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Student assessment and knowing in contemporary Western societies

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Abstract: *The role of universities in the determination of what counts as knowing and what it is to be knowledgeable is, at the start of the twenty-first century, a contested one. While universities and other higher education institutions frequently draw on Enlightenment understandings to define their role in this regard they are also, and perhaps increasingly, called upon to prepare students to fill performative roles in complex contemporary Western societies. These roles are shaped by many influences beyond the institution and call into question the place of the university as arbiter of what counts as knowing. This paper considers the views of students studying in a New Zealand institute of technology. It draws on narrative data collected during in-depth, semi-structured interviews about the effect of the assessment régimes to which the students were subjected during the course of their degree study. These data suggest that students resist the authority of the academic to decide what they should know and value. It is argued that students privilege teaching and learning approaches they perceive as linked to professional ways of knowing over those designed by academics who students may perceive as acting outside the framework of the profession and, therefore, the performative roles for which they are preparing.*

Keywords: *Assessment; development of expertise; student views.*

Introduction

Institutions of higher education perform two primary roles in contemporary Western society. They continue to espouse and reproduce the institutional understandings bequeathed to them from ancient universities and based in Enlightenment understandings. Namely, that the central role of higher education is to free students from the bondage of ignorance and superstition. As a result of the educational processes and philosophies to which they have been exposed students will be able to challenge the norms currently manifested in society (Lucas, 1996). At the same time, and in a process related to this emancipatory yearning, institutions have a performative role. They are concerned with the development of “experts” to fill the posts that ensure the smooth running of complex contemporary society (Lyotard, 1984). Thus, institutions seek to inculcate students with the routines and discourses of various disciplines in order that they might take their place in the web of expertise associated with effective and coherent communities and meet the needs of an increasingly complex technological world.

In their role as pedagogues developing curriculum, varied teaching approaches and assessment tools, academics working in higher education are concerned with persuading students to think and act in particular ways. As assessment remains one of the most powerful technologies available to the academic it provides an excellent vehicle for considering the

productive nature of power in forming educated subjects. Thus talking to senior undergraduate students about their perceptions of the effect of the assessment régimes to which they have been exposed provides interesting data about assessment's effect on their emancipation and preparation for expert roles.

The complex interrelationships amongst students, lecturers, institutions and professions draw together at the point of assessment. While many would consider the development of a student assessment régime as the sole concern of the academic, in a number of disciplines the approach students take to assessment and assessment tasks is influenced by their view of the relationship between the profession they are preparing for and the institution.

Knowledge, knowing and assessment in contemporary higher education

Of all the technologies used in higher education, assessment is the one (according to many educational researchers) that provides the most powerful messages to students about what they should become and how they should behave (see for example, Ramsden, 1992; Rowntree, 1987).

Much assessment discourse in contemporary education institutions has developed on the basis of understandings gained from the study of psychometrics. In its purest form, such "norm-referenced" assessment is designed to allow the interpretation of test scores in relation to norms, grading one student's performance in relation to that of others (Gipps, 1994). Since the latter half of the twentieth century, assessment based on such a model has been subject to increasing scrutiny and criticism; criticism grounded, according to Broadfoot (1996), in changing socio-political understandings. The norm-referenced model is associated with an education system concerned mainly with providing a legitimate means of controlling access to resources and of controlling individual aspirations. It legitimises the exclusion of some members of the population from advanced education and from some sectors of the employment market. In contrast to this model, the economic imperatives of contemporary post-industrial society require more and more learners to advance to higher levels of education, rather than attempting to exclude them (Broadfoot, 1996).

Associated with this post-industrialism, there have been changes in concepts of knowledge and what counts as "knowledgeable" and as "educated" (see Hager & Beckett, 1995; Lyotard, 1984; Peters et al., 1999). There has been a reduction in the value of "knowing that something is the case" and an increase in the value of "knowing how", placing greater emphasis on the development of skills, attitudes and values (Peters et al., 1999) appropriate to the discipline being studied or the profession being prepared for. The concept of knowledge now includes notions of "know-how", "knowing how to live" and also "how to listen". That is, knowledge involves a competence that "goes beyond the simple determination and application of the criterion of truth" (Lyotard, 1984). Thus, in higher education there is an increasing emphasis on students being able to analyse, understand, assign significance and interpret through developing intellectual skills like problem-solving, logical thinking and information-gathering, with a subordination of the acquisition of knowledge and facts that underpin the discipline. Students are being judged, not on the knowledge in their possession but on their self-critical awareness of what they do not know and their readiness to find out more (Ramsden, 1992).

Related to changes in concepts of knowledge is a will to create greater integration between the world of work and education (Boud, 1996). With world economies being driven to more and

more integration, and with increasing competition from developing countries, Western economies are increasingly dependent on developing people with high-level skills, knowledge and understandings. In this post-industrial “knowledge society”, institutions increasingly become “knowledge factories... at the centre of the knowledge economy” (The Economist, 1997). By the mid-1980s, changing economic and labour market contexts (for example, the loss of low-skill jobs to the third-world (Brown & Lauder, 1995)) led to a re-casting of the role of higher education into human capital formation to fulfil the manpower needs of the “expert society” (OECD, 1987). Simultaneously, greater responsibility and authority are bestowed on groups of “para-professionals” (for example, medical imaging technologists and designers). Rather than achieve protection of individuals by direct regulation and control, the State chooses to invest expertise in individuals through mechanisms such as licensing and professionalisation (Rose, 1996) with these new experts expected to govern themselves and their charges in a manner consistent with the norms of the day. This calls for more degree-level entry qualifications and in turn leads to closer links between more professional bodies and educational institutions and an increasing emphasis on the development of key competencies for employment (Taylor et al., 1997).

So while it is a commonly held view that authorities in higher education control what counts as truth and what should be discarded, these authorities may not be the institutions alone. Rather, the institution may act in concert with a professional body. Together these authorities define the terms of salvation for educated people deciding what will count as “knowing” and emancipation in these new disciplines. Drawing on various intellectual and theoretical traditions academics and professional bodies create new disciplines, cultivating certain capabilities within their boundaries (Joseph, 1995).

The result for the student is specialisation and development of expertise to become, for example (in the case of this study), an accountant, a designer or a medical radiation technologist. Although generalist components may be included in these new programmes of study, the distinctive version of truth required for the particular role that society demands leads to the narrowing of the curriculum for the student. The individual thus prepared will take his or her place in the web of experts and expertise required for the government of society. This individual is at once an expert in one area, but defers to the expertise of other individuals in other areas placing him- or herself under their care (Howley & Hartnett, 1992). Institutions contribute to the formalisation and legitimisation of this development of expertise and use assessment to attest to the extent to which an individual student has become the expert that is required.

Assessment practices in three degrees

The students in this study were subject to a range of assessment techniques and events during their enrolment in three undergraduate degree programmes in Business (specifically Accountancy), Health Science (specifically Medical Imaging) and Design. In order to ascertain student views of the effects of assessment, senior students from each of the programmes were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions designed to cause the informants to be reflective and to describe the feelings and responses that had been aroused by their assessment experience. Data from transcribed interviews was coded into a set of categories of response. The data was then sorted by category and degree enabling the drawing together of convergent and divergent understandings and views within and between categories and degrees.

Assessment events provided a variety of information used by the lecturer to evaluate the student's progress towards the completion of the course and of the degree, and thus the extent to which the student was becoming educated and prepared for professional life. The study informants' experience of the different approaches to assessment in these degree programmes suggests that the different techniques had varied effects on the students, leading to the formation of a variety of opinions as to what counts as knowing and being knowledgeable. Whilst there was considerable divergence of views between students (within a degree and between degrees) this paper draws on those categories of response where the students in a degree showed considerable commonality of views.

Students in the Bachelor of Business degree reported that, for them, the lecturer formed a link to the discourse of the discipline. Each lecturer was perceived as having expertise in the part of the discipline that he or she delivered and was judged, by the student, on the extent to which he or she stimulated interest in that aspect of the discipline. Those lecturers who made the discourse comprehensible and compelling became trusted guides. Throughout their studies, the structure of the degree ensured that the students were exposed to the range of sub-disciplines that make up the discipline of accountancy. Students expressed the view that assessment was, to greater or lesser extent, a measure of the extent to which they had absorbed the knowledge and information transmitted to them by the teacher. For example one student contended that "the only thing [assessments] do is reinforce what you have learnt, what you have been taught. So in effect they complete the learning cycle" (James, Business student). As a student progressed through the degree he or she was expected to supplement this with an ability to apply knowledge in techniques appropriate to the course – for example, auditing or management accounting – and to find relevant material to present to the lecturer.

The attitude of the business students to the discipline they were studying varied from that of other students who were part of this study. While there may be a number of explanations for this difference, it is argued that an important influence was the nature of the assessment régime to which they were exposed and the effect of this régime. In completing assessment tasks, students are expected to show the lecturer that they are able to make links and connections between different aspects of the discourse relevant to the particular course. For this reason, accountancy students require the lecturers to enthuse them within a course, but they do not require the assessor to be an expert in accountancy as a whole (even though the lecturer and assessor are more often than not one and the same person). One student, Teresa, summed up the interviewed students' attitude to the authority of the assessor thus:

I don't think you care who marks [assessments]. As long as you get a mark back and you are happy with it. It could be a fellow student ... that is what I mean, some things are so trivial that you have to do them but you hand them in, you don't really care who marks them, you get your marks and you carry on to the next one (Teresa, Business student).

The students see the link between themselves and the truth of the discipline as limited to familiarity with the discourse. The assessment to which they are exposed doesn't compel them to consider or problematise the relationship of their psyche with the discipline of accountancy. Jenny summed this up, saying assessments are designed to show the lecturer you have "master(ed) the theory, you know how to apply the theory to practical things". In an institution committed to the preparation of professionals for a place in society, such a limitation on the role of assessment could be viewed as a shortcoming. However, the accountancy profession limits the authority of tertiary institutions and the role their lecturers can play in this regard. It separates the ability of the student to achieve the status of

“chartered accountant” from the conferral of the degree alone. Students who complete the Bachelor of Business will emerge to a period of apprenticeship and will not be able to present themselves for registration as a member of a professional body until they have completed final qualifying examinations set and marked by the professional body. Thus the degree represents only a part of the technology that will be brought to bear in inscribing the norms of accountancy on these students. This means that the authority of lecturers in the institution is limited to attesting to the students’ familiarity with the discourse and its application within the subject of accountancy. The professional body itself retains the right to regulate the accountant subject and to inscribe on it the subjective and emotional capacities that will link the character of the individual to the discipline.

The assessment régime of the Bachelor of Design contrasts with business assessment in many ways. Here the student’s studio work is evaluated against a set of criteria which have been generated from aspects of the design process. All the design students in this study acknowledged these criteria as encompassing the fundamentals of the design discipline and the institution saw studio as the basis of student learning in the degree. Students of the Bachelor of Health Science are assessed on their performance in clinical tasks in a similar way. The clinical experience of student in this degree performs a similar role to that of the Design studio.

In the Bachelor of Design, students are preparing for work as designers in a range of situations, from self-employment to working as part of a larger enterprise. The students reported an expectation that degree study would make them “work-ready” and acknowledged the part the assessment process played in this preparation; for example:

Well [assessment] must have [influenced my conceptions of what it is to be a designer] I think. I mean I didn’t know what it was before this course and I’m going to leave and I will know what it is hopefully and I think they have prepared me quite well to go out into the real world (Angela, Design student).

The assessment régime to which these students are subject provides the lecturer not with the students’ recitation of the discipline’s discourse and ability to apply it. Rather, the object of the assessor’s gaze is the students’ demonstration of the processes they have enacted through the investigations made during the production of work, and the changes in the students’ relationship with their self that these processes have stimulated. The lecturer focuses on the subjective, emotional and intellectual capacities of the students and the developing ethical framework, which will guide their lives in relation to the design discipline. It is upon these attributes that the lecturer bases his or her grades and evaluative comments. Students in this programme perceived assessment as a “conversation” with the lecturer/assessor where, although the student was not physically present, his or her work and learning diary provided the assessor with the material to be interrogated in order to view the student’s developing identity as a designer.

[Assessment] is not just to put a drawing there. There are many things to draw, but it is something that has to be recognisable, something that says something about you (Belinda, Design student).

It is argued that this is a fundamental difference in the assessment process, and that it explains the very different attitude to assessment and the lecturer-as-assessor observed in students in the design degree (particularly in comparison to the business students). In this programme the assessment criteria, available to both student and lecturer, form the basis of the assessment relationship. The design students interviewed acknowledged that their assessors had authority derived from their esoteric ways of understanding the truth in the design discipline, and that

the assessment process enjoins the student to act in particular ways in his or her future role as a design professional. Design is a discipline and profession that is not controlled by a professional body. Thus the institution and the assessment it implements become governmental agents. The assessment is able to provide an assurance to student, institution and society that the graduate will act in a manner good for design, society and the individual.

Students in the Bachelor of Health Science are eligible for registration as medical radiation technologists upon completion of the degree. Students interviewed in this programme acknowledged the assessment of clinical practice as setting out to ensure that they had the skills to manage outside the educational environment. The clinical assessment conforms closely to the model described for the design degree. However, the assessment of theoretical understandings conforms more closely to the model of assessment in the business programme. With regard to each of these aspects of their assessment, the medical imaging students interviewed expressed attitudes equivalent to those of both groups described above.

The students privileged the clinical experience as the most formative education experience provided by the programme. They viewed success in the assessment of clinical work as being significantly more important than success in the theoretical aspects of the programme. Penelope (a Health Science student) spoke for all these students when she reported that the “theory” side “is just a means to getting the degree” while “it is what I do in the hospital that counts”. During the clinical assessment process medical imaging students are expected to display their ability to work within the community where they will find future employment. Thus it is within clinical assessment that the students are enjoined to show that they have learnt to act and behave in ways acceptable to that community. The judgement that this learning has – or has not – occurred is carried out by members of the profession, who are vested with the authority that working as part of an accredited degree brings them. Students are judged against competency criteria developed in conjunction with the professional body that the students are seeking to join.

Conclusion

In this paper it has been contended that assessment practices regulate students in different ways. Further, different assessment régimes are more or less effective in inciting the students to modify their own thoughts and actions so that the varied assessment régimes have the effect both of promoting and judging different ways of knowing in the students.

The assessment régime of the Bachelor of Business has been discussed in light of the relationship of the student, degree and institution with the professional body active in accountancy. The attainment of this degree does not entitle the student to membership of a professional body. Instead its purpose is to allow the student to embark on the process of preparing for and seeking such membership. These students saw the assessment régime as a mechanism for the demonstration of the extent to which they had absorbed, and could restate, the discourse of the discipline. The lecturers, in their role as assessors, judged the extent of the students’ reiteration ability. The assessment régime encouraged students to develop their capacity to know that “something was the case” (Peters et al., 1999) rather than the development of “know-how”. The academics who design and administer the assessment régime are not expected to attest to the development of the latter. This disjunction between the institution and the world of work is recognised by the students who diminish the role of the lecturer as a result.

Through the Bachelor of Design, the institution is preparing students to take their places as designers. The lack of mediation or regulation of the “profession” by a professional body means that the institution is in an influential position to act as an authority of truth in this discipline. Thus the lecturers have a greater level of power and authority than the accountancy lecturers do and the students acknowledge the capacity of the degree’s lecturers to guide and assess their development. The academics have designed an assessment régime promoting the development of “know-how” in students, a situation recognised by the participants.

The students interviewed from the Bachelor of Health Science programme exhibited attitudes and behaviours towards assessment that were equivalent to those found in both the business and the design students interviewed. In that the degree allows the graduate to take his or her place as a member of the profession, it echoes the Bachelor of Design. However, unlike the latter, the presence of the professional body acts as a constraint on the authority of the tertiary institution alone to determine what counts as truth in the discipline. The interviewed students themselves privileged the expertise of the clinical assessors as it was to them, rather than the “theory” lecturers, that students demonstrated their ability to regulate their conduct in a manner consistent with being a professional medical radiation technologist

Assessment is a powerful technology that influences the type of “knowing” subject a student will become. The data in this study suggest that it has influenced accountancy students to consider that “knowing that something is the case” is the path to successful completion of the degree. At the same time the assessment is not challenging the students to develop their character as an accountant, which leads them to have limited expectations of the expertise of the academic. This is in contrast to the attitude of students in those programmes where assessment encourages students to problematise their relationship with the ways of knowing of the discipline. Here students have high expectations of the academic’s discipline expertise.

Thus, while assessment is a point where academics brings their authority to bear on students, the data in this study indicate that students resist this authority if assessment is viewed as outside professional frameworks and outside post-industrial understandings of knowing and what it is to be knowledgeable.

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