IS STUDENT ALIENATION IN POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION RELATED TO ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT?

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Abstract

Policies to widen access have increased numbers of *non-traditional* students in higher education institutions (HEIs), and a concomitant increase in academic failure. Academic writing is a central aspect of assessment considered essential for academic success. HEIs have been slow to adapt to changes in student demographics, typically implementing *ability deficit* approaches to supporting student learning locating the "problem" with the student. This qualitative study applies Marx's (1844/1978) concept of alienation to explore students' experiences of engagement with processes of written assessment. Findings suggest that institutional deficit approaches ignore and/or downplay interactions of wider structural factors that impact on students' experiences of self-alienation.

Introduction

Policies to widen access to higher education (HE) have led to increased numbers of students entering university through *non-traditional* routes from an increasingly diverse range of social and educational backgrounds (Lillis, 2006). Widening access to HE offers the potential for greater social mobility and diversity in the graduate workforce. However, studies have shown that students from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be disadvantaged when entering the labour market (Morely & Aynsley, 2007). A growing *binary divide* between higher education institutions (HEIs) influences employers' ideas on which produce the most suitable graduate employees. According to Morely and Aynsley, many graduate employers continue to display a preference for graduates from older established universities who recruit fewer students from deprived areas and non-traditional entry routes. Students entering HE through non-traditional entry routes may "find themselves needed within higher education to meet the government's targets, yet perhaps not wanted, evident via the exclusionary practices of institutional habits" (Hoskins, 2012, 240).

A degree from an HEI has always been viewed as a commodity to some extent, with qualifications considered exchangeable within the labour market for employment (Littlewood, 2004). However, as Littlewood noted, in the last several decades a process of commodification has come to define the policy landscape within which HEIs operate. Arguably HE has been reframed in such a way that the *use value* of a transformational learning experience has been supplanted by a focus on the academic qualification as a tradable commodity with exchange value in the marketplace, serving the needs of corporate business interests.

In the context of widening access, institutional approaches to teaching and assessment remain rooted in assumptions based on the abilities of a traditional student demographic. As such, despite wider access to learning materials and support being provided by a variety of learning management system (such as the VLE), non-traditional students, both on and off campus, may find meaningful engagement with this to be difficult, particularly when producing written assessments.   Institutional approaches to teaching assume students have mastered the basics of academic writing prior to entering university (Ivanic & Lea, 2006). However, academic assessment can be a daunting and even alienating experience for many non-traditional students. In this context, the focus on qualifications as commodities has two related consequences: students perceive the degree as a product of learning; and in the context of widening access, processes of commodification impact on increasingly problematic institutional approaches to learning and teaching.

Alienation

The concept of alienation can be traced to its roots in the philosophy of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, and Durkheim. To Marx (1844/1978) alienation is a historically specific concept that can only be overcome by changing and replacing the capitalist economic system. In a capitalist system, workers experience alienation from the product of labour, as it exists as an independent, hostile and alien object that has power over the worker and the working activity (the process of labour) as the work activity of workers becomes directed against them, which they do not own. Workers also experience alienation from their *species being,* i.e., one's essential capacities as a human being and in addition alienation from others.   Marx conceptualised alienation as an inevitable process of capitalism. He contended that within capitalist modes of production, workers lose the ability to shape destiny and are systematically deprived of the right to be the architect of their own actions and to shape their work environment.

Defining Student Alienation

Dean (1961) developed a Marxist conception of student alienation comprising 3 dimensions: social alienation, powerlessness, and normlessness. Social alienation results from a perceived subjective experience of isolation, even when in the company of others, and from the absence of meaningful, fulfilling relationships with peers, family and/or community. Powerlessness results from a perceived lack of personal control and ability to influence choices, resulting from perceptions of an external locus of control. In an educational setting, feelings of powerlessness can lead to high dropout rates and non-submission of assessable work. Normlessness involves a rejection of dominant cultural values and rules, and in a learning environment, means that students find it difficult to relate to assessment rules, and regulations. This may lead to conflicts between students and staff when student and institutional values diverge to such a degree that it impacts negatively on student experiences. Dean suggested that high ratings in any one of the three dimensions of alienation adversely affect students' academic performance.

Newmann (1981) identified four aspects of student alienation: powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. Powerlessness was

defined in terms of students' perception of absence of personal control in learning. Normlessness reflects lack of appropriate rule-governed behaviour (e.g., academic dishonesty). Meaninglessness describes students' interpretation of curriculum as irrelevant to their current and future needs. Social isolation refers to reported feelings of loneliness and separation from peers and teachers.

Applying Marx's conception of alienation to students' experience of learning in HE, Mann (2001,13) suggested that an "ethos of performativity" is prevalent; placing an emphasis on the products of learning, rather than on the learning processes themselves. The institutional ownership of the norms and conventions of learning, the assessment process, and institutional control of when and how assessments are to be produced serve to remove ownership and control of the learning process from the student, resulting in students experiencing alienation from the product of their learning and "from the process of production of that work; from one's self; and from others" (Mann 2001, 14).

Assessment

Academic writing is a central, taken for granted, aspect of assessment in higher education (Lea, 2004), defined as a central skill essential for academic success (Catt & Gregory, 2006, 17). However, the complex reasons for failure or non-completion of written assessment may be masked by institutional approaches that focus on, or *fetishize*, the exchange value of the academic product. The written assessment tends to be viewed as an event, an end product to test student learning, and is not explicitly explored as a site and process of learning. In addition, the provision of student support means that "student problems" with writing are addressed by *writing specialists* and *learning support* staff, meaning that that problems with attainment remain defined in terms of a skills deficit in the student (Ivanic & Lea 2006,12).

This *deficit* approach to reducing rates of academic failure (Redden, 2002; Thorpe, 2003) tends to ignore or downplay the impact of wider structural factors and the interrelationship between these factors and traditional "elite" academic culture. Practices underpinned by the deficit approach fail to recognise the need for institutions to adapt in response to a changing student cohort, and instead focus on re-shaping individual students to conform to an idealised, typical *traditional* student (Lewis, 2008). This potentially subverts the very principles underpinning widening access policy as: "for improved social justice outcomes, it is not just the student who has to change, but also the HEI. The deficit model can shape and influence non-traditional students perceptions of themselves as learners" (Hoskins, 2012, 240).

This study builds on previous quantitative research that examined the learning experience of postgraduate students and found no significant difference in grade results between off and on campus students (McPhee, Marks, & Duffy, 2009; McPhee, 2012). However, research focusing on grade scores as a representation of student attainment excludes students who dropped out or failed to submit an end of module assessment, which may influence the *no significant differences* results.

Methods

This study focuses on student experiences and perceptions when producing written academic work (Johnson, 2005; Brown, Higgins, & Paulsen, 2003; Thorpe, 2003) to assess the effects of study mode on student alienation. A case-study approach was chosen allowing the researchers to concentrate on a specific instance or situation to identify the interactive processes (Bell 1999). Using in depth semi-structured interviews, six participants who failed to complete assessable written work were interviewed, and results were compared in relation to on and off campus modes of study:

Group 1   Full time on-campus students with access to Virtual learning environment (VLE) (full time), supported on and off-campus, in an approach known as *blended learning* or *integrated learning.*

Group 2   Part time off-campus students with access to VLE with no on-campus or face-to-face tutor contact.

To ensure equivalency (Simonson, 2000), all students, regardless of study mode, had access the same learning materials, and opportunities to 'meet' and interact through the VLE. The module uses continues assessment, a 1,500 word mid-term essay of, and a 3,500-word end of module essay. Assessments were accessed through the VLE and grading and feedback was delivered using Turnitin software, using the advanced features of grade mark, quick marks, and standardised rubrics mapped to learning programme and module learning outcomes (http://www.turnitin.com/en_us/features/grademark).

The module selected for investigation within this study is titled "Understanding Substance Use and Consequences." The module used in this study is a core module that students must complete to exist with a postgraduate qualification in Alcohol and Drugs Studies from UWS.

Table 1

Student Numbers by Study Mode 2007-2013

	Understanding Substance Use and Consequences Module. Student Numbers						
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Group 1 On campus	44	24	30	48	48	40	46
Group 2 Off campus	31	14	31	9	5	21	7
Total	75	38	61	57	53	61	53

Utilising qualitative methods, we evaluated the experiences of 6 students from a cohort of 53, exploring how and in what way the concept of alienation adequately describes their experience as a sufficient explanation of why they failed to meet assessment deadlines**.**

Results

The impact of the institutional and disciplinary *ownership* of the rules, conventions and practices of academic writing, result in students becoming alienated from (a) the product of the writing process, (b) the process of writing and understanding of subject knowledge gained through the writing process, (c) potential capacity for personal and professional development, and (d) from fellow learners and teaching staff.

Alienation from the Product of Writing

The participants described the purposes of the assessment as: to check understanding, for the lecturer to identify gaps, and to provide a solution to individual student failings or deficits in learning. The VLE used as a central hub to create equivalence in the learning experiences presented several challenges to the part time on campus and the off campus distance learner. As the participants had failed to submit end of module essays, the focus of the interview was on the mid-term essay, a 1,500-word essay, which allows the learner the opportunity to receive formative feedback on their academic ability. The use of technology, in this case Turnitin, provided the opportunity to deliver standardised feedback using rubrics mapped to learning outcomes via the VLE using quickmark comments. Ms R stated that on reading her formative feedback she understood what was required for final module 3,500 word assessment. She explained:

Ms R "Because then I knew what the question was asking of me. You know, I knew what the person who was reading this was looking for, which then made it more specific."

Alienation from the Process of Writing

The participants described their thoughts and feelings when accessing assessment questions. Ms R suggested that being a mature student out of full time education for some time resulted in an experience of panic. She explained:

Ms R "It was my first assessment for a long time I felt apprehensive, you know, I'd been out of education for 2 years, obviously I'm not getting any younger…em…and at that point I was working between 40 and 48 hours a week, you know, dealing with family and trying to find space…well, which I did somehow."

Ms R described her subjective feelings with reference to her personal and social life. It is acknowledged that external pressures on non-traditional students, a lack of money, work and family commitments, are factors that impact on the student experience. As a result, Ms R interprets her ability in line with the institutional deficit approach to assessment in terms of a lack of knowledge, skills and understanding. However for Ms R it was about ability and more importantly for her, a lack of time. She explained:

Ms R "Erm…when I first saw the question…my first thought was…I need to read more, em…no, I need to… [laughs]…I need to find more journals."

Ms R stated that she would often over prepare to compensate for her perceived lack of skill and time:

Ms R   " A 1,500 word assessment, would end up as 4,000 words [laughs], you know, and then trying to break it down."

Ms R helpfully revealed the difficulties imposed on her by the *form* of the writing and how this interfered with her own process of learning/thinking. (In this example it is the word count, however participants also discussed referencing conventions.) Mr B described the process of sourcing and amassing journal articles and internet pages in preparation for academic writing. He explained this process:

Mr B   "You end up with this mountain of stuff that you have to read, and by the time you have read it all, at the end you cannot remember any of it and it's been a pointless exercise...any normal person would write it down as they go along or record it."

Mr B seemed to disregard this gathering of information as learning as "pointless" as he did not make notes or memorise the information. It is interesting that he believed himself to be abnormal. However, in contrast, Mr J described his process of preparing to engage with the assessment. Having assumed he knew what was expected of him, he started to prepare for the essay without fully understanding the question leading to a lower than expected grade. He implied misplaced confidence in his understanding and skill set due to his previous occupation as a high school mathematics teacher. He explained why he was awarded a low grade for his mid-term essay:

Mr J   "The first thing I probably dived in head first, a wee bit too quick…even though I spent thirty years telling people to read the question, I possibly didn't fully."

Alienation from Personal and Professional Development
Participants were asked about their perceptions of the usefulness of the assessment in increasing employability in the specialist field of addiction. Ms R a part time student in full time employment in the field stated:

Ms R   "I don't know…employers don't know the questions you have been asked. But I think…once you've got employment; it gives you a better understanding of the situations other people are going through… because although maybe you were doing things similar before, you didn't know the theory behind it."

Ms R believed that the assessments helped link her practice with theory considering them extremely helpful; however was unsure if a written assessment was a useful means to gaining employment.

Alienation from Other Students and Teaching Staff
Participants were asked if they were made aware of institutional support to aid completion of assessments. Many were aware as this information was on the home page of the VLE. A small minority sought this out. However, many did

not. Some participants accessed formal learning support; some contacted the lecturer directly, while others created their own support networks.

Accessing formal learning support: Mr J a retired mathematics teacher found out that some students were accessing learning support, but did not wish to seek it out. He explained:

Mr J   "I probably could have done with some support on how to structure a social sciences essay. I know that another student I know was going to seek learning support, but I didn't feel that I wanted to."

Accessing lecturer support: When the participants sought help from members of teaching staff, this led to several subjective misconceptions. Accessing help from several sources, led to more rather than less confusion. Ms R noted:

Ms R   "The directive that was given by the other lecturer, I didn't think I related to the question at all."

However, this is contrasted by Mr B, who explained that for him seeking help from the lecturer who set the essay question was important. He said:

Mr B   "I think sometimes it's best to approach the lecturer, the person who posted the question and (ask) is my understanding of this right? (…)

However after accessing support, Mr B discovered that his over preparation in the process has served to complicate and make completion of the essay difficult. He observed that in his experience not seeking help quickly enough leads to a lack of understanding. When seeking help from the lecturer who set the question on what criterion should be included to answer the question he found that the lecturer stated:

Mr B   "…what we are looking for is ABC where as I've gone ABCDEFG… So I have skirted round, probably trying to get too much in; and miss the key elements of the actual question."

Creating imagined rules: Participants were asked if writing the essay provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate what they had learned. It is apparent that students construct a set of *imagined expectations,* whereby students, individually and in groups, construct their own ideas of what they think the lecturer wants them to write, or that the lecturer has not shared with them, that they must find, even though nothing has been explicitly stated or asked for by the lecturer. Mr J revealed his thoughts about a set of imagined rules for the assessment:

Mr J   "There are times where I thought….I would think I think this is important, but should I be saying it…I know I am going to lose few points here, but I want to say it."

Accessing informal support: It was clear however that many students did not seek formal help and created their own leaning support groups, which had several key benefits. Ms R discussed this:

Ms R   "It was really good because they all had different perspectives, you know we all had... em, different ways of approaching it. So it was, kind of we helped each other…it was really, really helpful for me, really helpful."

The experiences of such an informal support mechanism were agreed to be very helpful. However for others this was not at all helpful. Indeed differences of opinion, rather than helping, were considered to be yet another dent to self-esteem and confidence in academic ability. Mr B described his experiences of informal student support groups:

Mr B   "When you are with other people, you think to yourself I cannot write…you think that you cannot write to the same standard as they are at, so you back away."

Participants were asked directly if preparing and writing the TMA essay ever resulted in feelings of isolation. The term alienation was not used deliberately; however, it was mentioned by participants on several occasions. Mr B used the term isolation first and then specifically mentioned the term 'self-alienation' to describe his experiences:

Mr B   "I think isolation is a fair description of it; however I think that, as I said previously, that isolation is very often of my own making. It's not that I am excluded or that the Department turns its back or fellow students alienate you. It's about self-alienation."

However, alienation was not necessarily a negative process. Mr J and Mr JP provided information about their experiences:

Mr J   "Was working till midnight some nights, and that can be isolating, but I didn't *feel* isolated."

Mr JP "I think when I am writing the essay I like to work on my own, although, in class we will have debates, but when actually writing up the essay I do it on my own."

Some students were not passive in the academic writing process, and took active steps to minimise alienation. Ms R noted that she did not always feel isolated, being a cigarette smoker presented several opportunities to discuss academic writing and essay preparation with other students:

Ms R   "To be perfectly honest with you, I smoke, and so did some of the other people in the class and that was how I think we started speaking, you know, when we went outside for a cigarette."

Despite several ways in which students describe experiencing alienation, and ways in which they actively resisted this, one participant in particular had internalised his inability to meet expectations as a very personal failure. Mr B revealed that a lack of confidence and a persistent focus on his perceived deficits created several issues that acted as a barrier to completing the assessment. He explained:

Mr B   "I find that my procrastination, my failure to submit on occasions, it's not about laziness, it's about lack of confidence to put what I feel or

what think or what I want to write… I kind of argue with myself and I run out of time."

Finally he revealed in a single powerful statement his experience of the assessment process:

Mr. B "My only consistency in here is my failure."

Discussion

We note the limitations of this small study. However the perceptions of the study participants describe several factors intersecting to create the subjective experience of student alienation. Attracting larger numbers of students to university with a promise of employability has increased numbers of students recruited from less affluent backgrounds. However, these *non-traditional* students from less affluent backgrounds, often in part time or full time employment, have family commitments and report crises in confidence in their ability to understand the assessment requirements resulting in missed deadlines and programme drop out. Participants described adopting self-alienating identities as *other* based on a binary dichotomy between them and *traditional* students, who are young, have no work or family commitments, and who are perceived to be more academic.

The essay as *product*, something that needs to be *assembled* and *produced* creates a fetish or abnormal focus on the exchange value of the essay, rather than its use value (Mann, 2001). Meeting the needs of capitalism, employers have altered the function and focus of the assessment from being a tool for leaning to a unit of exchange. This process of *fetishization* of the essay as unit of exchange rather than process of learning alienates students, and the lecturers. By viewing the product of student labour as a pathway to employment rather than a pathway to enlightenment creates the conditions for alienation. We contend that institutional practices of teaching and course design should instead recognise writing as a social practice consisting of a variety of discourses or *literacies*, and account for institutional, disciplinary and social contexts within which student texts are produced. Such an approach has the capacity to have a positive impacting on student attainment, progression and retention. However attempts by institutions to address student alienation may raise expectations, perhaps by convincing students that they can count on the lecturer for help, without actually changing conditions in the institution to facilitate this (Newman, 1981).

Participants report being isolated from themselves and others students. However, several developed strategies to cope, creating informal study groups, and gatherings in social spaces. It is possible that if this could be replicated online, this could reduce isolation and alienation.

Widening participation underpinned by the needs of a corporate state nexus has not increased participation or educational engagement. We assert that policy based educational practices perpetuate production and reproduction of identities that serve to maintain a stratified social system of entrenched inequality. While we suggest that student alienation will continue until

Institution practices are modified to meet the needs of non-traditional students, we acknowledge the need for further research to test these assumptions.

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