

Externally moderated school-based assessment in Queensland: lessons for implementing an Australian curriculum

Leanne Rolph and Peter Jordan

Leanne Rolph is acting assistant director, P-12 Implementation Branch and Peter Jordan is acting deputy director of Assessment and Reporting Division of the Queensland Studies Authority.

Leanne.Rolph@qsa.qld.edu.au

Peter.Jordan@qsa.qld.edu.au

Abstract

In Queensland, senior secondary teachers are responsible for designing assessment programs and making judgments about the standards achieved by their students. These judgments are based on evidence that must stand up to external scrutiny. Queensland's moderation process supported by professional training provided by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), enhances teachers' capacity to make comparable judgments about the quality of student work.

From 2013, an Australian curriculum in senior secondary English, Mathematics, Science and History will be introduced with content outlined and achievement standards described in terms of the qualities of learning expected each year. Queensland senior secondary school teachers already have some experience in this and will be looking for evidence in folios of student work matched against standard descriptors over five levels to make judgments about student achievement.

This presentation will examine the relationship between the theory that has informed the practice of externally moderated school-based assessment in Queensland and the practical application of this in the development of classroom assessment practices for an Australian curriculum across P-12. This will be explored through annotated student responses to assessment instruments using current standards descriptors in Queensland senior syllabuses for English, Mathematics, Science and History.

Key words

Moderation, consensus moderation, standards, teacher judgments,

Introduction

In May 2009 the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), an independent statutory authority, took over the work of the National Curriculum Board (NCB). The NCB had been established in February 2008 to develop the core content and achievement standards in Mathematics, Science, History and English from Kindergarten (K) to Year 12 with a national curriculum to be available in 2010.

ACARA's work in developing the Australian curriculum is guided by the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. The Melbourne Declaration commits "to supporting all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens", and to promoting equity and excellence in education. The Australian curriculum will "equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century." The national curriculum will be accessible to all young Australians, regardless of their social or economic background or the school they attend.

Until 2007, the six states and two territories of Australia developed individual approaches to the use of standards in the implementation of curriculum, assessment and reporting. Change began with the establishment of the NCB in February 2008. By May 2009 the NCB had,

through a consultation process managed the development of four framing papers in the four key subject areas. ACARA now has the responsibility for the management and the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, national student assessment and reporting of school education outcomes. A major aim is to establish a standards-referenced framework to 'invigorate a national effort to improve student learning in the selected subjects' (National Curriculum Board 2008, 3), yet there has been very little discussion, debate or articulation about the curriculum and its relationship with the achievement standards. What has been missing from the public statements of developments is the identification of the assessment evidence that is to be used to inform the development and employment of achievement standards. To date there has been very limited information about how national achievement standards have been developed and how they will be used in practice. There are numerous meanings of 'standards' in the educational literature. The 'achievement standards' in the draft Australian curriculum K(P)-10 can be understood as progressive targets or milestones. While successfully articulating a framework for growth and development, these 'achievement standards' at this stage will provide little assistance to teachers when they will be used to judge the quality of students' achievement and reporting the achievements on an A-E scale. It has been agreed nationally that at each year level from K-10, teachers are required to report students' achievements to parents using an A-E framework. ACARA will develop brief descriptors for each of the five reporting levels. These descriptors will be generic across year levels and learning areas. They will provide a consistent nomenclature to describe the quality of achievement associated with each A-E grade for use across K-10. Each K-10 achievement standard will be aligned with a C level on this reporting framework. A D level on the reporting framework describes a quality of learning that is adequate for progression but may indicate the student will need additional support or assistance in progressing within the next level. Additional work samples, which illustrate achievement well above and well below the achievement standard, will be provided to teachers to assist them to make on-balance judgements of A, B, D and E standards of achievement. From a review of the literature related to standards it is apparent 'that a set of standards should represent consensus among stakeholders, on what students must know and be able to do' (Zepke et al 2005, 22-23). The closer the alignment between standards and assessment, between standards and teaching, between standards and curriculum and between teaching and assessments the better students achieve (Zepke et al 2005). Therefore it is anticipated that QSA will need to provide advice for teachers in Queensland to assist them to recognise standards from A-E and identify levels of achievement. Advice will be required to assist teachers to monitor and provide feedback to students about what they need to focus on in order to achieve as well as they are able.

Background

In 1972 Queensland's system of externally moderated school-based assessment was introduced based on recommendations for schooling in the Radford Report (1970). For the first time, assessment instruments devised by teachers, and the judgments they had made about how well the students had learnt, became the major component of the final results. It was the end of the one-off external examination and the beginning of high-stakes conversations between teachers. These conversations are commonly known as moderation 'a process for producing consistency across assessors in qualitative judgments of student performance or achievement...[m]oderation contributes to quality assurance of assessment procedures and outcomes' (Maxwell 2010, 457).

Over the last 40 years Queensland has continued to review and revise the moderation system for years 11 and 12. In particular in the 1980s the system moved from a norm-based model to criteria based model of assessing student achievement. In 1990 the Viviani report recommended that a system be investigated to determine the comparability of assessment outcomes across schools in Queensland.

Since the 1970s Queensland students in their final two years of schooling, have been taught and assessed by teachers who operate within a system of rigorous checks and balances to ensure fair and accurate outcomes. Queensland has found no need over the last 40 years for

high-stakes public exams. Our system is unique within Australia and the world. It relies entirely on school-based assessment, a system in which:

- teachers are responsible for the assessment of student achievement using standards descriptors, making judgments of students' work against these standards
- review panels of trained teachers undertake external moderation.

Moderation system

In Queensland, moderation practice occurs in terms of the system of externally moderated school-based assessment in senior schooling and the Queensland Curriculum Assessment and Reform initiative, which has introduced standards-referenced moderation in Years 1-9. While the details of these two approaches necessarily differ, common to them is the understanding that system level support ensures teachers reach judgments with high validity and high reliability levels.

Queensland's system of externally moderated school-based assessment relies on the practices of 'consensus moderation', or 'social moderation' where groups of trained teacher-reviewers meet formally to assure the quality of assessment instruments and ensure the judgments of standards are comparable from school to school through a process of independent reviewing, evidence-based decision making and consensus-based professional conversations and negotiations.

The essential ingredients for it to work effectively are:

- syllabuses that clearly describe content and achievement standards
- contextualised exemplar assessment instruments
- samples of student work annotated to explain how they represent different standards
- consensus through teacher discussions about the quality of assessment instruments and the standards of student work
- professional judgment of teachers
- an organizational infrastructure encompassing an independent authority and schools to oversee the system.

Recent studies have confirmed the importance of social moderation in any assessment regime to ensure comparable outcomes and improve teachers' assessment capabilities. For example, the findings from a trial of moderation models in the United Kingdom showed a positive impact on the nature and range of evidence used to support assessment, the accuracy of assessments and the understanding of what characterizes performance at a national curriculum level (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2009).

Importance of standards

Maxwell (2002) argues that there are at least four different usages or meanings of the term 'standards' in relation to educational assessment and reporting. These are:

- Standards as moral or ethical imperatives (what someone should do - guidelines for exemplary practice. Usually implied when older generations say that "standards are falling". For assessment practice, such standards are usually seen as desirable rather than essential.)
- Standards as legal or regulatory requirements (what someone must do -. An example would be that all people who drive cars must have a licence. Another example might consider the requirement that in order to be registered teachers need to have completed certain courses and met specific requirements.)
- Standards as quality benchmarks (expected practice or achievement - Benchmarks indicate what ought to be the case, expectations of a particular level of quality in delivery or outcome. This usage could also refer to milestones that define what is to be achieved by a certain stage of development..)

- Standards as arbiters of the quality of the performance (defining success or merit - referents that underlie human judgments of success or merit in performance. That is, they are the basis on which such judgments are made.)

The Australian curriculum sometimes refers to performance standards. It is not clear from the ACARA documentation whether these are the same as or different from achievement standards. In human resource contexts, performance standards tend to describe behaviour that is acceptable for the carrying out of certain duties. Using word derivation it would seem evident that achievement standards can be linked to the achieving of intended outcomes or objectives. Performance standards suggest that students have carried out some activity and we want to describe how well they have carried out a defined activity.

In Queensland, the fourth usage has been adopted; standards as arbiters of quality. The QSA's P-12 assessment policy describes achievement standards in the following way:

Achievement standards are fixed reference points used to describe how well students have achieved the objectives or Essential Learnings in syllabuses. The description of achievement standards are derived by groups of teachers and subject experts describing the actual differences in examples of student work.

In Queensland, assessment for years 1-12 is standards-based. This means in years 11-12 judgments about the quality of student achievement are made with reference to predefined standards that describe how well students have achieved the objectives in syllabuses.

Predefined standards ensure that:

- students and teachers know what is expected for each level of achievement and can work together to achieve the best result for the student
- comparability from school to school can be achieved
- teachers can discuss standards with parents/carers when reporting a student's achievements.

It has been argued that: '[t]eachers need the freedom to make definitive evidence-based judgements on their students' work according to established standards and a quality framework that guarantees the dependability of teacher-led assessment' (Klenowski 2008, 150) Consistency in the matching of standards is more likely if those standards are explicitly stated and exemplified. Clarification of the standards is the key activity in moderation. However, no matter how appropriate the standards statements and exemplars are, assessors (teachers) can and will interpret them differently. Moderation is directed at aligning assessor's different understandings and judgments of the relevant standards to produce shared interpretations and meanings. Meaning is not transparent; rather it must be constructed. The words used in the statement of a standard denote the standard, that is, attempt to convey the meaning of the standard. Whether the same meaning is derived by each assessor is problematic. Thus, the foundation for any moderation system needs to be based on discussions among assessors. These discussions should occur before, during and after assessment. They also need to be ongoing. Such discussions need to start with the syllabus statements of standards, the criteria for representing those standards, and any available exemplars.

Recent research has focused on the 'design of the moderation system that makes extensive use of conversations between panelists that is highly brain-compatible and develops assessor expertise is likely to have wide applicability' (Purnell & Dudley 2010, 1). Accurate judgments by assessors are critical in quality assessment practices. The moderation system in Queensland, externally-moderated school based assessment, provides opportunities for teachers (panelists) to have conversations about student work that aligns with subject standards descriptors. According to Purnell and Dudley (2010, 3) 'the clarity of purpose in moderation panel meetings is brain compatible (our brains like to know what they should pay attention to, and what to ignore or purposefully filter out). What becomes apparent is that no

matter the context or the purpose of standards, professional judgments are needed to describe and maintain standards and this implies a degree of trust in the professionals. The Queensland system is based on confidence and trust in the professional judgments of teachers. Their judgments may be open to external scrutiny and moderation through review panels and this is an important safeguard in the system – but teachers have developed a sense of ownership and accountability independent of any external compliance measures. As argued by Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski (2010, 17) ‘in the context of examinations, high stakes testing or in the use of standards for improving learning the teacher has an important role in a community of judgment practice. This is because standards-referenced assessment relies on teacher judgements that can be made dependable if standards are promulgated in appropriate forms and teachers have the conceptual tools and professional training. Teacher judgement is central to the use of standards and moderation’.

Exemplar student work

In Queensland part of the professional training of teachers is supported by exemplar student work. Exemplars are used to represent standards. Exemplars help to explicate judgment practice and form one part of a comprehensive approach to moderation. Annotated samples of each standard (A-E) are required to assist teachers to make valid and reliable judgments. The provision of carefully chosen exemplars of standards can meet the need to improve and support judgment practice. They also have a capacity to illustrate different ways of satisfying the requirements of standards. The use of such exemplars can have an important effect on teaching and student learning, and in turn, using standards to draw on feedback for student improvement. Sadler (1989) argued, for example, that exemplars or samples of student work provide concrete referents for illustrating standards that otherwise remain abstract mental constructs. One of the important elements of the Queensland system is that ‘given that standards require interpretation, moderation provides the means through which teachers meet to review how they have interpreted and applied given standards, and in this way moderation is vital in system efforts to promote a more consistent use of standards over time and across the country (Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski 2010, 20)

In Queensland, standards in particular at A and C are illustrated by obtaining student work in years 11 and 12 that has been moderated, usually after being verified by panels. The quality assurance process ensures that the work demonstrates the standard, meets syllabus requirements and provides a good model for teachers and students to use. The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) provides on their open website for years 11 and 12 and through the Assessment Bank for years 1-9 annotated assessment instruments, annotated student responses to the assessment instrument, highlighted standards matrix and other associated support materials. This support of teachers and students lends weight to Maxwell’s (2002, 2) claim that the frames of reference (standards, support materials, criteria, etc.) must be defined and disseminated to allow for common interpretation. A common understanding and application of the agreed criteria and the standards is what Sadler (1986b) referred to as ‘guild knowledge’. QSA’s quality assurance processes are directed at building fundamental knowledge and skills about assessment and at establishing ‘guild knowledge’ of criteria and standards. Workshops, support material on the web, internal and external reviews, and consultative advice provide the foundations for good assessment practices.

Disclosure and visibility

Wyatt-Smith and Val Klenowski (2010, 2) have explored ‘how standards can be harnessed to realize improvement for all students and especially those students most at risk due to educational disadvantage’. Twenty years earlier, Sadler (1989) mused over a ‘common but puzzling observation that even when teachers provide(d) students with valid and reliable judgments about the quality of their work, improvement did not necessarily follow’. For effective feedback to be realized, Sadler argued that not only were standards to be well defined and understood by teachers, but for students to be able to improve, they must develop the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production of that work. This, in turn, required that students develop an appreciation of high quality work as well as an

evaluative skill to compare the quality of their work with the higher standard. Following on from this Sadler (1998) suggested that by disclosing criteria and standards, and ensuring that the decision-making underpinning teacher judgments is visible to students and understood by students, the locus of control for learning can move more effectively from the teacher to the student and can empower students in terms of their own learning. Sadler called it 'letting students into the secret, allowing them to become insiders into the assessment process' (1998). Teachers can do this by making the criteria for making judgments about student work more explicit to the students, both before and after each task.

Conclusion

As Australia moves towards the implementation of an Australian curriculum, Queensland's system of school-based, standard-based, assessment is more relevant than ever before. Other education systems can learn more about school-based assessment from the Queensland experience, not just in the senior years but also in the earlier years of schooling. It is not just about summative assessment at the end of a two-year course of study. Across P-12, our system respects and relies upon the role of teachers as professionals. Queensland teachers are confident in using the standards to assess student work and have the language to provide feedback to students in order to improve their performance.

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