

Senior secondary school-based assessment: quality management processes
and teachers' professional learning

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ABSTRACT

2011 was the first year in which the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) employed social moderation of school-based assessment in all Year 12 subjects. Social moderation had been recommended in the 2006 report of the Ministerial Review of the SACE. The panel recommended greater reliance on the professional judgements of classroom teachers and had been impressed by Queensland's system which, while verifying standards, served as professional development for teachers. Much literature on social moderation makes similar claims for its educative value. A major purpose of the research reported in this thesis was to examine evidence for such claims. The *new* SACE¹ envisaged social moderation of school-based assessment as one process in a quality management cycle. The present research was, therefore, an exploration of the potential for teacher learning from involvement in a range of processes, including teacher meetings, membership of assessment panels, moderation feedback and the use of assessment exemplars. The research focussed on teachers of Physics, a subject with no history of social moderation in the SACE. It was considered that these teachers might be more likely to evince learning because it was their first year of involvement in an assessment system that included social moderation. The data included SACE documents, observations, a series of questionnaires and interviews with thirteen Physics teachers over a twelve-month period and two focus groups with SACE Board officers. Teachers reflected on their revised assessment tasks and the means of their development; they also graded student work using "think aloud" protocols. The data were examined in the light of the literature on effective teacher learning and adult learning.

It was found that the quality management processes possessed some of the features associated with effective professional development and teacher learning. Increased teacher involvement in quality management processes, viewed as desirable by the

¹ The revised SACE was initially known as the *future* SACE (*future* SACE Office, 2008), which was changed to the *new* SACE (SACE Board of South Australia, 2010n; SACE Principals Partnership Strategy Group, 2009) as implementation approached, with both terms italicised. The non-italicised term "new SACE" will be used subsequently.

Review Panel, appeared, however to have been minimal. Teachers reported changes in their assessment practices, particularly in tasks requiring students to undertake practical work or research an issue with social or environmental implications. The findings suggested that the changed assessment practices arose from changed syllabus requirements rather than from the ongoing cycle of quality management processes *per se*. Teachers reported that changed practices commonly involved experimentation followed by reflection on, and evaluation of, the tasks. Through these processes the teachers seemed to demonstrate experiential learning, reflective practice and deep learning. Membership of a community of practice contributed to constructive reflection, particularly where there was more than one Physics teacher in a school.

It is argued that, while a quality management cycle, such as used in South Australia, has the potential for teacher learning, learning would be more likely if the processes are specifically designed to facilitate such learning, and teacher involvement is encouraged. It was concluded that, for learning to be more likely, the processes should be based on evidence in the literature about (a) effective professional development and adult learning strategies and (b) research where social moderation has been found to contribute to teacher learning.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Brent Atherton

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Brent Atherton