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‘Being an artist you kind of, I mean, you get used to excellence’: Identity, values and fine art assessment practices

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Abstract

In this article I report on a study into fine art lecturers’ assessment practices in higher education. This study explores the ways that lecturers bring ‘themselves’ into the act of assessment (Hand and Clewes 2000,12). I interviewed twelve fine art lecturers who worked across six English universities. Lecturers were asked to relate to me how they learnt to assess student artwork and what informed their judgement making. My research explores the interfaces between fine art lecturers’ assessment practices, their values and identity/ies. My analysis offers a rendering of the ways that values underpin lecturers’ assessment practices. The article explores the ways that lecturers’ assessment decisions relate to their experiences as ex art students, their identity as artists, their own artistic practices, their conceptualisation of the arts arenas and the HE sector. My key overarching argument is that identity/ies and values underpin and enrich fine art lecturers’ assessment practices.

Introduction

Professional judgement is central to assessment practices in all HE disciplines. Yorke, Bridges and Woolf (2000, 26) point out that in art and design the role of professional

judgement is central because attainment is ‘not amenable to precise specification in advance’. The act of professional judgement places the lecturer and their identity at the centre of assessment. In Rowntree’s (2007, 4) seminal words ‘assessment can be seen as a human encounter’.

Hand and Clewes’ research into assessment practices in a business studies department suggests that lecturers bring ‘a great deal of *themselves* to the task’ when they mark students’ work (2000, 12 my emphasis). This view is supported by Shay (2005) who studied assessment practices in a higher education engineering department. Shay found that lecturer readings of student work were ‘deeply invested with the self’ (Shay 2005, 675). Hawe (2002) argues that professional judgement always allows for a degree of personal autonomy. These researchers are linking assessment practice to issues of lecturer identity. In Wenger’s words ‘participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are’ (Wenger 2004, 4). The relationship between identity and assessment points to the role of values in assessment. Delandshere (2001) adopts a post-structuralist view of assessment; in her research she identifies that values are embodied in lecturers’ narratives about assessment. Delandshere and Petrosky (1994, 16) argue that assessors’ ‘values, experience, and interests are what make them capable of interpreting complex performances’. Working from a similar perspective, Leach et al (2001, 296) state that ‘teachers will always view the learners’ work through changing filters of, for example, values, beliefs, personal attraction or aversion, health or mood’. Thus values and assessment are interlinked.

Art and Design Assessment Practices

In higher education art and design education artwork is normally assessed in situ in the studio. Group marking is commonplace in this arena. In earlier research I have explored the ways that groups of assessors work in the studio to construct an understanding of assessment standards through dialogue (Orr 2007). Group marking events where lecturers walk around a studio and discuss and dis/agree students' marks is an established part of assessment in art and design so the notion of publicly agreeing marks through dialogue is a disciplinary norm. Decisions about students' grades are accomplished 'in and through interaction' (Heath and Hindmarch (2002,101). This means that when lecturers mark student artwork the decisions they make are not isolated. The lecturers' decisions are nested within a team, a department, a discipline, a university and the arts/education sector. These nested layers inform and are informed by practices at a local level. This view of assessment is supported by Layder (1997) who presents assessment as a socially situated practice informed by, and mediated through, the socio-political context within which it occurs.

This study forms part of a larger research study into fine art lecturers' assessment practices. For this study I contacted fine art lecturers using university website contact information. This approach resulted in an opportunity sample of twelve fine art lecturers. The lecturers worked across six English university fine art departments. The sample included Post 92 and Russell Group universities.

I carried out semi-structured in-depth interviews with each participant. In these interviews respondents were asked a range of questions about their approaches to the assessment of student artwork in the studio. The interviews also focused on the individual assessor's position within their course team, their university and the arts arena. These questions allowed me to explore the ways that assessment decisions are nested. The key aim of this particular aspect of the study was to explore the interfaces between lecturers' identities, values and their assessment practices within fine art in higher education.

Analysis

My analysis started at the completion of the first interview and developed as I progressed through the sample and received typed-up transcriptions. My data collection and analysis were carried out iteratively. What I learned as I collected my data informed data collection at the next stage (Smith 2002). I worked iteratively through my research aim, my research questions and my interview questions (Wengraf 2001).

After each interview I listened to the audio recording and made field notes. I then read three transcripts very closely. Whilst reading these transcripts I had in front of me my key research questions. When I read responses that related to my research questions I simply marked the text with a highlighter pen and made notes in the margins. Once I had done this with three sets of interview transcripts I moved on to develop a coding frame. I noted the development of this coding frame in an analysis notebook so I had a clear record of its development over time. Initially I simply wrote my responses and comments in the transcripts' margins. When I had written the same comment several times I coded it more formally. Once I had devised this initial coding frame I selected three different transcripts and I read them without annotating them. For these transcripts I read the interview transcript as a whole and made detailed notes in my analysis notebook. The purpose of this was to check that my coding was not fragmenting the narratives in such a way that

certain meanings were lost. This approach helped me to internalise the narratives of each interviewee. I developed a coding frame and its applications led to repeated categorisation and re-categorisation.

When I had completed this I worked hard to develop a sense about how the draft codings related to each other. I drew numerous mind maps that tested out a number of inter-relationships. I did not attempt to categorise each respondent's view as a single entity, instead I sought to categorise the range of conceptions held by the group of lecturers.

This analysis led me to create five macro headings:

1. Assessor as ex art student
2. Assessor as artist
3. Assessor as artist practitioner
4. Assessor in the arts arena
5. Assessors' location within HE sector

Assessor as ex art student

In this study I noted that the experience of having been art students informed the lecturers' approaches to marking student artwork. One experienced lecturer describes how he learnt to assess:

Through one's own experience, you know, both dreadful and wonderful as an art student and in the immediate aftermath as a very young and perhaps rather naïve art school teacher [...]. One observed their style and their mode of engagement with students and perhaps thought 'well I can use a bit of that.' ST¹

¹ All respondents were assigned anonymised initials

Bourdieu (1990, 87) argues that habitus ‘leads us to “reproduce” the social conditions of our own production’. This helps to explain why the lecturers reproduce elements of the assessment practices they experienced as art students. Rowntree (1987) reminds us that assessment is something that all lecturers have experienced as students long before they carry it out as lecturers. My analysis suggests that the experience of being a student is a powerful source of assessment learning for new lecturers.

Assessor as Artist

Lecturers’ artistic identity also relates to how they learnt to approach assessment. The extracts below illustrate the view that the lecturers’ participation as artists is related to how they learnt to assess student work:

Yeh, but how did I learn? Oh that’s an interesting question, em, being an artist you kind of, I mean you get used to excellence. MP

How did I learn to assess student work? Well I guess how did I learn to assess art? [laughter]. ST

We all define ourselves as artists. DR

These extracts illustrate the ‘artist teacher identity narratives’ discussed by Adams (2007, 266). The lecturers’ assessment practices are premised on their identities as artists. In the words of one lecturer:

I've always been active as an artist and as an artist you make judgements about your own practice consistently and as an artist you also have a kind of framework that you work within of opinion and I think when you assess students' work there has to be space for that, your position as an artist, there has to be a space for that in the assessment process. DR

The primacy of the artist identity is unwittingly underlined by a respondent who was a Reader at a Post '92 university. He said, without any apparent sense of irony, that he would have had a career if he had not become absorbed in academic work. The career he refers to is, of course, that of an artist and he views his academic life as reducing his opportunity for personal artistic engagement.

Another lecturer, NC, talks about having been a student in a prestigious, highly selective fine art department and contrasts this to working in a university that takes students that, as he puts it, other more selective universities 'wouldn't touch'. This lecturer is constructed by his work context and he talks about being gradually 'pulled in' to full-time academic work in a new university:

Well you do, don't you....you get drawn into the academic side of it, em, so that's what happens (NC)

These narratives stress constraint, inevitability and hint at unreconciled necessities. They reflect the 'deeply rooted material and emotional constraints on choice' (Reay et al 2001:863) that prescribe the subject positions available.

The lecturers identities underline Morgan and Wyatt- Smith's view that 'we are constituted out of shreds and patches of institutions, discourses and practices to which we

have become habituated and which inform us and our “choices” in ways that exceed our conscious understanding’ (Morgan and Wyatt-Smith 2000:136).

Assessor as artist practitioner

The lecturers’ own artistic practices connect to how they mark artwork, for example, in the extracts below two lecturer explain that they can be a ‘harder’ markers when assessing students whose artistic practices are very similar to their own:

It’s quite rare to see somebody specialising in that area [his own area of practice] but when I see it, it’s quite nice, but actually it’s not necessarily an advantage to the students. I think from experience I’ve probably been quite tough [laughter].

MT

One of the really interesting things that we’ve been discussing quite a lot recently is when..., when a student is working in an area that’s related to your own practice you can sometimes be harder....on that work because you recognise the weaknesses more clearly when..., when a student is working on an area that’s kind of alien to your own practice it’s easier to be..... impressed, exactly ‘cause you have that kind of lack of depth of understanding, certainly of technical stuff (JR)

The fact that both lecturers appear to be ‘harder’ markers with students who pursue their area of practice appears to relate to the unconscious compensation tactics described by Ecclestone (2001) that can work for or (as in this case) against the student. Lecturers are positioned in relation to their own practice and in relation to other artistic practices because all sub-disciplines have different ‘epistemological standpoints’ (Shay 2005:670).

These extracts are illustrative of the ways that lecturers’ identities and assessment practices are positioned in relation to their own practices. Clark and Ivanic use the term

‘discoursal self’ to bring ‘particular representations of self through practices and discourse’ to the forefront (2004: 137). The discoursal self is shaped by our personal history, the subject positions available to us and our social context. In the extract below the lecturer relates issues of identity to the practice of assessment by describing the nuanced differences between the ways that his colleagues *see* student artwork:

*I think there can be subtle differences in the way in which we approach [assessment] depending on our backgrounds, depending on **how we see** the ways in which the students have realised their ideas and presented them (my emphasis).*

LC

Assessor in the arts arena

The lecturers’ conceptualisation of the arts arena and their position within that arena links to assessment. In the extract below a lecturer at a post ‘92 university explores her understanding of what constitutes fine art in the contemporary arena. The repeated use of ‘I’ (she uses the word **I** 24 times in this extract) serves to underline her sense of positionality. These are not givens or truths; they are positions that are fought over:

I definitely think that certain people have pet hates as well, certain types of practices [...] that they struggle with. [...] Em in terms of my, my own sort of pet hates I, em, struggle with stuff that looks like modernist painting. I [...] I struggle with, em, that, em, oh I don’t know, I think when I was at university I used to call it blobby splatty painting, I’m not talking about abstract art broadly. I’m talking about a certain type of, em, abstract painting. [...] So I think my issues come from within what I think fine art practice is and what I think good and bad practice is, em, and what I think a contemporary context is and what I think is relevant now [...] I see myself as prioritising something conceptual rather than something

visual [...] I think it's to do with ideas around what good practice is in fine art and I think my ideas around what good practice is in fine art is to do with..., with I suppose something about what's old fashioned and what doesn't seem to be kind of relevant now [...] I think that I, em, focus on something conceptual but I also definitely have a clear focus on supporting practices that I think are, em, boundary pushing and that..., I mean in a temporal sense but I also mean in a disciplinary sense. JR

The lecturer goes on to explain that this conceptualisation of the fine arts arena offers a framework for her assessment practices. In critiquing a certain view of fine art this lecturer is still situating herself firmly within its disciplinary boundaries. As Adams (2007, 267) points out, the view that one's own practice as an artist as 'uncommon, unusual or singular' is in itself a 'normative practice' within fine art. This lecturer illustrates how 'values [...] influence every step of the assessment process' (Cresswell 1996, 57).

The relationship between the respondents' conceptualisations of the arts arena and their assessment practices is encapsulated in the comment of a fine art lecturer who described to me a student's summer show. The lecturer said about the student artwork 'if it wasn't going to be a first it would have to be a fail' (MH). This paradoxical view becomes clearer if we note Barrow's (2006) point that student artwork that is viewed as excellent sometimes explores the boundaries of the discipline itself. Another respondent in the study (BW) discusses a final year student who was reported to be working on the boundaries of the discipline. Some tutors felt that this student was not on campus enough and 'she wasn't making work' (BW), the lecturer himself admitted that 'there's a sense in

which that maybe isn't artwork' (BW). Lecturers in this marking team were worried that although this was a 'good student' (BW), they were not sure that what she was doing was anything that 'they would call work' (BW). The lecturers had to decide if the artwork was normal (i.e. sitting within the discipline) or pathological (sitting outside the discipline) (Foucault 1990). The fact that this student went on to gain a first suggests that fine art lecturers see a testing of boundaries as related to excellent fine art practice. The key point is that the marking team had to decide whether or not this student's artwork fitted into their frame of reference for fine art practice. If the artwork passed this test it merited a first; if it failed this test it would fail. The student who is awarded the first is positioned within the territory of the arts arena.

The relationship between assessment and the arts arena is writ large in a vignette described by one lecturer (MP) who relates the details of a marking meeting that occurred some years ago where there was a 'wild conceptual' sound artist who 'failed all the painters' in one student cohort because he 'couldn't see the point of painting any more'! The sound artist's view (that painting no longer had a role in fine art) was contained and moderated by the team who 'still had some belief in the ability of painting'. What this vignette illustrates powerfully is that issues of identity and values collide with issues of agency and structure. The sound artist was not able to fail all the painting students because his marks were moderated by his colleagues. Working in communities of assessment practice allows for the 'discursive production of legitimated values' (Johnson 2002, 216). Through continued participation, the sound artist would learn to align his assessment practices to those of the group, or he might decide to maintain his outsider

status in the community of assessment practice. As Shreeve (2009, 152) reminds us in her study of part time art and design tutors' identity work 'individuals have choice about the positions they adopt in relation to the workplace'. In this vignette the sound artist's outsider status was signaled by the way that the other lecturers moderated (ignored?) his marks to 'fit' their normative expectations.

Assessors' location within HE sector

Each fine art department affords certain 'possibilities for selfhood' (Clark and Ivanic 2004, 136). One lecturer, working at a newly recognised university, talks about having been an art student in a prestigious, highly selective London based fine art department and he contrasts this rather wistfully to working in a northern university that recruits students rather than selects. The lecturer and his students are constructed by the particular university context reflecting what Ball et al refer to as the 'social classification of self and institution' (Ball et al 2002, 52-53). The respondents described each university department as offering a distinctive discursive space for art making that relates to the practices and expertise of the lecturers on the staff team working with groups of students at any given time. One respondent offers the following simile:

It's very much like molecules mixing together because it's only from the team that are here with their students that you develop a kind of mix. NC

Bruner argues that classrooms have specific 'climates' that reflect 'inarticulate cultural values' (Bruner 1996, 27). In the same vein, each fine art department will have its own

local culture that will influence how the work made there is interpreted and assigned value (Shay 2005). In one lecturer's words:

I think that each institution has its own values and students work towards those values and they'll be assessed within that, so some of the student work at university [M], or university [F] and [we might] think, 'Blimey, how did he get a first because it's just nothing there?'. But there's obviously something within the system at that university that they achieved well, being considered as being very high because of the way that the system has been set up so it's not that, that student wouldn't have got a first here it's just that we.., he would have changed completely, he wouldn't have worked in that way really, he would have worked completely differently. Yeh the.., subjectivity is probably wrong but it's probably each centre has its own thinking and culture. NC

(DEVELOP) This extract illustrates the ways that values are co-constructed in communities of practice. Issues of identity collide with issues of agency and structure. Identities are formed through our contacts and positions in the world. Lecturers' expert knowledge bases are 'products of reciprocal and interpretive construction arising from individuals' engagement in social practice' (Billett 2001:431). This is articulated by NC who relates the story of an art college principal moving from one art college to a similar position in another prestigious art college. Let us call this person Jeremy Edwards. NC talks about the differences between the two art college environments:

Cultures change and he's since moved into a different situation at [X] now. He's realised that he can't be the [Jeremy Edwards] from [Y], he has to be something a bit more contextual (NC455)

This extract underlines the ways that identities are socially constructed, dynamic and fluid. Aspects of this principal's identity are contextually constituted.

Discussion

Fine art assessment is not primarily about individual judgement making. Marking decisions occur within webs of influence and experience. This analysis offers a rendering of the ways that values underpin lecturers' assessment practices. To some, the presence of values might be seen to undermine the efficacy of assessment but on the contrary, my key point is that values and identity are central to fine art assessment. Delandshere and Petrosky (1994:16) argue that assessors' 'values, experience, and interests are what make them capable of interpreting complex performances'. Exploring the relationship between identity and assessment is of key importance, because, as Wenger observes, the 'issue of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging' (Wenger 2004, 263). These 'identities and modes of belonging' may be invisibilised in the techno-rationalism of exam board mark sheets and degree classifications but they are essential to recognise if we are to explore the nature of judgement making in fine art. Assessment in fine art is about 'a becoming' for students and lecturers because identities and marks are discursively constructed. The students 'become' their marks and their practices.

This study identifies the influence of the lecturers' own experiences as art students.

Rowntree (1987) explains this when he comments that all lecturers come to the act of assessment with preconceived ideas about how it is done, and one powerful source of knowledge is the lecturer's own experience of being assessed. Yorke, Bridges and Woolf (2000) and Hand and Clewes (2000) identify that lecturers draw on their past experiences of being a student to help them assess. It would be useful for HE teaching development courses or assessment staff development courses to recognise the significance of lecturers' experiences as students more directly. Lecturers could be encouraged to offer assessment 'stories of identity' (Shreeve 2009, 154) to enable them to become more reflexive about their assessment practices.

This study supports Atkinson's argument that 'teachers *become* their practices' (Atkinson (2002, 107, emphasis in original). Lecturers' own sense of their aesthetic informs how they classify students' artwork and how, in doing so, they classify themselves. As Bourdieu (1986, 6) points out, 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier'. My key argument is that within fine art values, artistic practices, assessment practices and identities are enmeshed.

The lecturers' identities offer 'a nexus of multi-memberships' that span the local and the cultural (Wenger 2004, 159). These identities offer a series of lenses or filters through which artwork is understood and evaluated. The lecturers in this study offer a portrayal of Atkinson's (2002, 4) 'pedagogised identities' in relation to a particular aspect of fine art academic work. When lecturers assess student artwork they are making marks and making themselves.

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