequent assessment items. Administrative staff at TNE partner institutions were often in the front line of dealing with upset students whilst Australian administrative staff had a role in 'chasing' Australian academics for moderation results. In addition, academic staff in TNE partner institutions

sometimes felt undervalued when their considered, professional marking was scaled down, often with little qualitative feedback to explain the reasons for such scaling.

Experienced and well-qualified staff at TNE partner institutions were sometimes designated as 'tutors' in the discourse of TNE teaching and regarded as the junior partner with few negotiation rights in the assessment context. In some cases, their expressed lack of influence over assessment protocols, challenge to their marking standards and lack of response from the Australian subject co-ordinators were seen to actively work against collegiality. For some academic staff in TNE partner institutions this power imbalance was a cause of frustration, however in other cases it was seen to cause a 'neediness' or disempowerment where the expectation was that everything would be provided by the Australian university. In some cases, the key attribute of professional respect seemed to have been obscured in the concerns for quality reporting and the busy nature of fly-in-fly-out teaching blocks, more than two teaching sessions per annum, difficulties in communication and mismatches in expectations of students' performance. However, as one Australian academic stated;

> You have to respect all of them because sometimes there are some people here who feel like WE (emphasised by interviewee) are (university name) and THEY (emphasised by interviewee) are (partner name) and they are lower than us in terms of underqualified students or the quality of the lecturers … I don't think like this. They are exactly like us so we have to respect them and they, of course, are going to respect us. You have to be open-minded to their opinion. You don't force them to follow what you do here, or what you would like them to do. So discussion and respect and everything will follow smoothly after that.

Australian and TNE partner institution staff almost universally emphasised and valued the need for relationship building between members of the teaching team. TNE staff had expectations of the leadership role of the Australian subject co-ordinator in initiating communications. The success of the relationship appeared to be very dependent on the subject coordinator as they held the power over the curriculum design and grading/moderation of the assessment tasks. Thus, the individual personality, commitment to the concept and philosophy of TNE higher education, intercultural communication skills, discipline knowledge and ability to convey it and understanding of the transnational students' learning contexts were viewed as critical subject co-ordinator competencies in building and maintaining relationships in the teaching team. This view is supported by other research into TNE teaching (Galvin, 2004, Gribble and Ziguras, 2003, Teekens, 2003).

In support of collaboration, continuity of staff was considered the ideal both by Australian and also TNE academic partner staff. Several cases were reported where staff had been working together for two to six years and relationships had developed over successive iterations of the subject with common thinking emerging on expectations of students' performances and marking standards. As these relationships matured, the TNE academics had more input into feedback on assessment, development of assessment, input into curriculum content, development of 'local' case studies and examples that were included for all students and, in the most mature relationships, joint research undertakings with Australian academic staff. However, these relationships were exceptions rather than the rule as staff turnover meant that the remaining academic had to 'start all over again' in relationship building. An absence of, or little, documentation from previous iterations of the subject was also identified as not supporting continuity when staff changed. As one Australian academic lamented:

> There's no institutional relationship because of the sessional nature of the tutors. There is no institutional support for building a relationship with offshore tutors.

Clearly defined roles were also identified as helpful to the development of collegiality. There appeared to be few guidelines as to what the role of the subject coordinator in the TNE context might be and partner institution staff were unsure what was expected of them. Some academic staff at TNE partner institutions were unsure about who on the Australian side was the ultimate authority on a subject as there could be three or more people dealing with them regarding the one subject, for example, a subject coordinator who delivered block teaching, a marker and a moderator. Such practices, while defensible from a teaching team and objective moderation perspective, led to confusion as roles were not defined or explained. TNE partner institution staff (and students) tended to view the Australian staff they met face-to-face as the authority.

Impact of Culture on Collaborative Approaches

Many of the issues identified above may be said to apply equally to teaching and moderation in Australia. However, there is an overlay of other critical elements, including cultural differences that make the TNE moderation of assessment more complex. There are a number of cultural differences that pertain to both TNE teaching and assessment that go beyond perceived issues of plagiarism addressed elsewhere (Evans and Tregenza, 2002). TNE teams conduct assessment work across national and organisational cultural boundaries.

First, there appear to be different conceptions of merit. An Australian academic marks a student's work on what is before them and against established marking criteria. There was a perception that some TNE partner institution academics take into account other meritorious factors such as how much effort a student has put into the assignment, how diligent they were overall and their personal circumstances. A number of TNE partner institution academics stated in different ways the message that, 'I am closer to the students than the Australian lecturer and I know more about their backgrounds'.

Second, the *type* of assessment is also a point of cultural difference. A number of academic staff in TNE partner institutions asserted that the 'local' educational assessment in secondary education or prior, undergraduate studies in their home country was highly weighted to examinations. Assignments, when they occurred, were highly structured 'Q & A' papers or similar. Partner institution staff in at least three TNE locations asserted that analysis of case studies, working out problems, writing essays with a well-developed argument, and critical analysis or research components were not part of the academic repertoire of many students when they entered their TNE program. Moreover, these skills did not seem to be explicitly developed through transnational curricula. Assessment weighted to these types of tasks was seen by academic staff in TNE partner institutions (but not by Australian academics) to disadvantage many TNE students.

Third, some academic staff in TNE partner institutions argued that they were operating in a different environment to their Australian counterparts. They suggested that there was a different type of relationship between 'local' academics and their students. Student success was perceived to be largely the result of an academic's input rather than wholly attributable to a student's application to learning. This is in contrast to Australia where the relationship, while low in 'power-distance' and informal, is perceived to be more objective when it comes to assessment; the student is judged on performance/outcome. Furthermore, marking and results are a matter between the academic and student. In some TNE contexts parents play a bigger role, and some academic and administrative staff in TNE partner institutions reported that parents (who were paying the fees) requested information on their child's results. This places the TNE partner institution staff in a more complex position culturally.

Fourth, cultural issues and differences of opinion between the academics involved were discipline dependent. Those teaching in mathematical based subjects, where marks can be apportioned to each part of a developing answer reported high levels of consistency, as compared to staff working in more qualitatively-based subjects, for example, 'organisational behaviour and leadership'.

Fifth, language was also an issue. Some staff found the use of unexplained acronyms or jargon in subject information or assessment items confusing. Also Euro-Australian-centric concepts in assignments such as 'Think Globally, Act Locally' or the Australian Wheat Board scandal were unfathomable to some students. As one TNE partner institution academic said, 'You have to read between the lines'. It is the context and tacit knowledge about Australia that is implicit in many assignments. Pre-moderation (where assessment items are evaluated in terms of their synergy with the learning objectives of the subject and for fairness and clarity), especially by the TNE partner institution academic could minimise such confusion. There was also a strong perception that students were marked down by moderators because of English expression difficulties despite the 'sense' in their assignment being conveyed. One TNE tutor commented that whilst Australian academics marked for 'academic English', nowhere in the curriculum were students – all clearly English as an Additional Language speakers – ever supported to develop 'academic English' as a specific literacy. A common understanding among the teaching team regarding language expectations and weighting plus direct instruction regarding academic English suited to the discipline are some ways to support the learning of students and promote fairness.

Finally, some Australian academics viewed the situation in certain partnerships as ones in which students could not fail because of cultural pressure on academic staff at TNE partner institutions to secure good grades not only for the students' sakes but also to ensure their continued employment as academics. Some Australian staff also viewed academic integrity as not being well understood by some TNE partner institution academic staff especially around issues of plagiarism.

Identification of good practice in collaborative approaches

All academics expressed the view that relationship building is dependent on face-to-face communication not 'disembodied voices' in a teleconference. The need to meet in person was emphasised by an academic staff member at a TNE partner institution:

> *Picking up a new subject and never having seen the co-ordinator before and to email them is so stiff and formal. So after the visit, no lengthy explanations are required, just a brief email is sufficient.*

There were many examples of close, collegial partnerships with relationships marked by courtesy, hospitality, common interests, passion for the subject/discipline and genuine concern for student learning. The activities that fostered such collaboration included hosting courtesies such as being picked up at the airport and discussion over meals. Regarding academic matters, partner institution staff participated in or observed Australian academics teaching, and helped the Australian academic understand the social, economic and academic culture of the host country, participated in co-development of assessment, gave input of local examples into the curriculum and negotiated standards in moderation. This is supported by the project's survey results that revealed a strong correlation between satisfaction with communication and satisfaction with moderation of assessment.

Some staff from the TNE partner institutions had visited Australia and had participated in lectures at the Australian university. In some cases academics were researching and

publishing together. However, in most cases there was an acknowledgment of the need for at least one initial visit from the Australian subject coordinator and more communication to debrief at the end of a teaching period for subject revision. It was felt that the workload implications of communication were not fully appreciated by university management and several staff noted the budgetary restraint meant that there were fewer inter-campus visits by those involved in TNE teaching so that face-to-face communication was occurring less frequently. The development of collaboration in new relationships between Australian and partner staff could well be negatively affected by such cuts.

A case was outlined where exemplar assignments from past years and extensive marking guides were provided to all Australian and TNE staff marking in the subject and communication technology was used to assemble the entire teaching team in real time discuss teaching and marking standards. Several staff also reported that they had changed their assessment practices for the better due to exposure to TNE teaching.

Our research has identified a number of institutional and subject/academic level practices that can facilitate collaboration. At the institutional level collaboration can be facilitated by:

- Support for relationship building in the form of time allowances for Australian and TNE partner academics to meet and discuss (even if only virtually, e.g. via Skype);

- Negotiated policies, guidelines and reporting processes and forms to assist in effective, streamlined and simplified documentation of all TNE teaching issues including moderation reporting;

- Procedural manuals for professional (administrative) staff and job descriptions of the roles of each professional and academic person in the partnership;

- Support for staff visits/exchange between partner institutions;

- Setting of minimum standards for level, type and frequency of communication between academics and professional staff in partner programs;

- Inclusion of partner institution in communications that may involve changes in personnel, policies and processes;

- Induction and ongoing professional development for staff from both institutions in the partnership.

At subject/academic level, collaboration can be facilitated by:

- Communication among the teaching team prior to commencement of teaching session – leadership by Australian subject coordinator;

- Joint development of assessment items and marking guides to minimise cultural bias, and ensure fairness;

- Observation of each other's teaching;

- Use of exemplars and samples of students' work for joint marking;

- Cross marking of assignments – the academic at the TNE partner institution marks some Australian assignments and vice versa;

- Leveraging off differences – developing different types of assignments, utilising local cases, local knowledge and expertise to internationalise the curriculum, teaching the genre of assignments;

- Meaningful and joint moderation reporting to 'close the loop' on evaluation for subject revision.

Conclusion

Collaboration is not solely about assessment and its moderation but encompasses all facets of the teaching cycle. Our research has revealed practices that actively work against staff collaboration and position TNE sites as 'remote outposts' rather than full partners in the learning and teaching cycle. However, our research has also revealed resistance to this positioning. Staff in partner institutions and in Australia are well aware of what should/could occur to foster greater collaboration and more equal power relationships within TNE teaching teams and clearly express the aspirations for more equal relationships and rich learning and teaching experiences for their students and themselves and greater fairness in assessment. They are attuned to the institutional, academic and cultural challenges in achieving this.

Our research has also revealed a number of examples of aspirations translated into good practice. Communities of practice are developing in relation to TNE teaching, assessment and moderation. However, these most often depend on the commitment and additional effort of individuals and are thus fragile due to staff turnover and burnout. Clearly, institutional support is needed to facilitate and mainstream these unique communities of practice. This support includes staff development in establishing and sustaining relationships, policies and guidelines that are genuinely helpful to relationship building rather than being simply mechanisms of control and recognition of the workload involved. Authentic dialogue and collaboration are capacity building for both institutions in a TNE partnership, benefit both domestic and TNE student learning and should be supported at institutional level.

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