

Applying Foucault to Participatory Assessment in Higher Education: A Case Study in South Africa

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Abstract

Assessment policy reform has led to the adoption of a “participatory” framework of assessment in South African higher education. Using a Foucauldian theoretical lens, this article explores the relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control. Empirical evidence is drawn from assessment practices observed in certain lectures in a South African university and interviews with lecturers. Data is analysed through a Foucauldian lens that forges a connection between disciplinary power, control and regulation. The article then describes the technologies of disciplinary power that play out within the participatory assessment practices and demonstrates what these technologies of power do to assessors and students when they become involved in them. The article argues that participatory assessment in some respects epitomises progressive educational themes, yet, when studied with an eye towards power, it reveals deep contradictions and paradoxes.

Keywords: participatory assessment; disciplinary power; higher education; Michel Foucault; panoptic power

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Introduction

This article explores the relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control. It particularly employs Michel Foucault's (1977) theory on disciplinary power to provide an interpretation of this relation. Employing a theoretical framework that centralises a conception of power based on the work of Foucault (1977), this article highlights some of the tensions evident in *participatory* assessment practices in a South African university.

Postmodernism and its ancillary wave of radical changes such as progress in information technology have called for a fundamental paradigm shift in the philosophy, structure, and contents of educational policies worldwide (Mockler 2005). In line with this, assessment policy reform has been a common trend at both international and local levels, resulting in significant implications for practice (Berry and Adamson 2011; Chisholm and Wildeman 2013). Traditionally, assessment was largely behaviourist in practice in the sense that it was a teacher-centred practice, which focused extensively on the gathering of marks and the administration of once-off tests or examinations (Hargreaves 2005). The assessor adopted an objective stance, remaining "outside the universe of the person assessed" (Dikli 2003, 10). In terms of power relations, traditional processes of assessment were characterised by a fundamental element of domination of the assessed by the assessor.

The behaviourist perspective has received much criticism because it gave precedence to *measurement* rather than *learning* itself (Gipps 2011). A mass of recent empirical work concurs that when assessment practices follow the principles of behaviourism, learning is decontextualised (Chisholm and Wildeman 2013; Earl 2012; Gardner 2012; Lambert and Lines 2013; Stiggins and Chappuis 2005; Wilson 2005). These writers agree that the focus of behaviourist principles leads to an overemphasis on the product of learning, ignoring the process of learning. The belief that learning is an active social process, built on prior knowledge and experience, has compelled scholars to draw links between assessment and the constructivist model (Banks 2012; Black et al. 2006; Clarke 2005; Giebelhaus and Bowman 2002; James 2006; Lutz and Huitt 2004; Wilson 2005). The constructivist perspective extends the notion of assessment to incorporate the dynamism and authenticity of the learning process. It catches the formative aspects of learning in action, instead of "measuring in a de-contextualised way, what has been learnt" (Gipps 1999, 7). The magnitude of the constructivist influence on assessment is evident in the literature; in fact, it appears to have revolutionised the character of assessment (Shepard 2001, 1). As Genishi (1997, 37) puts it, "a new grand narrative" of assessment has been born.

The constructivist approach to assessment embodies a different set of power relations. It displaces the traditional element of domination of the assessed by the assessor and offers in its place egalitarian roles (Lutz and Huitt 2004). It also comes across as strongly participatory in the sense that it recognises both assessor and assessed as equally important *participants* in the highly complex context of learning. The learner takes on

a new empowered role as a critical assessor, moving from “a passive, powerless, often oppressed subject who is mystified by the process to an active participant who shares responsibility in the process, practices self-evaluation, reflection, and collaboration, and conducts a continuous dialogue with the teacher” (Birenbaum and Dochy 1996, 7). Similarly, the assessor moves from the traditional dominant position in the relationship and takes on a role of mentor or coach. In this capacity, the assessor forms a learning relationship with the student, facilitating the process of understanding new material (Birenbaum and Dochy 1996). The literature on participatory assessment centralises learner-centredness, arguing that tasks such as group work, discussion, and learner presentations open up more opportunities for students to improve their communication with others in both spoken and written forms (McFarland 2001).

The South African education system is not exempt from global influences: its assessment trajectory mirrors international trends in its move from “behaviourist” to “constructivist” approaches. In 1994, South Africa became a democracy, mobilising a process of transforming its historically “flawed” educational system (Wilmot 2005, 1). The *White Paper on Education and Training* (Department of Education [Doe] 1995, 17) embodies this goal. One of the policies introduced is an outcomes-based approach to assessment, which focuses on transforming the power imbalances that existed in past teaching, learning and assessment practices. This policy, which provides guidelines for all levels of education in South Africa, is aimed at promoting learner empowerment through active participation in their own learning (DoE 2002). Stemming from current theoretical insights and national policy guidelines regarding teaching, learning and assessment, the University of Johannesburg has mobilised major efforts at the level of policy to promote learner centredness. Its Assessment Policy (UJ 2019) sets out guidelines to promote the movement away from teacher-centred assessment practices to equipping students with skills to become life-long learners who are competent professionals in the future (DoE 1998). In line with the shift in assessment policy, lecturers at the university are offered training to facilitate the embrace and implementation of alternative assessment techniques.

Despite the well-publicised changes in educational theory from a behaviourist to a constructivist pedagogy together with the well-documented shifts in assessment policy and practices in education in South Africa (DoE 1998, 2005), research indicates that the higher-education sector has not fully embraced the alternative assessment methodologies (Beets 2009). Furthermore, the limited cases of implementation show that they have been “employed with trepidation” and “remain similar to what has been the traditional practice” (Beets 2009, 190). While policies emphasising the principles behind outcomes-based assessment are clearly in place, it is evident that translating them into practice at the level of higher education is a major challenge.

A significant body of recent research focuses on the impact, in practice, of policies directed at transforming power imbalances (Spaull 2015). While useful insight has emerged from these studies, they predominantly focus on the macro level of practice in

South Africa. The way in which lecturers interpret and enact power relations at the micro level offers a unique perspective on the impact of the educational change that has been implemented in South Africa since 1994. However, the research in this area is rather thin, indicating a gap in the literature. This article seeks to close this gap by problematising power in participatory assessment practices in higher education.

The significance of this article lies in its contribution towards an understanding of power relations in participatory assessment practices in higher education. Moreover, it contributes to such an understanding from a unique empirical base: it shows how power relations are central in the micro-level enactment of pedagogy. In gaining understanding of strategic power relations in certain techniques and methods of assessment, assessors may be better able to facilitate the completion of learning goals, thereby making a substantial contribution to educational theory, policy, and practice. With that said, the aim of this article is both diagnostic and critical. Through recourse to empirical data, this study diagnoses a problem with the participatory approach to assessment practices in South African universities in order to analyse their purportedly progressive aims.

Three key questions guide this study: 1) What kind of power relations exist within participatory assessment practices? 2) What possibilities exist for lecturers to act and think differently about their assessment practices? 3) How can lecturers create openings in assessment that will allow their students to grow and develop?

Theoretical Framework

Foucault's (1977) theory is used as a theoretical framework to examine the micro practices of power in assessment in this article. Foucault argues for the study of power at the extremities of the social body because important action occurs in the everyday relationships in which people and groups experience power. His argument is that an analysis of the relations between knowledge and power at these points provides awareness of the way they constitute our subjectivities (Hoy 1986, 12). In Harwood's (2006, 122) view, such awareness helps us to "challenge" and possibly "transfigure" these subjectivities by strategically rupturing the very mechanisms that lie at the root of their creation, namely the relations of power. Hoy (1986, 7) adds that such a perspective would allow us to "think and act differently". Foucault's theory is valued in this research for its ability to shift the analysis of power in assessment "from the macro realm of structures and ideologies to the micro level of the bodies" of students and teachers (Gore 1995, 167).

Foucault's (1977) theory of power has relevance to modern-day educational practices because it illustrates the general ways in which the institution defines relations, creates certain subjectivities, and organises space and time in relation to certain discourses (Gore 1995, 168). Recent studies make a compelling argument for the use of Foucault's (1977) model of panoptic power when investigating the micro practices within modern school settings. For example, Nemorin (2017) and Taylor (2014) were, through Foucault's (1977) model of panoptic power, able to reveal a range of surveillance

processes at play within the school setting. Foucault's toolbox of concepts helped these researchers to illustrate how forms of disciplinary power were encountered and experienced by a range of stakeholders within the school context.

Foucault's theory of power is of further relevance to the South African context because it is particularly responsive to the current call for decolonising education in South Africa. Dismantling traditional power relationships to uphold academic democracy is one of the key points in this discussion (Le Grange 2016). Prominent researchers in post-apartheid South Africa highlight the need to shift the underlying power imbalances that underpin conventional methods of teaching, learning and assessment towards inclusivity and social justice (Hlatshwayo, Shawa, and Nxumalo 2020). The decolonisation goals that have arisen from student protests in South Africa have created a strategic entry point for the analysis of how social relations (power imbalances) that currently constrain student learning could be shifted. Foucault (1977) offers an enduring conception of power that illustrates the ways in which power relations intrinsic to pedagogy regulate individuals.

Foucault's (1977) view of power is valued in this study because it accounts for the intricacies, nuances and subtleties of human interaction, acknowledging far more than merely the ways in which society imposes and reproduces power relations. In applying Foucault's theory of power to alternative assessment, an opportunity is afforded to present a perspective that accentuates fluidity and change in South Africa. Foucault's conception of power is employed in this article to examine the technologies of power within the micro practices of lecturers at a university in South Africa. It offers an analysis of the patterns of power currently determining lecturers' and students' experiences of participatory assessment.

Literature Review

Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power, which is central to this study, illustrates how power works in everyday situations of human life. Foucault (1980, 39) points to the functioning of disciplinary power at the level of the body where "it reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives". He emphasises that disciplinary power is invisible and pervasive in modern society, occurring as "a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body rather than from above it" (1980, 39). Central to Foucault's (1977) notion of disciplinary power is his description of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. This was "a system of surveillance originally designed with penal institutions in mind, but which has become a metaphor for the much broader and subtle intrusion of observation and record-keeping techniques into more and more areas of social life" (Burbules 1997, 38).

The basic idea of the panopticon is that its structure and environment exert "control, where people internalize changes to their habits and movements without remembering the original circumstances that necessitated them" (Foucault 1977, 200). Foucault points

out that with repetition, the surveillance becomes harder to escape because individuals tend to take less notice of the panoptic mechanisms that are monitoring them. Foucault (1980) explains that the panopticon aims at generating self-surveillance by the people under observation within the tower. In particular, the guards are under observation not only for what they do wrong, but more importantly, for what they do right. Foucault's (1977) work goes on to draw interesting parallels between the "school" and the "panopticon". Speaking about the school as instrumental in defining relations within the institution and in the classroom, Foucault (1977, 202) highlights its creation of certain subjectivities, as well as the way in which it organises space and time according to particular discourses. His ideas suggest that classrooms are very similar to the panopticon in architecture, which is integral to political power. Burbules (1997, 38) highlights Foucault's point that as people accept that they are being watched, they change their habits. Foucault (1977, 292) sees power relations as "mobile, reversible, and unstable", making it possible for resistance as "strategic reversal, violent resistance, flight or deception". He argues that resistance does not function outside power, but rather as positions within power, as reactions to power, or as productions of new expressions of power. His point is that if there is no possibility of resistance, then it is suggestive of violence and not of power. He implies that just as power is everywhere, so too is resistance (Foucault 1977).

Although the literature reflects the highly influential nature of Foucault's (1926–1984) ideas, there are also considerable concerns raised about his work. His work in the area of resistance has received extensive critique. The work of Gane (2013) reflects that Foucault's ideas in this area have been widely criticised by writers such as Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Nancy Fraser, Nancy Hartsock, Judith Butler, and Hayden White, among others. Charles Taylor (1984, 152) highlights the common question these writers raise: What is the place of freedom in Foucault's propositions on power? Taylor questions the notion of "power" without "freedom" or "truth", querying whether there could really be an analysis that uses the notion of power and leaves no place for freedom or truth. Taylor (1984, 152) describes Foucault's propositions on power as paradoxical in the sense that he appears to work towards bringing "evils to light", yet he distances himself from the idea that overcoming these evils promotes good. Taylor's work questions whether there is confusion/contradiction or a "genuinely original position" (1984, 153) presented by Foucault's idea of power.

Another key critique of Foucault's work is the elusiveness of his ideas. Ball (1990, 1) sums up the paradoxical response to Foucault's "playfulness and elusiveness" by stating that his work seems to have "stimulated fascination and exasperation in equal measure". Some of the descriptions of Foucault's elusiveness range from "astonishing ambiguity" (Megill 1992, 86) to nihilistic (Gutting 2005). Some philosophers describe Foucault as a structuralist—a view contrary to how he portrays himself (Macy 1977 cited in Marshall 1990, 11). Prominent philosophers such as Jacques Derrida object to Foucault's style of playing "fast and loose" with historical data and time (McNay 2013, 14). Critics assert that Foucault is vague when he appeals to concepts such as rupture

and discontinuity, and when he fails to explain his intent (Marshall 1990, 11). Taylor, a key critic, explains that the absence of “norms” has implications for the “critical power” of Foucault’s analyses (cited in Gutting 2005, 149). Habermas argues that without a “normative yardstick, Foucault’s historical analyses cannot be genuinely critical” (cited in Gutting 2005, 149). In response, Foucault (1978, 288) argues that he revels in his mystical image because he does not want to come across as a “specialist” of any universalised ideas. I argue that Foucault’s “elusiveness” is intrinsic to his postmodernist goal of challenging those who “speak” for truth in society.

The literature also reflects a strong defence of Foucault’s approach to power from various postmodernist writers. For example, Viriasova (2006) argues that the critique above reflects a misunderstanding of Foucault’s aim of challenging traditional thought. Viriasova asserts that Taylor (1984) understands freedom and liberation in a traditional sense, while Foucault presents an alternative view. Another writer exemplary of such thought is Ball (1990), who believes that Foucault’s philosophy was basically optimistic and suggestive of his strong belief in human freedom. Ball (1990) defends Foucault’s ideas, arguing that he did find place for freedom when he presented his genealogies as acts of “opposition” and his work as a form of “resistance”. Sustaining the defence of Foucault’s ideas on power, Smart (2013, 135) sees them as useful in producing critical discourses that function to interrupt the smooth passage of “regimes of truth”. He argues that it is vital to disrupt those forms of knowledge that have assumed a self-evident quality, and to bring about a state of uncertainty in these power-knowledge relations (Smart 2013).

Although Foucault’s ideas are controversial, he offers educational research a useful framework with new articulations of problems and new objects of study. Even though Foucault was reticent in defining “who” or “what” he was, at the same time, he revealed a commitment to challenging the limitations of thought (Gane 2013). I agree with Marshall (1990) that rather than theorise about its limits of application, it may be better to see how his ideas play out in practice. Foucault (Chomsky and Foucault 1974, 171) enlightens us that the priority for any researcher is “to criticise the working of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent”. It is in this spirit of critique that my article offers its work. I apply a Foucauldian analysis to participatory assessment practices to “unmask the politics that underlie some of the apparent neutrality of the educational reform” (Ball 1990, 7). I use Foucault’s (1977) panoptic constructs to explore the following issues within participatory assessment practices: What forms of discipline does participatory assessment authorise? Where and how is discipline applied? What educational opportunities does participatory assessment foreclose?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach in recognition of the possibilities that it provides for a deeper understanding of the power relations that accompany assessment practice (Ezzy 2013). I conducted the study at the University of Johannesburg, located

in the metropolitan city of Johannesburg in South Africa. The key participants in this study were three lecturers who were trained in the alternative assessment methodologies as outlined in the university's assessment policy document. Although focus is given to the experiences of the students in the respective lecturers' classes, I do not report on them. I use the pseudonyms Mary, Jill and Thom for the lecturers. This article acknowledges that a small sample limits the possibility for any generalisation (Ezzy 2013). However, the use of the case study approach facilitated a deeper and broader exploration into the power relations inherent in participatory assessment practices.

I address the questions and concerns raised in this article through qualitative data generated from two primary sources. The first data source is video observations conducted in the lecture rooms of three lecturers who taught Communication Skills to students pursuing a national diploma in engineering. The second data source is interviews, which I conducted with the lecturers after they had reviewed the videos. I conducted observations during the Communication Skills lecture periods weekly, over a total period of three months. Although there were many lectures that were primarily teaching-based, I gave stronger focus to transcripts that dealt more specifically with assessment issues. The size of the classes varied slightly, with an average of about 50 students per class. I reduced data from video-recorded observations and interviews with the lecturers, identifying important themes and "concepts" (Bazeley 2009). I subsequently attempted to determine, in a more contextualised way, the object of the practice of power, the specific enactment of the technique of power, and any reactions or consequences evident. The themes in this article are therefore suggestive of the configurations of power inherent in participatory assessment practices at the site, and the kinds of subjects produced.

This research project adheres to the basic ethical principles of scientific research as outlined by Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006, 67). I sought informed consent and assent from my participants, treating the principles of autonomy and confidentiality with seriousness. Additionally, I worked to reduce bias in my management of the data as well as in my interactions with participants. I applied my methods with rigour as well as a sense of openness, continually working to ensure that my practices were congruent with my intended methodological approach. To ensure that my findings are an accurate reflection of the data, I managed the analytical processes with integrity and consistency (Torrance 2012). In my endeavour, I listened intently to the voices within the struggles and searched deeply for what they wanted to say.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I present an analysis of problems within the phenomenon of participatory assessment through a deconstruction of critical discourses drawn from the assessment experiences of the participants. It should be borne in mind that it was not my intention to find solutions to these problems. Citing Foucault, Rabinow (1984, 343) elucidates the complexity of this approach in research: "you can't find the solution for a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people". Following

a Foucauldian philosophy, my perspective on problems does not imply that the methods, techniques and processes in participatory assessment are bad, but that they may be “dangerous” (Foucault 1977, 209). My inquiry does not try to unearth any concealed meaning, nor does it provide options for freeing researchers from the dominant ideology. Instead, as everything is “dangerous”, this article problematises participatory assessment in the present, using history as a resource.

The technologies of power in existence at this site, which are embodied in the three themes discussed below, often overlapped each other and occurred sequentially. The result was a set of conspicuous imbalances on the surface and oppositional discourses in existence beneath the surface of assessment practice. In one dimension, there was the tension experienced by lecturers of embracing new and strange practices of teaching and assessment versus the pull towards the comfort zones of their traditional practices. In another dimension, there was the tension of lecturers embracing progressive ideas about assessment versus their personal feelings of accountability in terms of fulfilling mark requirements to the university. In yet a further dimension, there was the university’s expectation for lecturers to change to new methods of teaching versus lecturers’ personal beliefs and values about how this should happen. These experiences occurred against the background of strong personal circumstances and challenging contextual factors.

Struggles with a New Identity: Safe versus Risky Roles

The analysis illustrates that all three participants (Mary, Jill and Thom) experienced considerable struggles in their attempts to integrate the expected new assessment identity. In their attempts to take on roles congruent with the participatory assessment ideology, all three lecturers struggled. A sense was conveyed that the expected role was a riskier one, in which the lecturer lost control of power in the classroom. All three lecturers seemed to return to their traditional roles, which came across as “safer”.

In discussions prior to my observation of her Communication Skills lectures, Mary shared with me her planned assessment structure, which included four peer assessments. From the spectrum of lectures that Mary presented, it was apparent that she deviated from her plan and administered two written traditional tests instead of the four scheduled peer assessments. Mary explained that the peer assessments “were taking up too much time” and that she needed “to get marks before the end of the semester”. When she did carry out her peer-assessment activities, Mary was seemingly preoccupied with the orderliness of her students. She commented that peer assessment often brought a “sense of disorderliness” into her lecture room, and she did “not like” that “scenario”. She was clearly uncomfortable with the more relaxed classroom environment brought on by the dynamic of the peer activity. After viewing the video footage, Mary confirmed that she was “uncomfortable” with the atmosphere of boisterousness that the peer assessment brought into the lesson. During both peer-assessment attempts, Mary showed signs of frustration and made repeated attempts to get her students to become more orderly. She commented that her students were “becoming increasing impossible”. Mary commented

that she was aware that she had to be a facilitator, but that it was a “difficult role” because her “students need structure”. She explained that “they don’t have the skills to figure things out themselves. ... They need someone to be in charge of things.” It was apparent that Mary found the dynamics of being a facilitator strange and uncomfortable.

Jill’s practice reflected a similar pattern of identity struggles as Mary. Jill similarly abandoned her schedule of four planned peer assessments, completing only one task. Like Mary, she resorted to her traditional strategy of giving her students three written tests. In the one peer-assessment activity she did go through with, Jill adopted a strict approach concerning the physical space in the lecture room. She explained in the interview that she “did not allow” the movement of students during the peer-assessment task, as “things would become too chaotic”. Jill explained that she returned to her past methods of testing because her students’ rowdy behaviour “distracted” her, making it “impossible to continue” with peer assessments. Jill commented that she was not coping with the new “expectations and demands of assessment” and that it was “hard to keep a focus on prepping students for the exam, and still doing peer assessment”. Jill felt that she “didn’t have the time or the energy”. She went on to state that “the old style is so much easier. I give them the test and they do it!” Like Mary, Jill seemed to be struggling with the demands and risks of losing control brought on by the new role as assessor. Her comments and actions similarly point to her preference for the “safer” traditional role to which she was accustomed.

As with Mary and Jill, Thom also diverged from his original plan of four peer-assessment tasks, carrying out only one of them, and continuing with his prior routine written tests. Although Thom was not as vocal about his discomfort with the new assessment mode as Jill and Mary, his non-verbal behaviour showed that he shared their feelings of frustration with the loss of control brought on by the peer activity. Thom adopted a peculiar assessor stance of remaining seated at his desk at the front of the room throughout the peer activity. He stated that his stance gave him “an advantage”, providing him with a “bird’s eye view of everything”. He justified his strategy of remaining outside the discussions because he wanted to “give students freedom” to enjoy the new mode of assessment. Although Thom commented that he was “pleased” with the way the peer activity had panned out, in a contradictory way his non-verbal behaviour suggested that he was agitated and uncomfortable with the apparent new messiness brought on by the assessment. Other aspects of Thom’s behaviour confirmed that his experience with the assessment activity was far more complex than his casual portrayal of it. For example, Thom appeared reluctant for me to observe any more of his classes, and when I queried why he replied, “I presented a very good peer-assessment class for you last week. ... Don’t you *have* all the data you need?” Another apparent contradiction was that Thom did not continue with the three other peer-assessment strategies as he had planned, despite telling me that he found the experience “pleasing”.

The architectural structure of the respective peer-assessment practices reveals important dimensions and limitations to students’ freedom. Evidently, all three lecturers adopted

certain organisational strategies that facilitated a heightened visibility of their students from strategic vantage points. In all three cases, the positions were externalised and implicitly hierarchical, allowing the respective lecturers to regulate activities in time and space. Mary and Jill opted to remain external to their students' discussions, surveying their work, instead of entering the students' world. Thom also externalised himself from his students, subtly constructing a position suggestive of authority. Thus, the social system of all three lecturers' classrooms worked to establish hierarchies and specific relationships of control. These strategies are perhaps a natural part of any classroom and vital to the productive functioning of any lecturer. At the same time, it may be argued that the lecturers adopted such externalised roles because they were fearful of the loss of control, which seemed to have accompanied co-participatory roles.

It was clear that the peer-assessment activities, in all three cases, ruptured the order and structure of the lessons, bringing into all the lecturers' classrooms a distinctive amalgam of apprehension and anxiety. The themes and concepts concentrated on at this point suggest a neat splitting of the ethos of the respective lessons of each of the three lecturers into two segments: the one characterised by strong structure and smooth lesson mobility, the other by disorder, uncertainty and tension in lecturer-student relations. It was apparent that the lecturers did not facilitate strategies that allowed their students the freedom to explore the context of learning themselves. In fact, they rejected the participatory assessment practices because it seemed to loosen their explicit hold on discipline. This point is vital in terms of participatory assessment. *Participation* in assessment suggests a state that depends on a reciprocal flow of communication. From the discussion above, it seems that a true, communicative dialogue with equal giving was rather challenging to attain.

A paradox emerges from the struggles the lecturers faced in incorporating and adjusting to new assessment practices. It was apparent that the unique social demands of the participatory assessment practices interfered with the order and formality that the lecturers had established in their traditional classroom arrangements. All three lecturers found the power relations brought on by their required roles as facilitators rather intense. They subsequently rejected these practices for those that secured their dominance over the relationship between themselves and their students. One got the impression that the lecturers commonly struggled to embrace a new subjectivity of "intermediary" in their roles as assessors. This role came across as an extreme to their existing (or "old") subjectivity of the lecturer "in charge". In the face of the risk posed by the new roles, all three lecturers opted for the familiarity and safety of their traditional roles—a choice that ensured their positions of being in control. It was apparent that the circulation of power relations between the lecturers and students occurred in both disciplining and regulating ways. In fact, the physical classroom seemed to serve as a significant site for the panoptic plays of power. The emerging relations of power in this case suggest a duality: on an explicit level, there was the suggestion of participatory relationships between the lecturers and students, yet on an implicit level, the lecturer-student relationship came across as largely traditional. The power relations that emerged and

the subjects that were formed in this analysis are reflective of the “non-egalitarian” and “asymmetrical” elements of power relations Foucault (1980, 88) writes about. This paradox makes apparent the relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control.

Accountability: Learning versus Measurement

Participants in the study were seemingly on board with the goals of participatory assessment, yet, in contradictory ways, they emphasised work that scored towards the accumulation of “marks”. Mary’s lesson bore distinctive characteristics of developing human agency in the sense that she showed encouragement and support (“we ... together”), demonstrating a keenness to engage in a co-participatory relationship with her students. Furthermore, Mary offered opportunities for “extended negotiation” when her students complained that their peers had marked them unfairly. On the surface, Mary’s approach came across as democratic and true to the spirit of the participatory assessment philosophy. However, the analysis suggests that other intersecting and co-complicated discourses were at play. Classroom activities that took place later showed that Mary did not actually follow through with her offer of extended negotiation because of time constraints. She mentioned that she had to “produce” students’ semester marks and that time was her “main enemy”. Thus, while Mary presented a picture of working in co-participatory ways with her students, in reality she sustained a polarised relationship with them, returning very quickly to her distinctively traditional role. It was clear that the lecturers’ plans to implement the alternative methodologies of participatory assessment were thrown off course by the university’s mark structure.

Jill made repeated and explicit references to the “examination”, suggesting that it represented something of high value to her. For example, she stated, “guys ... you must remember this for the exam hey”, and “exams are around the corner, so pay attention to this”. Jill felt that she was “justified” in focusing on the examination because she was concerned about her students passing. As she stated, “I have to get my marks sorted before the exam; I mean if my students don’t have enough opportunities for a proper semester mark, they may not get entry into the exam.” From this perspective, Jill might have put to positive effect the power produced from the discourse of “examination”, in that it provided a focus and sense of purpose to her teaching. While Jill’s references to the examination might have come across as regular to the functioning in any classroom, there were compelling illustrations that they served as a subtle strategy to control her learners’ interest levels. One of these illustrations is the sacrificial appeal Jill makes to her students when she says, “Ah I *know* this stuff. ... I am doing this for you, not for me. ... YOU need to pass this exam.” For Jill, the discourse of the examination served as a convenient tool to discipline her students into obedience. She projected the “examination” as a high-stakes event or a “need” only she could fulfil. In drawing students’ attention to the personal sacrifice she was making for them, one gets a clear sense of her controlling the direction their learning should take. Understandably, lecturers need to be creative about the ways in which they maintain learners’ interest

levels. However, the act of holding learner interest at the cost of learner freedom is clearly dangerous.

Evidently, the force of accountability to the university's mark structure had subtly worked its way into the internal discourses of both Jill's and Mary's assessment practices. As the analysis shows, there was much adjusting and re-aligning of aims and purposes in their different activities, suggesting that they were constantly engaged in forms of self-surveillance. A second paradox emerges with lecturers caught between conflicting subjectivities: one of dealing with students' responses to the new methodologies with sensitivity, tolerance and the spirit of nurturing, and another of being able to provide rigorous accounts or schedules of marks to the university. In the face of these conflicting forces, one can understand the lecturers' rejection of participatory techniques for traditional methods of assessment. Perhaps they found it easier to use traditional testing methods—having practised and experienced such trends in the past. Participatory assessment practices on the other hand might have come across not only as new and foreign, but as far more demanding in terms of time and engagement.

The relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control became apparent in this part of the analysis through the metaphorical idea of "policing". The forms of accountability that both lecturers and students experienced in the study show that they were subject to a form of policing. This took the form of covert and overt external expectations from the university and beyond, in terms of expected records of marks, expected norms for student and lecturer conduct, and expected exemplifications of assessment competence (e.g., semester marks and examinations). There were clearly subtle indications that deeper concealed forces of power were at play. The lecturers appeared to become part of the process by which they disciplined their students, and they were in turn under the control of the same forces (Foucault 1977). From a Foucauldian perspective, such displays of behaviour may be viewed as forms of social control, which can be likened to a two-edged sword: the lecturers control the students, but other external forces, in ways subtler and difficult to detect, shape and control both lecturers and students.

Outward Performances: A Disguise of Inner Struggles

The analysis suggests a further set of power plays, which are indicative of deeper inner struggles with dangerous consequences. In all three participants' practices, new forms of assessing were started but never completed as planned, giving way to old practices of testing. In discussions, students indicated that the peer work did not take place "normally", occurring only when I was present in the classroom. A practice that drew particular attention was the way in which certain lecturers emphasised concepts pertinent to the alternative assessment approach. Jill often spoke louder whenever she mentioned the word "assessment". There was a strong sense that Jill was literally drawing my attention to her interest in the alternative assessment practices. Similarly, Thom often repeated the word "group-work" during his lectures. As he stated, "we've

worked a lot in groups ... remember last term there was a lot of group-work ... also now there's a lot of group-work". In a particular lecture, Thom mentioned the words "group/group-work" at six distinctive points. Although such repetitions might have been incidental, the discussion that follows shows they were also suggestive of deeper concealed forces of power at play.

The possibility exists that Thom and Jill were demonstrating (by repetition and emphasis) to an observer like myself that they were fulfilling assessment policy expectations as assessors. An undeniable pressure emerges from policy discourses for lecturers to embrace change. By making obvious their compliance with participatory assessment practices, lecturers would be suggesting their professionalism and receptivity to change. From this perspective, the peer activity might have been "forced" into the lesson as "window dressing" to indicate to me, the external observer, that they were embracing change. The result was that the peer activities were seemingly conducted for my benefit and the whole "participatory assessment" experience was part of a charade. The lecturers' persistent "outward" attempts to convey their acceptance of participatory assessment certainly hints at the possibility of subtle but powerful forces of social control. This form of social control seems to exist as a complex form of internal pressure brought on by my role as an observer. The lecturers' peer-assessment practices then devolved to a power play in which my role as researcher became entangled in the relationship the lecturers were possibly attempting to establish with their students.

Foucault's (1977) ideas about the way in which panoptic power produces patterns of self-surveillance has resonance in this analysis. A sense was conveyed that all three lecturers were self-monitoring or conducting disciplinary actions upon their own bodies on account of perceived hidden forces of power at play. The lecturers seemed to be aware of being "watched", and so employed techniques of self-surveillance to comply with the expectations of the apparent *external* gaze. This form of self-surveillance characterised the lecturers' behaviour even at times when I was not visibly in the lecture room. It would seem that the *external* surveillance was so enveloping that even when there were no physical surveillance mechanisms present, the lecturers regulated their practices. The accountability lecturers faced in terms of complying with the university regulations could be argued to constitute the external "gaze" Foucault writes about. In terms of Foucault's (1977) theory, these gazes are likely to serve as panoptic "guards" of the new assessment methodology. The idea that self-surveillance took place without any visible factors of control resonates with Foucault's (1980, 88–89) idea that the technologies of power often disappear into the "ideological" frameworks of the institution. One could argue that the lecturers' self-surveillance served as a way for them to reconstitute themselves as conforming, successful practitioners of the participatory assessment philosophy. It appears that the surveillance system embodied in the "gaze" created a context where the lecturers became an additional driving force of the external accountability system rather than governors of their individual potential. My presence as a possible representative of the new methodology was possibly also inherently panoptic.

A third paradox emerges from analysis, revealing a trend where, when observed, the lecturers' commonly set up the scene to show their openness to using participatory techniques of assessment. However, there was much to suggest from the data that when they believed they were not under observation, they reverted to their traditional practices of lecture-centred assessments and traditional testing. Earlier discussions in this article have pointed to the well-documented, worldwide preference of constructivist methodologies over behaviourist approaches in assessment (Gipps 1999). In a similar vein, the efforts to transform South African education, which are captured in various policy documents, position the alternative methodologies of assessment as educationally sound and progressive (Beets 2009). It may be natural then for any lecturer in South Africa and beyond to want their colleagues to perceive them as progressive and pro-change. In this case, it may have been about bringing their assessment practices into line with the new participatory practices advocated in curricular policy documents (DoE 1998).

My presence in the lecture rooms compounded this complexity in the sense that participants felt compelled to show me their receptivity to the changes currently advocated. From this perspective, all three lecturers' "peer work" comes across as a form of "window dressing"—it was for them a tool to reflect (to an outsider's gaze, such as mine) that they were progressive and open to participatory teaching/assessment methodologies. The paradox revealed is that the lecturers "showed" one thing but "did" the opposite in practice. This inconsistency is possibly an outward manifestation of inner conflicting identities: lecturers experienced a push towards a progressive new role of facilitator/mediator/caregiver yet succumbed to the safety of their traditional practices. In a way that resonates with Foucault's ideas, I may have served as "guard in the tower" of the new "will to truth" (Foucault 1977, 200–9) of participatory assessment. Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, I had, through my well-intended research needs of observing lecturers, together with the participants' trust, unintentionally and unknowingly reinforced the strength of the accountability system. True to Foucault's (1980) ideas, it is possible that we cannot escape power. As Foucault writes (1980, 141): "It seems to me that power is always already there, that one is never outside it, that there are no margins for those who break with the system to gambol in." This study therefore endorses Foucault's (1977, 143) concept that we are always "inside some disciplinary machine, always inside some net-like organization where we can be subjected to the effects of power and act as vehicles for its articulation".

Conclusion

Foucault's insights on disciplinary power have been invaluable in examining the power relations inherent in the assessment practices of three lecturers at the University of Johannesburg. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power and his model of the panopticon have been relevant and effective in facilitating an analysis of power in various states of circulation and in operation in the site. The power inherent in the participatory assessment at this site existed primarily in its disciplinary form, underscoring intense

contradictions and producing dangerous consequences. In support of Foucault's (1977) ideas about disciplinary power, the analysis has shown the totalising hold those in power can have over individual bodies and provided an understanding of how multiple realities operate upon bodies to render them as subjects.

While this article recognises some of the "dangerous" ways that subjectivity is constructed within participatory assessment practices, it acknowledges that a return to the traditional system of assessment is questionable. Nor can a form of participatory assessment that may liberate us from the panoptic effects of power be used. This article does not use Foucault's work to project an exclusively negative critique. Following Roth (1992), Selwyn (2000, 252) advises of the danger of being "seduced by the Panopticon thesis and concepts of total surveillance". This article recognises certain restrictions. Selwyn (2000) cautions against an overemphasis of the panopticon metaphor. His point is that lecturer accountability and student accountability are necessary if we wish to make progress and not repeat our mistakes. This article acknowledges Selwyn's (2000) point, and in its treatment of power relations does not intentionally emphasise the negative effects of participatory assessment practices.

In terms of the way forward for participatory assessment, I draw on Foucault's (1980), thought-provoking ideas about power and resistance. From Foucault's perspective, an analysis such as this has revealed critical points of "fragility", raising possibilities for resistance. In so doing, it has created openings or alternatives for change for the improvement of the relationship between lecturers and students in participatory assessment practices. This inquiry has revealed that alternatives are indeed possible in participatory assessment. This article advocates a vision of the role of participatory assessment as one that acknowledges the importance of more trusting and open relationships between the assessed and the assessor. For stronger coherence in participatory assessment, lecturers need to strategise the relationship aspects of their roles. Assessors need to value the relationships with students and create more opportunities to listen and acknowledge their voices. For positive effect, lecturers need to be opportunistic and take advantage of learning moments that occur spontaneously in classrooms. In addition, assessors need to consciously question the notion of accountability and find ways to avoid domination by the "system". Furthermore, assessors need to gain a deeper understanding the concepts of choice, voice, and multiplicity of roles within the discourses of participatory assessment.

In cognisance of Foucault's (1980, 80–81) ideas, it is possible that the analysis of power undertaken in this study will help academics to break out of the oppressive relationships that conventional histories in assessment have carved out. From Foucault's perspective, it has the potential to assist in gaining access to the histories that have formally been "disguised by functionalist or systematising thought" (Foucault 1980, 81). This study, in agreement with Foucault (1980, 81), advocates a loosening of the "grip" that functionalist accounts have over perceptions and apparent possibilities in participatory assessment.

Acknowledging Foucault's (1977) view of power as productive, this article concludes that researchers should strive for a detailed understanding of power in participatory assessment practices. It makes sense that in gaining knowledge of fragile points in pedagogical practices, intervention in the truths about participatory assessment may be needed. Although researchers and academics may not be able to prevent participatory assessment discourses from generating non-productive outcomes, they can actively cultivate an awareness of the dangers. As a critical take-away point for university lecturers in their practices of participatory assessment, this article has argued for a view of the self as engaged, open to possibilities, being mindful of hidden possibilities, and maintaining vigilance against social relations that constrain student learning.

Declaration of Interest Statement

I declare no conflict of interest.

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