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Power and vulnerability: the social construction of assessment and the complexities of the lecturer/professional doctorate student relationship

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Background

This paper looks at on the power dynamics, vulnerability/trust and the complexly constructed relationship between student and (potential) supervisor in the particular context of a doctorate that has gained increasing recognition in many areas of the social sciences (although interestingly not at the level of status of 'traditional' doctorates) - the professional doctorate programme, in particular the professional doctorate in Education (EdD). In EdD programmes, students need to progress through two years of taught courses with assessed written assignments before embarking on their doctoral thesis. Lengthy and detailed written feedback is often given to students, in part compensating for the limited time available for face-to-face interaction with students who are likely to work full-time and may live far away from the institution(s) where the Programme is taught.

As writers such as Lea and Street point out, writing is not a 'transparent medium of representation' and the meaning of pieces of writing, including feedback comments, may be interpreted very differently by author and reader (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 35). Whilst tutors might believe that their comments will be clearly understood, students and tutors might actually hold very different conceptions of the meanings of terms and phrases such as 'structure' and 'argument' (Lea & Street, 2000). Moreover-and importantly for this paper-the 'emotion', 'tone' and impact of the comments might well be constructed very differently by different tutors and be conceived of very differently by tutor and student, or by different students receiving the same comments. Ivanic et al (2000) have noted how the interpretation of feedback can often have a direct bearing on a student's own self-esteem and the construction of themselves as a 'good' or 'successful' student. As we go on to discuss, the assessment process may well also be intellectually and emotionally stimulating, challenging or discomfiting for the lecturer herself, sometimes challenging her own perceptions of academic 'self'.

Research Questions

Our paper specifically focuses on the ways in which the complex power relationship between lecturer and student is constructed and (re-)presented through written communication - in particular the marking/feedback of students' written assignments. We would like to explore issues relating to the inevitable subjectivity of the marking process, and the ways in which the complex emotional relationship of (mis)trust/vulnerability that the student constructs for their tutor (and vice versa) impact on the construction of lecturers' feedback.

Methods

The paper brings together two separate but complementary pieces of empirical research conducted by the presenters. One of these is a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with four different lecturers (two men, two women) teaching on an EdD course jointly offered by two different London universities (on which the presenters both teach). In these interviews the participants are encouraged to reflect on the issues raised above in relation to assessment at D level, including (with the consent of the students involved) their reflections on their feedback given on particular assignments. The second piece of research is based on one of the presenter's own self-reflexive textual analysis of a range of feedback texts she has written to first- and second- year EdD students over the five years in which the doctorate has been running.

Frame

The presenters both approach the analysis of the lecturer/student relationship and the practices of assessment from a poststructural perspective. Such a perspective argues that the 'bias' of subjectivity is inevitable in the process of assessing essays, for the quality of a piece of academic writing cannot be objectively

determined but is ultimately constructed by the assessor.. This is not to say that

such assessment is completely arbitrary, but that assessment is inextricably influenced by a number of factors, including

both the author's and the assessor's own 'ways of understanding the world', which is

in turn constructed through discourse, and influenced by social positioning such as class, 'race' and gender. Moreover,

the same factors influence the way in which the assessor constructs and presents

'feedback' to the student in the form of written comments on the essay itself, and how the student interprets this feedback (see Read et al, 2005). In keeping with such a perspective we will be applying

a discourse analysis approach to the analysis of the texts (eg MacLure, 2003), in order to tease out the discourses infusing the construction/reception of feedback texts and the workings of power that infuse them. Finally, our theoretical position and hence our analysis of the data are also influenced by the 'academic literacies' approach (eg Lea and Street, 2000; Ivanic, 2000), which highlights the workings of power in written communication in higher education and advocates both more transparency of, and critique and challenge to, the tacit 'rules of the game' of academic writing and the wider 'cultures' of higher education.

Research findings

It is hoped that the findings will contribute new insights to work in the areas of the lecturer/student relationship, and the social practices of assessment in higher education. . We will also finish by reflecting on the dialogic possibilities of engaging with doctoral level students about the extent to which professionals engage their tacit knowledge and value-positions in the supposedly simple act of marking students' work. What would the implications of such engagement be for the complex power relations that infuse the lecturer/student relationship?

References

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