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Tensions and ambiguity: assignment texts and practices in a vocational film production course (0054)

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Meaning and learning in higher education are increasingly being expressed through literacies and textual forms other than written language (Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006). This is partly a consequence of the expansion of vocational and professional courses in higher education, which has led to the reframing of what counts as knowledge in the academy (Ivanič and Lea, 2006). The ways in which students are been asked to demonstrate this knowledge through the assignment texts they produce are also reframed (Lea, 2013). The primacy given to written assignments, especially the essay, has therefore been somewhat dislodged. In contemporary vocational higher education settings, privileged assignment texts are those that bear a direct resemblance to the types of textual products produced in professional practice. These professionally-relevant texts do not rely on the written forms and practices once dominant in higher education (Lea and Stierer, 2000). For example, in the visual communication and media industries that have a strong visual and multimodal basis, like film production, the primary textual form is the audio-visual film.

Researchers have, however, pointed to the tensions that students and lecturers have to manage when their course environments rely on the production of both written and other forms of assignment texts (Archer, 2006; Mitchell et al, 2000; Thesen, 2001). The assessment processes and the non-written assignment texts and practices that students engage in within certain vocational higher education contexts remain, however, under researched. The value of exploring and describing students' assignment practices in such contexts are crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which professional and academic practices are incorporated into the curriculum and the consequences for assessment. This poster presentation reports on an ethnographic study that sought to explore the practices students engaged with when producing assignments texts in visual communication and media courses at a South African vocational higher education institution. The poster focuses specifically on the analysis of assessment processes in a film production course. It shows how essay writing was used to legitimise the course and give a sense of academic credibility.

The research employed an academic literacies perspective (Blommaert, Street and Turner, 2007; Lea, 2008 and Lillis and Scott, 2007) to investigate the social and cultural influences on student assignment practices. A social realist curriculum framework (Bernstein, 1975, 1996, 2000) was used to analyse the broader curriculum structure. Using an ethnographic methodology, fieldwork with a film production course was conducted over a three month period and included primarily participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews with lecturers and students, and a collection of various curriculum and assessment documentation. Thematic analysis was then used to describe student assignment literacy practices, features of the curriculum structure and organisation, and the influences on curriculum decision making.

The analysis shows that the logic of the curriculum (Muller, 2009; Shay, 2011) was primarily driven by the professional practices of film production and the skills and competencies associated with being a film maker. Primacy was given to the creation of texts that have validity in film production industries and resemble or mimic those typically associated with film making, like creating film clips. Alongside these strongly promoted industry-relevant textual forms, the course also encouraged students to 'argue like a film scholar' primarily through the inclusion of theoretically framed film analysis activities. A key way in which students demonstrated their engagement in such film analysis tasks was through the production of written film analysis essays. The analysis highlighted that the academy's preference for theory is maintained in this course through the film analysis essay. As such, this essay functions as a mechanism to preserve the dominance of traditional ways of being and doing in higher education, despite changing professional and vocational foci. A consequence for students is the need to negotiate complex and sometimes competing assessment practices when producing assignment texts that have to have validity in both industry and the academy.

The findings show how writing, and essay writing in particular, is used as leverage to legitimate the course's theoretical credibility in a higher education environment where the written text is still the primary means of demonstrating learning and understanding (Lea, 2012; 2013 and Mitchell et al, 2000). A further aspect highlighted by the findings is the inherent tensions that vocational curricula have to accommodate as they attempt to meet the needs of industry while also asserting their academic legitimacy in the broader higher education sector. This strengthens similar claims made by curriculum scholars about the complexity of curriculum development in vocational higher education settings that balance competing professional and academic influences (Barnett, 2006; Gamble, 2006; Kilpert and Shay, 2012 and Wheelahan, 2010). The research stresses the implication that curriculum development in vocational higher education settings becomes a contested activity when industry-relevant and academic textual practices have to be accommodated. As a result, students have to

navigate assessment practices that have multiple, ambiguous and competing interests. Curriculum and pedagogic interventions, aimed at making clear to students how different assignment types represent the practices of different environments, are offered as a means whereby the tensions and ambiguities that students face in the context of vocational higher education can be lessened.