

Assessment As An Interpretative Act - The Personal Reflections Of A Technikon Lecturer.

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As a student and also a teacher, the importance and legitimacy of the assessment process has been a taken-for-granted assumption. In both of these roles the validity and purpose of the assessment process and the ultimate award of a mark at the end of the process was regarded as legitimate. As an assessor, to ensure that the process is valid and fair adherence to Biggs' (1996) notion of 'constructive alignment' is a useful strategy. At a basic level the principles of constructive alignment put forward by Biggs' (1996) seek to link and connect the overall course and learning goals directly with the assessment methods used. In this way the inferences and final mark awarded can be justified and regarded as legitimate. As a student, the respect and acknowledgement of lecturers' expertise have rarely allowed one to question their assessment process or indeed the mark awarded for performances. In many respects this suggests a total 'buy-in' to the seemingly neutral and unbiased role of assessment and the assessor. Recently however this comfortable assessment paradigm has been somewhat rearranged by two challenging theoretical considerations. Firstly, the issues of assessment validity as residing in the inferences made about student learning rather than in the assessment method being used (Killen, 2003 and Nitko, 2001). Secondly, that the notion of assessment is largely an interpretative act and heavily influenced by the assessors' context and Discourse¹. In this paper the second notion of the interpretative influences operating alongside often explicit criteria during any assessment process, is an important aspect that any assessor should consider.

This paper attempts to grapple with the assessment 'disequilibrium' currently experienced. Firstly, the notion of assessment as an

interpretative act is outlined. A social theory lens is then used as probing device to uncover the underlying influences on assessment interpretations made. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field are used to inform this exploration. It is thought that this process will reveal a more critical picture of the 'subjective' influences on assessment practices within a specific context.

Assessment as an Interpretative Act

Contrary to what our common sense theories of assessment might suggest, many scholars acknowledge the social location and influence of context on the assessment interpretations made (Reed et al, 2003; Gipps, 1999; Becher, 1997; Sutherland, 1996 in Gipps, 1999; Shay, 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Issues which impact on the interpretations are located with the assessor but also the contextual location of the discipline and indeed the institution where the assessment is taking place. In this respect, Becher's position articulates that different academic contexts will result in different patterns and approaches to assessment (1997, p.161), while Sutherland's (1996 in Gipps, 1999) contention positions assessment as a social activity. Assessment is seen not only as an individual cognitive activity, but rather influenced and shaped by other assessors and their practices and the social and disciplinary environment and norms that always envelope assessor actions. To fully understand assessment, cognizance needs to be taken of the social, cultural, economic and political location and context in which assessment operates (in Gipps, 1999, p.355). Different institutions, departments or disciplines will approach assessment differently. Of importance here is the acknowledgement of the methodological and epistemological paradigms valued by the discipline. The value systems implicit in the discipline then act to powerfully influence the assessors' interpretations of their students' work (Shay, 2004, p.12).

Interestingly, while we may assume that by using explicit assessment criteria assessors' interpretations are objective and thus free of contextual (disciplinary, institutional,) and personal (values and taste) influences - this might not be the case. Reed et al argue that while explicit assessment

criteria do go some way towards providing both students and assessors with assessment guidelines, they do not however guarantee assessment reliability as much depends on professional judgment (2003, p.16). How marks are awarded is seemingly deeply influenced by "...values and judgments concerning intellectual position and interest as well as personal taste or professional judgment" (Reed et al, 2003, p.17). I argue that interpretations in assessment are therefore socially constituted by the influences of the assessor, the institution and the specific discipline. Shay's comment "...that assessment is not an isolated act or event, but a practice located within a network of practices" (2004, p.6) is a valuable observation. These ideas are examined in a case study in my site of practice that seeks to explore and reflect on the social and contextual influences that shape the assessment interpretations made in a single assessment event.

Assessment Case Study

The case study is constituted by one assessment process that took place in 2004 with the first year cohort on the Multimedia Technology Programme National Certificate course. The assessment event was located within a module on Information Literacy. As part of the assessment for this module students were required to take a Multiple Choice Questionnaire (MCQ), short answer open book test, and complete an academic essay. Only the essay component of the overall assessment activities was used as data for this case study. The essay was selected as it provided an excellent means to look at both the seemingly objectively constructed assessment criteria (via the criteria referenced feedback sheets) and the more personal or subjective influences noted in the personal comments made on student scripts. In order to examine interpretations in this assessment process, two sources of data were reviewed in relation to the completed essays. One source was the essay marking rating scaleⁱⁱ. The second source was the feedback noted on a selection of students' essaysⁱⁱⁱ on which a mini-discourse analysis^{iv} was conducted. Five essay samples (thus 15 in a total of 50 scripts) within each of the various grade bands of "Very Good" "Satisfactory" and "Needs

to improve" were selected for analysis. For the sake of continuity and flow, the discourse analysis will not be presented separately; rather the results will be integrated into the general discussion of the interpretations. The general discussion that follows provides a delineation of the theoretical concepts underlying the investigation

Habitus and Field

Habitus and field are concepts used by Bourdieu to describe how people inherit the ways they perceive society and are able to adapt these perceptions according to their experiences (Swain, 2000). Habitus can be seen to embody mental attitudes and perceptions and as such is expressed through durable ways "...of standing, speaking, walking and thereby feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p.70 in Reay, 2004, p.4). Habitus further constitutes and allows for individual action and agency but also predisposes individuals towards certain ways of behaving (Reay, 2004, p.5). Reay claims that Bourdieu conceives of habitus as a multi-layered concept assigning more general notions of habitus at the level of society and more complex, differentiated notions at the level of the individual (2004, p.6). Habitus is said to be the product of early childhood experiences, but it is continually re-shaped as the individual encounters the world (Di Maggio, 1979 in Raey, 2004, p.8). Habitus, according to Jenkins, disposes individuals to act in certain ways and provides the basis for the generation of practices: "Once acquired habitus underlies and conditions all subsequent learning and social experiences" (Jenkins, 1992, p.78). An important distinguishing feature of habitus is the unconscious nature of the socially competent performances it generates with the individual not necessarily "knowing what they are doing" (Jenkins, 1992, p.76). In addition, while habitus is reflective of the social position in which it was constituted, it holds the possibility and capacity to transcend the social condition in which it was produced (Reay, 2004, p.9). This position starts to illuminate the individual and social position embedded in the concept and indeed its interplay with social structures most notably that of "field".

A field can be seen as a structured system of social positions occupied either by individuals or institutions. The nature of the field defines the situation for the occupants (Jenkins, 1992, p.85). A field can also be seen as a social arena within which struggles and movement occur over specific resources or stakes and access to these sought after attributes. Furthermore a field is defined "...by the stakes which are at stake - cultural goods (life-style), housing, intellectual distinction (education), employment, land, power (politics), social class and prestige or whatever - and may be of differing degrees of specificity and concreteness" (Jenkins, 1992, p.84). Internally a field is structured in terms of power relations by virtue of access to the goods or resources, referred to as capital, which are at stake in the field. Capital is differentiated into four categories: "...economic capital, social capital (various kinds of valued relations with significant others), cultural capital (primarily legitimate knowledge of one kind or another) and symbolic capital (prestige and social honour)" (Bourdieu,1991 in Jenkins, 1992, p.85).

Field is also defined by struggles where agents are concerned with the preservation or improvement of their position in respect to the defining capital of the field. As society has become more technologically complex and socially differentiated so more fields have come into being. (Jenkins, 1992, p.85). The various fields and sub-fields at play in the context under review are the fields of Higher Education (HE) and the multimedia industry. The sub-fields of Peninsula Technikon (Pentech) and University of Cape Town (UCT) as institutions that I am connected to, are then located within the HE field.

The interrelationship between habitus and field is such that habitus only operates in relation to a social field. Habitus is seen as the embodiment of field. The same habitus can produce very different practices depending upon what is going on in the field (Jenkins, 1992, p.82).

"Each field, by virtue of its defining content, has a different logic and taken-for-granted structure of necessity and relevance which is both the product and producer of habitus which is specific and appropriate to the field"(Jenkins, 1992, p.84)

One view suggests that each field generates its own specific habitus. Another option proposes that individuals bring to field, their own pre-existing and historically constituted habitus (Jenkins, 1992, p.90). According to Bourdieu, the logic of practice involves the interaction of habitus, cultural capital^v and field (1990b cited in Reay, 2004, p.9).

While a comparison between Bourdieu's concepts and Gee's notion of Discourse is not the focus of this paper, the apparent similarity of the concepts of "field" and "Discourse", provides a useful conceptual framework. Gee suggests that Discourse represents the "...integral combination of sayings-doings-thinkings-feelings and valuings" (1990, p.1). Discourse signifies to ourselves and to others "...who we are and what we are doing" (Gee, 1996, pp.128-129). Discourse could be seen as the embodiment of the abstract valuing and socially constructed practices. It is however acknowledged that habitus allows for a more nuanced interpretation when investigating and accounting for the subtle influences on interpretative practices. In addition the concept of habitus is able to provide a notion of agency, personal subjectivity and accounts for the historical location or context of our embedded actions.

Nature of the Interpretations

By uncovering the nature of assessment interpretation, a window into the underlying values of the assessor is provided. Of particular importance is identifying what the assessor brings to the educational context or field, thus the identification of the assessors' habitus. What follows is an attempt to uncover the specific interpretations made in the case study and the insight this provides about my habitus. Some of the Discourse(s) and habitus influences I bring to the assessment situation are *disciplinary influences* (Arts, Social Science and Adult Education); *institutional influences* (Status and capital assigned to assessors/ educators at Pentech, UCT's status, the social and cultural capital of UCT being my alma mater); *personal taste* (privileging of structure, carefully planned, intelligent, informed arguments); *professional judgments* (UCT, university trained knowledge and expertise); *value system* (equal opportunities, social and economic justice). I would argue that these influences in terms

of Discourse and habitus are in part the HE field's requirements of assessment practices, suggesting an interconnection between my habitus and field.

Explicit criteria and values

The attempt to make my assessment values explicit can be seen in the utilization of the marking rating sheet that includes a description of what would be regarded as a "very good", "satisfactory" or "needs to improve" essay (see the attached Marking Sheet). Shay suggests (2004) that the use of a rating sheet is a fairly common strategy to attempt to make marking values explicit via a marking memorandum. Broad (2000) however offers some insightful critique of these rubrics. While these marking scales might be able to describe textual features (to which relative values are then assigned) they are completely silent about the "prejudices and foreknowledge which are inevitable and valuable in interpreting a text" (Moss cited by Broad, 2000, p.247 in Shay, 2004, p.18). In addition Broad (2000) argues that rubrics are misleading as they are "...completely silent about the value system which underlies the interpretative act" (cited in Shay, 2004, p.18). In this aspect of the essay assessment strategy, a hidden or implicit interpretative system is at play.

The marking scale provides a fruitful window into the perceived 'explicit' values and structural aspects required from student performances. Here students are expected to demonstrate understanding of the course content, use of formal academic language, be able to structure and write an essay that is structurally appropriate and acknowledge their sources and use correct bibliography conventions. In addition guidelines are provided that delineate how performances will be judged under three categories of 'very good', 'satisfactory' and 'needs to improve'. The intention here is to provide an explicit reference system against which students can judge and interpret their own performances possibly noting their strong and developmental areas. These criteria also correlate rather strongly with the explicit academic values I hold for this assessment and provide some insight into the educational values I support and attempt to promote in my classroom; the most obvious of these values relate to 'how

to write' an academically proficient essay. This could be referred to as my academic literacy Discourse, with the explicit part of this Discourse made visible in the structural or "textual features" (See Moss, 2000 in Shay, 2004) of the marking scheme. These textual features were also the features focused on during class sessions and via the personalized feedback in the essays seen in such comments as *"Inappropriate approach to conclusion"*(NTI- NS:3^{vi}) *"Would rather prefer a formal writing style rather than simply posing a series of questions"* (S-DM:4) *"Clear, inviting introduction"*(S-CE:1) *"This quote doesn't support the statement made in the previous sentence"* (NTI-EM:2)*"Your argument is poorly structured and you have used your sources poorly to support your opinion"* (NTI-EM:4) and *"Nice use of examples to illustrate your point"* (S-CE:3). The criteria themselves are fairly standardised in terms of what many HE educators and assessors would regard as defining academic writing as Thesen (1997, p.451) notes while disciplines might differ, some core literacy practice at higher education institutions include "...the obligation to acknowledge sources, develop arguments in conventional ways including appropriate forms of evidence and observe restriction on the use of personal pronouns"

The implicit merge with the explicit values

The more hidden aspects of this academic literacy Discourse reveal a deeper almost invisible level of values that become enmeshed in the "field". The aspects that influence my marking are status divisions that seem to exist (explicitly and implicitly) between Pentech (my current professional sub-field) and UCT (the sub-field where my induction to academia and academic literacy was formed). The UCT - Pentech status issue relates to broader struggles between practical career - orientated education advanced at technikons versus the academic, theoretical and research based educational focus of universities. Embedded here are issues relating to the status of different kinds of knowledge. Struggles around the status of knowledge or cultural capital is further illustrative of the different positions of these institutions in the field of HE and how they contest for what is regarded as legitimate knowledge.

The explicit marking scale also links to what I call my adult education philosophy Discourse^{vii}. The values and principles such as - transparency, respect between student and facilitator, teacher-as-facilitator, dialogue, meaningful engagements, approachability, informality, the facilitator-as-guide and the importance of individual development - are all underlying the use of the marking scale and the inclusion of personalised essay feedback. The personalised, often informally written feedback comments on the essays suggest an attempt to engage directly with the student in some form of dialogue. It also sets up a personalised conversational structure and tone with the use of personal pronouns 'you' and 'your' to address the student, further implying a friendly, conversational and non-threatening approach, possibly implying 'the friendly assessor', with a gentle guiding demeanour.

I believe these values, while somewhat implicit, are positively contributing to aspects of my interpretive practice. However, clearly seen in the data, particularly the personalised feedback, are notions of my role as 'legitimator' of the academic literacy rules. In this role I strictly uphold the 'rules of the game' without really taking into account the capabilities the players bring to the game. Bourdieu would acknowledge that to become a member of a field is to play the game, recognizing the stakes and investing in it (Shay, 2005). This investment is illustrated when the rules are sometimes crudely enforced (four students were given a zero for what was regarded as plagiarised essays) upholding the values of the game learnt at UCT as a student. By imposing a UCT framed academic literacy Discourse onto Pentech students when marking essays the status and strength of one sub-field is valued over another. The broad status-related battle that exists between these two institutions on more general social fields seems to be playing itself out in my own personal habitus. It would seem that by maintaining the UCT - taught academic literacy, I am consciously accepting UCT's higher academic status in relation to Pentech. Thus how I play the game in other words my habitus, is firstly strongly influenced by the various field, and sub-fields encountered and secondly, by the perceived status and strength of the fields in relation to each other.

These features all act to shape the interpretative judgements made when marking assessments.

Various institutional mechanisms provide lecturers with high level status and power in relation to assessment and this combines with a notion that as lecturer you become the guardian or legitimator of appropriate academic literacy Discourse(s). In the assessment process the cultural capital embodied in my role as guardian of academic literacy subverts my role as respectful facilitator.

The values that seem to underpin this assessment Discourse and indeed regulate my interpretations include the assessor as all knowing and the assessor who has the power to punish poor performances with negative comments while affirming good performances with complimentary remarks. More importantly the assessment mark is a determinant of what is valued or not valued in student performances. In addition it regulates what knowledge is deemed valid and also how that knowledge should be expressed in order to be rewarded as legitimate. Examples are seen in comments such as: *"A clear, coherent and carefully structured essay. Your argument and positions are articulated convincingly with interesting examples and support"* (S-EC:4) *"Where are the sources used during the course? Why have you not chosen to use them?"* (NTI-EM:5) *"Not appropriate for a formal essay. This isn't a political speech"*(S-SH:5) and *"You carefully used the course content and demonstrated your critical understanding of the issues. Well Done!"*(VG-MH:4) . It could be argued that this Discourse is strongly influenced, reinforced and legitimated by the institutional authority and power assigned to assessors. Here the influence and impact of both the HE field and the institutional sub-fields, especially in relation to power and how it then shapes personal and social ways of `doing' is clearly illustrated. Institutions confer status and power onto lecturers who most notably exercise this power through their roles as assessors. The analysis of the essay grading activity clearly highlights the pervasive influence of the assessors' power over students through the interpretative act. It also further exposes the inter-related influences existing between my habitus and field.

Accounting for power and status

What is however of particular concern about this interrogation is why certain influences such as power and status seem to supersede and override other qualities such as the more respectful and equitable facilitation and social values espoused in my classroom practices. An answer could be hypothesized in a somewhat crude and incomplete argument, but utilizing Bourdieu's notion of the interrelationship between habitus and field, the logic of practice and the lasting influences of one's initial childhood experiences.

I identify most notably with the majority of my students in relation to our common racial and class status. All my students are black and the majority come from working class socio-economic backgrounds where they are the first generation to enter HE. Like me, they come from what would be regarded within the South African context as educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, yet unlike me, they are continuing their education at a HE institution regarded as historically disadvantaged. This label is not arbitrary, as in my opinion, both industry and other academic institutions are consciously aware of and reinforce this status. I believe my UCT education allowed me the opportunity to compete in the socio-economically unequal professional world of work in South Africa because I was able to play the rules of the game. Part of these rules of the game was having the right kind of cultural capital. My UCT education provided me with a particular bend of cultural capital (that is acknowledged by industry), but that is very different to what a Pentech education might provide my students. For my students to have any chance in their industry they must be able to compete competently. My role as teacher/facilitator is to help them succeed at this game, and therefore I need to teach the rules and enforce and regulate explicit following of the rules. My students have to overcompensate for the perceived lower status of Pentech by being fully efficient and skilled in university - framed rules such as academic literacy. In a different context, if all my students were white, middle class and had educationally advantaged backgrounds, I might respond differently. My argument for this position uses Bourdieu's

(1990b) logic of practice concept to suggest that any action taken resides in the interaction between an individual's specific habitus, their cultural capital and the field where the action takes place. In a South African context if I had only white, middle class, educationally advantaged students the institutional context or field would be such that required me to use my cultural capital and habitus in very different ways. The institution itself would not be regarded as an access institution for educationally and economically disadvantaged students and would certainly have a perceived high status to all its stakeholders. I would speculate that the social, economic and cultural capital that students brought to the classroom environment would be closely aligned to what they found in the institution and possibly the working environment, freeing me from having to overtly regulate and enforce the learning of certain rules of the game. All these factors would subtly and overtly interact to shape and influence the logic of any practice (including assessment interpretations) I performed in that environment.

Conclusion

This very brief sojourn to uncover the influences on my assessment judgments has been both insightful and uncomfortable. It is insightful in that it reveals a habitus that is a multi-layered matrix of various social, cultural, political and economic structures, values and identities all exerting some pressure and influence on the inferences I make and grades I award for student performances. It is needless to say that the account represented here of these influences is undoubtedly incomplete. The uncomfortable part relates to how certain influences and their effects shape my interpretative practices; most notably the influence of power on my assessment judgments. What has become more apparent is the complexity of the concept of habitus, especially when attempting to identify it. Furthermore the interconnectedness of habitus and field and the expression of this connectedness through the social practices and positions taken - in this instance my personal assessment practices and interpretations - is demonstrated. The value of these concepts in helping to uncover the nature of one's assessment interpretations is

acknowledged. This investigation does however confirm that multiple factors are at play and influence academics' interpretative acts (Shay, 2004, p.6).

In many respects this self reflection has raised more questions than it has been able to answer. The implication for my assessment practices are still unclear, however the acknowledgement of some of the interpretative influences is seen as enlightening.

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National Certificate in Multimedia: - Information Literacy

Essay Assessment

Multimedia Skills MMSD010

Due date	March 12, 2004
TOTAL ALLOCATION	
Student Number	
Surname, Initial	

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND RATING SCALE CATEGORIES

	Very Good	Satisfactory	Needs to improve	
Content	Relevant to the topic and well developed. Clearly understands topic. Interesting and creative. Extensive range of sources consulted.	Related to the topic. Not very well developed but adequate for the standard required. Some aspects of the topic understood. Average range of sources consulted.	Not on the topic or not developed at all. Limited range of sources consulted. Limited understanding of topic.	
	10 - 9 - 8	7 - 6 - 5	4 - 3 - 2 - 1	
Language use	Excellent use of formal academic language. Meaning is very clear.	Some attempt to use formal academic language. Meaning is clear.	No attempt to use formal academic language. Meaning is unclear	
	10 - 9 - 8	7 - 6 - 5	4 - 3 - 2 - 1	
Essay / Report Structure	Clear, logical structure. Good use of paragraphs, introduction and conclusion. Clear adherence to guidelines.	Structure not always clear and logical. Some attempt made to use paragraphs, introduction and conclusion. Some adherence to guidelines.	Little or no coherent structure to the essay. Very limited use of guidelines.	
	10 - 9 - 8	7 - 6 - 5	4 - 3 - 2 - 1	
Spelling & Grammar	Hardly any mistakes.	Some mistakes but does not distract from the meaning.	Many grammar and spelling mistakes.	
	10 - 9 - 8	7 - 6 - 5	4 - 3 - 2 - 1	
Bibliography and references	Excellent bibliography. Correct use of in text referencing conventions.	Some mistakes in bibliography. Attempts made to use correct in text referencing conventions.	Poor bibliography. Very little attempt made at in text referencing. Commits plagiarism.	
	10 - 9 - 8	7 - 6 - 5	4 - 3 - 2 - 1	
Overall	Competent Plus. Far above the standard required for this level. Very well written essay.	Competent. The essay is satisfactory.	Not yet competent. The learner needs to try again.	
	10 - 9 - 8	7 - 6 - 5	4 - 3 - 2 - 1	
Link to assessment scale	Above Standard at this level	Meets the minimum standards/ Competent	Almost competent, needs improvement	Far from meeting the standard
	A > 80%	B 70-79%	C 60-69%	D 50-59%
			E & F 30-49%	G & H 0 - 29%

Lecturer: L Coleman

Date: _____

Student: _____

1. Gee's notion of Discourse is implied here. Gee's conceptualization of discourse makes a distinction between its linguistic usage i.e. "an instant of language use" (Pennycook, 1996:115 In Alborough) and a broader even abstract conceptualization that embodies "...socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' or to signal that one is playing a socially meaningful role" (Gee, 1996:131). The uppercase 'D' in Discourse is used (as in this paper) to define the more abstract notion that moves beyond language and encompasses multiple ways of being in a community. Thus language comes to be seen as only one component of what Discourse is (Alborough, 2004:5). The lowercase 'd' for discourse - signifies the use of discourse in a linguistic sense or refers to the use of language that makes sense to the community who is using it.

2. See attached criterion referenced marking sheet

3 I initially suspected that my comments would differ depending on the grades awarded, however expect for being more affirming of students who achieved higher results the general approach to the comments was consistent across the grades.

4. The discourse analysis approach utilized draws on Faircloughs' (1992) framework. This essentially incorporates the three-dimensional approach that incorporates the following aspects:

1. Text dimension – seeks to explore and produce a language analysis of the text. Included here would be an analysis of grammar, vocabulary, modality, tenses, interactional control, politeness and ethos.
2. Discursive practice – this involves an investigation into the nature of the processes of text production, distribution and interpretation.
3. Social Practice – here issues of concern are social analysis and how it shapes the nature of discursive practice. A key objective would be the identification of the discourses impacting on the text including the ideological and hegemonic influences (Fairclough, 1992).

The analysis in the case study focused primarily on the discursive and social practices components of Fairclough's framework.

5. A more detailed description of cultural capital suggests it "...is the product of education, which Bourdieu also often refers to as an 'academic market', and exists in three distinct forms: connected to individuals in their general educated character - accent, dispositions, learning, etc.; connected to objects - books, qualifications, machines, dictionaries, etc.; and connected to institutions - places of learning, universities, libraries, etc." (Grenfell et al 1998 p20-21)

6. The following format has been used as an identification mechanism for each of the comments. First, the abbreviation of the overall assessment category of the student – thus NIT refer to Needs To Improve; S refers to Satisfactory and VG refers to Very Good. This is followed by the students initials and the page number of the feedback comment in the essay

7. If one supports Bourdieu's notion of field in relation to power and consider Adult Education as a sub-field within the Higher Education field, then it is generally accepted that Adult Education is seen as marginalized within the broader field. This becomes rather interesting in relation to the legitimator role that is taken on in the assessment environment. This could suggest a sub-conscious acknowledgement of forms of legitimate power within HE.