

Exploration of collaboration with university students in marking and moderation

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Collaboration of undergraduate students in marking and moderation

Student assignment moderation and written feedback are integral to tertiary education, supporting student learning and providing a means of ensuring equity in grading. The processes of moderation and feedback provision have, however, been associated with a number of negative outcomes including confusion, disengagement, and reduced self-confidence. Improvements to moderation processes must be reviewed to facilitate continued student engagement and learning. Embedded within empowerment theory, this pilot study aimed to explore the feasibility of involving students in the moderation process and to determine whether students benefit from participating in the moderation process. A multiple-method approach was undertaken to understand the perspectives of students engaging in the moderation process. Six undergraduate occupational therapy students participated in the moderation of a written essay with university tutors and participated in a focus group. Three themes relating to their experiences emerged: 1) student empowerment, 2) transparency and increased understanding of the moderation process, and 3) understanding the assessor mindset. Combined results suggest that inclusion of students in the moderation process is feasible within a tertiary education context, with this study acting as a pilot for the inclusion of students in these processes. (188/300)

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Introduction

The provision of feedback to students is a major tool used by teaching academics in tertiary education contexts to promote learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback on written assignments has been shown to not only enhance an understanding of course content and the assessment process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) but also contributes to improvements in the application of knowledge, and more effective, life-long independent learning (Eraut, 2006; Hounsell, 2003).

While feedback contributes significantly to these student-related outcomes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), evidence has shown that students often have difficulty understanding or applying feedback, or are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive (Carless, 2006; Hall, Hanna, & Quinn, 2012; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Weaver, 2006). The negative reception of feedback by students may have several negative effects including reduced self-confidence, disengagement from the learning and feedback process, and critically, withdrawal from the course (Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, & Perry, 2007). Combined, these negative outcomes have resulted in concerns regarding the efficacy of current feedback strategies in tertiary education (Price, 2005).

The provision and reception of feedback are influenced by a dynamic interplay of social, institutional and subjectively experienced factors (Higgins et al., 2001). At the basis, evidence has suggested that students and lecturers may have different understandings and beliefs about feedback (Adcroft, 2011). Discrepancies between student and lecturer understanding of course-relevant discourses and assessment procedures can hinder the ability of students to adequately interpret and apply feedback (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004; Weaver, 2006). Though lecturers are considered experts on the rhetoric related to their field, students may lack an understanding of their area-specific discourse (Weaver, 2006), resulting in feedback provided by lecturers being perceived as unhelpful or ambiguous (Weaver, 2006). Further, while assessment evaluation procedures aim to improve the validity and fairness of assessment evaluation (Birmingham, 2015), students and lecturers may differ in their interpretation of criteria (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2001; O'Donovan et al., 2004), producing disparity between what lecturers and students believe constitutes a “good mark” (Lea & Street, 2000; O'Donovan et al., 2004). An understanding of these course-relevant discourses places lecturers in a position of authority and power (Higgins et al., 2001). While these power differentials are inherent during the learning process, the nature of these differentials may serve to disempower students. Students often feel that assessments are a reflection on themselves and negative feedback received from an individual in authority may contribute to feelings of rejection or shame (Higgins et al., 2001; Rowe, 2017). Further, as students may not have an understanding of the course-relevant discourses through which feedback is provided (O'Donovan et al., 2004; Weaver, 2006), students may feel unable to exert change over the marks they receive, potentially contributing to an externally orientated locus of control during the learning process. This disempowerment of students is likely to compound negative outcomes associated with the feedback process and may have detrimental effects on the student's ability to develop into a self-regulated learner (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

While eradicating all power differentials between lecturers and students is not feasible, it may be possible to enable students to choose to be more empowered during the assessment process (Nicol, 2008). Empowerment is defined as a multi-dimensional construct pertaining to an individual's control and

influence over their lives, purported to be inclusive of factors such as competence, impact, meaning and self-determination (Spreitzer, 1995). Providing students with the opportunity to choose to be more empowered during the assessment process may enhance their understanding, reception, and application of feedback, reducing the negative outcomes that have been associated with feedback.

Knowledge and access to information are considered an important antecedent to empowerment (Conger & Kanungo, 1988), contributing to a greater ability to exert control over one's decisions (Bandura, 1982), and improved self-efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). While greater access to information serves as a precursor to empowerment in itself, congruency in the understanding of this information between students and lecturers may also be essential (Buchanan, 2007). Providing students with insight into the assessment process and reducing disparity in student and lecturer understanding, may provide students with the opportunity to be empowered, improving their understanding and application of feedback. Indeed, engagement of students in the feedback and assessment process has been proposed to enhance the efficacy of feedback (Falchikov, 2005), with the generation of dialogue between students and lecturers encouraging a greater shared understanding of the process (Nicol, 2010).

To date, the majority of investigations examining the inclusion of students in the assessment process have focused on peer-mediated feedback, group feedback or self-assessment (Falchikov, 2005; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). While these methods have been purported to assist in student learning (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), the effectiveness of these methods is questionable (Strijbos, Narciss, & Dünnebier, 2010) and challenges to these process are evident (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). Students may lack the necessary knowledge to provide a valid and reliable assessment (Kaufman & Schun, 2011; Strijbos et al., 2010), and have concerns regarding their competency to provide marks (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), students can also perceive feedback from peers as unfair or question their markers' competence (Kaufman & Schun, 2011). Though there has been a considerable exploration of peer-mediated or self-assessment methods, little investigation has been conducted on the effectiveness of including students in the moderation process. Unlike traditional peer feedback, the involvement of students in the moderation process involves students working collaboratively with lecturers during assignment evaluation. The involvement of students in the moderation process may assist in reducing the potential negative effects of feedback and negate issues associated with traditional peer feedback methods. It is also possible that inclusion in these processes may provide students with the opportunity to choose to be empowered during the assessment process, improving their application of feedback and enhancing their involvement and in the learning process.

This paper presents preliminary findings of a pilot study conducted to explore the feasibility of including students in the moderation process to empower students and enhance learning and satisfaction in feedback. This study explores the involvement of students in the moderation process of a written assignment (essay) to understand the perspective of students' perceptions of the content of the work and moderation processes.

Methods

Design

Following a multiple-method approach, a pilot study was conducted to explore occupational therapy

students' perceptions of the content and moderation processes when marking a written essay (Dowling, 2009). Using this approach, marks awarded to moderated assignments by participating students and tutors were compared and contrasted. Focus groups were then conducted to create a narrative of the moderation experience. This multiple-methodology approach was selected as these approaches have a particular utility in obtaining rich and thick descriptions of participants' experiences in an effective and efficient manner (Morse & Niehaus, 2009).

Participants

A purposive sample was used due to the preliminary nature of this study. A total of six female participants were recruited from the undergraduate occupational therapy course at a Western Australian university to form part of a moderation appraising team. Participants were enrolled in a full-time capacity and were currently completing the second-year unit, with which the written essay was a requirement. Participants had previously participated in an informal review of the unit materials in 2016. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Participant	Age Group	Couse enrollment status	Previous education prior to course enrollment
Student 1	18-21	Full-time	Year 12 high school
Student 2	26-29	Full-time	Year 11 high school; Occupational Therapy Enabling course
Student 3	26-29	Full-time	Year 12 high school; partial completion of Bachelor of Science Human Biology Preclinical; Technical and Further Education College Diploma III
Student 4	34-37	Full-time	Year 11 high school
Student 5	26-29	Full-time	Year 12 high school; TAFE Certificate III: Hairdressing
Student 6	30-33	Full-time	Year 12 high school, Technical and Further Education College Certificate IV

Data collection and procedure

Phase One

Phase one involved the group appraisal and moderation of three essays by all six participants, facilitated by two university tutors. Prior to commencing the appraisal process, participants were briefed in regards to the confidentiality and responsibility associated with taking part in the moderation process, as well as being required to sign a confidentiality waiver. Participants were advised of the group appraisal process whereby marking initially occurs independently using an assigned rubric to guide the process, followed by group discussion and moderation. Next, each participant was presented with three hard copies of de-identified essays from their student cohort representing a low, medium and high scoring essay as pre-marked by the teaching team. In addition, a de-identified example of a moderated essay was provided to assist in the

appraisal process. Moderated marks provided to the essays by the students included in the study were not included in the final marks provided to the essays. The moderation session for the essays lasted 120 minutes, here the assigned rubric was used to guide marking of the essays. Essays were marked according to five criteria with seven marks allocable to each criterion, with a total possible score of 35 achievable. Upon completion of the appraisal session, essays were collected by the research team and the participants reflected upon the marks allocated to each moderated student.

Phase Two

In Phase two, participants were invited to attend a focus group three weeks later to reflect on their experiences of the moderation process. The focus group lasted 90 minutes. The group's discussions were directed by a series of reflective questions which explored participants' understanding of the moderation process and the associated expectations, the rationale underpinning their assigned marks and the identified barriers and facilitators impacting the moderation process. These questions included "what thoughts feelings did you have before the commencement of moderating the assignment?", "what parts of the moderation did you enjoy/not enjoy?", "how might the experience of moderation influence or impact on the way you learn and prepare for assignments in the future?" Questions were also targeted at examining their peers' perceptions of the moderation process through prompting questions such as "explain your understanding from a peer perspective of moderation" and "having been through the moderation experience, how would you explain the process to your student peers?"

Data analysis

In phase one, the marked copies and rubrics were collated (see table 2-4) and compared through discussion of the marks for each section with the students. The phase two focus group discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and de-identified. Thematic analysis was conducted as follows (Braun & Clarke, 2006): 1) familiarisation with transcribed data by two researchers; 2) generation of themes by two independent researchers, reviewing for significant nodes for extraction for further analysis. Extracted themes were reviewed by a third researcher and any uncertainties were discussed until consensus was reached; 3) identification of four broad themes by grouping categorised themes; 4) reviewing themes for refinement by grouping and collapsing similar themes and discarding inconsistent themes; 5) defining and finalising theme names by two members of the research team, that was later reviewed and verified by two other researchers and; 6) themes were compared for similarities and differences against the reflections made by the marking team in relation to final essay grades allocated, marking style, rationale underpinning essay appraisal and the overall moderation experience.

Trustworthiness and rigor of the data were achieved through multiple strategies. All participants were provided with the opportunity to member check both the audio transcripts and established themes and request any alterations (McConnell-Henry, 2011). Data were further triangulated with multiple researchers coding and analysing the data transcripts and refining themes to create a rich description of participants' experiences (Lincoln, 2000; Taylor, 2007). Reflective practices were engaged in by the research team when reviewing, refining and determining the codes and themes. The process of interpretation was enhanced through the majority of research team members also being teaching staff in the unit and reflecting on their teaching experiences to guide the analysis (Taylor, 2007).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE2017-0139) in Western Australia. An information letter briefly outlining the purpose of the study was sent to participants and written and informed consent was obtained and data collected from the study were de-identified and securely stored to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of participants.

Results

Quantitative moderation results

The moderation marks of the students and those of tutors (marking team) are presented in Tables 2 to 4. Table 2 presents marks assigned for the 'low' scoring essay, Table 3 presents marks for the 'moderate' scoring essay, and Table 4 presents marks assigned to the 'high' scoring essay.

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, students assigned lower marks to both the 'low' (Table 2) and 'moderate' (Table 3) scoring essays compared to tutors. This was however reversed for the 'high' scoring essay (Table 4) with students assigning higher marks than tutors. On average, there was a 0.84 (SD: 0.56) score difference across the five criteria between students and tutors, and a 3.7 (SD: 0.46) score difference for total scores. Across all essays, the largest score discrepancies between student and tutor marks were observed in criteria 4 'DDA integration' and criteria 5 'Grammar'.

Table 2. Moderation for essay 1: student and tutor (marking team) comparison

Participant	Criteria 1 Overall organisation		Criteria 2 Analysis and critique		Criteria 3 Understanding and application of theories		Criteria 4 DDA integration		Criteria 5 Grammar		Total out of 35	
	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor
1	1.4	3.5	3.5	4.2	1.4	4.2	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	13.3	18.9
2	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.2	3.5	3.5	1.4	4.2	1.4	1.4	13.3	16.8
3	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	1.4	3.5	3.5	1.4	3.5	15.4	15.4
4	3.5	3.5	4.2	4.2	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.2	1.4	3.5	16.1	18.9
5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	1.4	1.4	1.4	3.5	1.4	1.4	11.2	13.3
6	3.5	N/A	4.2	N/A	1.4	N/A	1.4	N/A	1.4	N/A	11.9	N/A
Average	3.2	3.5	3.7	3.9	2.5	2.8	2.5	3.8	1.8	2.7	13.5	16.7

Note. DDA: Disability Discrimination Act

Table 3. Moderation for essay 2: student and tutor (marking team) comparison

	Criteria 1 Overall organisation		Criteria 2 Analysis and critique		Criteria 3 Understanding and application of theories		Criteria 4 DDA integration		Criteria 5 Grammar		Total out of 35	
Participa nt	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r
1	4.2	3.5	5.25	5.3	4.2	3.5	3.5	4.2	3.5	3.5	20.65	20.0
2	3.5	4.2	4.2	5.3	3.5	4.2	4.2	5.3	1.4	4.2	16.8	23.1
3	4.2	4.2	4.2	5.3	4.2	3.5	4.2	5.3	1.4	4.2	18.2	22.4
4	4.2	5.3	4.2	5.3	3.5	0.0	3.5	7.0	1.4	5.3	16.8	22.8
5	3.5	4.2	4.2	5.3	4.2	4.2	4.2	5.3	3.5	4.2	19.6	23.1
6	4.2	N/A	4.2	N/A	3.5	N/A	4.2	N/A	1.4	N/A	17.5	N/A
Average	4.0	4.3	4.4	5.3	3.9	3.1	4.0	5.4	2.1	4.3	18.3	22.3

Note. DDA: Disability Discrimination Act

Table 4. Moderation for essay 3: student and tutor (marking team) comparison

	Criteria 1 Overall organisation		Criteria 2 Analysis and critique		Criteria 3 Understanding and application of theories		Criteria 4 DDA integration		Criteria 5 Grammar		Total out of 35	
Participa nt	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r	Student	Tuto r
1	7	7.0	7	5.3	7	5.3	7	4.2	5.25	5.3	33.25	27.0
2	7	7.0	7	7.0	5.25	5.3	5.25	7.0	7	7.0	31.5	33.3
3	7	7.0	7	7.0	5.25	7.0	7	7.0	7	5.3	33.25	33.3
4	7	4.2	7	4.2	7	5.3	7	5.3	7	5.3	35	24.2
5	7	5.3	7	7.0	7	7.0	7	5.3	7	5.3	35	29.8
6	7	N/A	7	N/A	5.25	N/A	7	N/A	7	N/A	33.25	N/A
Average	7.0	6.1	7.0	6.1	6.1	6.0	6.7	5.7	6.7	5.6	33.5	29.5

Note. DDA: Disability Discrimination Act

Qualitative thematic results

Three themes emerged illustrating the experiences of the students in the moderation process: 1) student

empowerment, 2) transparency and increased understanding of the moderation process, and 3) understanding of the assessor mind-set.

Theme One: Student empowerment

Participants described how they felt empowered as they were given a voice through the moderation process. They regarded this moderation process as an opportunity to speak up outside of the classroom environment, and they felt that they were able to contribute to the unit, “having the opportunity to ask us to be the voice of every other student. Because we are the users and we’re the ones that are doing the assessments...it’s really important that we got to tweak it a little bit.”

Another student indicated, “I do definitely think that a lot of us feel quite invisible ...being a part of something... it’s really meaningful for us...We feel more valued.” It was common among participants to describe feeling honoured to be part of this process. One of the participants stated, “I was quite excited and felt honoured to be asked to be a part of the process.” This notion was echoed by another participant “...there’s a lot of students in our cohort and...to be part of something...it made me feel good.”

An underlying factor for student empowerment for participants was a feeling derived from a perceived power-relationship between students and tutors, “I think more of us (students) are fearful of getting into trouble. Maybe if we do speak up or complain about something...if we complain it may affect our mark...”

Theme Two: Transparency and increased understanding of the moderation process

Participants reflected that being involved with the moderation process created a feeling of transparency. The moderation process provided the participants with a greater depth of insight and understanding of the complexities of the thought process, decision making and utilization of the marking rubric and application of a grade to a piece of work:

I think a lot of the students – and I know before I started this process, had no idea about what it actually takes to mark a paper and the impact it has on you psychologically – because it does – you’ve read one paper and it influences how you ‘read’ others.

This, in turn, provided a unique opportunity to understand the moderation process was, in fact, a tool for tutors to ensure fairness and equality in marking:

The tutors aren’t ‘out’ to get us. It’s just their way to make sure that everyone’s on the same page and that it is equal.... I suppose it’s like a ‘safety-guard’ to ensure that all the markers are on the same page, start on a more level playing field.

The participants also described how the transparency of the moderation process facilitated a better understanding of their own work:

We critique our own work while we’re doing the marking. We’re constantly asking “Is this good enough? What do I need to add in? Is this pertaining to the rubric?” I think when we went into it, it was – we’re looking at this as if it was our own. What ‘we’ would change and what’s not ‘right’ and stuff like that. Whereas the ‘educational’ staff, look at ‘What are they doing right? Which bits are in there and what’s working?’ Yeah, so it was very different.

Of particular note, participants reflected on their tendency to mark students more harshly than the tutors “I feel like we as students were really ‘hard’ on – we’re hard on ourselves and therefore we were harder on the others when we were marking”.

The moderation process provided an opportunity for the participants to gain insight into the process that is otherwise distant from their usual students' life. The participants discussed the value of the practical experiences to mark assignments and the merit that they were able to see the process of how tutors mark. One of the participants discussed her experience of moderating an assignment whilst contrasting with her own process of completing assignments. The participants also described their acquired understanding of the complexity in regard to time spent in the marking process.

Participants also discussed how participating in the moderation process gave them an understanding of the time constraints associated with the process. One of the participants stated, "the really short time limit was a struggle." Another participant echoed this and described common experiences among students "if students had a little bit better of an idea of how much work it actually takes to mark a paper, they might be a bit more understanding of the really big 'gap' between submission and receiving a grade"

Theme Three: Understanding the assessor mindset

Participants commented on how the moderation process provided them with insight into the mind-set of the examiner and provided them with skills for self-reflection and critical analysis:

Something that was really common when we were doing the actual moderation process was that we all felt we learned so much from the assignment...it's more about you might have an 'understanding' of what's going on. But your writing 'fails' you. I think we said it when we were marking the first two. If we sat down with whoever wrote these – they could probably tell us their ideas and back it up. It's just the writing that actually 'lets you down.'

Participants described how being involved in the moderation process of the assignment provided a reflective voice, validating their own academic skills "It's nice to keep getting those 'light bulb' moments where you are like "Aha!...you can see it starting to gel and being applied." This reflective process was also experienced from a role reversal perspective, with participants putting themselves in the shoes of the teaching staff and other students, "Just seeing yourself in those 'shoes' like how would you feel, you know? In doing their job it's actually quite challenging...Trying to portray that understanding to other people and how you would you feel." Similarly, participants expressed insight into what makers may be thinking and how it relates to the process of learning "You guys (teaching staff) actually look at "Are they (students) actually getting it? Are they (students) learning stuff?" Whereas we look at "Are we doing it right? Well, that doesn't look right or that doesn't make sense."

Discussion

The aim of this pilot study was to examine the feasibility of including students in the moderation process and to explore students' experiences of collaborating in the marking and moderating process of a written assignment. Increasing collaboration with students is imperative given that the tertiary education system is increasingly focused on enhancing the student and educational experience (Curan & Millard, 2016). Through preliminary, this study provides important insights into how student collaboration in the assignment marking and moderation processes may impact the transmission of knowledge and development of learning.

Though caution must be exercised when interpreting quantitative results from this study, it was found that when examining the marks assigned to essays by the students, despite some larger discrepancies observed between individual raters, students provided marks which were, on average, within one mark of the tutors. This may suggest that students largely appeared to understand the moderation process following an explanation from the tutors. While marks provided by students were largely consistent with tutors, there was a tendency for students to provide 'lower' and 'moderate' scoring essays, with lower marks than tutors, with this reversed for the 'higher' scoring essay. Further investigation is required to explore the reasoning for this pattern of results, however, some tentative explanation for this finding may be found in the responses from students, who reported that as they are harsh on themselves, they were similarly harsh on other students. Thus it is possible that the pattern of marking observed was the result of students benchmarking their assignments against other students during the moderation process. It is possible that differences between student and tutor marks were due to a lack of previous experience in these processes.

Participants in the study expressed ideas about being valued as a collaborator and being provided with a voice. Having a voice is intrinsic to identity formation (Waterman, 2004). Having a voice provides opportunities for expression of thoughts which in turn enables ownership and responsibility of thoughts and actions (Giddens, 1991). As students then develop, they are required to use their student identity to interact, comprehend and position themselves within their educational journey (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). Immersion within a student identity enables students to learn and recognise the limits of their knowledge and the consequences of their actions (Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong, & Gibson, 2005). Participants identified how many of them felt "invisible" and the invitation to moderate provided a voice and insight into their own academic skills and work and how this may be used in the future. This finding is supported by Ross and Buehler (2004) who propose that an increased sense of student identity enables opportunities for increasing confidence, skills and achievement.

Students felt honoured and pleased by being asked to collaborate with tutors in moderation process, perhaps indicating that involving students to engage in the same academic skills and work as tutors, such as moderation, may counterbalance a perceived power-relationship between students and tutors. The study found that power dynamics related to the tertiary education assessment process appeared to have a significant influence on the way that students perceived the moderation process. Of particular concern was the perception by students that the marker was "out to get them" prior to their involvement in these processes. This sentiment is largely consistent with other studies which have identified that students may believe that marker bias influences the marks they receive (Birch, Batten, & Batey, 2015).

The power issue in a tertiary education context is an important factor that nurtures or hinders student-educator relationships (Kantek & Gezer, 2010). For example, a study that investigated university students' perceptions of the educators' use of power found that the most commonly used power by the educators was coercive power that is a power to influence people's behaviours through punishments or threats (Kantek & Gezer, 2010). Previous research found that many students agreed for educators to hold more power than themselves (Chan, Tong, & Henderson, 2017). However, power bases other than coercive power, such as expert power, based on knowledge and experience, should be used, if academic staff are to foster student-educator relationships (Kantek & Gezer, 2010). A positive student-educator relationship supports students' learning processes (Chan et al., 2017), and may assist students in developing support-

seeking behaviours that have been found to predict students' academic performance (Ofori & Charlton, 2002). There is a shift in the education paradigm where students are regarded as collaborators in facilitating their learning processes (Falchikov, 2005).

Greater transparency in the marking process through the inclusion of students during moderation may serve to further enhance students' perceptions of feedback. Trust in the competency of the marker and the assessment process significantly influences how students perceive feedback (Carless, 2008), with ambiguity related to the assessment process likely to erode student trust. Greater transparency in the assessment process facilitated by the inclusion of students in the moderation process may have assisted students to develop a greater degree of trust in the integrity of the assessment process (Carless, 2008). While the inclusion of students in the moderation process didn't necessarily reduce the actual power differentials between students and tutors, it assisted the students to be more willing to accept the distribution of power characteristic of the student-tutor relationship (Carless, 2008, 2013).

Although including students in the moderation process did not seek to reduce power differentials between lecturers and students, it was anticipated that students may choose to become more empowered as a result. The effect of being disempowered by the assessment process was in fact outlined by students discussing the "psychological impact" of not knowing about the assessment process. Upon reflection of the process, it appeared that inclusion in the moderation process afforded students a greater understanding of feedback and assessments. It is possible that this enhanced understanding enabled students to exert greater control over the assessment process.

Models of empowerment have further purported the inclusion of congruency characteristics between an organisation and the individual in contributing to empowerment (Buchanan, 2007). Clear discrepancies in student and lecturer understanding of the assessment process were apparent prior to the involvement of students in the moderation process. Following inclusion in these processes, students reported having a greater understanding of the assessment process and the perspectives of the lecturers. It may, therefore, be hypothesised that in addition to improving knowledge and access to information, the inclusion of students in the moderation process also enhanced the congruency between student and lecturer understanding, further contributing to student empowerment.

It must be noted that empowerment is considered a multidimensional construct (Spreitzer, 1995). The inclusion of students in the moderation process may have provided an environment more conducive to the development of empowerment, however, it did not address all dimensions related to the construct of empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995). It may be argued that students were not empowered by the teaching staff, but rather through improved conditions in which students can choose to be empowered. Enabling students to be empowered during the assessment process may result in a shift in the psychological state in which they enter the assessment process. Further, empowering and involving students in tertiary education may also contribute to improved well-being (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker, 2019). Rather than perceiving feedback as unhelpful (Weaver, 2006), and as a negative reflection on their identity (Higgins et al., 2001; Rowe, 2017), students may be more likely to perceive feedback as an opportunity for learning, shifting their locus of control during the assessment process from the lecturer to themselves (Nicol, 2008).

Implications and Future Directions

Based on the preliminary findings presented in this pilot study, it is evident that the inclusion of students in the moderation process is beneficial to student learning and engagement. For example, participating students in this study reported not only a greater understanding of the assessment process but also in developing reflection and critical analysis skills, enabling greater empowerment as a result. Tutors and lecturers within tertiary education contexts may benefit from considering ways through which they may share power with students, such as including students in discussions about assignments and marking processes.

Given the preliminary nature of these findings, future research would benefit from further exploring how students can be enabled to be more empowered during the assessment and moderation process. Future research must also consider how these findings may translate to other student cohorts or other assignment formats, such as for verbal assignments or how power-sharing may be extended, for example including students in the designing and moderation of particular aspects of course content. The participants of this study were also in their third academic year, future research should also examine the effect of involvement at different academic stages (e.g., first-year students). The current study provides a pilot methodology for a larger study examining the participation of students in the moderation process.

Limitations

A purposive sampling method was used whereby participants were purposefully selected for participation by the researchers (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2014). As this study was a pilot, employing a novel method of engaging students in the moderation process, participating students were selected based on their reflective abilities to ensure a thorough exploration of their experiences. It is possible however that the use of this sampling method introduced significant bias (Krefting, 1991). The novel nature of this study also necessitated the use of a small sample size, introducing possible limitations (Sandelowski, 1995). A larger number of students would enable a greater ability to test significant effects of student involvement in the moderation process. The students participating in this study were mature aged students, and likely to have had other employment or educational experiences. As the assessment process is influenced by a student's subjective experiences (Higgins et al., 2001; Pekrun et al., 2007; Rowe, 2017), the views expressed by the students in the current study may not be representative of typical undergraduate students. Caution must also be used when generalising these findings to other contexts (Polit & Beck, 2010). It is possible that results may differ across countries, disciplines and assignment types, with previous research finding evidence to suggest that feedback should be tailored to disciplines and assignments (Taylor & da Silva, 2013). It should also be noted that there was a three-week delay between participating in the moderation process and participating in the focus group. It is possible that this may have influenced the students' recollection and reported perceptions of the moderation process.

Conclusion

Given the discrepancy between student and lecturer interpretation of course content and assessment procedures, the findings from this study highlighted the importance of understanding students' perceptions

of the content and moderation processes when marking a written essay. Though preliminary results from this pilot study suggest that the inclusion of students in the moderation process is both feasible and beneficial for students, thus an extension of this pilot methodology to larger samples is warranted. The process of engaging and including students in the moderation process not only created a sense of empowerment and ownership through contributing to the unit but increased students' understanding in regards to the complexities in the thought processes and decision-making criteria implemented by tutors. The benefits of student collaboration may have the potential to positively influence student identity, particularly in the interpretation and application of feedback. It may also increase understanding in relation to the perceived power differentials during the assessment process, providing an environment more conducive to students choosing to be empowered during these processes.

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Table 1. Characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Couse enrollment status	Previous education prior to course enrollment
Student 1	18-21	Full-time	Year 12 high school
Student 2	26-29	Full-time	Year 11 high school; Occupational Therapy Enabling course
Student 3	26-29	Full-time	Year 12 high school; partial completion of Bachelor of Science Human Biology Preclinical; Technical and Further Education College Diploma III
Student 4	34-37	Full-time	Year 11 high school
Student 5	26-29	Full-time	Year 12 high school; TAFE Certificate III: Hairdressing

Student 6 30-33 Full-time Year 12 high school, Technical and Further Education College Certificate IV

Table 2. Moderation for essay 1: student and tutor (marking team) comparison

	Criteria 1 Overall organisation		Criteria 2 Analysis and critique		Criteria 3 Understanding and application of theories		Criteria 4 DDA integration		Criteria 5 Grammar		Total out of 35	
Participant	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor
1	1.4	3.5	3.5	4.2	1.4	4.2	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	13.3	18.9
2	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.2	3.5	3.5	1.4	4.2	1.4	1.4	13.3	16.8
3	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	1.4	3.5	3.5	1.4	3.5	15.4	15.4
4	3.5	3.5	4.2	4.2	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.2	1.4	3.5	16.1	18.9
5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	1.4	1.4	1.4	3.5	1.4	1.4	11.2	13.3
6	3.5	N/A	4.2	N/A	1.4	N/A	1.4	N/A	1.4	N/A	11.9	N/A
Average	3.2	3.5	3.7	3.9	2.5	2.8	2.5	3.8	1.8	2.7	13.5	16.7

Note. DDA: Disability Discrimination Act

Table 3. Moderation for essay 2: student and tutor (marking team) comparison

	Criteria 1 Overall organisation		Criteria 2 Analysis and critique		Criteria 3 Understanding and application of theories		Criteria 4 DDA integration		Criteria 5 Grammar		Total out of 35	
Participant	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor
1	4.2	3.5	5.25	5.3	4.2	3.5	3.5	4.2	3.5	3.5	20.65	20.0
2	3.5	4.2	4.2	5.3	3.5	4.2	4.2	5.3	1.4	4.2	16.8	23.1
3	4.2	4.2	4.2	5.3	4.2	3.5	4.2	5.3	1.4	4.2	18.2	22.4
4	4.2	5.3	4.2	5.3	3.5	0.0	3.5	7.0	1.4	5.3	16.8	22.8
5	3.5	4.2	4.2	5.3	4.2	4.2	4.2	5.3	3.5	4.2	19.6	23.1
6	4.2	N/A	4.2	N/A	3.5	N/A	4.2	N/A	1.4	N/A	17.5	N/A
Average	4.0	4.3	4.4	5.3	3.9	3.1	4.0	5.4	2.1	4.3	18.3	22.3

Note. DDA: Disability Discrimination Act

Table 4. Moderation for essay 3: student and tutor (marking team) comparison

	Criteria 1		Criteria 2		Criteria 3		Criteria 4		Criteria 5		Total out of 35	
	Overall organisation		Analysis and critique		Understanding and application of theories		DDA integration		Grammar			
Participant	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor	Student	Tutor
1	7	7.0	7	5.3	7	5.3	7	4.2	5.25	5.3	33.25	27.0
2	7	7.0	7	7.0	5.25	5.3	5.25	7.0	7	7.0	31.5	33.3
3	7	7.0	7	7.0	5.25	7.0	7	7.0	7	5.3	33.25	33.3
4	7	4.2	7	4.2	7	5.3	7	5.3	7	5.3	35	24.2
5	7	5.3	7	7.0	7	7.0	7	5.3	7	5.3	35	29.8
6	7	N/A	7	N/A	5.25	N/A	7	N/A	7	N/A	33.25	N/A
Average	7.0	6.1	7.0	6.1	6.1	6.0	6.7	5.7	6.7	5.6	33.5	29.5

Note. DDA: Disability Discrimination Act