

Working-class students' experiences of assessment: Barriers and pedagogical approaches to compassionate assessment change

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a PhD project exploring working-class students lived experiences of assessment in higher education. Working-class students face systemic educational barriers that are reflected in their assessment outcomes. As such, their experiences and emotional responses to assessment play a crucial role in shaping their educational outcomes.

Using a post-qualitative, community of practice approach, I worked with five-working class HE students to produce a workshop to communicate the barriers they face in their engagements with their assessments. The data generated included transcripts, poems, zines, diaries, a mind map, and workshop plan.

In analysing this data, all students expressed barriers regarding feedback, clear assessment tasks, assessment scheduling, and over-use of the same formats of assessment. In making sense of these barriers for working-class students lived experiences, I offer some pedagogical tools educators can use to create more collegial and compassionate relationships with students around assessment.

Full paper

In this paper, I present my findings from my PhD project exploring working-class students lived experiences of assessment in higher education (HE). Throughout the research, the students and I collaborated through a community of practice (CoP) to produce a workshop to help educators understand the barriers working-class students experience with their assessments, and to consider how assessments can be more inclusive of all students. Through an analysis of the transcripts of the community of practice, and the artefacts produced by the group, I will present the barriers the students faced in engaging with their

assessments, and the role that these barriers played in creating their experiences of assessment and their wider HE journey.

While the focus of exploring working-class people's experiences of society had been relegated to the areas of individual psychology and not sociological analysis (Reay, 2005), more recent literature brings more focus to working-class student's experiences of HE generally, looking at how these students navigate the transition to and integration into university life (Thiele, et al., 2017; Jin and Ball, 2020). There is also recognition of how widening access activities and perspectives partly shape working-class students' experiences of HE (Loveday, 2015; Rainford, 2021). However, there is little literature that specifically explores the impact of more universal HE practices on working-class students, such as assessment. This gap is all the more notable given the wider presence of literature that explores students' experiences of assessment in relation to pedagogy (McArthur, 2014), curriculum (Matshedisho, 2019), modes of knowledge expression (Ballysingh, 2018), and broader higher education structures (McArthur, 2018).

Class-based educational disparities in degree outcomes (Mountford-Zimdars, et al. 2017) are made visible through assessments, meaning that aspects of working-class students' experiences impact their assessments negatively. However, what these aspects are and how they come about has not been explored from an explicitly classed lens. It is this need, as well as my own experience as a working-class student, which motivates this project.

As such, 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?

To answer these questions, I adopted a post-qualitative approach to the research, primarily influenced by Deleuzian philosophy (1994). As such, the participants' present experiences and how they come about from their pasts and expectations for the future are the primary analytical focus. This allowed for the recognition of what specific human and non-human elements of their experiences impact students differently. This post-qualitative approach pushed me to use creative data generation methods, including poetry, zines, playing games, mindmapping, and design work. The use of these methods recognises each step of the research process is creative, seeking to make experiences for students that provide avenues for thinking about assessments differently.

To take the research forward, I recruited five working-class students from the University of Glasgow to convene a CoP, running across two academic semesters. The CoP produced a planned workshop for staff to go through and learn about the unique barriers working-class students experience regarding assessment practices. I also asked the students to keep diaries regarding their assessment experiences across this time. I finally conducted follow-up interviews for the students to express issues that were not covered in the group sessions that they expressed as important to their experience, and to provide feedback on their experience of the research project. Alongside this, I recorded staff focus groups that helped frame the initial discussions of the CoP and respond to the workshop the students created.

Through the analysis of the data, it became clear that all of the students struggled with similar barriers around quality feedback, clarity of assessment tasks, assessment scheduling, and overreliance on similar formats of assessment. However, what these barriers meant for each of these students was different and played different roles relative to the wider contexts of their lives. This motivates educators to adopt pedagogical approaches to inclusive and socially just assessment that means educators need to work more compassionately and collegially with working-class students, and all students, to understand how specific assessment practices impacts students and their lives.