

7

ONTOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT DECISIONS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Orientation

Concerned with the design and implementation of assessment for inclusion, in this conceptual chapter we discuss sustainable orientations towards equitable ways of working by adopting a theory that embraces the ontological turn. What we mean by this is that we want to use theory to think with (Jackson and Mazzei 2011) which concentrates on the “nature of being and the basic categories of existence” (St. Pierre, Jackson, and Mazzei 2016, 99) as an ethical project. This contrasts with what assessment tends to emphasise; a constructivist approach to evidencing understanding and knowing against preconceived learning outcomes (Sadler and Reimann 2017). Our reason for taking this conceptual pathway will become clearer as this chapter unfolds; though to briefly introduce it here, a push for evidence-informed practices in education tends to obfuscate context and circumstance, ignoring complex structural and social impacts on student achievement. As Spina observes, “arguments in favour of standardised testing and evidence-informed decision making are frequently framed around the need for evidence as a means of increasing achievement and equity” (Spina 2018, 335). However, as she and others (e.g., McArthur 2016) have forcefully argued, approaches to equity in education that start with evidence-based “best practices”, and that espouse equity in so doing, tend to be framed by a determination to set a level playing field, whereby difference among student groups is minimised. Consequently, social justice in education through these practices remains elusive.

In this chapter, then, we build a case for centring ontology in assessment for inclusion and social justice by paying attention to the implications of diversity in educational design. The discussion takes place in two interrelated movements. In the first, we explore ways inclusive education has been differentially framed in the tertiary sector across 40 years, and correspondingly, how educational design

can present temporal barriers to diverse students. Accounting for institutional assessment decisions to be highly contingent (Dawson et al. 2013) and the experiences of students in higher education to be highly varied in terms of temporal engagement (Bennett and Burke 2017; Whitburn and Thomas 2021). In the second movement, we explore the ontological turn. Here we advance a framework for orientating towards ontology to reframe assessment for social justice and inclusion in higher education (McArthur 2016). We draw on an evidence-making intervention (EMI) framework adapted from Rhodes and Lancaster (2019) to advance an approach to assessment design and implementation from an ontological position, discussing how this can be more equitable for students in ways that difference is treated differently.

Inclusive times

We live in a fascinating period of educational and social history, in which matters of equity underpin policies and practices in higher education. Indeed, widening participation in higher education has been a prominent policy strategy in Australia since the late 1980s for students whose profile and/or living conditions are not reflective of the mainstream (Bennett and Burke 2017). This has not been straightforward, with divergent priorities taken over this period. For instance, whereas once heightening participation for student diversity in higher education was initially taken to mean ensuring that institutions are more representative of their populations, at present this concept has been expanded: broader inclusion in higher education is prioritised for its contribution to a more functional economy (Adam 2003). Rights-based arguments have also been prevalent internationally, although these centre on a liberal humanist universal norm to which to aspire, and in so doing, they have tended to favour inclusion for discrete categories of identity, such as people with disabilities, cultural diversities, and sexualities (Whitburn and Thomas 2021).

Indeed, whichever mast we nail our colours to, the underlying premise behind contemporary inclusive education discourse across the sectors is that all individuals can take part on the basis that they are equal stakeholders in the marketplaces which dominate our lives (Simons and Masschelein 2015). Though as scholars of inclusive education have pointed out (Dolmage 2017; Whitburn and Thomas 2021), interventions targeting specific student identities do little to address entrenched barriers to inclusion in education. Here we want to take the notions of equity and social justice further, to consider how they shape teaching practices in higher education, and more specifically how they influence what Dawson et al. (2013) refer to as assessment decisions. That is, how conditions in the higher education sector lead to making particular decisions about the role and purpose of assessment in educational design. Indeed, these concerns pertain both to the “what” and “how” of assessment – both in the ways assessments are designed and implemented, and “the role of assessment in nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society as a whole”

(McArthur 2016, 968), which together form the root of the present discussion across both movements of the chapter.

Supplying fair opportunities to local and global communities through inclusive teaching and learning features highly on university strategic mission statements internationally. However, rigid practice standards, academic integrity, and the development of individual students' core skills to increase employability are often given centre stage, leading McArthur (2016) to consider that institutional concerns for procedural fairness overtake aspirations for increasing and responding to student diversity. Regulatory compliance is at the fore when compelling students to disclose disabilities to institutions, as a way to ensure that they can then expect reasonable adjustments to be made to their programs of learning, rather than to consider the inclusiveness and accessibility of courses writ large (Bunbury 2020). We suggest that educators would do well to consider what is reasonable, and inclusive, about adjustments, and further, how, and why assessment decisions are made that foster learning conditions through which adjustments are necessitated for designated student groups. In noting that extensions to time are a core means by which universities adjust programs of assessment for particular students (Dolmage 2017), rather than engage with them to demonstrate learning development (McArthur 2016), we acknowledge that assessment in higher education is inescapably temporal.

Consider how time mediates learning design in higher education. Courses of higher education are designed according to pre-conceived temporal milestones, cast against national benchmarks of duration, be they 3-year undergraduate courses or 2-year Masters programs. Years are typically divided into semesters, splitting the year into teaching periods framed within pockets of time. Each bi- or trifurcated measure is replete with regularly established pauses that students must utilise to catch up should they fall foul of the predetermined pace of learning progression; or perhaps if they can, to push forward in time, gaining the elusive edge over their fellow students in a race against the clock to demonstrate fledgling competency. Summative tasks in such programs are simultaneously mediated by time, for "educational attainment targets and assessment apply the invariable norm as measure" (Adam 2003, 63). Students are expected to turn in assessment tasks on specific dates corresponding with their contractual agreements as stipulated in course outlines (McArthur 2016), or else produce knowledge on cue under timed examination conditions (Gilovich, Kerr, and Medvec 1993). Adjustments to such temporal expectations can be made, but only to those who have verifiable reasons to make such interruptions, and only if those adaptations are considered reasonable (Bunbury 2020).

For committed students and engaged educators alike, these conditions to study and receive judgement on submitted evidence of learning (Dawson et al. 2013) may seem entirely feasible, and unassailable. Yet, these approaches to assessment favour a normative, top-down approach to working with difference, in which disruptions to the temporal order of teaching and learning are sanctioned on the basis that they are documented as reasonable adjustments. Put differently,

students' propensities for learning are associated with assumptions of being able to comply with timed deadlines. Time pressures are moreover a principal reason that underrepresented students exclude themselves from higher education (Bennett and Burke 2017), giving little heed to the ways that normative frameworks of hegemonic time affect student engagement. There are two points of significance worthy of consideration, related to matters of assessment procedures in higher education. Firstly, as they are easier and quicker to control than the ways students engage with relevant and professional knowledge, procedural concerns are given primacy in assessment over ontological ones (Bennett and Burke 2017; McArthur 2016). As McArthur (2016) notes, a "focus on procedure in assessment thus leads students away from the most important aspect of what they should be doing – critical engagement with complex knowledge" (972). Secondly, these ways of working with assessment and the design of education programs more broadly are predicated on linear, neoliberal-driven notions of learning progression (Lingard and Thompson 2017), which emphasise individualised skill development in support of economies. Theorists have surmised that we live in a period of sped up and individualised psychology, and that higher education has consequently never been as hyper-accelerated as in the present (Vostal 2014), wherein temporal compressions, such as shortened teaching periods containing tight assessment deadlines have become de rigueur. As we have foreshadowed, while many can thrive in fast-paced and self-driven environments of learning, left behind are those students who are unable to conform to linear, normative progression, and institutions of higher education risk marginalising these students further (Bennett and Burke 2017; Whitburn and Thomas 2021). In the next movement of this chapter, we turn to ontology, and consider its productive possibilities for assessment, and making evidence of learning.

Turning to ontology

To recap, what we have argued for is to recognise how higher education institutions invoke assessment in their course designs to privilege particular ways of being and engaging with knowledge; ways that evoke universalist ideals that everybody can be equally included in a classroom and that balancing fairness in assessment by way of procedural means to attempt achieving a level playing field stifles critical engagement with knowledge for students. This approach neglects to account for diversity, and how time – "the way it is lived, experienced and (re)constructed through our location, positionality and experience – is gendered, classed and racialised and tied to unequal power relations and socio-cultural differences" (Bennett and Burke 2017, 2). To that end, the extent to which assessment can be meaningfully understood as a hallmark of inclusive practice is contingent, in our view, on how it can go beyond epistemological limitations – ways of knowing or not knowing – to incorporate ontological awareness: the ways that knowledge affects co-existence.

As we briefly presaged at the start, the ontological turn in social science inquiry is concerned with the nature of being (St. Pierre, Jackson, and Mazzei 2016).

It primarily shifts focus away from knowledge as fixed, infallible, and separate to bodies, and thereby to be learned, held, and applied incontrovertibly, to an alternative point of departure that instead emphasises matter and meaning-making. We draw here from the new materialism (St. Pierre, Jackson, and Mazzei 2016), which is an orientation to social science inquiry that emphasises ontology to challenge categorical assumptions, including that which is material such as objects, texts, and buildings and that which is non-material such as mood, time, and intention. To consider inclusion through assessment in higher education gives us scope to draw students' attention towards the interconnections between things that affect their experiences while engaging in the processes of meaning-making about and for their chosen course of study. It supplies conditions for contexts of learning in which students are made aware that educational programs and assessment procedures are constructed (McArthur 2016), and that the knowledge that is produced through learning is co-created, contingent on other variables, temporary and forever changeable.

The co-creation of knowledge is of particular significance to an ontological orientation to assessment in higher education. Similarly compelled to engage ontology in approaches to assessment, Bourke (2017) observes that unnatural divisions take shape through assessment practices in higher education: ones that prevent teachers from forming legitimate partnerships with students, and that also functions to detach students from their learning. As she writes, "students take less responsibility for their own assessment because they have learned to rely on assessments that tell them that they had learned, and by how much" (Bourke 2017, 829), or perhaps, how little. Bourke (2017) advocates instead for self-assessment approaches, which, in co-production with teachers and peers, allow students to identify questions for investigation, and grow professionally through their inquiries. Significant to ensuring this approach led to strong outcomes for students, teaching staff were themselves made to justify the decisions they made about the types of assessment tasks set, and their purpose in supporting professional development. Assessment in use, then, is always changeable, being contingent on the profile of learners and teachers in context, and they have their utility in showing student learning aligned to these contexts.

Designing assessment: An evidence-making intervention framework

Institutions of higher education increasingly rely on authentic forms of assessment to judge student learning, identified as such by the implied connection of tasks to real-world applications. While evidence for their fitness to purpose remains illusory (Hathcoat et al. 2016), the benefits of authentic assessment to shoring up academic integrity are in doubt, not least because authenticity can differ starkly for different stakeholders (Ellis et al. 2019). A corresponding issue is that despite there being little understanding about how teachers in higher education purposefully engage in assessment design and implementation

practices, social constructivist conceptualisations dominate the field (Sadler and Reimann 2017). On the surface, engaging students in the active development of their knowledge in conjunction with others, as per social constructivist theories of learning espoused by Bruner and Vygotsky, seems appropriate for ensuring education is an initiative-taking pursuit. Yet, we would caution that social constructivism trades in psychological individualism, assuming pre-existing agency, rationality, and developmental normativity, and its continued dominance in the field of education is antithetical to an inclusive design (Whitburn and Corcoran 2019). To expand on these and the above points, we draw on an EMI framework as a way of attending to questions of ontological relevance in assessment design and implementation.

Originally developed and applied in the health field and implementation sciences, Rhodes and Lancaster (2019) outline an ontology-driven framework, which emphasises the “processes and practices through which ‘evidence’, ‘intervention’ and ‘context’ come to be” (1); foregrounding matters that, to us, make inclusive assessment possible for the ways that the approach orientates to difference. A distinction is made between evidence-based interventions (EBIs) and EMIs, primarily in laying the groundwork for questioning what evidence is, what it does, and how it contributes to sense-making. EBIs developed in education as a crossover from evidence-based medicine, creating notions of best practice that are centred on evidence to inform ongoing improvement to aspects of learning including course design, teaching practices, and assessment. While EBIs are sensitive to contextual specificity in populations and complex adaptive systems, they draw very closely on epistemological (randomised controlled trials, meta-analyses) evidence, and it is Rhodes and Lancaster’s contention that EBIs do not account sufficiently for material practices in the constitution of evidence as fluid, emergent practice. EMIs, on the other hand, start with practice; they concentrate on “what interventions *become* through their implementations; how they are worked-with into *different things* with *multiple effects*; and crucially, how they are *made-to-matter* locally” (Rhodes and Lancaster 2019, 2). An EMI framework has been used across broad contexts, for example, to interrogate how evidence informs programs of school-wide behaviour (Corcoran and Thomas 2021), as well as media accounts of temporal implications in public sentiment about COVID-19 vaccinations (Harrison, Lancaster, and Rhodes 2021). Based on the ways this work centres ontological concerns at the core of their subject matter, we are similarly drawn to consider its contribution to assessment decisions in higher education, for supplying a sustainable approach to centring ontological concerns in the design and implementation of assessment.

Before offering an example of how to apply an EMI framework to the design of assessment for inclusion, we situate it alongside policies and principles of learning design in higher education. Evidence is a core concern of the EMI framework, for how it is associated with assessment and learning design. Yet, assessment is a form of learning intervention – a process by which students demonstrate understanding (Dawson et al. 2013). While evidence about appropriate approaches to the design

and implementation of assessment is unsurprisingly varied (Sadler and Reimann 2017), rigorous institutional criteria articulate assessment as the form by which students develop cumulative evidence of their learning. Focusing squarely on outcomes, the evidence here quantifies levels of achievement against standardised learning progression expectations. Similarly, evidence is used to inform the ongoing development of the course and assessment design. We wish to emphatically state that it is not itself a problem that evidence is held in such high regard for its capacity to demonstrate knowledge attainment and improvement. However, and aligned with the EMI framework, “[b]eing evidence-based is largely a function of *method*, a question of *epistemology*, of how we judge an appropriate, and optimum, way of knowing an intervention and its effects” (Rhodes and Lancaster 2019, 2). We contend this ought to be accounted for more explicitly when making assessment decisions so that institutions of higher education can provide more inclusive ways of engaging evidence of a students’ learning.

In directing the application of their EMI framework to public health research, Rhodes and Lancaster (2019) offer a series of tenets for researchers and practitioners concerned with pursuing different approaches to explicating how evidence is made, and how it is used, and how it is made to matter. Drawing on the principles of new materialism and adapting these EMI-oriented tenets for application to assessment decisions, design and implementation in higher education, our approach proposes:

- Material-discursive practices inform learning outcomes and assessment, and a multiplicity of practices generates multiple realities.
- Multiple human and non-human agents create assessment events.
- Evidencing learning should develop diverse ways of intervening in matters of concern.

Let us now discuss each of these tenets in turn, for how they set the groundwork for an ontological orientation to assessment, drawing on an example applicable to each to invite others to pursue a similar orientation in their assessment decisions.

Material-discursive practices inform learning outcomes and assessment, and a multiplicity of practices generates multiple realities

The intention is to problematise rigid binaries, which were and continue to be recklessly dispensed to situate divisions between things such as learner/teacher, ability/disability, adjusted and non-adjusted programs of study. Instead, in recognition that such categories are contingent on context and emergent through practice, an inclusive curriculum and associated programs of assessments can obviate the necessity for reasonable adjustments when multiplicity is given consideration (Bunbury 2020). Emphasis on the processual nature of learning, and an ontological orientation favours assessment tasks that highlight the co-existence of students’ knowledge-creating processes in heterogenous connections with one another. Learning

outcomes are thereby formed to not assume static indicators of knowledge or skill acquisition, but on the realities (evidence) created through relational interconnection. In an example of such an approach to learning design in inclusive education for preservice teachers (Whitburn and Corcoran 2019), students are set summative assessment tasks in which they are asked to articulate their conceptualisations of heterogeneous learning environments, while decentring focus away from diagnostic categories in favour of inclusive pedagogical approaches and accessibility considerations. In so doing, they are assigned assessment partners and asked to reflect on their interactions with one another in the development of their knowledge. What is assessed, then, is how students come to recognise the ways that an ontological orientation affects their understanding about diversity, and how they will use this approach to knowledge making in their practices as school-based educators.

Multiple human and non-human agents create assessment events

All matter is agentic, and inclusion in education is temporal, emergent, and multiple, rather than representing a fixed or aspirational state (Whitburn and Thomas 2021). Emphasis is given to affect: bodies and things mutually affect and can be affected, through constitutive actions or events. This has implications for assessment design and implementation, requiring a focus on the specific interactions that occur within such events. EMIs foreground the constitutive forces of material (e.g., technology) and non-material (e.g., study motivation), human (students, teachers) and non-human (institutional assessment policy) agents at work, whose interactions are fluid, transversal and temporary. Returning to the example cited above (Whitburn and Corcoran 2019), students have their attention drawn to the human and non-human interactions they experience in undertaking paired work and are assessed on their capacity to apply analysis to the implications of these on the knowledge they learned. These include how they named their strengths and those of their assigned partner, how they centred equity in working together, and as well how digital tools and knowledge traditions influenced their assessment responses. The focus is on the continuous making and remaking of students' ways of being within relationships. Importantly, reasonable adjustments are not considered a bolt-on or extra procedural considerations but are anticipated and accounted for in assessment design, in recognition that all students will have divergent strengths, accessibility capabilities and temporal capacities to engage in their studies, and that these will shape their learning achievements.

Evidencing learning should develop diverse ways of intervening in matters of concern

To abstract knowledge from its ontological and political context is to make an intervention that promotes outcomes limited to pre-set criteria. Shifting from matters of fact to matters of concern (Latour 2004) is to emphasise context, and

focuses on evidencing and intervening as ontological and political undertakings (Corcoran and Thomas 2021). Returning once more to our example of assessment design (Whitburn and Corcoran 2019), students are supplied with assessment tasks that show their learning by explaining how matters of concern affect them, and how they can in turn affect inclusive possibilities for learners. One political matter of particular concern to education jurisdictions internationally has been individualised planning for students with disabilities – a process that is a key policy driver for inclusive education in our context in Victoria (Department of Education and Training 2021). The paired assessment task focuses on students' contexts of teaching and the implications of individualised planning on their roles, centring on individualisation as a key concern for its ability to affect inclusion or exclusion. Students are invited to articulate how they are affected by this and related policies, and how inclusive curriculum design and pedagogy become their matters of concern.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to centre ontological awareness in assessment decisions as the means to develop inclusiveness. Drawing on evidence using an EMI framework it engages with relational and temporal concepts to orientate towards assessment for inclusion, providing examples of how these principles have been used to develop assessment tasks in the scholarship of inclusive education. By designing assessment activities that attentively engage students in assessing their ongoing development, that encourage them to identify and work within the parameters of their strengths and those of their peers, and applying these skills to the context of the profession in which they are studying, educators can move focus away from quantifying knowledge and shifting conceptual focus towards assessment for inclusion. We optimistically predict wider acceptance of ontological orientations in the field, for escaping the clutches of constructivism and giving educators the necessary theoretical resources to think with that promote affirmative ways of engaging difference.

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