

## **Paper 2: Disciplinary spaces, assessment and identity (0249)**

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### **Abstract**

Despite considerable shifts in understandings of learning and more complex expectations of higher education (HE), a predominantly technicist approach to HE assessment still seems prevalent. This paper draws on our research into formative assessment and suggests how formative assessment might be constructed in ways that give more recognition to issues of student and teacher identity and to the particularities of different HE cultures. This analysis draws on social theory where identity is seen less in terms of the individualized psychological self and more in terms of identity embedded in and constructed through dialogic social processes and practices.

**Keywords: Formative assessment; learning cultures, third space, difference, equity**

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Current understandings of learning are moving beyond theories of transmission and cognitive reconstruction to see learning and identity formation as co-implicated. New vocabularies of learning potentially afford greater recognition of value positions, their contingency and cultural specificity. However the vocabularies of ‘socio-cultural learning’ could be solidifying as a ‘new orthodoxy’ (Wegerif 2008). So although

these vocabularies invoke more participatory understandings of learning, the power relations of formal education settings are left relatively undisturbed.

Since higher education typically involves accredited learning, how power relations are addressed within different understandings of learning has particular significance for our engagement with assessment. Having emerged as a social practice when psychometrics held sway, assessment is historically associated with the assumption that one can make objective measurements of complex social activities. Critical inspection of objective measurements shows them to be bound up with normative judgements, although the pseudo-objectivity of such judgements allows the norms themselves to become invisible, beyond critique. In other words, the value judgements and power relations embedded within assessment and its products can be considered an axiomatic but misrecognised aspect of the social fabrics of formal learning settings.

Although we recognize that knowledge and subject formation are ineluctably located within wider sets of social relations, the inequities of these invisibilities provoke us. As teachers and researchers in higher education, we raise a possible role for formative assessment for bringing out the relevance of student and educator positionalities within different HE disciplinary contexts, to allow more recognition of the performative nature of learning, involving ontological rather than just epistemological effects.

As described in Pryor and Crossouard (2008; 2010), our conceptualisation of formative assessment derives from analysis of practice in different educational

contexts (see Torrance and Pryor 1998; 2001; Pryor and Lubisi 2001; Crossouard and Pryor 2008). Formative assessment will readily be associated by most readers with supporting learners in completing the task in hand, thinking about improvement, and, sometimes, making sense of criteria. These aspects feature in our analysis. However, rather than assuming that criteria can become transparent from being stated in a handbook, or that feedback can be meaningful in any superficial ‘sender-receiver’ way, we see language and communication as slippery and value-laden: meaning-making and identity formation arise relationally across differences which are to be welcomed rather than needing to be overcome (Biesta 2004). Identity is thus not seen in terms of an individualized psychological self but as embedded in and constructed through discursive processes and practices (Biesta 2004; Hey 2006). This recognizes the structuring of learning within disciplinary and institutional fields, while also seeking to recognize students’ agency and their prospective agendas and identities.

To give play to the performative nature of learning, formative assessment might begin by considering what spaces the learning context affords for the performance of students’ new identities, and how the design of these spaces allows these performances to be in dialogue with institutional and disciplinary cultures. Drawing from a recent project in postgraduate education, Pryor and Crossouard (2010) illustrate how this might involve a longitudinal series of encounters between students and a tutor, in which concrete instances of students’ work provide opportunities for the tutor to respond to students, in ways that are dialogic rather than expository.

We analysed the student-tutor dialogues through the lens of the continuum of convergent and divergent assessment (Torrance and Pryor, 2001; Pryor and

Crossouard, 2008), where convergent assessment can be summarized as formative assessment that involves an illumination of curricular requirements, while divergent assessment reflects a more open concern for the student's agenda and their agency. Pryor and Crossouard (2010) illustrate what this might mean in practice, providing specific examples of how the student/tutor data reflected convergent concrete/procedural elements, as well as reflective/discursive elements, in which there was a constant play across the continuum, between convergent and divergent elements. In addition, although much less frequent, tutor discourses occasionally and opportunistically addressed the existential or ontological nature of learning, invoking a *discourse of identity* that aimed to encourage reflection about students' and tutors' positioning within different professional and disciplinary cultures. A brief illustration would be tutor instructions such as '*Post some notes giving your immediate personal reactions to the text, taking account of your identity as a practitioner and researcher*' (Pryor and Crossouard 2010 provide more examples).

Student interviews suggested that although it was sometimes misrecognized, for some, the tutor's emphasis on the reflexivity of learning and the power relations of the institutional context was important. Rather than turning learners' attention towards their inner 'cognitive' processes, leaving as taken-for-granted the social context of learning and the play of identities, this '*meta-social*' as opposed to 'meta-cognitive' discourse had possibilities for supporting greater awareness of the power relations and cultural specificities of higher education settings and the social fabrics within which learning becomes recognizable.

The focus on *designing for dialogue* and on *identity* emphasizes the performative nature of learning, whereby knowledge is constantly brought into being. As Biesta (2004) shows, this implies that Bhabha's (2000) notion of the Third Space between the subject and the Other, where meanings are produced and constantly reconstituted, is at the heart of education. Formative assessment from this perspective does not seek to erase difference, but recognises that the play of difference is at the heart of meaning-making and identity formation. Learning may therefore become less predictable but this also opens up possibilities of learner and teacher agency.

We see formative assessment of this kind as a way to get to what really matters to the learner, in contrast to other current teaching and learning discourses and the instrumentality of sender-receiver models of formative assessment. In addition, asserting the centrality of disciplinary knowledge and identities within formative assessment may entice academics into thinking more organically about appropriate pedagogies in their contexts. Against this the complexities of our argument and the more unpredictable nature of such learning could provoke resistance. However the justification for embracing such complexities lies in the inequities described above and a conviction that education involves more than reproduction and repetition.

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## **Biographies**

Barbara Crossouard is a researcher within the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER). Her doctorate explored formative assessment in doctoral contexts as part of the EC-funded project Internet-Based Assessment, directed at the University of Sussex by John Pryor. Later research projects include a study of student perceptions of the doctoral viva voce and an exploration of the career trajectories of newly qualified researchers.

John Pryor is Reader in Education at the University of Sussex. His research interests centre on aspects of social identity and equity in education including their link with pedagogy and formative assessment most recently in collaboration with Barbara Crossouard. John has researched projects in both the UK and sub Saharan Africa and works within the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) and the Centre for International Education (CIE).