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Why teacher moderation?

"When teachers work together to consider the work students have produced, or listen to their presentations or analyse their electronic projects and so on, they bring the collective wisdom of all the people in the group to the exercise. More eyes (and consequently more brains) result in more reliable determinations of what students understand."

• Earl, 2004, p. 41

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You will explore the teacher moderation process through the experiences of three teachers of students in the junior division as they come together to compare, confirm, and adjust judgments about their students' work.

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SECRETARIAT
SPECIAL EDITION # 2

**TEACHER MODERATION:
COLLABORATIVE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WORK**

There is considerable evidence that assessment, when practised effectively, can improve student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). One of the most powerful research-based strategies for linking assessment to improved instructional practice is teacher moderation. This process involves educators in a collaborative discussion of student work based on predetermined assessment criteria.

Little et al. (2003) found that teachers who engaged consistently in the moderation process were able to:

- assess student performance more consistently, effectively, confidently, and fairly;
- build common knowledge about curriculum expectations and levels of achievement;
- identify strengths and areas for growth based on evidence of student learning;
- adjust and acquire new learning by comparing one's thinking to that of another student or teacher;
- share effective practices to meet the needs of all students, monitor progress, and celebrate growth.

The most powerful aspect of teacher moderation is the discussion involved in assessing student work and the collective sharing of effective strategies in planning next steps for instruction.

Moderation Process vs. Independent Assessment

When teachers gather to review and assess student work, they bring different experiences and often find that their understandings of curriculum expectations, levels of achievement, and instructional effectiveness differ. Assessment practices can have wide variance from classroom to classroom. Opportunities for professional dialogue about assessment practices bring coherence to those practices, nourish a climate of inquiry that supports student learning, and challenge teachers to focus future instruction on specific learning outcomes.



September 2007

ISSN: 1913 8482 (Print)
ISSN: 1913 8490 (Online)

Creating a culture of trust ...

"When a Grade 4 teacher questioned my assessment decision and disagreed with me about a child's work leveled at Level 3 both of us were challenged to dig deeper and align our understandings of the criteria we were using to assess. Our entire team became immersed in a rich dialogue about what makes a Level 3 performance, and what this student needed to do to move forward into a solid 3 range. I recognized at that moment we had established a culture that was open to differing ideas ... we were equitably heard, respected, and unafraid to voice our opinions for the purpose of attaining high student achievement."

- From a reflective journal

Quality common assessments are ...

- based on curriculum expectations
- linked to instruction
- able to measure the intended essential learnings
- used immediately to provide helpful feedback to students
- used to determine patterns and trends in a grade, division, school, or district
- the result of rich professional dialogue focused on student learning
- the medium for developing a common language, consistent criteria, and a collective knowledge base for improved student achievement

The school community benefits when teacher moderation becomes an integral aspect of professional learning. Through the collective wisdom of all participants, school teams delve deeper in the assessment data leading to greater consistency, alignment, and targeted instruction.

Creating a Culture of Trust and Productive Conflict

Building a culture of relational trust will ensure that teachers feel safe to share their ideas, experiences, and opinions. Research tells us that highly effective schools have strong relational trust among all stakeholders (Fullan, 2001). A major aspect of relational trust is the practice of productive conflict, where staff members communicate openly in a professional manner, to improve practice and student success. Teacher moderation is most effective when productive conflict is deeply embedded in the school's culture.

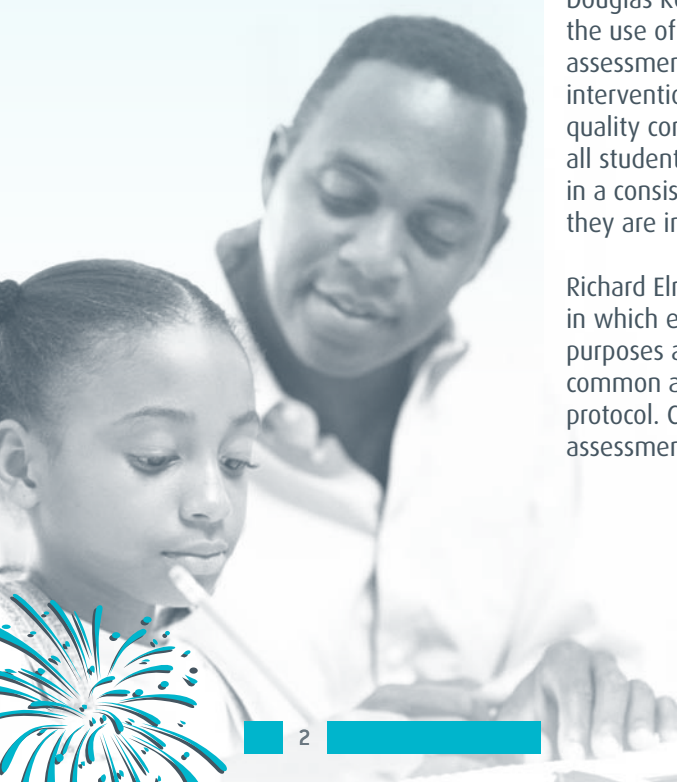
To build a culture of productive conflict may require that we change our own perception of conflict. People often think of conflict as an argument that needs to be won or lost, where one person is right and the other is wrong. Instead, productive conflict should be perceived as a collaborative approach in which the conflict forces us to deepen our knowledge base. Every teacher should feel like he or she is an influential part of the learning community. Teacher moderation cannot be effective if teachers are afraid to risk expressing their thinking, asking questions about the assessment data, or adapting their thinking after listening to the ideas of others.

With established norms that ensure respect, members of a school's Professional Learning Community (PLC) can listen and accept different points of view to deepen knowledge of their students' achievement. In the end, teachers come to agreement through engaged dialogue about what evidence of student learning they are seeing. It is through this dialogue about the evidence of student learning that teachers learn to think deeply about their practices and question aspects of their instructional choices.

Importance of Common Assessments

Douglas Reeves (2006) discusses a major characteristic of highly successful schools – the use of frequent common assessments. When school teams deliver quality common assessments, teachers use the results to make immediate decisions which include interventions that directly affect low-performing students. Schools and districts that use quality common assessments are able to articulate appropriate achievement targets for all students. The administration of common assessment tasks measures student progress in a consistent manner, ensuring that all students, regardless of which class or school they are in, are receiving the key knowledge and skills they need.

Richard Elmore (2007) describes a practice drawn from the medical rounds model, in which educators collect a common body of evidence for diagnostic and formative purposes and then work through targeting explicit improvement practices. The use of common assessments and moderation discussions are a major aspect of this structured protocol. Consistent key criteria that teachers are looking for in quality common assessments enable teachers to constructively interpret data and target instructions.



Steps in the Teacher Moderation Process

This step-by-step process draws on examples of student writing.

Before

1. Decide collaboratively on an assessment task based on identified curricular expectations that will identify students' strengths and learning gaps.
2. Establish assessment tools and resources that will support assessment (e.g., rubrics, checklists, school- or district-based assessments, anchors, rationales, Ontario Curriculum, Guides to Effective Instruction).
3. Plan a time for the teacher moderation session to occur immediately after conducting the assessment – remember, feedback should be “just in time” in order to make a positive impact on students.
4. Make multiple copies of student work to distribute to group members.
5. Book a location with table space to spread out papers, books, and resources.
6. Decide on a chairperson to facilitate the process. (This can be a rotating role.)

During

7. Have a teacher read a student's work aloud to listen for the fluency and ease of writing.
8. Confer with group members as the student's work is assessed using the pre-set criteria.
9. Assess the writing through the four categories of knowledge and skills using the four levels of achievement.
10. Refer to anchors, rationales, rubrics, curriculum documents, and various support materials.
11. If appropriate, listen to the student's teacher, who may share the context of the work and more information about the student (at times, anonymity of students ensures that prejudgments and bias are not part of the process).
12. Engage in a respectful dialogue to develop a common understanding of the levels of achievement and assessment criteria.
13. Use language from the achievement chart (e.g., *limited, some, considerable, high degree*).
14. Collectively discuss students' strengths and learning gaps and determine patterns and trends in the data.
15. Set goals for student progress based on curriculum expectations and achievement chart categories. Investigate and share key instructional strategies. Plan next steps.

After

16. Deliver next steps for instruction.
17. Begin the cycle again. Assess student progress and analyse to determine the effectiveness of targeted instructional strategies.
18. Set new goals for student, class, and school improvement.

To consider ...

Before – Key Points for Effective Moderation Sessions

- Begin and end on time.
- Bring student work to the teacher moderation session. (Work samples may be predetermined based on particular students being tracked.)
- Listen to each other with respect and trust.
- Be open to and be willing to share new ideas.
- Make decisions based on improving student learning.

During – Probe the Data through Asking Deep Questions

- What is your reasoning behind the assigned level of achievement?
- Which descriptors in the rubric best match the student's writing?
- What evidence from the student's writing do you see that helps you determine the rating?
- What are the areas for improvement that will move the student forward?
- How will you give formative feedback to the student?

After – Time Your Moderation Session

Take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to assess one student's work. Do not rush this process. If the team collectively scores one or two pieces of work from each teacher's class, this should give sufficient experience to calibrate this assessment session. Once teachers feel more confident, they can assess students on their own, while working at the table with group members. This provides opportunities to collaboratively assess pieces that require discussion.



Example of Teacher Moderation: Grade 2 Recount

Grade 2 Culminating Writing Task		Term 2 Feb 13.		
Student Name	Knowledge & Understanding	Thinking	Communication	Application
	4	4	4	3

Our picnic at Saugeen park My mom took me and my sister and our dog JJ. to The Saugeen Park. We drove to The Park early in the morning. The first thing we did was see The special birds. My mom's favourite bird was The white Silkies. They had feathers like white silk. Next we feed the gees. One got mad at JJ and JJ braked at it! After The gees we walked to The deer. We feed deer and the turkey and they liked it. Then The deer liked my sister's hand. Then we walked down Rabbit Road. But we saw no Rabbits.	Finally we ate lunch by The Playground. We ate hot dogs on a bun, yogurt and apples. My mom eat tofu. The last thing we did was Play on The Play ground. My sister got stuck on The teter totter. We had a grate Trip To Saugeen Park. The End
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Writing Prompt:

In your journal, write about a special trip you took. Recount the events that took place.

This writing task was independently completed after the teacher spent five days explicitly teaching recount writing, through modeled, shared, interactive, guided, and independent practices.

Teachers collaboratively assessed this writing sample with reference to the four categories of knowledge and skills outlined in the Ontario Curriculum. Included in the assessment chart (below) are *their collective thoughts*, after working through a teacher moderation process, based on the achievement charts, a task-specific rubric, anchors, and rationales.

We thank the group of teachers who provided this transcript reflecting their collective work.

Knowledge and Understanding – Level 4

This piece of writing demonstrates a high degree of effectiveness in the student's knowledge and understanding of the recount text form. The writing includes a thorough recount of the trip's events. The piece is organized in a logical and sequential way and includes all features that are necessary for a thorough recount (i.e., setting, characters, chronological events, and closing sentence).

Thinking – Level 4

The writing contains ideas about the trip that are supported with a high degree of effectiveness. Each event is developed through the use of thorough details (e.g., "Finally we ate lunch by the playground. We ate hot dogs on a bun ..."). The writing also demonstrates evidence of critical thinking processes (i.e., the ability to interpret the goose's feelings and how his dog JJ responded).

Communication – Level 4

This piece of writing expresses and organizes ideas in the journal recount with a high degree of effectiveness. The writing includes appropriate use of punctuation such as periods, commas in a list, and exclamation marks. Sentence structure is varied throughout and spelling of most words is conventional. The writer thoroughly communicates to the reader using appropriate word choices indicating sequence and time (i.e., "early in the morning ... first thing ... next ... then ... finally ... the last thing").

Application – Level 3

The writing includes connections between recounting the trip's activities and life situations with considerable effectiveness. This is demonstrated in the statement about seeing no rabbits when walking down Rabbit Road. The writer also makes a connection about why the bird is called "White Silkies" (i.e., "My mom's favourite bird was the White Silkies."). More reflection would have made the closing statement stronger. Probing questions such as, "What did this trip remind you of? Why was it such a great trip?" will help the writer develop skills in application.

Grade 2 Recount continued

Next steps with the end in mind:

The classroom/school data revealed that most of the students had achieved the expectations for recount writing – a cause for celebration of student growth and improved learning. But, it was also observed that many had developed limited metacognitive skills. For example, when the teacher asked the student, “How did you generate your ideas for your recount writing?” the reply was, “I don’t know, I just did it.” To another question, “Why did you read your recount aloud when checking over your writing?” the student responded, “... because you told me to.”

In order to write about metacognition, writers must reflect on their thinking, monitor their understandings, and make connections to self, text, and world. As students develop their writing and metcognition skills, they are expected to use various strategies, including graphic organizers, writer’s notebook, mentor texts, and reading aloud to check for fluency (e.g., grammar, conventions, sentence structure).

When a student reports being challenged by a writing piece, the teacher should have the student discuss or write about the challenges and the strategies used before, during, and after writing. The student needs to think about questions like: “What made sense?” “What didn’t make sense?” “How does this fit into my schema?” “How did this writing change my schema?”

Backward Mapping During Moderation

A major benefit of teacher moderation is the opportunity for teachers to plan with the end in mind, based on the learning needs of students. Research tells us that the backward mapping design framework emphasizes the teacher’s critical role as the designer of student learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

What curriculum expectations will be the focus in your instruction, based on the evidence found from the assessment data?

- At the end of a two- or three-week teaching unit, what culminating task do you expect students to perform independently? How will your students demonstrate the essential learnings of the expectations?
- Begin to work backward from the culminating task to determine what you need to teach so that your students can accomplish the final task. What knowledge, thinking processes, and performance skills do your students require in order to be successful in the achievement of the culminating activity?
- At the beginning of the unit, there will be high teacher support, gradually releasing the responsibility onto the student until independent practice is actualized.
- Throughout the unit, formative assessment and continual monitoring are necessary to ensure students are making progress.
- At the end of the unit, teachers reconvene for another teacher moderation session to measure growth in learning and to determine the effectiveness of targeted strategies.

Benefits of Teacher Moderation

Benefit #1 – Consistency & Reliability

Through moderation, teachers and administrators confirm and validate student progress as they develop a common understanding of the criteria that are being applied and the levels of achievement outlined in the curriculum documents.

The Ontario Curriculum’s achievement chart outlines four categories of knowledge and skill for all subject areas: (1) Knowledge and Understanding, (2) Thinking, (3) Communication, and (4) Application.

Teachers assess student work in a balanced way with respect to the four categories and achievement of expectations. The moderation process allows teachers to build a common understanding of the criteria included in the curriculum documents. Consistent language and common understandings are developed through discussions referencing student work samples. In the end, moderation by groups of teachers promotes consistency and reliability in assessing student samples when measured against predetermined curriculum criteria.

Benefit #2 – Collaborative Planning

Through rich dialogue and developing consistent standards for students, schools develop meaningful and deep knowledge of the criteria, descriptors, and qualifiers for each category across the four levels of achievement. Teachers compare, confirm, and adjust judgments about student work, discovering what a Level 3 performance looks like (the provincial standard), and what is required for students to move towards Level 3 or higher. When teachers use the moderation process the natural outcome is the collaborative planning of next steps to improve achievement for all students and to close the gap between high- and low-performing students.



Example of Teacher Moderation: Grade 5 Persuasive/Opinion Text Form

Grade 5
Writing Assessment - Persuasive Text Form

Date Oct 8

Student	Knowledge & Understanding	Thinking	Communication	Application
	2	2	3-	2

Good morning boys and girls. Please listen carefully. This is what I saw. The other day I saw a bunch of grade 5 girls throwing their garbage all around the play area. These girls then ran to the Baseball diamond and left juice boxes on the benches. After the girls went into the school.

Boys and girls, Please listen. Our principal wants everyone to stop the garbage and mess. Our school is looking pretty gross out there. It is important to keep your school yard clean. Here are my reasons:

First, what if a little student from Kindergarten picks up a sharp piece of garbage and then he is cut and starts to bleed.

Second, what will other people think of our school when they visit or walk by our playground. They will probably think we are a "ucky pigs".

Third, the garbage blows all around and can end up in other people's houses and backyards. These people will be mad at our school!

Fourth, the mess will bring those bad Seagulls to our school and they will bother us at recess time.

Please, clean up!

From a concerned grade 5 student

Writing Prompt:

Your school has a litter problem. Students are throwing garbage on the playground and leaving their empty pop cans and juice bottles on the benches. Your principal has asked you to write an announcement to persuade students to stop littering and to promote a clean school environment.

A group of teachers planned a three-week unit of study with the goal to have students independently write a persuasive/opinion text. At the beginning of the unit they assigned the writing task and then collaboratively assessed it through teacher moderation.

Teachers assessed this writing sample with reference to the four categories of knowledge and skills as outlined in the Ontario Curriculum. In the chart (below) are *their collective thoughts* as they underwent the process of moderation, using the achievement charts, a task specific rubric, anchors, and rationales.

We thank the group of teachers who provided this transcript reflecting their collective work.

Knowledge and Understanding – Level 2

The first part of the writing resembles more of a recount, as opposed to stating an opinion and clarifying the problem. Although the announcement format begins with an address to the audience, it ends more like a signature of a letter (i.e., "From a concerned Grade 5 student"). The body of writing includes arguments presented as four reasons. The conclusion has some effectiveness, but requires more depth to successfully bring closure to the persuasive opinion. Specific techniques used in persuasive text forms require explicit teaching (e.g., use research or facts, tug at the reader's emotions, and point out a famous person we trust).

Thinking – Level 2

Further details to support the main idea of the litter problem are required. The writing shows evidence of concrete thinking but does not strongly capture higher order thinking skills, such as demonstrating "respect" for the environment. The writing presents the perspective of a young kindergarten student and the consequences of unsafe garbage, suggesting a critical literacy stance. This idea would have been stronger if it included a comment about the value of responsible behaviour and its impact on safety.

Communication – Level 3

This piece of writing demonstrates voice, style, and tone that are appropriate for this opinion piece. There is a voice of concern communicated in the description of how the neighbouring homes "will be mad at our school!" A sense of urgency is communicated through the use of exclamation marks (i.e., "Please clean up!"). Sentence variation and word choice are effective but can be further developed to demonstrate a solid level three range. For example, the seagulls are described as "bad" – precise adjectives would have been more powerful (e.g., bothersome, disruptive, or trouble-making).

Application – Level 2

Connections are made between the garbage problem and personal/life experiences throughout the piece, (e.g., "What if a little student from kindergarten picks up a sharp piece of garbage and then he is cut and starts to bleed"). Some concrete concepts of the garbage problem are transferred to the writing task with some effectiveness. (e.g., what visitors might think of the school, how neighbouring homes will be mad, and how seagulls will be attracted to the garbage). The application of connections would have been stronger if some knowledge about environmentalism had been included in the writing task (i.e., litterless lunches and recycling).

Grade 5 Persuasive/Opinion Text Form continued

Next steps with the end in mind:

Following a three-week block, students will be asked to write a persuasive letter to a person of authority to promote environmentally friendly practices. During the block, students will receive detailed feedback on their first piece of writing in the unit (assignment above). They will be immersed in a variety of relevant texts and will research and study environmental issues and character development concepts such as caring, responsibility, and respect. In this unit, teachers will teach the structure and features of persuasive text forms, including techniques that writers use to engage readers' emotions and create a sense of urgency.

With respect to the sample written piece, teachers recommended that the classroom teacher carefully select mentor texts for dissection and offer the student choices that support the development of persuasive writing. They thought the plan to immerse the student in texts of all types (e.g., persuasive blogs, letters to the editor, posters, advertisements, commercials, and historical recounts) was an effective instructional choice. They also recommended an individual writing conference with the student to focus on self-assessment of sentence variety and complexity.

Steps to Engage Students in Moderation

This strategy is powerful because it gives students ownership as they work together to build meaningful knowledge of the assessment criteria.

Teachers ...

- decide on an instructional focus (e.g., knowing how to use a specific text form, effective word choice);
- explicitly teach the criteria that they looking for; use tools such as anchors, a rubric, or a checklist;
- use anonymous work samples that represent different levels of achievement;
- collectively discuss reactions to a piece of student writing, identifying criteria and evidence that are aligned, and making suggestions for improvement;
- rate the samples from least to most effective based on criteria identified;
- instruct students to be explicit about their ratings and to justify their reasons by giving evidence from the samples. Have students record their thinking using sticky notes;
- revisit the rubric and add more details in response to feedback from students (students will have ownership).

Students ...

- read the samples in pairs or triads;
- actively participate in the process through asking effective questions;
- share their moderation experiences with the whole group.

Benefits of Teacher Moderation Benefit #3 – Fairness and Equity

Every child can achieve given appropriate time, support, and resources. Teacher moderation brings this important belief statement to reality in every classroom. With ongoing moderation conversations, teachers build a solid understanding of what is expected from their students, ensuring that fairness and equitable practices are in place. Moderation allows for the provincial standard to permeate in each classroom, across schools and among districts, regardless of student demographics or social class. When school communities clearly articulate high expectations for all students, educators are better able to plan and deliver improvement strategies (Pellegrino, et al., 2001).

Benefit #4 – Alignment of Instruction

Teacher moderation fosters the alignment of instruction as teachers share high-yield strategies among the team members. Research strongly suggests that when teachers implement common structures on a school-wide level, students benefit as they journey from grade to grade (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006). Students are consistently surrounded by effective strategies, based on regular teacher moderation inquiry. As learners progress from one grade to the next, they are familiar with such strategies. Instructional time is not spent on teaching the strategies from scratch, but rather on delving deeper based on students' readiness and entry points.



Key Roles in the Teacher Moderation Process

The principal plays a vital role in creating a school culture that values the process of collective learning and planning (Booth & Rowsell, 2007). To ensure that moderation is not an isolated event but an integral part of the assessment, teaching, and learning cycle, the principal:

- schedules regular moderation sessions and makes sure resources are available to respond to assessment results;
- participates in moderation sessions, learning side-by-side with teachers, thereby increasing the staff's knowledge base about students' achievement;
- models effective questioning, accountable talk, and actively contributes to the collegial dialogue about student achievement;
- supports opportunities for distributed leadership.

Teachers have the most direct impact on student achievement and their role during the moderation process is critical. In order to focus moderation sessions on student learning and to help shape a culture that is open to professional learning, rich dialogue, and collaborative planning, teachers:

- collectively discuss results and use this information to plan instruction, providing students with feedback in a timely fashion to help them improve their performance;
- actively participate in sessions through asking effective questions (resulting in building a solid knowledge base about curriculum expectations and achievement levels);
- share their successful instructional strategies and resources with their team, leading to learning opportunities for students that meet their needs precisely.

A critical aspect of the students' role involves identifying what strategies they found to be most helpful during their own learning process. This better informs the moderation process as teachers gain insights from their students' reflections, adding depth to assessment discussions. In order for students to benefit from teacher moderation, they should:

- practise articulating strengths and weaknesses in their learning;
- apply feedback to improve subsequent work.

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