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Researching assessment as social practice: Implications for research Methodology

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Abstract
Recent educational journals on both sides of the Atlantic have seen a resurgence of debate about the nature of educational research. As a contribution to these debates, this paper draws on theoretical and methodological 'thinking tools' of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Specifically, the paper explores what Jenkins [Jenkins, R. (2002). *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge and Falmer] refers to as Bourdieu's ''reflexive epistemological pluralism'' and its implications for research into higher education, with a particular focus on assessment as social practice. This particular theoretical and methodological understanding is used to critically reflect on a study conducted in 2005 on the impact of a policy on anonymous examination marking which was implemented at the University of Cape Town in 2004. The study collected both quantitative data of student examination performance pre- and post-policy implementation, as well as interviews with course conveners. The paper argues that when viewed interdependently the data offers insight into some of the ''principles of vision and division'' [Bourdieu, P. (1996). The state nobility: Elite schools in the field of power. Cambridge: Polity Press] at work in assessors' judgmentmaking process. The assessors' deliberations expose ideological tensions between the dual challenges of equity and excellence in the context of a historically white liberal university under transformation.

Keywords: Social practice; Assessment; Research methodology

Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science, the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism. The very fact that this division constantly reappears in virtually the same form would suffice to indicate that the modes of knowledge which it distinguishes are equally indispensable to a science of the social world. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 25).

1. Introduction
Prompted by the United States' National Research Council's attempt to set guiding principles for scientifically based education research, there has been a flurry of debate in recent educational journals on both sides of the Atlantic in defence of the educational research enterprise (Hammersley, 2005; Hodkinson, 2004; Moss, 2005; Nash, 2005). This resurgence of debate is in part a response to US governmental attacks on the quality of educational research and moves to prescribe what constitutes methodologically appropriate scientific inquiry. For some the contestation focuses on differences of methodology, others on differences of epistemology, even ontology. Moss (2005) argues that the debate is not about methods but about the aims of social science research given its focus on social practice. This paper is seen as a contribution to these on-going debates.

The past few decades have seen a 'social turn' in theories of teaching, learning and assessment [as is evidenced in this special dition]. In contrast to the psychometric approach which has dominated assessment research and practice, there has been a rowing interest in assessment as a social practice (Broadfoot, 1996; Filer, 2000; Gipps, 1999; Shay, 2004, 2005). What does such an emphasis on practice mean, however, and what are the implications for researching assessment as practice? An interest in practice has two dimensions to it. Firstly, the interest is in what people do in their daily activities. These doings are located in space and time, and cannot therefore be understood outside of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which they occurs (Gipps, 1999). Secondly, the notion of 'practice' also suggests that these doings are habitual; they have hardened into a kind of relative permanency (Chouliariki & Fairclough, 1999). This relative permanency means that people engage in practices purposefully, but not always consciously so.

Thus an interest in assessment as social practice is an interest in the daily acts of judgment that teachers/academics perform. These classification acts are constituted through a complex set of disciplinary, departmental and institutional values embedded in rules and procedures. This presents a challenge for researchers of these social practices. In exploring assessors' judgment-making processes it emerged that the classificatory frameworks which inform these judgments are often deeply internalized: they are the outcome of being at home in a particular 'field' (Shay, 2005). Assessors may not be fully conscious of their ways of viewing and classifying the world, and thus unable to fully articulate their judgment-making processes. This is a challenge for the researcher. At the same time, part of being human is to be reflexive, that is, we are continually attempting to make sense of what we do and why we do it. These sense-makings are part of the doing and therefore central to understanding the social practice. In addition to these challenges the researcher has to account for his or her own sense-making. These methodological challenges are central to researching social practice and central to the concerns of this paper.

My particular theoretical understanding of social practice has been heavily influenced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Taking his lead, the analytical focus is not on individual agents, though the role of agents within practice is crucial. Nor is it on structures, though the macro social conditions which enable practice are equally crucial. A social practice perspective is focused on the relationships between the acts of agents within practices (including their understandings of these acts) and the broader social conditions which constitute these practices, with a particular interest in their codetermination. Bourdieu refers to this as ''thinking relationally'' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 228). Ultimately the interest lies in the underlying principles which explain or make

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sense of practice in a particular social, historical, institutional context. The emphasis on the particularity of practice is not antithetical to a search for the more general or the universal. The goal of such research is "to grasp the particularity within the generality and the generality within the particularity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 75) and to uncover "the universal buried deep within the most particular" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 44).

As evidenced in the opening quote, one of the fundamental goals of Bourdieu's work is to straddle some of the "false antinomies" which have held the social sciences captive, antinomies between subject and object, structure and agency, subjectivism and objectivism (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 10). These antinomies are refuted in favour of a "double reality of social world" (Bourdieu &Wacquant, 1992, p. 11) – the mutually constituted relationship between structure and agency. However, Bourdieu's project of finding a middle way or third path between the thesis and antithesis of objectivism and subjectivism is not particularly unique. In the aftermath of postmodernism, much of the contemporary preoccupation of social theory in the mid to late 1900s has been the search for a middle ground (Berstein, 1983). What distinguishes Bourdieu's work is his rigorous pursuit of the inseparability of theory from method (Bourdieu &Wacquant, 1992). His theory of social practice necessitates a particular methodological approach: the reflexive epistemological pluralism referred to above. If we accept the double reality of social practice, then the analysis of social practice requires a "double reading" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 7), an epistemic pluralism. Reflexive epistemological pluralism refers to Bourdieu's insistence on an analytical turn on ourselves as researchers and our research practices – the necessity of critically reflecting on how we know what we know as a crucial part of the analytical process.

Out of this commitment, throughout his career Bourdieu repeatedly returned to the same data. In this spirit this paper is an attempt at such a reflexive turn. In the first part of the paper I give a brief overview of a study conducted on the impact of a policy on anonymous examination at the University Cape Town: the background, the research questions and design and key findings.[1] In the second part of the paper I return to this study with an explicit Bourdieu 'theory as method' lens for a more close-up view of the data collected, including my own interests as analyst.

2. The impact of anonymous marking: an institutional reading

In 2003 the University of Cape Town approved an anonymous examination policy which required the student name to be concealed from the marker. The policy was a response to students' concerns in the early 1990s – a politically turbulent time in South Africa's history – about the potential for racial or gender discrimination in the marking of examinations. The policy was approved and implemented in 2004 with the stated intention of "minimizing the possibility that irrelevant inferences be subconsciously used to discriminate for or against students, in particular inferences based on gender, race and any other kind of information which can be made on the basis of a student's name" (Proposal to the Examination and Assessment Committee 1/9/2003). The wording of this intention signals two important issues in the debate around this policy. The first issue was the recognition that discrimination could be negative or positive. The former refers to a situation where marks are withheld on the basis of information irrelevant to student performance such as race or gender. The latter refers to a situation where inferences about student identity may result in a more generous assessment (also referred to as sympathetic marking). The second issue was the recognition that such a policy could not ensure total anonymity; the intention was to minimize subconscious inferences. This was in part a result of the limitations of UCT's method of implementation,[2] as well as the recognition that no policy could prevent intentional discrimination for or against students.

In the first year of implementing the policy a course convener from a large undergraduate course conducted a comparison of the examination performance before and after the policy. The findings were that there was a significant decrease from 62% to 55% in the mean examination scores between the two years, and that the distribution of scores had widened significantly from a range of 56–67% in 2003 to 46–64% in 2004. This resulted in the exam failure rate increasing from 7% in the year before the policy implementation to 33% after implementation. He argued that these lower exam results and wider distribution patterns were a result of the shift to anonymous marking since all else in the course had remained stable across the years – the teaching staff, the course content, the examination, as well as the students' coursework marks. In terms of the reasons why the anonymous marking resulted in lower mean marks and wider distributions he speculated:

> The effect on markers. . . appears to have been shown through their awarding of a greater range of marks, particularly for weaker scripts. This may be because the anonymity of the exam liberated markers from a previously-held positive bias in favour of second-language speakers. Given that the majority of second-language English speakers are previously (and therefore probably currently) disadvantaged, markers may previously have been inclined to give incomprehensible or poorly-worded answers the benefit of the doubt to a greater than desirable extent, because one knew (or rather, could check) that the student was previously disadvantaged. With our current system of anonymous marking, it may therefore be the case that answers are treated on their merits, and consequently more fairly. (Report to the Head of Department written by the course convener, 13 September 2004).

This convener's account seemed to point to evidence of sympathetic marking in examination marking prior to the implementation of the policy, and thus endorsed the need for the policy.

In 2005 a study of the impact of the policy on student performance was conducted. The key questions were to establish whether there were any significant differences in patterns of examination performance pre- and post-policy, and to explore what the markers perceived to be the reasons for these differences (or lack of differences). Five undergraduate courses were selected, one from each of UCT's faculties (excluding UCT's Law Faculty where anonymous marking had been in place for some time). The courses were selected on the basis of a range of variables, the primary concern being curriculum stability during the period of study. Another key variable was selecting courses where the exam required some degree of interpretive work on the part of the assessor (e.g. essays). The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data consisted of student examination performance two years pre- and post-policy from each of the five courses. The data were disaggregated by population group,[3] educational background,[4] language,[5] gender. Interviews were conducted with each of the five course conveners.

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Analysis of the quantitative data revealed: Firstly, across all five courses and across all four years, there was a consistent pattern of performance differentiated by population group, educational background, language and gender. Specifically, across all the years and across all the courses under study there was a pattern of students classified 'white' outperforming student from other population groups, speakers of English as a first language outperforming speakers of English as an additional language, students from prior backgrounds of historically advantaged schooling outperforming students from prior backgrounds of historically disadvantaged schooling, and females outperforming males. Secondly, across all five courses, the differentiated performance patterns were consistent pre- and post-study. In other words, the patterns of differentiated performance between, for example, 'white' students and 'black' students did not change after the policy implementation.

Given the history of racial discrimination in South Africa and the students' particular concerns about the potential for such discrimination in examination marking, the primary institutional interest of the study was to establish whether there was any evidence of negative discrimination prior to the implementation of the policy. The argument would be that if there had been significant levels of discrimination, and if the implementation of the policy succeeded in masking these aspects of student identity, the findings should reveal changed performance for certain categories of students following the policy implementation (for example, one might expect Black African students to perform better). The fact that there were no changes in performance patterns pointed to no evidence for positive or negative discrimination prior to the implementation of the policy. This institutional reading of the data suggested that the students' concerns about racial discrimination were unfounded.

The findings were presented to Senate subcommittee noting that there was no conclusive evidence for discriminatory marking on examinations. These findings were consistent with the course convener's speculation noted above. It was recommended however that for political reasons the policy be retained. As far as the institution's interests in the study were concerned, this was the end of the story. However my own interests as a researcher of social practices led me to return to the data – to stand back and interrogate my acts of 'objectification' on behalf of the institution's interests. What emerged from this reflexive move was the possibility of an alternative reading of the data. This alternative account had less to say about the impact of anonymous marking and more to say about how assessors position themselves within a particular set of social realities.

3. An alternative reading

My theoretical understanding of assessment as a socially-situated interpretive act meant that I brought a particular set of interests to both the policy formulation and the follow-up study. An interpretive approach assumes discrimination (or 'prejudice' as Gadamer refers to it[6]) to be an unavoidable dimension of the judgment-making process. This policy implementation became an opportunity to explore this judgment-making process. Thus I was particularly attuned during the interviews to assessors' accounts of their deliberations over student performance particularly at the borderlines of pass and fail. I probed further into what emerged as an alternative interpretation of the unchanged performance patterns (noted above in the findings). The reason why the student performance patterns were consistent, these assessors argued, is because UCT does not in fact have anonymous marking. Irrespective of whether the student's name is on the script or not, markers make inferences about identity and these inferences inevitably influence judgments. Thus in contrast to the quantitative account which suggested no evidence of discrimination, these accounts laid bare markers' discriminatory judgment marking processes. These seemingly contradictory accounts led me to re-consider these two different data sets from a Bourdieu-ian perspective.

Drawing on his 'thinking tools' I want to propose that these different accounts represent what Bourdieu refers to as different 'modes of knowledge' each with its vantage points on social practice. Making sense of the logic of social practice necessitates an epistemic pluralism – the 'view from above' and the 'view from below' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 49). I explore these different modes of knowledge for what they each have to offer as well as their limitations. Starting with the quantitative data, these data provide a synoptic view of student performance in the form of mean scores and distributions. Furthermore the quantitative data provide comparisons of these mean scores and distributions over a period of time, between selected groups, and across different kinds of test items. These patterns represent a 'reality' that any particular subject (course convener, tutor, student) would not necessarily be aware of from the confines of their particular experience, unless they had done a similar kind of analysis (such as the course convener reported on above). In this sense (and this is Bourdieu's sense) these patterns represent an objective description of reality; they are independent from the subjects who are responsible for their construction. These subjects may be responsible for the 2005 marks but they are not responsible for previous years, and they are not responsible for the other four courses. This is the 'view from above' (Jenkins, 2002).

I noted earlier that the purpose of the analysis was to expose underlying principles which explain or make sense of practices in a particular social, historical, and institutional context. Such explanations for social practice reject mechanical or automatic causal links between 'variables', for example, the variable of 'school background' and examination performance. Scott (in Nash, 2005) argues that these 'variables' are not real but proxies for real variables. They are proxies for a "specific lived process" (p. 191). Following this argument, the variable of 'school background' in this data is a proxy for a whole set of conditions which influence examination performance. These conditions include, depending on which school background, differentiated levels of resources, quality of teachers, access to textbooks etc.. . . This might seem an obvious point to a South African reader. The issue here is the epistemological status of the data. It is a snapshot of differentiated performance under differentiated social conditions. Set alongside other snapshots[7] what emerges is a socially and politically constructed reality as one of the legacies of apartheid education. These conditions from the past, tenaciously still present, influence student performance – not only in the narrow confines of the exam but in the classroom, the tutorials, the corridors – influencing who speaks and who does not speak in tutorials, who comes for help and who does not, as well as who passes and who fails. Thus an alternative reading of the consistent pattern of student performance is that irrespective of the policy the social conditions instituted by apartheid education remain fixed, not for all time but for the present and some would argue for the foreseeable future.

I now turn to the qualitative data, that is, the accounts which emerged through the interviews. As noted above, one of the course conveners initially argued for a causal relationship between the implementation of the anonymous examination policy and the decreased performance. His explanation for the decreased marks was that the policy had minimized sympathetic marking. He argued that since the implementation of the policy markers could now assess on the basis of "merit" rather than accounting for

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extenuating circumstances – ''a poor answer now gets a low mark''. In a follow-up interview he elaborated on his reasoning: ''If you know the race of the student and. . . you make an assumption about the quality of their schooling that in general (it) was better than the majority of black students. . . one can almost say that there's a feeling that it's their (white students') fault. (It's) the students' fault if they haven't answered the question well, because they haven't worked hard enough or they haven't paid attention or whatever it might be. Whereas if you find that with a student that you know is a black student, it's not that easy to make that judgment. You think well, they were a victim of bad schooling and that principle of charity would come in, where you would give them the benefit of the doubt.''

This practice of 'sympathetic marking' came up in all the interviews. These are instances where a name, a student number or the actual performance evokes in the marker a stereotype of a 'disadvantaged' student which may generate sympathy on the part of the marker, particularly if the student's performance is on the pass/fail borderline. One convener admitted, ''You note the name and think the language isn't going to be good. And with that you'd have an element of, you know, how would I do in a second language?... Here's somebody carrying two bags of cement on their shoulders, not one. . .And so you go a bit easy. . .. If it's obvious to me that a student is not a first language English speaker and there's really something I'm struggling to understand, I would tend to give them the benefit of the doubt. I would sort of say to myself, 'Could he mean that?''' These data offer us a 'view from below'. These are assessors' accounts of deliberations on the borderlines. What is the contribution of these data to an understanding of assessment as a social practice? If we apply Bourdieu's relational thinking tools, the quantitative performance data, as argued above, is a representation of an objective reality of the field of higher education in South Africa. This is ''objectivity of the first order'' constituted by the distribution of material resources (capital) as a result of the legacy of apartheid. This reality in turn constitutes an ''objectivity of the second order'' that is, markers' systems of classification – the ''symbolic templates for the practical activities – conduct, thoughts, feelings, and judgments – of social agents'' (Bourdieu &Wacquant, 1992, p. 7). In Bourdieu's terms these subjective accounts are the ''internalization of externality'' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 29). But not all agents will internalize in the same way. All of those interviewed in this study were white. One can imagine other sorts of responses, such as those indicated in the data from a study conducted by Jawitz (2006) who is exploring how new academic staff in a South African university learn to judge student performance. He gives an account of a new black staff member who consciously adjusts his own marks downwards in response to his perception of white colleagues' sympathetic marking of black students. Thus within the objective reality of the field there is a range of possible responses depending on agents' trajectories into and within the field.

To summarize, these views from above and below provide different vantage points on social practice. The synoptic view of performance patterns across courses, across time and across different groups reduces and simplifies complex phenomenon into patterns which are useful for understanding social practice. It reminds us that there is a lot more happening in practice than what individuals can account for. However the danger of this objectivist point of view is the seductive slip from the data as a model (or representation) of reality to the data as reality itself. Bourdieu refers to as the 'synoptic illusion' (Jenkins, 2002). However useful the performance patterns may be we must not lose sight of their constructedness. This constructedness is best illustrated in the population group variables of 'White', 'Black', 'Coloured', 'Indian' – labels of classification with an explicit political and social history which are increasingly problematic.

The view from below gives us access to agents' reflexivities, their sense-making in context. We gain insight into ''the part that mundane knowledge, subjective meaning, and practical competency play in the continual production of society'' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 9). This view also has its limitations. Bourdieu raises a number of critiques of these 'native interpretations' many of which are familiar to qualitative researchers sensitive to the constructedness of, for example, interview data. Firstly, we note that interviewees' accounts are not descriptions of practice but explanations of practice. This is a crucial distinction. Epistemologically, informants' accounts have an already semi-theorized status. For example, the course convener's account of the relationship between the implementation of the policy and the examination performance (noted above) is not a description of what actually happened but rather his own attempts to make sense of what happened. Grenfell and James (2004) argue that, rather than taking what people say at face value, we must seek to understand people in terms of their location among a series of possible social positions.

Secondly, sociolinguists remind us that people are always doing things with language. Halliday and Hasan (1985) distinguish between the ideational and relational functions of language. The former refers to people using language to impart information. The latter refers to the way people use, for example interviews, to secure approval, protect themselves or others, set the record straight, distance or align themselves with particular agendas. Thus a relevant question might be, why are interviewees telling me about their sympathy for historically disadvantaged students? The answer to this question sheds further light on the social-situatedness of assessment. Thirdly, the data is doubly constructed: there is the account of the practice being told by the interviewee and there is the account of the practice being heard and interpreted by the researcher. I noted earlier how the institution's interests led to one reading of the data and my own theoretical interests led to another. There is no doubt that my interest in assessment as a social practice influenced what I found ''interesting''. As Bourdieu notes ''. . .to say we are interested in a problem is a euphemistic way of naming the fundamental fact that we have vital stakes in our scientific productions. . .'' (quoted in Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 515).

Thus the interdependence of these two representations of reality – the objective and the subjective – exposes some of the complexity of the judgment-making process. Privileging either reality at the expense of the other would not only result in a partial account but a misleading one. These views are ''equally indispensable'' to an understanding of assessment as social practice (see opening quote). I would like to suggest that, viewed in relation to each other, these data offer insight into some of the ''principles of vision and division'' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 265) at work in this judgment-making process in a particular social–historical context. These assessors' deliberations expose ideological tensions between the dual challenges of equity and excellence in the context of a historically white liberal university under transformation, that is, the imperative to redress past inequalities while maintaining standards of excellence (whatever that might mean). In their attempt to resolve these tensions agents' responses will vary depending on their own trajectories into and within the field, but the range of admissible responses is restricted. It comes as no surprise that there were no accounts of negative discrimination; at this point in South Africa's history, in this institution, negative

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discrimination is not admissible. In contrast positive discrimination is admissible for some, but as Jawitz's data indicates (noted above) it is problematic for others.

4. Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I noted the flurry of debate prompted by the US governmental attacks on the quality of educational research and the moves to prescribe what constitutes methodologically appropriate scientific inquiry. Like Moss (2005) I believe Bourdieu has much to offer in challenging the epistemic polarization which characterizes much of the debate, that is, the privileging of one mode of knowledge as more 'scientific' or more 'valid' than the other. If we accept Bourdieu's 'logic' of social practice it requires a "double-focused analytical lens" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 7), that is, an analysis of the regularities of the field and an analysis of agents' internalizations of these regularities through their reflexive deliberations and actions. This is consistent with critical realist Nash (2005) who argues, "The best accounts of social processes are thus multilayered, and in their attempt to reflect the complexity of the world offer narratives that integrate rather than disintegrate. . ." (p. 191). It could be argued that no sub-field of education has been more disintegrated than that of assessment where research has been dominated by psychometric preoccupations for classification with little attention to the epistemological status of these classificatory systems. Moss (1996) argues for a dialectic between 'the ontextualized understanding of local meanings and the distancing analysis of regularities' (p. 22). To the extent that the educational research debate represents genuine dialogue, let us hope that one of its outcomes will be such a dialectic understanding of the social practices we seek to understand.

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