

Marking Workshops as Peer Observation/Learning Opportunity

Rationale:

- 1) One of the most important interactions between TAs and undergraduate student occurs in the evaluative and formative function of marking. While marking is not conventionally thought of as a site of 'teaching observation' for professional development, arguably, it is in this mode of interaction that one of the most indelible marks is left on students; thus, peer-marking sessions provide a key arena for shaping TA practices.
- 2) TAs feel overworked and overwhelmed during the task of marking in the limited hours given to them. This sets up the conditions for marking as a "defensive" practice which involves: 1) getting marking done to decrease the overwhelming pile and 2) heavily favouring unsupportive/critical comments to justify the grade given. *IF* marking is to be taken seriously as an opportunity for "formative" feedback that helps to shape student learning outcomes over the course of a term (and beyond), then peer learning can foster best practices, student learning outcomes, and professional development of TAs.

Set-up:

This process has been done at an institution with "TA Consultants" (peer TAs) in many departments where a safe community of support has been established in (at least) 2 previous meetings. This activity can also occur at institutions without a TA Consultant, with the ideal scenario being a supportive, cooperative atmosphere among TAs who are already acquainted with one another.

Procedure:

- Set up a marking workshop when TAs are available at a time that coincides with an impending major marking time (mid-terms, essays, finals, etc)
- Allow some time for check-ins, expressions of overwhelm/ excitement, etc.
- Discuss the goals of the assignment at hand (in this case it was an Introductory Environmental Studies course mid-term with 200+ students and 4 TAs. Students were required to answer short conceptual questions and choose one essay question to answer)
- The facilitator/TA Consultant distributes either a) 3- 5 'sample' assignments that are not from the current cohort of students or b) 3-5 anonymized copies of assignments from the current cohort of students
- Each TA marks their 'set' of assignments giving 1) a grade and 2) a brief comment or two
- TAs get together and discuss their quantitative and qualitative feedback
- Pay special attention to cases where range of grades is divergent (Are goals of assignment clear? Is a particular TA, in general, too critical or too generous?)

Potential Learning Outcomes

- The focus on writing a positively reinforcing comment (in qualitative circumstances like short answers or essay responses – multiple choice questions may not provide an opportunity to do this)
- The team-creation of rubrics for assignment goals and CODE for mark-ups on assignments/exams (eg. “L” for logic issue, ‘S’ for unclear sentence structure)
- The norming of standards/expectations for marking across tutorial sections
- The building of confidence in TAs’ marking ability (and faculty confidence in TAs)
- The fostering of a community of support for joint-marking and trouble-shooting

We must recognize that all evaluators are human with limits!

Watch for:

- Fatigue – what is your own best time of day to offer a favourable approach to your students’ work?
- Marking burn-out – how many of each given assignment can you optimally do without feeling cranky?
- Your own physical, emotional/mental health issues (headaches, chronic pain, anxiety because of receiving heavy critique of your own work graduate by your supervisor, etc). How can you set yourself up to leave heaviness, pain, etc. behind, and/or or ask for help from a peer or supervisor if you are feeling limitations in your fair assessing abilities?
- Pre-formed impressions of students – do you find that you are primed to think of some students as “A” students because of their fabulous oral contributions in class/tutorials? What about those who haven’t attended recently/haven’t spoken (due to shyness, etc). Are you approaching the students’ work based on assumptions that might not hold? (If so, can you anonymize them ahead of time for yourself or trade with a peer in marking for the particular goals of the assignment?)

The following additional suggestions on marking from Vanderbilt U.Center for Teaching:

<http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/grading-student-work/>

- Use your comments to teach rather than to justify your grade, focusing on what you’d most like students to address in future work.
- Link your comments and feedback to the goals for an assignment.
- Comment primarily on patterns — representative strengths and weaknesses.
- Avoid over-commenting or “picking apart” students’ work.
- In your final comments, ask questions that will guide further inquiry by students rather than provide answers for them.

