

Title of example of practice: Quality Assessment in Literature Courses in One Highly Rated English Department in Sweden

Author

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

Uppsala University

Departments/faculties in which initiative is/was implemented/to be implemented:

Department of English

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

The following case study is based on interviews with two teachers (both with a Ph.D. in English, with a specialization in American Literature) at Uppsala University, Sweden. The case study is indicative of a group work approach with the aim to maintain quality assessment of students' work in literature courses in English. The teachers want to ensure that the students' exams are fairly and equally assessed and that the students' work meets the standards and learning outcomes stated in the syllabus. The case study presents three different measures that are or have been used to achieve these purposes: a half-day grading conference, the use of course coordinators for courses taught by more than one teacher, and a mentor system.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

At the English department at Uppsala University, there are often many teachers involved in teaching the same course unit, in this case a first-semester literature course, to different groups. It is important to ensure that the students' exams are fairly and equally assessed by the teachers and that the students' work meets the standards and learning outcomes stated in the syllabus. The assessment for this particular course unit is based on an open-book exam and a home-written essay on one of the additional texts on the reading list.

Description of activity or initiative**(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)**

One measure that was brought up in the interview was a half-day conference about grading exams. It occurred when there were many new teachers teaching the first-semester literature course (7.5 ECTS). This conference actually took place when I was a doctoral student (Ph.D. candidate) at Uppsala University and taught the course. As I recall, we were eight teachers including a few doctoral students teaching different groups in seminar form. The course also included and includes a series of lectures; each lecture is taught by a different teacher, and the full professors also give lectures in this first-semester course, which is a quality factor. Each of the eight teachers who had taught the seminars submitted what they saw as two borderline exams: one between Pass and Fail and one between Pass with Distinction and Pass. These exams were discussed at the conference in order to help the teachers in their grading of all of the exams. This type of grading conference has not been used since then. The reason is that there have not been that many new teachers teaching the course.

The measures that are in place to assure quality assessment today are course coordinators and mentors. The course coordinator – there is one for each course unit taught by more than one teacher – helps new teachers with assessment of borderline cases and other questions regarding the course. In addition to the course coordinator, there is also a mentor for doctoral students who teach. The mentor has taken a course in mentorship.

In general, there are meetings where teachers teaching the same course unit discuss and construct exams and hand-outs together. Herion Sarafidis and Löfroth also talked about courses that the two of them had developed and teach on their own every other semester or together (teaching half of the classes each).

Evaluative comments**(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)**

It is obvious that the English department at Uppsala University has well-developed mechanisms to assure the quality of assessment and that there is a great deal of cooperation and consensus around everything from designing courses to hand-outs, exam questions, and assessing exams. Löfroth and Herion Sarafidis talked about the importance of maintaining an “institutional identity” and agreement on norms/standards. These standards are kept up in different kinds of meetings and discussions of which the half-day conference on grading is one example. The course coordinator also has an important function, especially when new teachers need help with or hints on how to assess exams and other kinds of student work. Doctoral students also have a mentor to whom they can turn when they teach and who monitors them as teachers. Herion Sarafidis pointed out that it is an important quality aspect that the doctoral students are not “turned loose” in the classroom without help and monitoring, since the undergraduate students are entitled to quality teaching as well as fair assessment.

Advice to others

Take advantage of the opportunities to cooperate with colleagues when, for instance, planning courses, teaching, designing assignments and exams, and assessing students’ work. In most cases, cooperation helps to maintain and enhance quality.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

As a doctoral student, teaching my first university literature course at the English department at Uppsala, I was grateful to be one of many teachers teaching the course, since there was always somebody to talk to about the seminars, and I very much appreciated the half-day grading conference as well as the meeting when we constructed the exam together. Like my interviewees, I am certain that this way of working does indeed promote fair and equal assessment of student exams; to a large extent, it is very professional.

However, this way of working demands a large language department with many teachers and students. It also means that a teacher's individual freedom of choosing what to teach and what assignments to give is severely limited, which might be more or less frustrating depending on the teacher's experience, personality, and cultural belonging. For instance, changing the literature list of the first-semester literature course entails a great deal of negotiation involving a great number of teachers.

Further details

e.g. web links; relevant references/publications; alternative contact names

The university, Uppsala University, was singled out (together with Göteborg University and Umeå University) as particularly good in the field of English by "Högskoleverket" (The National Agency of HE) based on the evaluation of the subject in 2004. This pronouncement is the motivation behind the interview conducted by me during the spring term of 2009 with questions focused on issues of quality assessment and enhancement in literature courses and programs.

The English department's web site is a rich source of information (in English):

<http://www.engelska.uu.se/undergrad.page.html>

Here are some examples of links to material posted on that page that is related to the course that I have mentioned above.

First-term (A-level) Literature:

Lecture schedule: <http://www.engelska.uu.se/a.lit.plan.html>

Home Essay: <http://www.engelska.uu.se/a.lit.essay.html>

Open-book exam: <http://www.engelska.uu.se/a.lit.examinfo.html>