

Case Study 3: Assessing Learning and Exchanging Feedback.

Trialling A New Approach to Assessment Moderation

Contextual Background

In postgraduate art and design education, assessment frequently centres on showcasing process, ideation and research through workbooks and written submissions, particularly critical and reflective statements. A key challenge within my teaching context is ensuring fairness, consistency, and depth of interpretation in the assessment of learning outcomes and facilitating moderation. This is especially complex given the centrality of subjectivity, tone and creative voice to student development. Additionally, assessors often bring varying levels of experience with assessment practices, differing degrees of engagement with students throughout the unit, and their own subjectivities, all of which can influence evaluative decisions. Brookfield (2017) highlights the importance of critical reflection in teaching, particularly in recognising how power, perspective and personal assumptions shape educational practice. This framework underlines the need for a more transparent and dialogic model of moderation.

Evaluation

Current moderation practice for Units 1 to 4 involves staff discussing what an A, B, C or D looks like by meeting online and scrolling quickly through a selection of submissions. The Unit Leader then second marks 10% of submissions. While this ensures a baseline of consistency, it limits rich discussion between assessors and can overlook the dialogic nature of reflection. I experienced this recently during the moderation meeting for Unit 3: Collaborative, where tutors from across the three MA Photography programmes, each having worked on a collaborative option, met to discuss grading standards. While the intention was to ensure students were benchmarked consistently, the subjective and rapid decision-making applied to each student's work (which included portfolios of over 40 pages and a 2,500-word essay), coupled with vague learning outcomes, led to frustration, which I voiced during the meeting. I questioned whether we should be moderating in such a quick, arbitrary and tick-box fashion. I was reassured that second marking would be thorough and that initial grades could be revised once more time had been spent reviewing submissions. This was helpful, but it led me to wonder whether a different moderation style might be more effective, so I trialled one.

Moving Forward

Inspired by Orr and Bloxham's (2013) critique of assessment as judgement and Sadler's (2013) concept of communities of assessment practice, I propose a more dialogic and collaborative model of moderation.

For Unit 1: Commercial Photography in Practice, which involved five assessors, including two Associate Lecturers who were new to the programme, I provided a 'Unit 1 Assessment Guide' (attached as a resource below) and asked all markers to assess the same three student submissions. These submissions were pre-selected by myself and two core members of the MACP team to represent a broad spread of anticipated grades — A, B, C/D — based on the holistic knowledge of student engagement (by fractioned staff) during the unit. Each assessor arrived at the meeting with grades (for the four assessment criteria and an overall grade) for each pre-selected student. We then discussed areas of alignment and discrepancy.

This exercise sparked a revealing and productive dialogue, surfacing different interpretations of criteria, assumptions, language use and submission design. It was particularly valuable for new assessors, providing them with insight into the application of academic standards and the nuances of student work. The process reinforced the importance of spending time with full submissions, rather than scrolling quickly through examples in a moderation meeting. It demonstrated the benefit of verbal calibration and highlighted the potential of a more structured yet efficient moderation process.

Crucially, the moderation discussion included focused attention on the tone and structure of feedback being given to students. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that effective feedback must be both affirming and forward-looking, addressing where the learner is going, how they are progressing and what they can do next. This emphasis was reflected in our discussions, particularly when reviewing written comments. I also second marked the submissions graded by new assessors and offered them feedback on the clarity, tone and usefulness of their comments to ensure alignment with this principle.

Initial feedback has been encouraging. Markers reported greater confidence in their judgments and welcomed the opportunity for professional dialogue when discussing feedback. Students expressed increased trust in the fairness and usefulness of the assessment process when informed of this approach. The benefits in terms of transparency, consistency and learning - for both students and staff - make this a compelling direction for moderation in creative education. As we move through the final units of MACP 2024 to 2025, I plan to repeat this moderation process and continue refining the approach based on staff and student feedback.

For the next unit submission, we will also trial offering student's feedback tutorials with their first marker.

References:

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- Sadler, D.R., 2013. Assuring academic achievement standards: From moderation to calibration. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20(1), pp.5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2012.714742>