All things in moderation?

Doug Hales

Head of Design Centre, Hymers College, Hull

This article examines the role of the moderator in GCSE, including:

- preparing for the moderator
- how the moderator prepares
- the moderation process.

What is a moderator? A teacher who needs more money? A dedicated professional? A teacher who likes to get out of the classroom?

Personally, I am a lapsed GCSE moderator who decided, for the good of the school and my pupils, to take up the mantle once more because I needed more information on standards and marking for National Curriculum Technology and Design & Technology. So, in May and June 1995 I once again visited schools on behalf of an examination board.

Was it a mistake? I do not think so but it was an experience. Most teachers know the feeling of preparing projects for a moderator's visit and hoping against hope that they have implemented the new marking scheme correctly and to the pupils' best advantage.

As we are all well aware, design and technology has been going through a considerable amount of change lately but the basic principles of the moderation process have altered very little. It is still the teacher, the pupil and the moderator. The whole process can prove to be of advantage to any or all of them and should certainly not be seen as threatening or traumatic. The sense of relief for a teacher once the moderation is successfully completed is enormous, but what about the moderator?

The role of the moderator

The moderator's task is to ensure that all marking of internally assessed work has been done to the correct standard as set by the board. Should the marking deviate from the agreed standard, the moderator is charged with the task of bringing the marking back into line. This should ensure that the agreed standard of marking for a syllabus is consistent for all candidates. I hope all teachers realise that a moderator does not come to a centre intent on altering the marks in any way unless they are found to be outside the agreed standard. If this is found to be the case, you will be informed so that you can bring your marking into line in the future. It is an important task and is not undertaken lightly.

Any moderator will tell you what a pleasure it can be to moderate candidates' work at a centre that has applied the correct criteria. Every teacher involved in internal assessment can help to smooth the way for the moderator, and the moderation process by careful preparation.

Preparing for the moderator

Centres start the process by marking pupils' work. This of course takes little account of the hectic few weeks prior to marking, where the pupils rush around like headless chickens trying to complete their projects, having just realised that there is very little time left and they need components and materials that they want you to order, usually yesterday.

The following points are worth noting:

- Marking must be accurate, with a valid order of merit, and must adhere to the board's mark scheme. Try to set a specific time aside to do this when you will not be interrupted. Easy to say but not always easy to do.
- If you are in a large school where several parallel groups are entered for the same syllabus it is imperative that you set aside a time when all teachers involved in the delivery of the syllabus can get together, mark the work and moderate their own marking and agree on the rank order.
- It can also help if you are able to shift the pupils' work into rank order so that you can view it as the moderator will. This will help you confirm, in your own mind, that you have got it right and can quickly highlight the odd 'rogue' mark.

This is very time consuming but can prove beneficial.

Once you are satisfied with your marking, it has to be transferred to the required documentation. Be sure computer mark sheets and the breakdown of mark sheets give the same totals. Ask a colleague to check your additions and transpositions. Arithmetical errors can upset the rank order as well as generate a lot of unnecessary paperwork. We all make mistakes.

Once you have photocopied your mark sheets it could be a good idea to ensure that you have a suitable area that can be set aside for the moderator's visit. Try to ensure that the area chosen:

- is well lit by natural or artificial light
- allows the moderator to work undisturbed
- has any tools available that the moderator might need.

You may think that this is fairly obvious but it does not always happen.

Perhaps my most surprising visit was to a school, which should remain nameless, that on first contact seemed well organised. I had reported to the reception and been collected promptly by the Head of Department. As we walked across to the CDT area he said, "We are a bit cramped for space at the moment so I have laid the projects out in the swimming pool." I was certain I had misheard. As we entered the department I was offered a drink and then he said that he would take me over to the swimming pool. Obviously I had not misheard so I was rather impressed. Not many schools have such a luxury and even less would use one to display GCSE projects. Perhaps they were just showing off. Wrong!

The swimming pool did exist but had not been used for some time and was pretty derelict. Nothing worked. No heating, no lighting and no toilets. We walked around the side of the pool and climbed down into the shallow end. Thankfully there was only water in the deep end and that was filthy and stagnant. There before me were the projects, all correctly laid out, in order. Believe me, even with the welcome coffee it was very cold and very dank and that was June! Not a very good way to treat a moderator.

The moderator prepares

Once you have sent off the required paperwork the onus for the process shifts to the moderator. Much of the work done by a moderator is, of necessity, confidential. Every moderator undergoes a training day each year to ensure a very high degree of consistency in the marking of a syllabus. By the time a moderator leaves for home at the end of a training day he or she will be conversant with the agreed marking standard and properly prepared to implement this standard. Armed with the details of centre visits, reams and reams of forms and hopefully all the required paperwork, the moderator sets out on the 'open' road.

Sadly, our roads are not as open as we would like and hold-ups can all too easily occur. Quite often, a moderator is working to a fairly tight schedule and traffic jams are not part of the plan. A good idea here, which I intend to use this year, is to carry a mobile phone. I am not impressed by the 'upwardly mobile', pun intended, but it could prove a useful addition to the briefcase in an emergency. Having travelled down, by train, to a moderation meeting in London last year, I was horrified by the use of mobile phones on the train, once it had passed Peterborough. However, they can help if you're late for an appointment or you need to rearrange your schedule.

Moderators need to pack a lot of visits into a relatively short time and so schools can help here by accepting the visit date and time and making the best of the inconvenience it can sometimes cause to the smooth running of a department.

I can only comment from my own perspective. My department had visits fro m five moderators who, I hope, all felt that they

were well received and well looked after. We have no scars to show from the visits and most of the moderators were very complimentary about the pupils' work.

During my 'outings' I was generally well received, was always offered a drink and frequently offered lunch. Obviously this sort of pleasant treatment is likely to put a moderator in a good frame of mind and cannot do much harm to the moderation process either!

However, visits to schools do not always go smoothly. I recall one visit where I was kept waiting in the reception for almost 45 minutes because the teacher had got the day wrong and was busily trying to assemble the sample from all quarters of the school. It did upset my schedule but not as much as it upset his day. Believe me he was annoyed with himself, somewhat embarrassed and very apologetic. As he walked into the staff room at lunchtime I am sure you would have heard him say, "Guess what I forgot today!" It could happen to anyone!

The moderation process

When a moderator arrives at your school please try to remember it could be a bad day for him or her too. Make them feel relaxed, offer a cup of something and let them get on with the task undisturbed. If you want to upset moderators try looking over their shoulder!

Be sure you have assembled the sample as requested and everything is suitably labelled. Keep the children out of the area. As I know from experience, there is nothing worse than being constantly interrupted by pupils wanting to know if you know where Mr. A is or is this where 11DT are supposed to be. I also had one occasion when I was expected to moderate at the back of a classroom while the teacher taught at the front.

When the moderator has completed the task there is an overwhelming temptation to ask their opinion of how it went. Be careful at this point. Most boards are not keen on moderators discussing the work at all. Why? Because some teachers have used the information they were given to make a complaint to the board. Be fair. If a moderator is willing to pass on any comments regarding the moderation of your pupils' work accept it as the remarks of a colleague who is trying to help. It is probably best to let the moderator offer the comments rather than ask for them. You could, and probably would, be refused.

From your point of view, once the moderator has left, you are able to relax but this will probably not apply to the moderator who is off to the next port of call. However, there is a good side to the work. Moderators get to meet many delightful people, see new and interesting places and gain a few ideas along the way. Then, of course, there is the paperwork. Why is it that the paperwork changes so often? Is it to keep teachers off balance? Perhaps it is to teach moderators a few new tricks. Whatever the reason there always seems to be a lot, it is always different from the last lot and there is a form for absolutely everything!

They also get to stay in hotels, very occasionally, and eat those awful cooked breakfasts, full of everything that is bad for you. They also get to spend quiet evenings in their hotel room filling out forms and doing the required paperwork. Well, some of the time!

When it comes down to it, moderators are actually just like any other teacher and they too get visited, by moderators. So they know the problems and difficulties that moderation can cause and are generally fair-minded people only doing their job.

So let's hear it for the poor, misunderstood moderators: those visitors who entered your life last summer and made you feel that little bit more comfortable about National Curriculum Technology.