

Assessment as transformation (0177)

As transformation in higher education increasingly becomes part of a South African discourse and research focus, the conversation around what transformation means and how to make it happen has a variety of languages, applications and perspectives. Transformation forms part of the agenda in terms of organisational practices, institutional policies, and the multiple experiences and intentions of students and staff in universities in the country. This paper highlights a thread that runs through a theoretical, organisational and pedagogical engagement with the notion and practice of transformation in a specific site of practice: assessment in an extended studies class.

The study explains an extended studies programme in the humanities faculty at Rhodes University, which admits previously excluded first year students, and which is presented as a national and institutional strategy for transformation (Badat 2011; Boughey 2009). The programme is designed to augment these students' first year, providing differential entry, same exit, and expanding the 3 year degree by an extra year. Students take two mainstream subjects (in this case, Sociology 1 and Politics 1), and although the class is made up of students from a variety of backgrounds and secondary schools, provides students with additional computer and academic literacy support around these two subjects. The paper argues that student assessment in an extended studies class is one focal area where teaching philosophies and politics are made visible, and where student identities are performed in ways that could be transformative. It explains student subjectivities which, regarded as "at risk" and vulnerable, are framed by norms and practices which facilitate particular kinds of performances. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is explained, applied and expanded into the theoretical notion of transformativity: a state of being, contingent on how power and vulnerability are constructed and translated in a particular context (Butler 2004a; 2004b).

In a chapter on 'Emancipatory discourses and the ethics and politics of interpretation' (Denzin and Lincoln 2008:435-471), Norman Denzin talks about the dialogue between indigenous voices and critical theory and pedagogy, and the 'epistemology of resistance' (ibid 448). He invites scholars (and I accept the invitation in this exploration) to embark on a journey of 'practical, progressive politics of performative enquiry, an emancipatory discourse' in order to inspire 'new ways of reading, writing and performing culture' (ibid 435). This paper responds to this invitation as a kind of praxis – reflectively applying a Butlerian lens to a specific context in which I am a so-called insider researcher, and in so doing, expanding a conversation about student and lecturer subjectivities that is part of my practice. Academic papers and student assessment practices in this extended studies class are shown to be meta-spaces in which to legitimise potential new ways of doing things, of being, and of knowing, and so the paper is a way of theorising the practice of assessment in this context.

Just as the constitution, policies and laws "guide" civil life in South Africa, student assessment at university level could be said to guide (and is guided by) learning and teaching practice, and attempts to standardise and quantify learning goals of any given course in order to measure whether students can progress or be promoted. The notion of assessment, situated as it is in a context of national vigilance over quantifiable data (in keeping with the context of redress and social justice), has significant impact on the learning and teaching environment of any given university or classroom, and is explored in this paper. This paper subjectively appropriates and adapts a theoretical matrix developed from Judith Butler's notions of subjectivity, normativity and performativity to explore a new idea, transformativity, and in order to explore the dynamic between philosophies, politics, and a lived experience. It uses a Butlerian lens to describe evolving subjectivities in a Rhodes University extended studies programme class, where teaching and learning philosophies and policies are the

norms which frame practices, and where, arguably, student assessment is one of the stages upon which new subjectivities are formed and performed. So while a particular extended studies class's assessment practices, performances and experiences are a focus of the study, the paper constructs and interprets assessment as part of a particular praxis of teaching for and as transformation. Noticing a range of factors that affect and inspire assessment practices and policies, and the range of subjectivities, identities and epistemologies present in an ES class and programme, the paper explores how one could facilitate transformation in this space. In claiming assessment as transformation, the paper explains a general and particular context. The theory and context animate each other, and the constructed interpretations and the dynamic between these are ongoing and inter-related stepping stones to an alternative way to think about assessment and transformation. Butler contends that 'the task of the postcolonial translator...is precisely to bring into relief the non-convergence of discourses so that one might know the very ruptures of narrativity, the founding violence of an episteme'(Butler in Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000: 37). Student assessment in this context is such an in-between space, where a process is measured, and not an event. It is an opportunity for reciprocal epistemological access into teacher and student identities, and to animate for both the 'non-convergence' in order to increase my accommodation of them and their accommodation of me. It furthermore assists their own construction of who they are in relation to norms, which can be adjusted in order to increase their sense of self in a critical environment – in other words, to expand the range of subjectivities provided by the normative framework. Assessment in this extended studies class, then, is, and is of, a process, which could, arguably, lead to the transformation of and from an individual student at risk, to an emerging scholar; and the transformation of a teacher, who has an idea of what is expected, into a facilitator who can animate non-convergence in order to bring about transformation.

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