From the individual to the collective: Repositioning assessment as a social practice

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ABSTRACT

Although assessment theorists have long argued that assessment is a contextually located social practice, objectivist and psychometric discourses about assessment persist. The COVID-19 pandemic, in many contexts, unsettled and denaturalised assessment practices, creating a critical disruptive moment. This paper presents a reflection on what this moment might suggest about academics' assessment beliefs and practices at a research-intensive institution in the Western Cape. Drawing on an institutional survey, we argue that dominant concerns about academic integrity and mark inflation surface discourses of assessment for certification and accountability. Exploring some examples of assessment practices during the emergency remote teaching period at the same institution, we highlight some factors that influence design. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, we contemplate the conditions of field and capital that create opportunities for change. We propose that change is contingent on the complex interplay of the capital and habitus of agents, as well as the nature of the field. We reaffirm the case for positioning assessment as a social practice, arguing that this enables the conditions for discussion, negotiation, and scrutiny on the purpose of assessments, what is being valued and not valued, and who is benefiting or being marginalised from particular assessment practices.

Introduction

Discourses of quality, integrity, and reliability in relation to assessment are of continuing concern. These discourses have roots in the psychometric tradition, with a focus on validity and a tendency to favour quantitative methods of assessment, such as standardised tests, to measure student achievements. There has also been the tendency to prioritise summative assessments or end-of-semester invigilated examinations over formative or continuous assessments. Although assessment theorists have long advocated for a social approach to understanding assessment, that is, understanding that rather than an objective measurement, assessment is a social practice that involves complex dynamics of power and control (Gipps, 1999; Shay, 2004; Elwood & Murphy, 2015), by and large, the psychometric tradition dominates globally (Moss, Pullin, Gee, & Haertel, 2005). A critical disruptive moment to this tradition emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic as the pivot to online teaching, learning, and assessment brought unprecedented challenges to assessments conceived for the face-to-face context. Questions were raised around quality, academic integrity, what and how we assess (Padayachee & Matimolane, 2023; Gamage, Silva, & Gunawardhana, 2020; Janke, Rudert, Petersen, Fritz, & Daumiller, 2021; Senel & Senel, 2021; Dison & Padayachee, 2022). This discussion has been made ever more poignant with the advancement of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, which again raises questions about academic integrity and, more importantly, the purpose of assessment.

In this reflective paper, we attempt to make sense of the disruption that the COVID-19 pandemic presented to assessment practices from our position as academic staff development facilitators at a large research-intensive university in the Western Cape, South Africa. We draw on our colleague Suellen Shay's (2004) work on assessment and validation practices of academic communities to understand how the pandemic presented a "moment of crisis" (Fairclough, 1992:230) which opened up a rare opportunity to interrogate existing practices. Reflecting on academics' comments about assessment that were collected from an institutional survey, we propose that concerns about academic integrity and mark inflation reveal a belief about assessment that is rooted in a tradition of assessment of learning, that is, assessment for certification and accountability purposes. Reviewing some examples of assessment practices at the institution captured during this period, we outline concerns that underpinned assessment redesign. We argue that discourses about assessment transformation in higher education tend to present a 'deficit view' of the lecturer, placing responsibility on the lecturer to drive the change and when they fail, seeing that as an individual deficit on their part, without acknowledging national, institutional, and/or disciplinary practices and

policies that obstruct lecturers' capacity to enact change to assessments. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social practice, we posit that assessment is a social practice that involves a complex interplay between individuals and their contexts. For assessment transformation to happen, it is necessary to surface and acknowledge the tension and powers at play within and between individuals, assessment practices, and wider contexts. We argue that repositioning assessment as a social practice creates space for much needed conversation around purposes and values, moving from an individualised culture of assessment to a critical social understanding of assessment that is underpinned by an awareness of historical arrangements of power.

Assessment as a social practice

The psychometric tradition towards assessment has dominated assessment practices in higher education since the introduction of standardised testing in the form of college entrance exams in the early 20th century. This tradition is rooted in intelligence testing where assumptions about intelligence are that it is genetically predetermined, fixed, and unalterable throughout a person's life. Psychometrics prioritises tests and examinations as assessment methods and foregrounds replicability and generalisability as key attributes (Gipps, 1999). Within this tradition, assessment is seen to be objective, involving an "accurate, reliable scientific process of applying instruments to measure learner performance in order to qualify achievement" (Shay & Jawitz, 2005:106). This tradition conceives assessment as a measurement of an existing reality, which can be objectively and accurately measured.

The late 20th century saw a change in epistemologies as it became increasingly clear that "[k]nowledge does not exist objectively out there, independent of the knower", but rather "categories of 'truth' and 'knowledge' are seen to be not only hugely complex and subjective but also politically saturated" (Gipps, 1999:370). This view of the world led to a paradigm shift in understandings of assessment. Rather than assessment as an objective, scientific, and value-free activity, it came to be understood as a social practice that is value-laden and grounded in context. That is, assessment came to be understood as involving

> a judgement which is socially situated and thus contingent on a variety of factors which constitute the assessment event – the learning context, the nature of the assessment task, the purposes of the assessment, and the relationship between the assessor and assessed (Shay & Jawitz, 2005:106).

These two approaches to understanding assessment have implications for understanding both the potential for change and what kinds of change are possible. In the psychometric tradition, with an

understanding of assessment as a scientific activity, quality becomes reified as a fixed entity. For, if assessment is objective and value-free, then that which we seek to measure through an assessment must also be objective and value-free. This view, as such, masks issues of power and control that are embedded in assessment practices (Gipps, 1999). In contrast, by highlighting assessment as a social practice, assessments are repositioned as value-laden, allowing us to begin to question whose values and beliefs are reflected in assessment. In the psychometric view of assessment, change is arguably harder to enact, as when qualities of assessment are put across as value-free, there is little reason for contestation and change. A view of assessment as a social practice, however, signals that the validity of assessments and qualities which are valorised in assessment involves an "on-going process" (Shay & Jawitz, 2005:107). This view of assessment, we believe, presents opportunities for discussion, negotiation, and change.

What happened during the pandemic?

Assessment in the face-to-face context has a well-established set of social norms, some of which are implicit and acquired through socialisation rather than explicitly articulated. Shay (2004) illustrates this in her study on assessment and the validation of final-year projects in which lecturers are observed as describing marking as a matter of "taste", "intuitive", and involving an "academic feeling". She explains this phenomenon by drawing on Bourdieu's work, which illustrates that

> systems are constituted both objectively by social structures and subjectively by mental structures. Crucial to their effect is that they are never explicitly codified. They are subconscious, acquired through practical mastery (Shay, 2004:315).

According to Shay, in a "highly naturalized state", that is in times of stability, it is difficult to access the norms which academics have internalised, acquired through "practical mastery" or "processes of apprenticeship". "Moments of crisis" (Fairclough, 1992:230), however, can "serve to disrupt and denaturalise practices" (Shay, 2004:312) and thus present opportunities to see the social constructs behind norms and practices. For us, the COVID-19 pandemic presented such a moment. The rapid shift to online teaching, learning, and assessment unsettled long-established practices, creating confusion and discomfort, but also a rare moment for reflections and critique on entrenched assessment practices. In the following two sections, we reflect on 1) what an institutional survey says about beliefs about assessment, and 2) what examples of assessment practices captured during this period say about staffs' concerns within assessment design.

What an institutional survey says about beliefs about assessment

Between June and July of 2021, our institution conducted an institutional survey that was part of a larger national survey[1] where a key aim was to gain a perspective into staff experiences during the emergency remote teaching (ERT) period (the early stages of the pandemic), with regard to, for example, wellbeing, support and training, resilience and adaptability, access to resources, and successes and challenges. The institutional survey attracted 155 responses with respondents mainly consisting of senior academics (71%). While not representative of the entire university, the survey provides an overview of both the gains and the concerns and challenges of ERT in general, and also of assessment during this period. We have reported on this survey in detail elsewhere (Gachago, Huang, Czerniewicz, & Deacon, 2023), sharing how lecturers perceived ERT as both a space of opportunity, unleashing creativity to implement long overdue changes to their teaching and learning, but also a space of deep challenges, provoking a sense of alienation and being overwhelmed, leading to burnout and sometimes withdrawal.

Assessment was one area that seemed to attract more concerns than opportunities. The concerns raised in the survey can mainly be grouped into four areas: academic integrity, mark inflation, lack of time to design effective assessments, and a general sense of insecurity around quality of teaching, learning, and assessment. Firstly, many respondents (63%) raised concerns with academic integrity, commenting that they believed that integrity was breached as a result of factors such as lack of effective proctoring in online assessment, cheating, and plagiarism:

> …the biggest problem with quality was the assessment processes. Online assessments were not effectively proctored and this was dismissed by university managers.

> Assessments have also been strewn with plagiarism which again is a peril of purely online teaching and learning.

Secondly, the respondents were apprehensive of mark inflation, suggesting that marks were inflated as a result of lack of rigour in the assessments as well as staff expecting less of students during this period:

> … the inflated marks the students are getting make me worry that the rigour levels have been compromised due to everything being essentially open book now…

> I also feel that the assessment process is expecting less of students and as such, the learning outcomes will be compromised.

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[1] https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/inline-files/SEP-TLF_Report.pdf

Thirdly, lack of time was described as a challenge to both teaching and developing quality assessments. This led to instances where academics merely "migrated" (Allan, 2020) their assessment from the face-to-face context to the online context instead of "transforming" (Allan, 2020) or redesigning for the online context:

> The transition was too quick to prepare a better method of engagement with students, and adaptations to assessment and evaluation are reactive instead of proactive…

> …the suddenness of our switch meant that there is [limited] scope for improvement particularly in terms of tailoring our assessments to students now being in an open book environment.

Lastly, the survey highlighted a general insecurity around evaluating the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment:

> Despite creating unique questions for each student in a class test, I am still unsure about the quality of student work and am unsure that students did not cheat in some form…

It would seem that this general insecurity stems from an absence of feedback from students. Comments such as "it is hard to judge class preparedness or understanding when you cannot see people" and "I am teaching, but I don't know whether my students are learning" suggest that feedback through classroom engagement plays an important role in shaping how lecturers form judgements about their students. This view aligns with Wyatt-Smith and Castleton's (2005:150) study where they found teachers "actively incorporat[ing] other knowledge, relating, for example, to past performance and their 'local' observations of student progress over time and across tasks" to formulate judgements about student writing.

It is apparent from the concerns raised that assessment is taken "to serve as a 'window' on the quality of teaching and learning" (Shay & Jawitz, 2005:102). The concerns raised echo dominant views of assessment methods and grading practices, which see exams and tests as adequate means to attesting to quality (Onias & Gudhlanga, 2012), and mark inflation as an indicator of falling standards (Foster, 2016). Although there has been significant discussion in assessment literature in the last thirty years or so on shifting assessment paradigms, moving from psychometrics (testing and examination) to a broader social-cultural model of assessment (Gipps, 1994; Shay, 2004; Elwood & Murphy, 2015), as well as recognising the importance of assessment for learning (Boud, 2000), it is evident that, in practice, the practice of assessment of learning, for the purpose of certification and accountability, prevails. In their reflection on remote assessment practices, Padayachee and Matimolane (2023:1) echo similar views, arguing that the challenges experienced during this period

"stemmed from an entrenched view of assessment as a proxy for student competence and the quality of teaching".

While comments from the survey suggest that lecturers are aware that designing assessments for the online context is different to designing assessments for the face-to-face context, and attribute lack of time as the key barrier to redesign, examples of assessments captured in this period suggest that challenges with redesign go beyond the issue of time. When faced with the disruptive moment of the pandemic, lecturers' beliefs about assessment appear to inform the design choices that they make. Next, we reflect on some examples of assessment redesign during this period.

Assessment redesigns during the emergency remote teaching period

The Sharing Online Assessment Practices (SOAP)[2] project at our institution collected examples of assessment practices during this period across six faculties (Humanities, Science, Commerce, Engineering and Built Environment, Law, and Health Sciences). The examples were collected through a survey, with follow-up interviews conducted between September 2020 and January 2021. Each case was analysed and categorised into four categories according to purposes or intentions of the redesign strategies. The categories are namely expanding/enhancing/adapting; transforming; holding patterns/difficulties; and mitigation.

The expanding/enhancing/adapting category saw assessment redesigns that were aimed at enhancing the teaching and learning experience. For example, in a postgraduate diploma course on educational technology, the assessment redesign was noted to be around community building. Students were provided more support and scaffolding, with assessments redesigned to "incorporate smaller pieces of work for formative purposes, and to facilitate more communal and collaborative engagement between students". It was reported that "[c]ommunal and collaborative practices around the assessment improved the quality of the learning experience for students who were otherwise unable to engage with each other". In another example of an undergraduate accounting course, it was mentioned that "quizzes were designed to support students' learning as well as function as regular checks to assess whether students were on track". It was reported that "[a] general rule guiding the design process of the assessments was that, if a trade-off was observed between rigour and risk of disadvantaging students with poor connectivity, favour was given to

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[2] https://cilt.uct.ac.za/teaching-resources-assessing-learning/sharing-online-assessment-practices-case-studies

designing for the latter". Although challenging, ERT was noted to have provided "a high-quality teaching and learning experience" for the lecturers in the course.

Likewise, the transforming category was focused on enhancing the learning experience, but rather than making adaptations to existing assessment practices, the assessment redesign here involved fundamental changes. There were only two examples that fell into this category and both examples are from the Humanities. In the one course, a case of an undergraduate fine art foundation course, a new form of assessment was introduced to draw students into a practice of responding. Students were given themed provocations to discuss, which then formed the basis of a collective written response, summary, and report. Peer learning was mentioned as the motivating factor behind the redesign. In the second course, a postgraduate course on digital curation, the assessment was changed to include a practical component, which involved students conducting a data decay experiment, and an empirical component, which involved students making observations in a lab notebook. The change was said to be "hugely enriching and raised the standard of the course".

In the holding patterns/difficulties category, the core drive behind the assessment redesign was surviving the ERT period. While attempts were made to redesign assessment for online conditions, the results were found to be unsatisfactory. The assessments placed in this category typically highlight the limitations of the online or digital medium as a delivery mode. For example, in a music course, instead of live performances, the assessment was replaced with video recordings. It was noted that the quality of the recordings limited the assessor's ability to assess. While video recordings opened up the opportunity for students to edit their recording and perform multiple takes, it can be argued that this is not authentic to practise given that live performances only provide a single chance at demonstration. Another example is an undergraduate Health Sciences course on neonatology. In this course, it was noted that patient-bedside cases, which involve examining patients, were an important aspect of students' training. Replacing this with virtual cases is reported to be not ideal. Yet another example is a course on legal practice in law. Central to the course is the development of "multicultural lawyers who are able to work with diversity". Before COVID, the assessments in the course involved consultations with real clients. During ERT, the assessment was replaced with simulated cases, which were noted to be lacking in terms of developing students' interpersonal skills. It was noted that students "lose out on the skill of figuring out nuances in responses and details that clients may be withholding" as well as the "opportunity to engage and reflect upon their own prejudices or biases as they work with people from backgrounds very different to their own".

In the mitigation category, emphasis of the redesign was on maintaining integrity. The design strategies employed involved expanding questions pools, modes, and types of assessment to deter plagiarism, collusion, and cheating. Some examples of assessments captured in this category surfaced how social inequalities (Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, & Chili, 2020) impact on assessment. For instance, in an introductory statistics course, it was noted that the open-book assessments "may have disadvantaged those students without access to extensive reference materials". In another course situated in the chemical engineering programme, dropouts were reported "at the first part of lockdown, because students either had non-existent internet access, or they were in a non-conducive learning environment". This suggests a growing awareness of how socio-economic conditions impact assessment performance.

The examples of assessment captured in the SOAP project surface three key concerns that underlie assessment design: learning, authenticity, and integrity. The assessments in both the expanding/enhancing/adapting category and the transforming category highlight a vested interest to support students' learning through assessment design. While assessments in the holding patterns/difficulty category expose the limitations of the online context for assessments that involve practicals, they nonetheless, highlight the importance of authenticity in assessments. The assessments in the mitigation category foreground the importance of maintaining integrity in assessments but point towards a growing awareness of how socio-economic conditions can impact assessment performance. Padayachee and Matimolane (2023:5) posit that "assessment strategies that are driven primarily for (by) certification purposes and underpinned by conceptions of quality as exceptional may heighten social inequities [...] particularly for the most disadvantaged students". This surfaces an ongoing tension between the need to uphold integrity and standards and the desire to be more socially responsive and design assessments for greater equity. It is important to recognise that this is not a new tension, but a tension that South African higher education has had to engage with since the fall of Apartheid. Being expected to fulfil the public interest obligations of public universities with a priority for social justice and redress, within a practical and cultural climate which effectively privileges competition and private profit-making imperatives, leaves universities between a "rock and a hard place" (Swartz, Ivancheva, Czerniewicz, & Morris, 2019).

At our institution, attempts have been made to engage with issues of assessment and equity prior to the pandemic, but, arguably, these engagements have tended to be at the conceptual level. For instance, a pivotal moment in which the institution was forced to examine issues with equity in the curriculum was following the release of the Curriculum Change Framework report in 2018. The

report sought to address the concerns that were raised by students during the #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall protests in 2015 and 2016. While the report highlights a number of exclusionary practices that are entrenched in the university's assessment practices, engagement with these issues has tended to be at the conceptual level rather than on an operational level. The challenges brought on by the pandemic provided concrete experiences for lecturers on exactly how particular assessment designs can be exclusionary, as issues with access, ranging from device, internet to suitable learning conditions, became explicitly visible. This has provided a very pragmatic opportunity for lecturers to interrogate and critically reflect on why their assessments are the way they are, who they are designing their assessments for, who benefits, and who are disadvantaged by particular assessments' designs.

The assessment strategies identified in the SOAP project closely echo Mottiar, Byrne, Gorham and Robinson's (2022) 'Typology of assessment responses to COVID-19' (TARC) model, which identifies four categories of assessment responses: reactor (those who made minimal adjustments), adaptive responder (those who adapted their existing practices), committed innovator (those who would have made changes anyway as engaging in incremental teaching and learning changes is part of their regular practice), and opportunistic innovator (those who opportunistically seized the moment to trial ideas). Mottiar et al. (2022:16) suggest that the TARC model could be used to consider "implications for effecting change in higher education, teaching and learning, training and self-reflection among individual academics", but also acknowledge that as the changes made during the pandemic were largely driven by lone academics, once the emergency situation subsides, and the typical administrative systems and processes return, this is likely to have an impact on how lecturers move forward with their assessment strategies.

We strongly believe that to understand change and transformation in organisations, it is necessary to acknowledge the intricate interplay among various dimensions and not only place responsibility on the sole individual. In a recent paper, we highlighted how structure and agency intersected and impacted on lecturers' responses to ERT (Gachago, Cruz, Belford, Livingston, Morkel, & Patnaik, 2021). Similarly, in this paper, we would like to make a case to see assessment practices as emerging from a complex intersection of individual preferences, backgrounds, histories, positionality within the academic hierarchy, and disciplinary specificities developed over time. In the next section, we draw on Bourdieu's theory of social practice to make sense of the complex interplay between disciplinary practices and individual experiences and how they may impact on capacity to change.

Assessment through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social practice

Bourdieu's theory of social practice weaves together his notions of field, habitus, and capital, highlighting capital as key to understanding the structure and functioning of "the double reality of the social world" (Bourdieu in Wacqant, 1992:11), that is, a reality which involves a complex interplay between objective social structures and subjective individual experiences, and how individuals strategically navigate and position themselves within this complex interplay to pursue their interests.

For Bourdieu, society is organised into multiple fields, such as, politics, education, art, and economics. Each 'field' is a social arena with its own rules, structures, and power dynamics in which actors vie for various forms of capital. Bourdieu sees universities as functioning within a 'field' of higher education, which has traditionally been characterised as "a conceptual space that is relatively insulated from the direct forces of political and economic pressures" (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005:39). Contained in the field of higher education are other fields in the form of disciplines and professions (Jawitz, 2009). Individuals do not all have the same agency within a field. One factor that determines one's capacity to contribute to, or even shape, practice is an individual's 'habitus', which Bourdieu (1993:72-3) describes as "all at once a 'craft', a collection of techniques, references, a set of 'beliefs'" that is developed through the formative institutions of family and education (Burke, 2015:56). Habitus provides an important tool for understanding how agents are able to strategise and act in a field.

Alongside habitus is 'capital', which is defined as

> accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its "incorporated," embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. (Bourdieu, 1986:15)

According to Bourdieu, there are four fundamental forms of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Economic capital is captured in wealth and other material resources (Loyal & Loyal, 2017:27) and may be used to acquire other forms of capital. Social capital points to the network of relations on which one may draw to exert influence on and in the world, which are built through exchanges of other forms of capital. Cultural capital may be embodied or acquired through formal education (Bourdieu, 1984), or through "engagement with 'legitimate culture'" (Friedman, 2016:112). Symbolic capital exists as a "symbolic effect of capital", that is, "the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu,

1989:17). The capacity to participate in and change practices is influenced by both the individual's capital and habitus and that of the "collective habitus in departmental communities of practice" (Jawtiz, 2009:601).

Examining assessment through the lens of practice and the concepts of field, habitus, and capital challenges the psychometric understanding of assessment as an objective description of a student's capacity. Instead, we come to see it as

> complex, situated action(s) with a range of precursors and a range of consequences, anticipated, unanticipated, highly visible and less visible (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011:26)

This framing of assessment invites us to consider not only what needs to happen to overcome the "considerable resistance" to change assessment (Boud, Dawson, Bearman, Bennett, Joughin, & Molloy, 2018:1007), but also who needs to be involved, in what fields, and from what positions or roles. In Figure 1, we provide an illustration of how the nature of the field and capital which an academic brings to their assessment can impact both potential for scope of change as well as the shape or texture of the change.
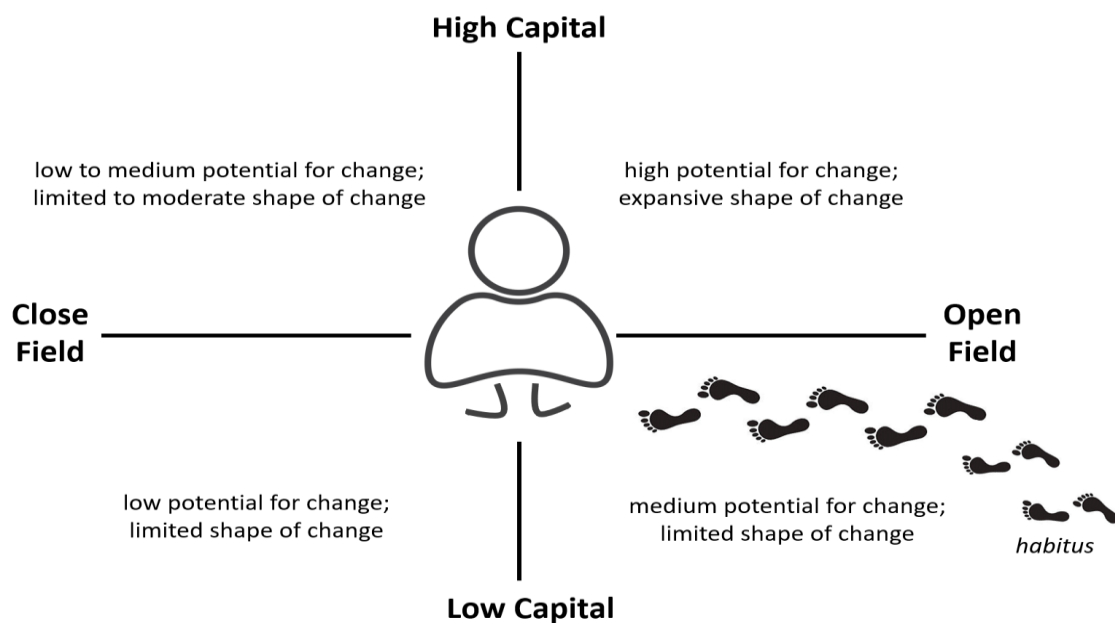

Figure 1: Changing assessment: Understanding the potential for forms of change using field, capital, and habitus

In Figure 1, the upper right quadrant is characterised by an 'open' field, and an agent with a strong position in the field. An open field, a field without strong constraining factors, creates a high or higher potential for change overall. Furthermore, having a strong position, or valued capital within the field, coupled with a habitus that is well oriented to the field, enables the agent to influence the

form or shape of the change. When the agent is playing on a familiar field, they can wield their capital to produce change that we describe as 'expansive'. Expansive changes might also be described as impactful or even transformative. In the SOAP project, this can be illustrated through a case of a postgraduate diploma course on learning design. Learning design is seen as a role, a practice and process, and recently as an emerging research field. Its relative novelty means an open field that is prone to constant shift and change shape. There are no external bodies accrediting the course. The School of Education, within which the programme is based, functions as a 'control' mechanism, but until very recently did not engage with blended and online learning and, as such, attributes expertise to the facilitation team running the course. The facilitation team consists of a mix of junior and senior academics and support staff (learning designers), possessing a fair amount of cultural and social capital to implement change relatively easily. An open field and fair amount of capital, in this way, provides the facilitation team considerable freedom to redesign.

Conversely, the upper left quadrant is characterised by a 'closed' field, on which an agent with relatively high capital for the field acts. A closed field permits limited change or, at least, less change than an open field. Fields may be described as tending towards closed as a result of strong disciplinary discourses, strongly structured professional bodies, or even hierarchical knowledge or professional structures. As with the previous case, an agent who is powerfully positioned in the field, as a result of having valued capital, can create powerful change to the extent that the field permits it. An example of this in the SOAP project is a case of an accounting course. Accounting can be described as a 'closed field' as the discipline is highly regulated by the national professional body. Despite the closed field, the lecturers in the course were able to implement changes, as they possessed the social and cultural capital to do so. It is interesting to note that although they were able to implement certain changes, in essence, the nature of the assessments was not changed, as the knowledge structure or ways of knowing remain the same. The reason for this can be attributed to the relatively closed field which constrains the extent to which change can happen.

The lower quadrants of Figure 1 depict scenarios where the agent's capacity to enact change – to play the game – is limited, not by the openness or closedness of the field, but by their positioning in it and the capital that they bring to the process. As staffing in higher education transforms across economic, racial, linguistic, and social lines, lecturers' access to economic, cultural, and social capital is becoming increasingly varied. What this variation means for the practice of assessment, if we understand it as a socially situated practice, remains poorly understood. However, while some of the people on the field are changing, bringing with them more diverse experiences, linguistic

backgrounds and kinds of knowledge, the field itself and the game that is played on it, changes more slowly. This gap between the field and habitus of the agents on it, produces individuals with capital that does not fully align with the higher education context. In contexts where the field is closed, that is to say, the potential for change is already constrained, and, furthermore, the individual academic cannot leverage their experience and dispositions into recognisable capital, the form of the change is unlikely to have much salience. Even in cases where the field is open, if, as we have argued, the individual academic does not bring to the field experience and dispositions which are valued, while they may be able to enact changes, these are unlikely to be widely adopted as the change may not be perceived as salient by the community.

In our analysis of the SOAP assessments, we realised that most of the respondents can be described as having access to varying kinds of well-recognised capital, often generated by the university context. For example, we had staff who had won teaching awards, who had been awarded a variety of competitive grants that support teaching, and who were long-term and well-established members of the teaching and learning community. This is not surprising, as the aim of the SOAP project was to collect representative examples of online assessment during the COVID-19 crisis, and those who volunteered their cases tended to be experienced academics. Thus, in the SOAP assessments, there are no cases that reflect the case of low or constrained capital. However, in our work as academic staff developers working with lecturers, we have encountered examples of misalignment between capital and field. When working with both novice and, surprisingly, fairly experienced individuals, lecturers often express an inability to change assessment. Further discussion reveals that they feel trapped by the weight of previous practice – when asked why something is the way that it is, responses often include "It's always been done that way" or "I didn't know I could change it." One staff member, for example, explained that when they started in the role, they were issued past examples of assessment as a model for future assessment. In addition to departmental expectations, staff report that students' expectations of assessment and study habits also carry weight. Students arrive inducted into a system of learning that is grounded in the practice of grading, primarily as a mechanism for sorting and certifying students, and for managing student behaviour. This gives rise to persistent requests for past papers, exemplar papers, model answers, extra examples, and so on. Explanations that assessments have or will be changing are often associated with high levels of student dissatisfaction, leading staff, especially those with more constrained capital, to avoid changes to assessment practices.

Some initial ideas and reflections

When it comes to assessment transformation in higher education, we believe that in foregrounding assessment as a social practice, this can better illuminate the complex dynamics at play between field, capital, and habitus. We argue that the capital a lecturer can bring to the field is important when it comes to innovative approaches to assessment.

Economic capital, in the context of assessment in higher education, may be understood as the material resources an individual lecturer can bring to bear on their teaching context. Given the reduction in real expenditure on higher education in South Africa (Nkohla, Munacinga, Marwa, & Ncwadi, 2021), accompanied by "the acceleration of the policy of public austerity" (Wangenge-Ouma & Carpentier, 2018:39), staff are required to 'do more with less' (Jubas & Kawalilak, 2012; Tronto, 2018), resulting in leaner models for tutoring, grading, and feedback becoming increasingly common. Staff who want to explore less lean assessment practices, including for example, authentic or mentored assessment, are increasingly dependent on grants to fund additional tutors, extra marking or mentoring time, and so on. Thus, not all staff are likely to have equal access to the financial resources required to explore alternative and particularly less lean forms of assessment. Broadly speaking, cultural capital can be understood as the cultural resources that are typically accumulated through education and experience. In relation to teaching and assessment, this can be considered as the knowledge, pedagogical skills, and experiences that a lecturer possesses in relation to their subject matter (Woolhouse, Bartle, Hunt, & Balmer, 2013). Research on how various players function within the academic workplace, however, indicates that cultural capital does not derive solely from academic expertise and experience, and that institutions, groups, and the activities within them become sites of struggle that involve norms and power. Researching how new academics engaged with the assessment practices in their departments, Jawitz (2009) observes that communities of practice within departments develop a 'collective habitus' that values particular forms of cultural capital. It is noted that "[t]he acquisition of the tacit knowledge of academic practice favours newcomers with forms of cultural capital that match the capital valued by the field" (Jawitz, 2009:603). Writing about class and gendered labour in the UK higher education context, Reay (2004:32) claims that "[a]cademia is full of cultural capitalists, but contract researchers are not among them". She further posits that masculinity and whiteness are forms of capital and argues that in the privatised, entrepreneurial academy, "great men" with "great personalities" increasingly function "as higher education's cultural capitalists profiting directly from the labours of 'hidden', usually female subordinates" (Reay, 2004:34). Elsewhere, Pherali (2012) observes how despite

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possessing academic capital – value that is associated with academic work – when academics from non-English-speaking backgrounds move to English universities, they struggle to adapt to the new environment as a result of lack of appropriate cultural capital to fit into the environment. Read together, these studies suggest that navigating higher education practices, and specifically, assessment practices, requires multiple kinds of cultural capital, including, but not limited to, academic capital.

Bourdieu (1986) asserts that social obligations and connections can, in certain contexts, be translated or leveraged into economic and symbolic capital. He defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986:21). In the context of assessment in higher education, social capital for lecturers might be interpreted as access to the kinds of social networks that can be used to support change. For example, a novice lecturer, new to a particular context, is likely to find themselves with something of a disrupted social network, brought-along networks from their previous work, and emerging networks in their current contexts. Connections with supportive colleagues – a mentor, trusted peer group, supportive head of department, a helpful academic staff development practitioner, or some combination of these – are often key to enabling the novice lecturer to explore changes to assessment.

An aspect of the field that shapes lecturers' ability to change assessment practices relates to other players on the field. Beyond institutional approval systems that do not necessarily support responsiveness when it comes to larger assessment changes, there are also external bodies that impede change. In our engagement with staff teaching on professional degrees, particularly those degrees with strong professional bodies such as in Engineering, Commerce and Health Sciences, accreditation of the degree was controlled, in part, by the professional body who often prescribed assessment conditions. These assessment conditions included, inter alia, requiring face-to-face assessment, requiring assessment without access to resources, requiring specific assessment regimes and graduate attributes tied to specific forms of assessment, alongside questioning the trustworthiness of online assessments. While some of this was changed during COVID-19, these changes were short-lived and often reversed once we returned to on-campus teaching. Regardless of the apparent capital or habitus of the individual staff member, or departmental capital and collective habitus, the field of power appeared to be structured in such a way that changes to assessment had to be approved by the relevant professional body. Having said this, there is also

contrasting narrative surfacing which suggests that professional accrediting bodies too are keen for change but are sometimes cited as convenient justifications by individual lecturers resisting change. What this suggests is that there are misaligned perceptions, which highlight the urgent need for constructive conversations among stakeholders.

Conclusion

Having proposed that field, habitus, and capital are factors that influence lecturers' ability to affect potential and shape of change in assessments, we recommend a broader engagement and conversation around quality, purpose, and value within departments, faculties, and the institution, as well as accreditation bodies, to develop new social practices of assessment. We have suggested that assessment is often seen as a lecturer's individual responsibility which can lead to feelings of frustration and overwhelm by academic staff who do not have the capability to effect change within their context. We posit that we need to move away from expecting individual lecturers to change their assessment practices without recognising that assessment is a socially embedded, historical practice with a range of stakeholders' interests attached. For impactful change to happen, we propose that there is a move towards a collective culture of sense-making.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity to disrupt the entrenched culture of assessment that prioritises assessment for certification and accountability and in which assessment is seen as an objective measurement of ability. The need for change has become more pressing than ever as generative artificial intelligence technologies, such as ChatGPT, are forcing us to reconsider our assessment approaches. We propose that by reaffirming assessment as a social practice, this opens up opportunities to make explicit the relations of power, history, and culture that are embedded in current assessment practices. By making these complexities in assessment practices explicit, we believe that this will enable spaces for sustained discussion, negotiation, and scrutiny on the purpose of assessment, who are benefiting or being marginalised from it, and ways in which assessments can be redesigned to support students' learning journey and success.

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