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Boud, David ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6883-2722>, Dawson, Phillip, Bearman, Margaret, Bennett, Sue, Joughin, Gordon and Molloy, Elizabeth (2018) Reframing assessment research: through a practice perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43 (7). pp. 1107-1118. ISSN 0307-5079

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Reframing assessment research: through a practice perspective

David Boud, Phillip Dawson, Margaret Bearman, Sue Bennett, Gordon Joughin and Elizabeth Molloy

Abstract

Assessment as a field of investigation has been influenced by a limited number of perspectives. These have focused assessment research in particular ways that have emphasised measurement, or student learning or institutional policies. The aim of this paper is to view the phenomenon of assessment from a practice perspective drawing upon ideas from practice theory. Such a view places assessment practices as central. This perspective is illustrated using data from an empirical study of assessment decision-making and uses as an exemplar the identified practice of ‘bringing a new assessment task into being’. It is suggested that a practice perspective can position assessment as integral to curriculum practices and end separations of assessment from teaching and learning. It enables research on assessment to de-centre measurement and take account of the wider range of people, phenomena and things that constitute it.

Keywords: student assessment, assessment research, practice theory, exemplar, assessment decision-making

Introduction

Despite important advances in assessment theory and practice over the past three decades, it is apparent that change does not come easily. While there are many accounts of desirable assessment activities in higher education, the features of assessment they present or advocate are taken up slowly, if at all, and they can face considerable resistance on the part of teaching staff (Deneen and Boud, 2014). Various explanations can be put forward for why this might be the case, including disciplinary cultures and traditions, lack of understanding of good assessment, push back to impositions by authority, and simple inertia. Over the past decade or so, particular impetus for assessment change has been provided by widespread critical responses to assessment by students in opinion surveys including the Course Experience Questionnaire and the National Student Survey (Carroll, 2014; HEFCE, 2014). These have led to revisions of institutional assessment policies and associated initiatives, and to improved ratings. However, assessment and feedback remains the lowest rated of all the features of student experience surveyed. Why then does assessment remain so little influenced?

We have been engaged in a national project about decision-making in the design of assessment and have undertaken research to understand how university teachers make decisions about assessment; our findings have been used to develop a tool to aid them in this design process (Dawson et al 2014, Bearman et al, in press). This work uncovered rich sets of examples of assessment and identified factors that support and inhibit its implementation. While it shows that a variety of developments are clearly occurring across the disciplines, it demonstrates the struggle that teachers experience in envisioning alternatives and changing what they do. The data suggest that decision-making about assessment is far from a simple process of rational choice between alternatives. In undertaking this work we have been continually confronted with the problem of why assessment does not reflect what literature might suggest be more desirable. Why is there so much apparent lag in responding to substantive criticism of assessment? It does not appear to be a simple matter of an inability to find out what can be done or simply a lack of resources. For us it points to limitations in the ways in which research on assessment is conceived and framed and the inadequacies of conventional assessment discourses to provide a focus for effective change.

This paper seeks to provide a way of understanding issues of assessment through conceptualising assessment using a socio-material and in particular a practice theory perspective (Hager, Lee and Reich, 2012a). We suggest that assessment can be fruitfully framed as a set of complex curriculum practices that engage and influence students and staff as well as producing information about students' work that can be recorded and utilised. This perspective marks a shift from a focus on the way assessment should be to a focus on the ways it is; a move from focusing on assessment judgements towards also considering the labours and contexts of staff and students. We suggest that by such reframing we can understand both how particular assessment activities have a tendency to strongly persist, and how to develop useful interventions that change the focus of staff, support better assessment design and subsequently positively affect the experiences of students of being assessed. Such a reframing will lead, we suggest, to more generative questions to ask in assessment contexts. This understanding of assessment as 'practice' will therefore serve two related purposes: it is an essential precursor to supporting the adoption of the desirable features of assessment referred to above while providing researchers with a new perspective on exploring assessment as a socially situated phenomenon.

The paper proceeds from a discussion of the limitations of conventional assessment discourse to the need for new perspectives on assessment research. Following a brief discussion of some alternatives, it focuses on practice theory and elucidates essential features of it. It then uses data from an Australian study of academics' decision-making about assessment to identify features of academic assessment practices, and focuses in detail on one common and pervasive activity to illustrate a possible use of practice theory in assessment.

A view of assessment

Thinking about assessment as practice involves finding a pathway through different traditions and assumptions, and a willingness to question what is taken-for-granted in common ways of discussing assessment. This is illustrated by *one* of the dominant assessment traditions, namely the measurement tradition characterised by a focus on tests and examinations. The assumption underpinning this tradition is that various kinds of assessment activities can be designed to measure particular learning

outcomes or characteristics of students and that the purpose of research is to improve their efficacy in so doing. This tradition has had a profound influence on how we see assessment and what is valued in assessment work. Assessment in this view involves setting assessment tasks, testing and grading as an act of producing accurate objective data to inform decisions about learners and their learning (e.g. Masters, 2013). Even when students are involved in self and peer assessment, research is still framed in this same view (eg. Panadero, Brown and Strijbos, in press)

The measurement tradition served many ends well—it desirably focused on making decisions based not on privilege, patronage or social acceptability but on desirably unbiased judgements of individual performance (Broadfoot, 1996). However, in doing so it prioritised certain kinds of purposes, effects and outcomes that represent only part of what we now see as the wider enterprise of assessment. Despite the addition of feedback as an adjunct to marking, it emphasised the assessment *of* learning rather than assessment *for* learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). It commonly did not consider the consequences of assessment for aspects of the educational process beyond the act of assessment itself—eg. the student did well on the test but avoided the subject thereafter. Most significantly for our purposes here, it took the individual student as the unit of analysis, and regarded all knowledge of others—student peers and their interactions, for example— as irrelevant.

What are the limitations of such a framing?

While the production of high quality data about student performance may be the *sine qua non* of assessment, an exclusive focus on this bounds the notion of assessment and what is regarded as central to assessment thinking. The first limitation of these views of assessment is that assessment activities (tests, tasks, etc.) are discussed as if they have an independent existence and can be moved from place to place, time to time and from one group of students to another. The focus is typically on the assessment task, the attributes of the task and how student responses to the task will be judged, not on how the task is positioned within a program or with respect to a given student or how it influences their learning.

The second limitation is that assessment is viewed as a unilateral act of teachers or course designers to which students are subjected: assessment is a given for students and their role is to undertake it. This is reinforced by requirements for it to be pre-specified in course outlines printed ahead of student enrolment. Earlier moves—signalled by Heron’s (1981) ‘Assessment revisited’—that recognise the agency and volition of students and the need for them to be active parties in the design process are still far from commonplace. Thirdly, in relation to the interest in staff decision-making about assessment that stimulated our concern, the role of the teacher and the teaching and learning program is marginalised. Assessment is often taken as a separate part of the course design process and the distorting influences of assessment activities on study patterns and the effects of the positioning of tasks in a semester underplayed.

We take the view here that student assessment as a descriptor aggregates a multiplicity of purposes (formative, summative, sustainable) (Boud and Soler, in press). It consists not just of particular assessment events, but includes the ecology of which they are part. Its worth is to be judged not only in terms of suitable portrayal of achievements, but in terms of the effects that this has on the players involved—

students, teachers, peers, consumers (in the case of workplace learning). Moreover, to understand assessment more fully we need to move from the normative position of what it should do (generate marks and grades), to descriptive positions of what it actually does and how it does it. In short, alternative perspectives are called for.

Alternative perspectives: assessment as cultural practice

There have been alternative ways of viewing assessment. The main set have derived from socio-cultural perspectives that include the precursors to the practice theories drawn on here. James and Diment (2003) focus on seeing assessment as a cultural practice using the ideas of Bourdieu. Also using Bourdieu, Shay (2004) viewed assessments as socially-situated interpretive acts. From a different tradition of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) Pryor and Crossouard (2008) considered the power relations embedded within formative assessment. And with a more pragmatic intent, Rust, O'Donovan and Price (2005) argued for a social constructivist assessment process model as a guide to good practice in assessment. This places assessment as part of a social activity in which students acquire understanding of assessment processes, criteria and standards through active engagement and participation. These accounts have gained little traction amid the dominant everyday discourse of testing and marks, leading us to consider whether they might be extended to create more productive perspectives on assessment.

A practice perspective

Our explorations of the data generated in our wider study have led us to the group of social-material theorisations gathered under the heading of practice theory (for example, as discussed in Hager, Lee and Reich, 2012a). What these offer for the field of assessment is acknowledgement of the everyday activities of assessment as conducted, without framing them normatively in terms of what assessment *should* do. It provides an emphasis on assessment-as-practiced and how it operates, thereby attending to the many issues rendered invisible when it is configured as marking students. It identifies practice and all involved in that as the focus of analysis, not measurement or individual students or the design characteristics of particular assessment tasks. It focuses on the various facets of the human and material activities that constitute assessment: their location in particular places and times, the relationships between the players and the various kinds of information provisions and documentation that are created and utilised, what is produced and how that comes about. It also helps us to understand what holds existing assessment practices in place and why assessment is so difficult to change. Finally, it can show that there are multiple points of entry in considering changing practice (eg, forms and protocols, the context of assessment tasks, occasions of assessment). Assessment as seen as a socio-material enterprise can embrace the concerns of other perspectives but locate them within the wider teaching and learning activities of educational work and the multiple players in that.

What then are the features of a practice? While there are many contemporary practice theorists to draw on (eg. Schatzki, Kemmis, Gherardi), they all tend to share a set of overlapping views of what constitutes a practice and how practices might be characterised. They see practice as the 'primary building block of the social' (Hager, Lee and Reich, 2012b) or at its most basic 'what people do, in a particular place or time' (Kemmis, 2005: 23). Practices are therefore always contextualised in sites of

practice and are connected to what goes on in those locations at any given time. Hager, Lee and Reich (2012b: 3) write of practice as consisting of 'relations among the everyday interactions, routines and material arrangements in particular environments and forms of knowing generated from these'. They see practice, following Schatzki (1997), as purposeful with people invested in it or attached to it, and it generating meanings of its own' (p. 3). Practice is embodied and relational in that it consists of the sayings and doings (Schatzki, 1997) of physical persons in interplay with each other. These practices are emergent; they change and vary over time. They often are pre-figured in the sense that any new example of a practice is recognisable to those who have participated in prior practices and have features that enable or constrain what is possible within the practice, what Kemmis (2009) terms 'practice architectures'.

In terms of practice theories then, assessment practices have purposes, are located at particular places and times, with various people (teachers, students, peers, others), with various material artefacts used and with a discourse of sayings and doings associated with it. Any given assessment task, for example, may be original or emergent, but the notion of an assessment task and what it seeks to do is familiar to all those who work with them and such tasks have practice architectures which frame what is regarded as possible within them. To be identified as a practice a shared set of assumptions and ways of saying and doing among practitioners are needed about what necessarily needs to be involved.

Case study: unit assessment design

These features of practice have allowed us to identify, through our interviews, a number of common characteristics of assessment in higher education:

- It is contextualised with a course unit and its learning outcomes and activities.
- It has a physical location, eg. academics' offices, meeting rooms, placement settings, online, etc.
- It is embodied in teachers some of whom double as assessors
- There are particular sayings in assessment discourse that privilege certain things: learning outcomes, marks and grades, rubrics, individual work, fairness, etc.
- There are ranges of material artefacts: written requirements, assessment policies and procedures.
- It is prefigured through assessment conventions common to a discipline or in particular forms of assessment activity (eg. use of particular kinds of assessment methods, weighting of examinations) and repetition of these over time and over the assessment career of a student.
- While there is scope for the development of new ideas or activities in assessment, assessment language tends to eschew emergence in favour of control through specifications in unit outlines and this can limit the scope for change in the practices.

Data supporting these features were drawn from that collected in a larger project into university teachers' assessment design work (Bearman et al, in press). Thirty-three academics, selected to ensure diversity across discipline and career stage, took part in 31 interviews in total (two interviews were with teaching teams). These included seven from non-professional arts subjects (history, politics, languages and sociology); nine from professional arts subjects (education and journalism); seven from non-

professional science subjects (biology, physics and chemistry); and eight from professional science subjects (health sciences and engineering). Participants were drawn from four Australian universities, using institutional learning and teaching networks (e.g. recommendation from an Associate Dean) and faculty assessment documentation. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol and were around one hour in duration. Interviewees were asked to bring artefacts from the assessment activities they used. Questioning focused on interviewees' assessment design processes for a specific course/unit that had undergone change in the last 12 months. Interviews were transcribed and the resulting dataset exceeded 1,000 pages. A subset of the coding framework that focused on educator activities was examined to identify common practices with sufficient data for further analysis. The practices represented by the most in-depth data were then selected for further analysis against the six practice features discussed earlier. The most evident practices, each of which exhibited the features of practices identified earlier, were ones we labelled:

- Bringing a new assessment task into being
- Designing assessment for a new unit
- Inheriting a unit
- Connecting assessment between units
- Enacting the assessment specified in new unit paperwork
- Informal peer review of assessment designs
- Designing examinations

We will focus on the first of these, 'Bringing a new assessment task into being', for the purposes of illustrating the practice approach here. This practice featured in all interviews and is of course, one of the more pervasive practices in assessment. We present this in the following section by firstly describing the practice and its activities then analysing it in terms of the general features of practices discussed earlier.

Exemplifying the practice approach: 'Bringing a new task into being'

'Bringing a new task into being' is the practice of going from an idea for a new assessment task to having that task embedded in a unit of study. Here a 'task' is an individual piece of assessment that forms part of the suite of assessment within a unit; an example of a task is a new essay assignment on a particular topic. This practice begins with some sort of spark, impetus or reason for change.

Activities

The practice our interviewees described can be conceived of as a group of activities. The first is usually the articulation and refinement of the initial idea or impetus for the task. The second is getting approval to implement the task and buy-in from anyone that might influence the adoption of it (eg. academic managers). In the third various materials are produced. In the fourth logistical matters are attended to. It is important to note that these activities are not linear; there was much backtracking and iteration. Also, each activity usually involved collaboration and consultation, although there were unusual circumstances where this was not the case.

Articulating and refining the idea

'Bringing a new task into being' began with articulating what the new task was in some sort of informal manner, such as a hallway conversation or an email. This was

followed by iterative refinement of the idea. The usual (but not universal) experience of this practice involved exploratory consultation or foreshadowing with colleagues.

Task ideas were then further developed, usually through further rounds of tentative discussions and thinking. Then, when the ideas were sufficiently developed (or the semester dates demanded) our interviewees moved on to the next activity: getting approval and buy-in.

Getting approval and buy-in

To implement a new task our practitioners required a variety of approvals, usually through a mixture of formal and informal processes. If the new task could not be accommodated through already-approved assessment documentation, our practitioners initiated formal change processes, which involved committees and documents.

In addition to navigating formal processes (or navigating around them), our interviewees usually described getting buy-in from a variety of other people involved in assessment. These varied according to a number of factors (e.g. discipline and cohort size) but usually involved other teachers, markers, and support staff. This process usually involved (sometimes extended) conversations, negotiation, and adjustments.

Producing materials

After sufficient approval for the new task (or when semester timelines mandated) our interviewees moved on to producing the materials of the task. These varied with the type of task, but usually included some of the following: expressions of the task for students; marking criteria; rubrics; exemplars; question sets; templates; or pages on the learning management system.

Managing logistics

Production was usually followed by some logistical work, which also occupied considerable time. The nature of this work varied substantially, but usually involved planning and timetabling; liaison to arrange resources and people; and work with the learning management system.

Practice features

Having described the practice of 'bringing a new task into being' by noting the activities associated with it, we can now examine this practice in terms of the several features of practice common to practice theories discussed earlier with reference to the literature. Each of these features is considered with reference to what interviewees told us about how they create new tasks.

Interconnectedness

Bringing a new task into being was connected with other activities: curriculum mapping and course planning are examples at a higher level, and at a lower level, practices of marking and feedback were commonly mentioned. Interconnectedness led to the instigation of this practice, for example when curriculum redesign practices identified the need for a new task. Interconnectedness also influenced the practice, such as when tasks were shaped by experiences our academics had with marking or feedback practices, for example changing the design of a task in response to student performance:

On the whole, they've done badly with the test.... So, instead of trying to cram, if you like, material for the entire unit, we'll break it down into two which should make it easy for them if they do the work. And that direct response to them not having performed well. [IV14, history]

Embodiment

New tasks are brought into being through the labours of academics. It was common for our interviewees to discuss their own agency, their ownership over particular tasks, or their identity, as part of this practice. Most interviewees held formal roles that required them to personally take responsibility for units or components of them. They were also affectively involved in this practice; they variously described feeling frustrated, accomplished, invested and stressed in the process of implementing their new tasks:

I was probably a bit stressed and anxious about [assessing students in this unit] 'cause I hadn't done it before. And probably it wasn't after I had sort of went through one iteration of the way it was that I found out things that didn't fit or didn't make sense to me. [IV18, occupational therapy]

Sayings and doings

A diverse collection of sayings and doings make up this practice. Some of these are particular to learning and teaching, for example there is a language of learning outcomes and constructive alignment that led to our interviewees undertaking certain sorts of work. Some other sayings and doings were part of academic life; hallway conversations, committee meetings, and filling out paperwork. But there was also a set of sayings and doings particular to assessment, for example, activities around designing marking and feedback approaches, which were accompanied by a shared language of rubrics, criteria, rigour and levels of performance:

we've changed the criteria of the tasks, well, the instructions and the criteria. So, to make it clearer to students what's expected of them, and what levels of performance look like. So, all those involved in writing criteria and referenced rubrics... The first part is a 1000 word investigative report which is again, reflective, but the second part is a collative task... Last year, they did it in pairs and it was peer-assessed. This year, we did it in groups of four and we made the requirement more rigorous. [IV16 – Education]

Relational

This practice was relational, in that it depended on who was worked with and their relationships, with the extent of this depending on context. At a minimum, new tasks require working with any other teachers on the given unit of study. However it was common for our practitioners to work together with a range of others: heads of department, colleagues, committees, technical staff, and students. Interviewees described varying levels of satisfaction with the relational aspects of this practice: some aspects were satisfying and led to improvements to the assessment being implemented; some were overly challenging and inhibited the design they were working on; and other relational aspects (eg. involvement with particular others) were desired but did not happen:

the process has been a bit out of necessity, less consultative than what it needs to be. I mean, we had to get a Journalism course up and running really quickly. And we have and it's good and it basically, I think. ... I'm seeking a meeting with [senior professor] in the wash up of this semester. We need to look at it again [IV4, journalism]

Contextualised

The practice of bringing a new task into being had several contexts. Spatially it was dispersed across many settings, including the usual settings of academic work, such as in offices, corridors, laboratories, meeting rooms and online. In addition to the different physical contexts, the practice always occupied institutional and disciplinary contexts, which brought with them particular assessment norms. There were also contextual features of the course team, and the unit of study the task sat within. The broader context of Australian higher education may also shape this practice and make it different to its counterparts in other contexts. The contextualised nature of this practice influenced which tasks were considered appropriate, for example:

Interviewer: Could you for instance, just not have an exam?

Senior academic: Well, I don't know actually. It depends whether it's important to test whether they have any basic knowledge, I don't know. I feel uncomfortable not having exams. Yeah. I don't know about you, [junior academic]?

Junior academic: I don't think that probably crossed our mind, not having an exam. [IV3, immunology]

This practice was also located in time: it spanned several weeks or months and was not confined to within-semester time. If changes to official paperwork were required then additional lead-time was required, and the practice would commence up to a year before the new task was ready. Semester due dates also bounded the practice in terms of time, as there were clear points when the assessment needed to be ready to be put into course documentation. The practice was more time-intensive at particular points in time, such as when materials needed to be produced.

Material mediation

This practice was materially mediated: course handbook entries, forms, remnants of previous assessment structures, and policy statements were all powerful influences. Although a few interviewees were designing tasks for completely new units, the usual experience of this practice involved designing new tasks within 'inherited' material.

Technology was also a common mediator in this practice. Documents were prepared electronically, shared by email, and placed on a learning management system. In many cases the affordances of the technology shaped the development of the tasks; for example, being able to implement a new type of task on the learning management system. Bringing a new task into being was influenced by material; it was also generative of material that in turn influences this practice and others, for example, rubrics that materially mediate marking practices:

I changed it because, if I'm going to be doing it I want to be able to enjoy it. ... You know for instance, the current assessment rubric for the practical exams, I'm really not that comfortable with it. Essentially, it's what we started with. And this week I'm

actually changing it. But it's because when I hand it out to the students as "This is what you're going to be assessed against"; I'm uncomfortable with it. And if I'm challenged on it, I feel I'm being evasive because my heart isn't behind what it says. [IV6, physiotherapy]

Prefiguration

Much of this practice was prefigured prior to interviewees becoming involved. Although formal procedures for assessment approval varied across contexts, they were always prefigured. Inherited material mediations provided structures that new tasks must fit within (timetables and deadlines for other activities). The language of assessment and course design was largely prefigured, for example: task, weighting, due date, essay, and exam, all held prefigured meanings in a particular context. Timelines around semesters and assessment committee dates were set prior to this practice being initiated. So although this practice was reinvented through new tasks and processes each time it was undertaken, it built on a layering of practice architectures, sometimes spanning decades:

[I took the unit over] about 10 years ago. Well, I was working with [previous coordinator] for a few years in that term... I was always very conscious of the fact that he and the co-coordinator had spent a fair bit of time rebuilding those units in the early '90s, rebuilding the pracs that were run, perhaps introducing the essay for the first time. [IV22, biology]

Emergence

This practice is one of the more regulated aspects of academic work, and rules are inscribed in policy and procedure. However there was substantial emergence in terms of creative reinterpretation of these rules to enable the implementation of new assessment. This usually consisted of finding ways that the new task could be seen as in some way equivalent to assessment already approved.

Our data show emergence of informal processes of peer review being built in to this practice. These took a variety of forms, ranging from ad-hoc conversations with colleagues, to teaching teams self-organising their own assessment review meetings:

We have a curriculum review day. It used to be the end of each year, but since I've taken over Undergraduate Program Coordinator, we now do it at the end of each semester. We've developed a pro forma which is an Excel spreadsheet where we get all the unit coordinators to fill out just the unit description, unit objectives and the assessment. Things that went well, things that didn't go well, and how things may change. And then people get up in front of everybody else and sort of review that in a very structured way, and then that's when you sort of propose potential changes or revisions to the unit, and it's almost like an external peer review. [IV18, occupational therapy]

Variations in practice

Practices are not rigid. In any given setting there are many variations, arising from variations in one or more of the above features that may characterise a practice. These are the variations in a practice. In our example there were a wide range of variations of 'bringing a new task into being' in our data. To give a sense of the diversity, variation existed in terms of the ways that collaboration worked, which ranged from

deep interconnections with colleagues and other parties to tokenistic consultation; division of labour (who did what, was it shared among the teaching team or just the responsibility of the coordinator?); the relationship of the practice with formal quality assurance practices, and the degree to which those practices were inhibiting and/or constructive (eg. did change arise from a systematic review or was it simply part of a cycle of change, was it required to conform to a standard pattern or were initiatives welcomed?); and, disciplinary variations in terms of norms and acceptability of different assessment ideas (eg. was a minimum percentage of exams required?). Variations like these do not constitute new practices, as they are still very recognisable as ‘bringing a new task into being’.

Discussion

What then does the framing of assessment in terms of practice contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of assessment and the ways in which it might be investigated? It portrays assessment as sets of complex relations between people and material things within changing discourses of purpose. Some of these things are familiar and quite mundane, however, it is the way they hang together, their interconnectedness that generates events that students and teachers experience. These draw attention to the multiple acts of construction that lead to what we identify as assessment.

A practice account is driven by what happens in the social and material world. It privileges what occurs rather than what some party believes should occur. It reveals the complexities of actions, the multiplicity of demands, the need for different kinds of representation of assessment work for different purposes, the interaction of practice with policies and institutional requirements and the interactions of multiple parties. It provides, for example, a view of assessment that is not akin to anything found in textbooks about the topic. We see assessment tasks as emerging from discussions with peers (in the next office, or encountered at meetings) and local influences, such as the demands of deadlines and documentation. While there are some assessment practices (eg. generating feedback information) that focus on teachers judging the work of students, in the case chosen here and in many others of the types listed earlier, there is much more to assessment than students completing tasks which are then marked by assessors. In this way a practice view is aligned with sociological turns underway in other education sub-fields, such as educational technology (e.g. Selwyn, 2010).

A practice view locates assessment as a part of a curriculum practice within a broader repertoire of pedagogic practices. It is clear from the example of ‘bringing a new task into being’ that assessment is necessarily positioned as an integral part of the teaching/learning/assessment enterprise and the players involved see themselves as fitting within that. While the practice of assessment as represented by our case study is constructed from the sayings and doings of practitioners and while they may and do draw upon theories and conceptions to give an account of their activities, it is not a view of assessment driven by, for example, the technical demands or even the language of test development. Further analysis of our data showed none of our interviewees talked about designing a new assessment as exclusively a measurement concern. The relationships between assessment activities and the learning outcomes and activities that precede them are central, and as illuminated by practice theory, inextricable. A practice view troubles the notion of systematic design through the many local adjustments and adaptations that are made for reasons beyond those of

judging student performance or fostering learning. Assessment design is framed here by the need to create sets of artefacts that will be accepted and approved prior to their enactment as a subsequent practice—grading students' work and providing helpful information to them—in which students become key players. What is being responded to here are the exigencies of the institution (centrally and locally) rather than what might ultimately be needed by the student.

The practice view thus provides a way of exploring assessment that is complementary to those that are purpose-driven or are based on a conceptualization of assessment as an act of judgement or measurement. Traces of these other views are to be found in the taken-for-granted assumptions made by the interviewees about being located in the wider context of a learning-outcomes oriented environment or as needing to meet the needs of students' anticipated professional practice.

Recent findings about problems with replicability in educational research (Makel & Plucker, 2014) may make the practice perspective proposed in this article attractive to researchers from a measurement perspective. Much measurement research suffers from inadequate description of the assessment approach undertaken, to the point where 'literal replication' by teachers or researchers is impossible. This could be addressed through mixed-methods research, where the practice under investigation is reported in a more holistic manner, alongside quantitative work into its efficacy, reliability or validity, enabling, for example, better appreciation of the effects of assessment events on student behaviour. The additional depth found in research papers using a practice approach may support educators wishing to implement new assessment ideas from what they read.

A practice perspective provides a rich portrayal of assessment. As our case begins to outline, it can help to explain why many prescriptions for good assessment are not translated into common practices and what are possible points of intervention to influence change. Through providing an unrelentingly grounded picture of the everyday world in which assessment sits, it can help to explain the persistence of particular assessment activities in particular disciplines: some aspects of practice are pre-figured in particular disciplinary cultures and are resistant to interventions which do not take into account the stories and justifications and habits (sayings and doings) that are reproduced in particular contexts. While assessment rules and templates may be generated centrally in universities, they are taken up and sometimes subverted within local groups and departments and made their own. Knowledge of these actual assessment practices may inform more effective assessment policy.

This paper points to the possibilities of a practice approach to assessment research which we believe may have traction in fostering new research in the wider domain of assessment. A more thorough treatment of assessment from a practice viewpoint would involve a comprehensive analysis of the different practices utilized, and how they are interrelated and nested within each other. It would also examine how different practices operate at different stages of assessment development and involve different mixes of personnel and generate different kinds of artifact (from course proposals to assessment task instructions to marking rubrics and so on). The methods used could examine actual practices rather than reports about practice from interviews that the present paper has relied on and pay particular attention to the documentation

used and the nature of the interactions between the parties involved throughout. It would pay particular attention to the discourse used and the assumptions made.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to demonstrate the application of a practice theory perspective to the study of assessment. It positions assessment as a socio-material act that is strongly located in particular distributed settings within higher education involving a multiplicity of players. It used the case of bringing a new task into being to show how a practice perspective can illuminate important issues that are less frequently explored in assessment design. A focus on such approaches to assessment research may enable us to examine problems, such as resistance to assessment change that hitherto have not been sufficiently addressed.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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