# Northumbria Research Link

# Centre for Excellence in Teaching & Learning in Assessment for Learning

## 'The designer', 'the teacher' and 'the assessor': changing academic identities

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**Introduction**

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**Summary**

This paper explores the assessment practices of a group of academics working in the subject area of Design in a post-1992 university in the UK. We are interested in how academics assess and why they assess in the ways that they do. We focus on interview data collected from a design lecturer during the Assessment Environments and Cultures project in order to undertake the analysis. We examine the interview texts in terms of the positions that are taken up by this lecturer and the positions this makes available to 'the student'. This analysis draws attention to the material effects of discourse. We suggest that there are multiple discourses in circulation in this school, which position academics and students in different ways, and that these different positionings (at times) create tension. The implications in terms of changing academic identities and assessment practices are discussed.

**Introduction**

This paper examines the effects of the circulation of multiple assessment discourses amongst design lecturers working in a post-1992 UK university. Data is presented in the form of a case study account of one lecturer, Dave. We examine the multiple subject positions Dave takes up when talking about assessment, in other words his identifications, and the positions this potentially makes available to 'the student'.

**Context and theoretical frame**

The Assessment Environments and Cultures project is an empirical study that aims to illuminate some of the complex interrelationships between assessment practices, institutional and disciplinary cultures and academic identities. Our broad interest is in examining why lecturers assess in the ways that they do.

Foucauldian poststructural literature (Foucault, 1980, 1982, 1988, 1998) provides the conceptual frame for the study. We suggest that this approach is useful as it draws attention to the material *effects* of discourse and the ways academic practices are discursively shaped. For example, Trowler (2001, pp. 186-187) discusses the material effects of discourse in the following way:

> *… the socially constitutive power of discourse extends beyond the realm of excluding the articulation of alternative ideas and 'planting' tacit assumptions. It also goes into the area of alternative practices: discourse guides and sets limits on* **recurrent practices** *as well as on* **values, attitudes** *and* **taken-for-granted knowledge***, so that 'social constitution' affects organizational practices in 'real' ways too.* [our emphasis]

In the project we explore the interrelationships between the macro and the micro and the mechanisms whereby the everyday assessment practices of academics are both sustained and transformed. Our focus is on the interplay of structural forces with the ways these are taken up by individual actors (du Gay, 1996; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004; Rose, 1999; Weedon, 1987). This enables academics to be represented as active subjects, rather than only acted on, and allows for possibilities for change.

**Data sources and analysis**

Academics from three subject areas, Design, Applied Sciences and Business  are participating in the Assessment Environments and Cultures project.  In this paper, we draw on preliminary and follow-up

interviews with academics teaching in the School of Design. The School offers a range of undergraduate programmes[1] that span three main subject groupings: Fashion, Visual Communication and Multimedia and 3D Design. The programmes have a strong vocational emphasis and the School has well established links with industry. Many of the modules in the undergraduate programme are delivered in what might be described as a traditional Design Studio model (Schön, 1985). This model incorporates elements of project-based learning and problem-based learning (e.g. Boud & Feletti, 1997). For example, students are generally provided with a design brief and then using a 'design process' method, which includes the stages of research, development and experimentation, they develop a design solution that addresses the stated problem in the brief.

Overall, there were seventeen interviews conducted with the design lecturers. In these interviews the lecturers described how they assess in specific modules they teach, as well as providing biographical information in relation to disciplinary and occupational background. A discursive analysis of the interview transcripts has been undertaken (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2001; MacLure, 2003; Tunstall, 2001). Our focus in this analysis is on the multiple discourses in circulation in the interview texts and the different subject positions taken up by lecturers when they are talking about assessment. We are particularly interested in the positions that the circulation of these discourses make available to 'the student' and relations of power within the academy. In order to illustrate the multiple positionings of the design academics we have focused on the interview texts from one academic, Dave.

**Taking up the position of 'the expert guide'**

A position that Dave frequently took up when talking about assessment was 'the expert guide' where he constructed 'the assessor' as one who provides students with ongoing guided direction thereby enabling students to keep moving forward with their work. For example:

> *And the key thing for me when I go into those meetings* [with students] *in terms of my formative feedback is that I want them to come out of those meetings with a real direction in which they feel confident. So I don't want them to leave feeling unsure what to do. My aim in all those meetings is for them to leave thinking, 'Great. I've got something that I can get my teeth into and I know where I'm going with it'.*

The language Dave used throughout his interviews reinforced the notion of the assessor as 'the guide' where there was talk of 'care' and assisting students.  For example, the following learning metaphor worked to construct this position:

> *And I keep saying to them that in some ways I feel a bit like as if there's water flowing down a river and … often, they're hitting rocks and don't quite know how to get round them and with experience we can just help them move round a problem so they're free to move onto the next crit.*

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[1] Only undergraduate programmes have been included in the 'Assessment Environments and Cultures' study.

This position can be linked with a humanist discourse of self-development, for example:

> *You try to give individual time to students and you're trying to bring them on as individuals and develop them as individuals …*

The circulation of this discourse reinforces the notion of artistic/creative ability as an individual and inherent characteristic that comes from within, thereby reproducing 'the student' as an autonomous, self-developing subject. We suggest, however, that the above texts, in pointing to the shaping and moulding work undertaken in lecturer-student relationships, potentially position the student as novice within a more hierarchical master-apprentice relationship rather than the autonomous subject implicit in the notion of self-development.  This tension is evident in the following text:

> *… you get to the point where you're **almost** like, there's **almost** like a real equality in third year where you're discussing projects, **although obviously I've got a lot more years of experience in industry and in teaching** but we can sit and have a discussion and their ideas are as valid as mine. There's a really nice rapport between the third years students and the staff. And we know them well as individuals and care for them as individuals.*

One way of reading this text is that Dave is attempting to level the traditional hierarchical teacher-student relationships, however, his frequent use of the qualifier 'almost' draws attention to the fact that these relationships are not equal. Rather than levelling the hierarchy this text works to draw attention to it.

**Taking up the position of 'the traditional teacher'**

At times when Dave was talking about assessment he took up, what we have named, 'the traditional teacher' position. For example:

> Dave: *…I think assessment helps drive the year group, to a degree, it sort of sets a bar.*
>
> Interviewer: *In terms of the actual marks?*
>
> Dave: *Yes, and seeing where they are within a group of peers. I mean, you can get that formatively but there's nothing quite like getting a mark to give you a kick up the bum if you need it. So I think that's one of the positives for it* [assessment] *and I think it does help, you know, in that sense, to drive the year group…*

Here marks are used as a tool for managing classroom behaviour, for example through comparison and motivation, suggesting a behaviourist understanding of learning (James, 2006). In taking up the position of 'the traditional teacher', the collective position of 'the pupils' is produced implying strongly hierarchical student-lecturer relationships.

**Taking up the position of 'the professional assessor'**

Another subject position that was, at times, taken up by Dave was that of 'the professional assessor'. Here he constructed assessment as an objective and reliable process, with no space for ambiguity or uncertainty, as shown when he described his meeting with a student who queried his marks:

> *I had a chat with him* [the student] *this morning and the structure of the assessment was really helpful and the feedback, because I was able to say 'Okay let's look at each of these* [learning outcomes] *individually. … we're able to kind of go through each section and justify the marks … I hadn't marked it other people had marked it, but I could see exactly what they've done and why they've marked and it makes it really, I'm very confident going in with any student that I haven't marked that I know I can sit down and talk them through.*

There was, however, a shift between the first and second interview in the way Dave spoke about learning outcomes. In the second interview Dave begins to trouble the notion of 'transparency', implicit in the above text, thereby introducing a less fixed notion of meaning making:

> *The language, just tacit understandings, and some of them covering some quite varied ideas within one learning outcome, and I think we as a staff team look at them and just think, 'If we struggle to understand exactly what these are assessing, how are the students going to possibly understand this?' so I think what we've got to do is convert that into something simple for ourselves and then we've got to set a brief which sort of extracts the knowledge required in the learning outcomes from the student … They don't have to really look at the learning outcomes, they just have to look at the brief and try and answer the brief and we've got to make sure that brief is very much in line with the learning outcomes. So I think we almost want to shelter them, well, not shelter them, but if we ask them to start really focusing on learning outcomes, I think it would be very confusing to a student.*

Here, the lecturer is constructed as a translator and one who is able to 'shelter' students by 'filtering' complexity. While Dave troubles the transparency of the learning outcomes, he still appears to be seeking alignment between the design brief and the learning outcomes.

Holding on to the discourse of assessment as an 'objective' process also provides a safe place for Dave when he has to confront difficult or uncomfortable tasks:

> *… occasionally you are aware that you are making decisions that are going to affect people's future, but you have to almost put that aside and just judge everything as you see it, against the criteria set. I just see it as part of the job really …*

**Taking up the position of 'the gate-keeper'**

Yet another position taken up by Dave during the interviews was that of 'the gate-keeper' and maintainer of industry/professional standards. When the interviewer enquired about the importance of industry requirements when assessing Dave replied:

> *Well it might influence me in the sense that if there's a third year leaving with a piece of work, you've got in your head, if this is in a portfolio being shown to a potential employee, it would be embarrassing. And you are almost using that as a judgement sometimes I think, or how I would feel if they'd shown it to me at a studio.*

This position is associated with the circulation of a vocational discourse in the School of Design which challenges the more traditional power of the academy. For instance, Dave seemed more concerned with regulating students in relation to industry standards and 'the job' rather than what might be described as more traditional academic standards.  When the interviewer asked about the purpose of assessment Dave constructed academic assessment and marks as almost irrelevant:

> *I don't think industry is that bothered. I think basically, we use assessment as a tool to get a portfolio of work ready for interview. Industry, when I was a part of that, they don't really look at the marks. It's not that important. They look at the portfolio.*

When Dave took up this position students were able to be positioned as either being  *right* or *wrong* for the course:

> *… it's* [i.e. assessment] *also a mechanism with which to take people off the course who just aren't on the right course **or they are not up to the job** … And it's a mechanism for … Hopefully it's a help to them because if they're not on the right course, then it gets them thinking about where they should be and some help to the tutors in terms of, if someone's failed and you know they are on the wrong course then you're not wasting your time teaching someone who is in the wrong place.*

**Discussion**

Educational research has, over many years, provided tools for thinking about assessment but these have been largely techno-rationalist in nature emphasising the accuracy of 'measurement' and the fitness of assessment to serve its ostensible purposes such as 'summing up' the learning achieved or providing a basis for selection e.g. by employers. In relation to purpose, the distinction between summative and formative assessment is a dominant conception.  The practice of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) where student behaviour is manipulated through the levers of assessment is widely espoused in higher education.  The official discourse of 'quality' is an aspect of the same world view.

Our research offers a different perspective on assessment as day-to-day practice which alludes to these wider discourses but operates with a quite different and constantly varying set of concepts, principles, positions and practices.  The analysis draws attention to the positioning and position taking made available through the circulation of multiple discourses. At different times Dave takes up the position of 'the expert guide', 'the traditional teacher', 'the professional assessor' and 'the gate-keeper' when talking about assessment, and at times these different positionings created tension. Further, the take up of particular positions by Dave positioned 'the student' in quite specific ways.

So 'why do academics assess in the ways that they do'? This account foregrounds the discursive shaping of academic identities, including the identities of 'the assessor', and the complex mechanisms whereby 'the social' becomes interiorised and understood as coming from within (Rose, 1996, 1999). It is also an account that directs attention to relations of power, with the academics both acted on and acting on others. When a particular subject position is taken up, other position taking possibilities are excluded. For example, at the moment that Dave took up the subject position of 'the gate keeper', made available through the circulation of a discourse of vocationalism, he was regulated by that discourse in what he was able to think, say and do – there was no space, at that moment, for other ways of being 'the assessor'. However, the circulation of multiple discourses and their intersections suggests a much less certain and more indeterminate process in relation to the shaping of subjectivity. Thus assessment might also be understood as a potential site where more traditional hierarchical relationships might begin to be renegotiated. The idea that there is a unified and cohesive way of being 'the assessor' is problematic. Instead there are assessor identities that appear to be more or less comfortable for academics within specific setting and are invoked by shifts in the micro-contexts of their day-to-day teaching and assessment practices.

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