

# An essay in the political economy of assessment design

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## Abstract

My point of departure in this essay is that student approaches to assessment appear to have become more instrumental, and that there has been a correlative propensity in my teaching practice to 'teach to the test'. Hence, both learners and teachers seem to have become more strategic in relation to assessment. This situation, I argue, is a product of power relations within contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) and the function higher education performs in the new capitalism. Assessment instrumentalism is part of a new learning culture; it is, I contend, a rational and pragmatic response to current social and economic imperatives. Thus, when designing assessments it is necessary to recognise and work with this instrumentalism if we desire its reconfiguration. The design of assessments worth learning and teaching for is made possible, I argue, by the development of a pedagogy *for* itself.

## Keywords

Power; perspective; capitalism; learning culture; pedagogy.

## Introduction: An Essay

In the 16th century Montaigne infused new meaning into the term 'essay'. The meaning he gave to this term was 'trial'. Montaigne's essays were trials of self- understanding, attempts to understand his relationship to himself and his world. An essay was a literary attempt to 'try out' one's judgment upon a subject, especially 'from some unaccustomed viewpoint' (Montaigne, 1958:130, 131). My goal in this essay is not to discuss Montaigne's pedagogy but rather to try to theorise a political economy of assessment. HE practitioners may be unaccustomed to a political economy viewpoint, but it is my contention that this viewpoint can offer useful insights into the limits and possibilities of assessment design. It is not, however, my goal to produce a global one-size-fits-all theorisation but rather to provide an exemplar essay – one possible way to try to theorise assessment design.

The catalyst for this essay was a growing concern that my students' approach to assessment had become more instrumental, and that my own educational practice had become increasingly orientated to 'teaching to the test'. This essay is an attempt to understand such assessment instrumentalism and how a political economy approach to assessment design can ameliorate its effects. My political economy approach draws substantially on Foucault's work on power. Indeed, my reading of Foucault has 'sharpened and deflected' (Borges, 1970: 236) my reading and synthesis of the work of the other authors I draw upon: Becker *et al.*, Sennett, Dysthe, and Bourdieu.

In this essay I will, firstly, discuss Foucault's notion of power as strategy. Secondly, I will explore the notion central to Becker *et al.*'s work that students' perspective upon and performance in assessments is socially structured. Thirdly, I shall argue that assessment takes place within the culture of the new capitalism which produces educational institutions increasingly oriented to training flexible workers for ever-changing jobs (Sennett, 2006). Fourthly, I shall use Dysthe's (2008) notion of the new learning culture to extol the virtues of a social constructivist approach to assessment design. Finally, I argue that by working with assessment instrumentalism we can begin to craft what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) have called a pedagogy *for* itself. This is a reflexive form of pedagogy that recognises the importance of assessment in the reproduction of capitalist culture. Nevertheless, a pedagogy *for* itself is committed to designing and instituting more critical and transformative modes of assessment practice.

## 1. Foucault: Power as strategy

Although Foucault's poststructuralism is both complex, and at times elusive, it has much to offer the HE practitioner interested in understanding assessment instrumentalism as an effect of power relations. My warrant for using a Foucaultian conception of power is the statement in:

*'... in its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating'* (Foucault, 1979:303).

I read this statement as indicating, firstly, that Foucault's cardinal interest lies in the social functions power performs; and secondly, that in modern societies power operates in a similar way in diverse institutions, for example in criminal justice, health care and education. For me, herein resides Foucault's significance: an examination of the exercise of power within social institutions.

Foucault (1998) summarises his conception of power in five propositions.

- Power cannot be possessed, only exercised.
- Power is not exterior to sociality.
- Power is everywhere in society.
- Power is both intentional and non-subjective.
- Resistance to power is an integral part of its functioning.

### *Power cannot be possessed, only exercised*

Power is not owned by different social groups – HE managers, teachers or students, etc. Rather, power flows through various social institutions. The exercise of power is characterised by movement and activity. Indeed:

*'Power exists only when it is put into action'* (Foucault, 1982:219) for example in various assessment regimes.

### *Power is not exterior to sociality*

Power is immanent in all relationships and processes. It animates:

- broad social, economic and political relationships and processes
- HEIs' policy and practice
- face-to-face student-teacher relationships
- assessment processes.

### *Power is everywhere in society*

Power is 'rooted deep in the social nexus' (Foucault, 1982:222). Power is not simply imposed from above, e.g. by a dominant group upon a subordinate group, it also flows from below. Students as well as teachers can exercise power through their unions and through other forms of collective action.

### *Power is both intentional and non-subjective*

'Power is both intentional and non-subjective' (Foucault 1998:94), that is, the functions and effects of power exceed the aims and objectives of particular individuals and social groups. The exercise of power has unintended consequences and possesses a degree of anonymity: it has a life of its own. Thus, teachers never quite know what effects teaching and assessment have upon their students or the unintended consequences of their practice.

### *Resistance to power is an integral part of its functioning*

Student resistance to pedagogical power or practitioner resistance to managerialism is then not something that can ever be eradicated, but rather it is one of the conditions which make the existence of power possible.

Foucault (1998:93) institutions are nodes of power, the means through which power is stored and distributed. Individuals access and exercise power by virtue of their incumbency of various the subject positions or social roles within institutions. These may include senior lecturer, dean, vice-chancellor or 'instrumental student subject position' (Grant, 1997:105). These institutional positions are themselves imbricated with other fields of power which position individuals according to their class, gender, ethnicity, and age. Power is like a force field such as electricity, or a web that extends throughout society and which functions to subordinate or promote the interests of diverse individuals and social groups.

Foucault proposes a multi-layered theorisation of power which has societal, institutional and individual dimensions. His elegant theorisation provides us with an analysis of the complex enabling and constraining, positive and negative social functions and effects of power. What also makes Foucault's theorisation relevant to HE practitioners is that power is inextricably intertwined with knowledge:

*'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations'*  
(Foucault, 1979:27).

So knowledge, its constitution and transmission, the quintessential material that HE practitioners craft and communicate in their diverse ways, is never outside or beyond power but is rather a product of the fields from which it emerges.

Within HEIs' assessment is an important site of both the exercise and effects of institutional power. Indeed we can usefully conceptualise assessment as 'political tactic' (Foucault, 1979:23) that operates within the 'micro-physics of power' (Foucault, 1979:26). The detailed observations, normalising judgments, and examinations involved in assessment produce knowledge, but also situate students and teachers in a 'field of surveillance' and in a 'mass of documents that capture and fix them' (Foucault, 1979:189). The exercise of power acts to individualise students (through their grades) but also assigns them a collective place within a classificatory system (through class bands). Assessment, then, is a very important technique in institutional power-knowledge relations.

In sum, the power effects of assessment are the product of how assessment is instituted in HE policy and practice, which is itself affected by the relationship between HE, the state, and the economy. A Foucaultian theory of power-knowledge then enables practitioners to visualise assessment's complex social functions and effects, the most salient of which is power's tendency to make people docile, useful and flexible.

Foucault's general theorisation of power, though useful for HE practitioners, is not without its weaknesses. For example, his theory, at times, becomes abstract and metaphysical, detached from the real, quotidian, material functions and effects of power. The inevitability of resistance to power is stated but not adequately explicated, and in the context of this essay, Foucault's theory lacks a specific analysis of students' experiences of assessment in contemporary HEIs. For this we can turn to a relatively neglected text: Becker *et al.* (1995) *Making the Grade*.

## **2. Becker et al: The Grade Point Average Perspective**

*Making the Grade*, first published in 1968, is based upon ethnographic research conducted between 1959 and 1961. Despite its age, this text retains a remarkable contemporary resonance (Burgess, 1995). The research question Becker *et al.* (1995:6) sought to address was:

*'What kinds of perspectives do college students create to deal with their academic work under the conditions of college life?'*

The sociological theory the authors used to frame their research question was symbolic interactionism. Emanating from the work of Dewey, Mead and Blumer, this theory contends that what makes social interaction possible is people's capacity for empathy. People are able to imagine their own actions from the viewpoint of others. Social actors, therefore, inhabit a shared symbolic world. People define situations in similar ways and act upon those definitions orientating their actions to those of others. People share a collective perspective upon the social meanings given to action. Writers from the Symbolic Interactionist school of sociology, such as Becker and his colleagues, are particularly interested in analysing the collective meanings and actions of groups, such as students, who occupy a similar social position within institutions. Their analysis encompasses both the institutional and the individual levels of student experience of assessment.

A key concept in the book is 'perspective'. Becker et al. (1961:36) define perspectives as being:

*'...situationally specific ... patterns of thought and action' that emerge 'in response to a specific set of institutional pressures and serve as a solution to the problems those pressures create.'*

A perspective contains several components:

- a definition of the situation including goals to be achieved
- judgements as to the right way of achieving those goals
- activities congruent therewith (1961, 1995).

Assessment instrumentality emerges as a response to institutional pressures, from a particular definition of assessment as the problematic means to attaining the end of a grade. The solution to this problem is judged to be learning what is necessary, and the action required is just enough effort to get a satisfactory grade. This strategic approach is not a product of "human frailty" or "student or faculty incompetence" but rather part of the 'structural logic' (Becker et al., 1995:91) of the student perspective. Student attitudes towards and performance in assessment are the result of 'socially structured conditions' (Becker et al., 1995:131). The tendency for students to narrow the focus of their studies to achieving satisfactory grades is also a response to the significance that academic institutions place upon grades. For Becker et al. (1995) grades are both the currency of academic life and the medium through which learners, teachers and the institution communicate.

In a very Foucaultian manner, the authors declare that students' institutional position is characterised by 'loose subjection' and 'relative autonomy'. It is from this position that their collective perspective on academic work emerges (Becker et al., 1995:133). Hence, what Becker et al. (1995) refer to as the 'grade point average perspective' is the result of both agency and structure, individual and institutional factors.

Becker et al. (1995) nicely capture the interface of the institutional and individual dimensions of the student experience of assessment as being principally about the attainment of grades. However, there is a dimension to the work of Becker et al., and to a lesser extent that of Foucault, that is underdeveloped: an understanding of the broader socio-economic structure within which the strategic exercise of institutional power and the political tactic of assessment functions. This shortcoming can be overcome by utilising the work of Sennett.

### 3. Sennett: The culture of the new capitalism

Sennett (2006) is interested in the ways in which structural changes in the economy affect the cultural value of work, the workers who perform that work, and the relations of power and authority that enmesh work. There is, Sennett (2006) argues, a new form of capitalism which sustains particular cultural values. The new capitalism is characterised by:

- **globalisation** – in which the ideology of neo-liberalism is ascendant and trans-national corporations are the most important institutions
- **technological innovation** – advances in information and communications technologies such as the internet, mobile phones, etc.
- **consumption** – the reorientation of economies and identities around the consumption commodities and services
- **dismantling of large state institutions** – particularly welfare institutions.

Capitalism in the late 20th and early 21st century is being transformed. The transformation is most evident in the cutting-edge industries of high technology such as manufacturing and shipping; global finance (merchant banks and hedge funds); and new service firms (legal and insurance). The cultural influence of these industries is widespread:

*'The values of the new economy have become a reference point for how government thinks about dependence and self-management in health care and pensions, or again about the kind of skills the education system provides' (Sennett, 2006:8).*

HEIs are a dimension of a globalised transnational neo-liberal economic system increasingly oriented to training flexible workers for ever changing jobs:

*'The educational system which trains people for mobile work favours facility at the expense of digging deep'* (Sennett, 2006:194).

Occupying a strategic position in relation to assessment is, therefore, a rational and pragmatic response to current socioeconomic conditions.

Indeed, the Government white paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (Great Britain.BIS, 2011) articulates the values of the new capitalism. There is now a market economy in HE 'in which popular institutions grow and where all universities must offer a good student experience to remain competitive'. This system must put 'financial power into the hands of learners' (Executive Summary, 2011: 5). Universities are to compete for students as this will 'drive quality and value for money'. Furthermore, the HEFCE is to have 'a new role as a consumer champion for students and promoter of a competitive system' (Executive Summary, 2011:6).

This is the new economic and political culture of global capitalism within which assessment takes place. The social capitalism of the welfare state era is dying and a new culture of fluidity, risk and enhanced individualism has emerged which favours the neo-liberal subject, at home in the educational marketplace and primarily driven by economic imperatives. Indeed, it is my view that students in English HEIs paying full fees may see themselves less as scholars than as short-term investors in an academic portfolio. Such investors will seek a quick return upon their capital (an upper second degree classification on a fast-track degree programme!). This is the era of 'impatient capital' (Sennett, 2006:40).

Whilst Sennett's work provides a very useful picture of the broad socioeconomic context of HE within contemporary social life, more specific insights into the new learning culture it has created is to be found in the work of Dysthe (2008).

#### 4. Dysthe: Assessment and the new learning culture

Dysthe's discussion of changes in the learning culture in HE complements Sennett's broader structural notion of a new capitalist culture. Socio-economic changes are creating new demands on education in the 21st century and changing the culture of learning. Within the new learning culture, there is a drive for students to become flexible lifelong learners and a demand that students acquire new forms of knowledge. There is also a greater emphasis on students acquiring a range of graduate competencies. Birenbaum (1996:4 cited in Dysthe, 2008:18) posited a fourfold classification of such competencies:

- **meta-cognitive** – e.g. reflexivity and self-evaluation
- **cognitive** – e.g. critical thinking, problem solving, and making informed judgments;
- **social** – e.g. leadership, collaboration, and teamwork
- **affective** – e.g. determination, autonomy and flexibility.

Arguably, this emphasis on competencies could lead to students becoming assessed in a narrow and atomised fashion. To avoid atomization, HE practitioners working within a social constructivist perspective can embed the acquisition of graduate competencies within the process of acquiring subject knowledge.

This can be achieved if educators align their theories of learning, teaching, and assessment with their pedagogic practice. (I will outline my attempt to do so in section 6 of this paper below).

The theory most adequate to this task, Dysthe (2008) argues, is social constructivism. This is because social constructivism proposes that:

- Learning is an active, reflexive process of sense making: students are not simply spectators passively consuming knowledge and learning how to perform skills.
- Students generate rather than simply reproduce knowledge: this is essential to assessment for learning, through individual and collective inquiry students discover and possibly create knowledge.
- Assessment must position students as subjects (participants) rather than objects (recipients) within the processes of knowledge production and competency acquisition.

- Learning has both epistemological and ontological dimensions: assessments must enable the discovery/creation knowledge but also provide opportunities for self- expression and identity transformation.
- Assessment must balance control and autonomy, for example, by allowing students to ask the wrong questions or pursue their own interests whilst, nonetheless, structuring such activities and ensuring there is progression in learning.
- Dysthe's social constructivism is homologous with the aspects of the work of Foucault, Becker et al., and Sennett outlined above, who are all in their different ways addressing the relationship between social structure, institutional culture and individual agency. This synthesis of their work infuses my approach to assessment, which builds upon an idea posited, but not developed, by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990): the need to move from practicing a pedagogy *in* itself to practicing a pedagogy *for* itself.

**5. Bourdieu and Passeron: Assessment within a pedagogy *for* itself**

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) describe a pedagogy *in* itself as the product of the objective position of HE practitioners within the social relations of academic capitalism. HE practitioners, through enacting a pedagogy *in* itself reproduce exploitative dominant cultural relations. Thus, a pedagogy *in* itself reproduces the kind of mobile, flexible workforce needed in the culture of the new capitalism. Such an unreflexive pedagogy institutes forms of assessment that preclude both teachers and students from realising the conservative and reproductive functions of HE. Assessment becomes a way of making students submit to pedagogical authority.

Disappointingly, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) do not then discuss what a pedagogy *for* itself might be. Perhaps their pessimism as to the potential to change pedagogy in HE prevents them from imagining this? I think a pedagogy *for* itself requires HE practitioners to recognise that:

- Assessment is a key site in the reproduction of the culture of the new capitalism.
- Occupying a strategic position in relation to assessments is a pragmatic response to current socio-economic imperatives which can potentially be reconfigured.

| <b>Assessment within a pedagogy <i>in</i> itself:</b> | <b>Assessment within a pedagogy <i>for</i> itself:</b> |
|---|--|
| is a monologic teaching to the test                   | is a dialogic struggle to teach for the test           |
| is primarily a test of learning                       | is principally a test for learning                     |
| tends toward the reproduction of                      | aspires to critique and reconfigure                    |
| asymmetrical power/knowledge relations                | power/knowledge relations                              |

A pedagogy *for* itself recognises that assessment is, in part, a function of political and economic imperatives, and is a tactic and technique within the micro-physics of power that has the potential to induce both conformity and creativity. It enables HE practitioners to understand assessment's limits, and the possibilities that exist for reconfiguring the strategic positions of both learner and teacher by designing assessments worth teaching for.

**6. A reconfiguration of assessment design**

My attempt to theorise a political economy of assessment design, and to align this theory with my pedagogical practice, framed the reconfiguration of the assessment regime of a semester A year 2 undergraduate sociology of globalisation module. This optional 20-credit module recruits sociology major and minor students and students from two other cognate BA programmes.

For the mid-semester essay and end of semester exam format, I substituted three interlinked and progressive assessments. The first two assessments, weighted at 20% (1,000 words) and 30% (1,500 words), are called Concept Notes 1 and 2. These assessments require students to choose, research, and write about a concept from the sociology of globalisation addressed in the lecture and workshop programme or discovered in their own self-directed study. Prior to the submission of these assessments each student has either a 10-minute face-to-face assessment tutorial, or an e-mail tutorial. In the assessment tutorial for Concept Notes 2, the students are expected to draw up action plans outlining how the feedback received can be most effectively fed forward to improve their grade.

Furthermore, as the ability to feed-forward feedback is a module learning outcome, then in both Concept Notes 2 and the subsequent essay, students must demonstrate their ability to feed-forward feedback. The grade awarded reflects, in part, a student's ability to use feedback. Feedback thereby becomes consequential and is principally for rather than simply on learning (Sutton, 2012). The written feedback accompanying the first two assessments clearly identifies areas for improvement and gives advice on how performance can be enhanced. Thus, whilst appealing to student assessment instrumentalism, I simultaneously tried to reconfigure it.

The essay (50% weighting and 2,500 words) required students to formulate their own question. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students initially resisted this process and found constructing precise and feasible questions a struggle. Students do not receive the feedback on the essay until after the module has been completed, just after the following semester has commenced. The feedback given is thus generic and orientated towards how to develop academic writing and research skills in semester B modules.

By shifting the module orientation from teaching to learning students were positioned (sometimes against their will) as having considerable responsibility for their assessments. This also required the re-structuring of the whole learning and teaching programme. Thus, in an entire 12-week module, there were only four key lectures. What had been lecture time was converted into workshop sessions, in which students collectively discussed specified readings and worked towards addressing specified workshop tasks, and individual tutorial time for each assessment. Again, the reduction in the number of lectures met with some initial student resistance as it transgressed their expectation, so expectations have to be carefully managed.

In short, conceptualising assessment as a political tactic, consciously aligned with the political economy approach to learning and teaching outlined above, enabled me to reconfigure my assessment practice. Central to this reconfiguration were:

- embedding a range of competencies within the process of acquiring knowledge of globalisation
- ensuring that active learning took place throughout
- balancing student freedom and constraint within assessment
- positioning students as relatively autonomous subjects capable of discovering knowledge
- creating a learning and teaching context that provided opportunities for self-expression.

### **Conclusion: A modest proposal**

In this essay I have tried to develop a framework for a political economy of assessment. I have argued that assessment is always already enmeshed in societal, institutional and interpersonal power relations, which produce both positive and negative effects. I then considered the student perspective on assessments as principally concerned with the achievement of grades and that student performance in assessment is socially structured. The process of structuration I then argued, is best understood as a response to pressures stimulated by:

- changes in the culture of capitalism, short-term profit maximisation (impatient capital) being its cardinal value
- changes in HEIs, especially the need to become more 'employer facing'.
- This in turn shapes the culture of learning, teaching and assessment in ways which reflect those values. By deploying a social constructivist theory of learning and teaching, however, it is possible to imagine ways in which assessment can be reconfigured so that a modest change in the meaning and practice of assessment is engendered. To do so, however, involves the struggle to locate assessment within a pedagogy *for* itself.

As Becker (1995:138) and his colleagues suggest, we should have modest expectations concerning the possibilities for changing assessment instrumentalism:

*'Instead of trying to get students to do what we want, we look only for ways of not encouraging them to do what we do not want.'*

To abolish grades and displace the grade point average perspective with the purity of scholarly curiosity may be desirable, but it is an unrealistic goal. Instead, we need to create ways of exercising our pedagogic power/knowledge to work with the grade point average perspective whilst simultaneously trying to reconfigure it. The beginnings of this reconfiguration lie in reflexively teaching for the test. This requires assessment and feedback for learning to be tactically positioned at the centre of the curriculum, and the use of assessment instrumentality and the currency of grades in ways that discourage students from being passive consumers of education. Dysthe (2008:27) is right to state that 'assessment has always been a political issue', but I would go further: as the culture of the new capitalism re-shapes HEIs, assessment has become an immediate and pressing issue of political economy.

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