Experiencing assessment: Towards a working-class lived experience understanding of assessment in Higher Education

Michael Malt-Cullen

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

This paper presents a post-qualitative methodology for investigating working-class students' assessment experiences in HE. Despite widening participation efforts, an attainment gap persists for working-class students, made visible through assessments. This makes assessment experiences a key area of investigation for the attainment gap. However, research covers working-class students and assessment practice separately, using conceptual schemas to characterise these contexts before investigation, centring concepts in their analyses. Therefore, an alternative framework and methodology is needed to focus on students' experiences and avoid using a priori concepts.

Using Deleuze (1994) and post-qualitative researchers, I articulate a methodology to explore how working-class students' assessment experiences arise. This methodology presents a resistance to the norms of educational research and including working-class students in the co-analysis of their experiences situates them, and myself, as activists whose voices can speak back to the HE system.

Full paper

In this paper, I explore my methodology for researching working-class students' experiences of assessment in higher education. I adopt a post-qualitative lens in designing this methodology, which responds to the standards and norms of educational research. I also take a post-qualitative view of the research context - working-class students at the University of Glasgow. This approach facilitates the exploration of a multiplicity of experiences, acknowledging the complexity in students' encounters with assessment, and emphasizes the inclusion of human and non-human agency in shaping research design and data analysis (Maclure, 2023). This research practice is an act of resistance against the dominant values that underlie how educational research is done.

Despite widening participation initiatives, working-class students still attend university at lower rates than their middle- and upper-class peers (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2018; The Scottish Government, 2016). Working-class students who do get in are still at a disadvantage as an attainment gap persists;

they tend to get worse qualifications than their peers upon completing their degrees (Mountford-Zimdars, et al., 2016). While this is impacted by factors such as a lack of belonging (Reay, et al., 2010) and an awareness of socio-economic difference (Silva-Laya, et al., 2019), the attainment gap is made visible through students' interactions with assessment practices. This places an imperative on educators to engage with assessments as constitutive of a working-class student's experience of HE. This requires exploring the barriers that exist and how students' experiences relate to this disparity.

Focusing on experience for working-class students in education has historically been left to the realms of psychology (Reay, 2005). However, literature on socially just assessment practices shows that, while individual psychology does play a constitutive role in educational experiences for students, encounters with pedagogy (McArthur, 2014), curriculum (Matshedisho, 2019), modes of assessment (Ballysingh, et al., 2018), and wider HE structures (McArthur, 2018) are also involved. These significant factors impact how students experience their assessments and they play a role in reproducing inequalities in HE. Currently, however, there is no literature which merges the working-class experiences of HE with the assessment practices which are constitutive of them.

In my masters research, I identified overlap between these fields. Both emphasize the importance of social and cultural values in constituting student experiences as they inform notions of failure and success, and impact how students understand their educational experiences. Both also emphasized how students' lived experiences are impacted, specifically focusing on the emotional and embodied qualities of how students relate to their education and assessments.

As a working-class student, I found issues with the conceptual tools used to understand their contexts seemed inappropriate for capturing students' lived experiences. The research on working-class students tended to rely heavily on Bourdieusian concepts which had difficulty rendering the nuanced differences between students' experiences (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). The research on assessment practices characterized assessments in terms of procedures or outcomes and how these impact the experiences of students rather than focusing on what it is like to live through the assessment experience (Adams, et al., 2020). As a result, there is a need for an alternative conceptual and methodological framework which centers working-class students' experiences of assessments and stays open as to what agencies come together to create these experiences.

Consequently, this project seeks to answer the following four questions:

1. How do working-class students perceive and experience assessment practices across emotional, affective, and embodied registers?

2. How do students' experiences of assessments arise? What people, practices, and objects shape their experiences?

3. How are working-class students' experiences and identities shaped over time, and how do they interact with assessments?

4. How could this research inform and reimagine socially just assessment practices in HE?

With a post-qualitative perspective in mind, this paper will articulate my methodological approach for this project which will be underway as the paper is delivered. This will include a Deleuzean (1994) understanding of the research process and what this means for research design. Following this line, I will describe my approach to data generation, keeping space to attend to both the human and non-human aspects of student experiences, and producing an output to allow working-class students to speak back to the practices of the university. Then I will outline my approach to data analysis and the prospect of including my participants in the co-analysis of their experiences, including their voices, and my own, in interpreting and representing their experiences, situating them as activists in their own education. Finally, I will offer some reflections on the data generation so far.

References

Abrahams, J. and Ingram, N. (2013) 'The Chameleon Habitus: Exploring Local Students' Negotiations of Multiple Fields', *Sociological Research Online*, 18(4), pp. 213–226. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3189.

Adams, A.-M. *et al.* (2020) 'Student engagement with feedback and attainment: the role of academic self-efficacy', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), pp. 317–329. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1640184.

Ballysingh, T.A., Hernández, I. and Zerquera, D. (2018) 'Teaching Assessment: Preparing our Colleagues Through Graduate Education', *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2018(177), pp. 87–104. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20258.

Connell-Smith, A. and Hubble, S. (2018) *Widening participation strategy in higher education in England*. UK Parliament. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8204/ (Accessed: 8 December 2020).

Deleuze, G. (1994) *Difference and repetition*. Translated by P. Patton. New York: Columbia University Press.

Matshedisho, K.R. (2020) 'Straddling rows and columns: Students' (mis)conceptions of an assessment rubric', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 45(2), pp. 169–179. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1616671.

McArthur, J. (2014) 'The Learning–Feedback–Assessment Triumvirate: Reconsidering Failure in Pursuit of Social Justice', in C. Kreber, C. Anderson, and N. Entwhistle (eds) *Advances and Innovations in University Assessment and Feedback*. Edinburgh University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748694549.001.0001.

McArthur, J. (2018) *Assessment for social justice: perspectives and practices within higher education*. Paperback edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Mountford-Zimdars, A. *et al.* (2017) 'What can universities do to support all their students to progress successfully throughout their time at university?', *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 21(2–3), pp. 101–110. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2016.1203368.

Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes*. Bristol: Policy Press (21st century standpoints).

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) '"Fitting in" or "standing out": working-class students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), pp. 107–124. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925.

Silva-Laya, M. *et al.* (2020) 'Urban poverty and education. A systematic literature review', *Educational Research Review*, 29, p. 100280. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.05.002.

St. Pierre, E.A. (2016) 'The Empirical and the New Empiricisms', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 16(2), pp. 111–124. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616636147.

The Scottish Government (2016) *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Comission on Wideneing Access*.