Failure of theory: grounding academic standards between rationality and interpretation (0149)

Academic standards (AS) are at the cornerstone of university education, a fundamental basis for universities’ reputation. However, concerns about AS and grade inflation are widespread and, in the UK, have prompted various reports and an investigation by parliament. Yet AS are poorly researched and understood, particularly in their everyday use by academics, managers and those involved in quality assurance. Sadler (2011) notes that the question of what is meant by ‘academic standards’ is rarely asked, never mind answered and Yorke (2008: 83) describes it as an ‘elusive concept’. The nature of standards in assessing complex, higher level, student output is particularly intangible.

Despite this elusiveness, and although statements of standards were rarely articulated in the past, there was an assumption pre-massification, that a ‘gold standard’ existed; fixed benchmarks which enshrined the standards of the ancient universities (Silver and Williams (1996) 27 & 30). Such a perspective sees standards as independent of the individuals who created or are custodians of them. However, theoretical exposition and empirical evidence is increasingly challenging the robust and reliable nature of such standards as posited by this technocratic tradition (see for example, Delandshere 2001; Gipps 1999; Shay 2004, 2005; Moss & Shultz 2001).

Consensus

There is no doubt that at a fairly general and abstract level, higher education assessors do share a significant measure of agreement about what they are looking for in student work (Warren Piper, 1994). Nevertheless, the hermeneutic critique challenges the potential for shared and stable standards. It argues that, in contrast to the gold standard approach and in the face of evidence that tutors think their standards are the same (Warren Piper 1994, 79), there is growing theoretical argument and empirical evidence for the notion that individuals construct their own ‘standards frameworks’ (Ashworth et al. 2010). These differ depending on academics’ values (Shay 2005), on other social worlds that they inhabit (Den Outer, Handley and Price forthcoming, 16), their history (Dobson 2008 A&E 285) and their previous experience (Milanovic, Saville and Shuhong, 106).

On the other hand, and within this epistemological perspective, there is a view that whilst individuals may develop their own standards’ frameworks, their ‘responses are constituted collectively’ (Orr 2010; 15) through activities such as moderation and external examining which help to build an intersubjective consensus. The question is whether this co-constitution of standards is sufficient or is widespread enough to claim a consensus, especially in a diversifying higher education environment? For example, empirical studies (Broad 2003, Bloxham et al 2011, Dobson 2008a, Greatorex 2000, Hawe 2002) have found that assessors use personal standards beyond or different to those stated. In addition, there is a challenge to consensus from the local use of norm referencing (Vaughan, 1991, Shay 2004, Orrell 2008, Orr 2008). Therefore, it can be argued that individualised standards survive regardless of social opportunities to negotiate and construct shared standards and it is not surprising that numerous studies over time indicate low agreement between higher education assessors (Elander and Hardman 2002, Wolf 1995, Bloxham 2009, Leach et al 2001, Shay 2004, Sadler 1987).

The challenge of tacit academic standards has generated a trend towards explicit statements of standards to guide assessors’ judgement, particularly in the professions. Statements of standards are also increasingly available to assessors and students in terms of rubrics (marking schemes) and assessment criteria. However studies suggest that such explicit propositions promise more that they can deliver (Hawe 2002, Moss and Shutz, 2001, Sadler 2009a & 2009b). As Broad (2003, 74) states, research shows that ‘standards refused to be as solid, stable and portable an entity as
participants wished’. Efforts to make standards explicit such as Subject Benchmarks are not statements of academic standards but ‘act as reference points for curriculum design and implementation’ (Yorke 2008: 28).

Interestingly, these substantive limitations to the concept of academic standards have hardly entered academic or public debate. Harvey (2002) argues that the external evaluation of Universities has served to legitimise the status quo, focusing more on the process of evaluation rather than the substance of what is being evaluated. Therefore, whilst the stated curriculum and learning outcomes for programmes are now generally in the public domain, one could argue that the judgement of student achievement remains largely unchanged; ‘the private preserve of teaching staff’ (Coates, 2010,: 10).

The paper will draw on the author’s co-research regarding academics learning about standards which found that faculty were torn between techno-rationalist quality assurance imperatives and an implicit grasp of standards as interpretive, co-constructed and tacit. However, the interpretive approach was only embraced to a certain extent with academics continuing to believe in fixed standards and ‘right’ marks and vesting external examiners with privileged knowledge of AS.

Have we no workable models to help staff bridge this theoretical gulf? On the other hand, perhaps, it is better not to open the Pandora’s box of consensus on standards. As Moss and Schultz argue, “No process is ever fully transparent or fully fair and inclusive. Are we better off acting as if we have achieved consensus even if we have not? It is possible that we are.” (p64). Conversely, should the academy be seeking a better model of standards for the sake of students and long term reputation. Currently, what confidence can we have that the average academic has the ‘assessment literacy’ to be aware of the complex influences on their standards and judgement processes? How likely are they to understand the provenance of their own standards and the influence of their background and experience; how strong is the temptation to draw largely on experience as an indicator of what standards should be rather than recognising the potential ‘bias’ in that approach, or the influence of a particular context or student body or professional experience? Perhaps, it is time to reverse a trend. Safeguarding AS should not rest on creating shared standards through documentation and/or external examining. Instead, perhaps efforts should be directed towards developing models for systematising the social construction of standards through increased intersubjectivity; intra and inter university dialogues.

References


Orr, S. (2010) ‘We kind of try to merge our own experience with the objectivity of the criteria: the role of connoisseurship and tacit practice in undergraduate fine art assessment. *Art, Design and communication in higher education* 9 (1) 5-19


