Assessment and social justice: Invigorating lines of articulation and lines of flight

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Abstract

This article is a collective project. It is a rhizome-article that is an assemblage of five heterogeneous essays that trouble dominant practices of assessment, generally, but also within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors problematise standardisation, measurement, quantification, and other technologies of performativity that dominate contemporary assessment practices in schools and universities. In the essays, the authors invigorate lines of flight from dominant assessment practices and do so in the interest of assessment that is more humane and socially just. They point out that, as with anything else, a rhizome-article also has lines of articulation/connection and invite readers to invigorate these as they read the essays. The authors of this article

draw on the works of several scholars but do so to think with them rather than having their work framed by them.

Introduction

This article is a collective project. As authors, we are inspired by those who have been experimenting with alternative genres of article writing that represent collective projects of performing academic work (for examples, see Peters et al., 2020, Waghid et al., 2020). Our article is an assemblage comprising five short essays on assessment, which align with some of the key topics outlined in the call for contributions to this special issue of *Journal of Education*. However, the assemblage here is not tree-like (arborescent) but rhizomatic. In their influential work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) distinguished between arborescent and rhizomatic thinking. Arborescent thinking refers to conceptions of knowledge as hierarchically articulated branches of a central stem or trunk rooted in firm foundations, whereas rhizomatic thinking refers to chaotically complex networkings of stems interconnecting the upshoots of some grasses (Sellers, 2006). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) identified six principles of a rhizome and, in this article, we shall invoke two: the principle of connection and heterogeneity, and the principle of multiplicity. The principle of connection and heterogeneity means that any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, implying that the rhizome is a network that is in a continual process of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 8) remind us that the rhizome has no points or positions such as those found in a structure, tree, or root—there are only lines. These lines enable proliferation in all directions to form an assemblage. Concerning the principle of multiplicity, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argued that the rhizome is a true multiplicity because, as new lines form and grow, the nature thereof changes itself. In contrast, arborescent thinking produces pseudo multiplicities whereby a single trunk produces branches that are variants of the same. The rhizome has no beginning and end and is always in the middle (*en milieu*).

Thinking with Deleuze and Guattari (1987) helps us in understanding assessment as an assemblage connecting learners, educators, knowledge, material resources, physical spaces, rubrics, concepts, criteria, objectives, and so forth. The assessment assemblage that dominates schooling and higher education is arborescent: integral to curriculum development in the Tylerian mould, with iterations such as outcomes-based education and constructive alignment (le Grange, 2014). Assessment has also become territorialised by a measurement culture, standardisation, and performativity regimes. However, assessment can become deterritorialised (become other than what it is) through invigorating lines of flight from its current dehumanising effects. The rhizome figuration enables us to think about assessment as not having fixity and always in a process of becoming.

The essays in this article assemblage invigorate lines of flight from the dehumanising effects of dominant assessment practices, based on the assumption that there can be no quality

education (system) if attention is not given to the quality of life of the human being. Drawing inspiration from John Rawls, Murillo and Hidalgo (2017) reminded us of the notion of fairness, arguing that "only with fair schools can we contribute to fair societies" (p. 15). They contended that fair assessment is usually construed along two ontologically confounding (binary) lines of thought, namely, legal justice versus social justice conceptions, with the former "related to equality, transparency, objectivity, and evaluation of class content; that is, an egalitarian conception" and the latter "associated with ideas such as adaptation, diversification of tests, and qualitative assessment, even taking into account students' effort and attitudes" (Murillo & Hidalgo, 2017, p.14)—assessment strongly connected to the notion of equity. Given the stark socioeconomic unevenness of schooling in South Africa (Maistry & Africa, 2020), we argue that a purist egalitarian, legal justice-oriented conception of assessment is likely to undermine the Rawlsian (1971) notion of fairness. In light of this, we encourage conceptions of assessment that invoke social justice as we trouble the performative nature of assessment and its perpetuation of socioeconomic unevenness, especially when assessment is (i) configured through the metric adequacy of a student, (ii) used to keep students on track toward a predetermined path (such as attaining a qualification, for example), and (iii) a way of normalising students within an individualistic and competitive culture of standardised assessment (Biesta, 2009; Flórez et al., 2018; Reddy et al., 2015). Flórez et al. (2018) proffered that assessment should rather embrace a "broader perspective" of social justice that "links metrics, education and society" so as to imagine "a contextualized approach to social justice" (pp. 662–3). Through the five essays of this paper, nuanced conceptions of a contextualised approach to social justice are imagined to invigorate new lines of flight to generate alternative pathways to thinking about assessment in post-Covid times.

In the first essay, Suriamurthee Maistry reflects on the territorialisation of assessment in an era of neoliberalism including performative regimes and forms of surveillance that have become more nuanced during the Covid-19 pandemic. His critique opens up possibilities for rethinking assessment in a post-Covid-19 era. In the second essay, Shan Simmonds reflects on how the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare existing injustices in education systems and how online teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education has had further dehumanising effects. She finds inspiration from the new materialist concept of diffraction and the productive form of power (*potentia)* to generate vectors of escape from dominant thinking on assessment. In the third essay, Sylvan Blignaut focuses on what precedes assessment and particularly on the concept, epistemological access. He argues that if assessment is to contribute to enhancing the quality of education systems, then students should not only gain formal access to the university but should also gain epistemological access. He opens up ways of expanding the notion of epistemological access so that it goes beyond granting students access only to what is in the Western canon. In the fourth essay, Labby Ramrathan troubles the measurement culture that dominates assessment practices in education systems and focuses specifically on the effects of quantification in assessment. He suggests ways in which we might rethink quantification in assessment. In the final essay, Lesley le Grange focuses on the concept of fairness in relation to classroom assessments, large-scale assessments, and examinations . He argues that a focus on what precedes assessment, and on

the consequences of assessment, offers lines of escape from fairness applied only to assessment design.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) have also helped us to think this article itself a rhizomatic assemblage. The essays comprise heterogeneous parts of the assemblage that were constructed by each author on their own with the only common thing in mind, the call for papers of this special issue. There is no single theory that has produced variants of same, as is the case with an arborescent assemblage. Lines of connection between and among the ideas/concepts in the essays can of course be invigorated. We invite the reader to generate such conceptual connections as we shall do in the parting section of this article. The rhizome has no beginning and end; it does not have a single entry point. Each essay in this article has a different point of focus. The different points of focus include higher education, schooling, undergraduate education, postgraduate education, broader systemic issues, and anecdotal musings. Unlike the tree, the rhizome predominantly grows horizontally, and so in this article-rhizome, the essays should be read transversally rather than vertically; seeking linearity and golden threads should not be the aim. Instead, what is envisaged is the invigoration of lines of connections that the disparate points of foci in the essays make possible so that unlikely fidelities may be constructed. We invite readers to relinquish their arborescent blinkers so as to increase their coefficient of transversality. Transversal thinking proliferates newness because it maps rather than traces—the rhizome is cartographic and therefore always becoming.

While the concept of assessment is commonly known as a measurement-based broad approach to obtaining information about what is learnt and whether students have acquired sufficient knowledge (van der Vleuten & Schuwirth, 2005), the concept has evolved substantially over the last few decades in terms of its purpose, its forms, and its processes. In this article we do not go into the details of what assessment is—nor of its evolution because there is a significant body of literature that speaks to this concept and its evolution—save to briefly summarise the main purposes of assessment. Archer (2017) outlined broad purposes, namely, assessment to support learning, assessment for accountability, and assessment for certification, progress, and transfer. Based on the purposes of assessment, the following assessment types have been identified: assessment of learning (van der Vleuten & Schuwirth, 2005), assessment for learning (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013), and assessment as learning (Dann, 2012). Assessment for learning data helps teachers to plan and decide how they could use such data to support learning better, and assessment of learning (also generally referred to as summative assessment) is to ascertain what students have learnt. However, our focus in this article is centred on a broader macro gaze on assessment informed by a social justice lens. A central question then to be pondered is: "How can we open up avenues to move assessment more in a direction to accommodate equity aspirations in a structurally and socially unequal society such as South Africa?"

Neoliberalism, performance assessment, and liquid surveillance (Suriamurthee Maistry)

In this piece, I offer an account of the neoliberal meta-narrative that has been shaping higher education pedagogy and practices in the last three decades. I also reflect on the assessment predicaments that presented in the abrupt transition to online higher education programme delivery. I argue that the architecture of the online space (learning management systems such as Moodle) has mutated into an efficient surveillance technology, especially as it relates to assessment and student performance monitoring.

There is little contention that neoliberalism's substantive ideational thickening in South African higher education is a response to global knowledge economy prerogatives (Maistry, 2015). This marks a shift from the transformation (social justice) imperative—namely, that of higher education as social good for communal upliftment—to higher education as economic good. Neoliberal creep into all facets of higher education (and society in general) has resulted in what might be described as normative ambivalence, a situation in which university academics can recognise and even articulate the perils that a knowledge economy ethos presents, but appear to acquiesce (Raaper, 2016) in response to the neoliberal tidal wave of higher education performativity "initiatives." Žižek (2011) reminds us that ideology works at the level of subconscious, that subjects have an imaginary relationship with the real world that is mediated through language. In the contemporary higher education space, a performativity discourse prevails and permeates pedagogy and assessment practices. The marketisation of higher education (Schwartzman, 2013) as a consumer product (commodification) has had the detrimental effect of curriculum narrowing—streamlining tight sets of graduate attributes in the preparation of subjects (human resources) with immediate economic production potential. The consequence is that assessment regimes degenerate into protocols that measure economic utility-producing knowledge and skills. The competitive market for labour (un)wittingly fuels a narcissism—individual pursuits (personal advancement) at the expense of the communitarian (Gane, 2012). There is also much extant literature that applies Foucauldian theory/concepts (the examination, hierarchical observation, and normalising judgement) that critiques and exposes the disciplining effect of performance assessment (see, for example, Raaper, 2016) and the rendering of a visible subject susceptible to constant measurement and scrutiny.

While a critique of the swing towards a performance culture in higher education is offered, I also recognise that in the "pre-performative era, higher education assessment practice has not been without tensions as it relates to inherent power hierarchy in student-professor teaching and assessment enterprise (Lorente-Catalán & Kirk, 2014).

In the discussion that follows, I argue that the neoliberal surveillance blueprint (already well established in the higher education space) as it relates to "monitoring, tracking, tracing, sorting, checking and systematic watching" (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p. iv) of students (and their performance) has morphed in the online space into what might be described as *liquid surveillance*. The use of online assessment submission systems, online grading, and feedback

marks the creation of permanent digital profiling. While this might be considered an efficient way of monitoring student progress, it has the effect of rendering a permanent visibility—a valuable neoliberal spinoff brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has forced higher education institutions to move their programme offerings online given the health risks that close human proximity presents for virus transmission.

There was a sudden but necessary move from face-to-face lecture hall teaching to emergency remote teaching (pandemic pedagogy), a distinct and distant relative of online teaching in the purist sense (Barbour et al., 2020). The exigency that presented after a period of mandatory state-imposed lockdown was that of timeous academic year completion, an imperative that higher education neoliberal managerial elites believed was fundamental to the survival of the economic entities (universities) under their governance given the inherent competitive relationship between higher education institutions. The completion of the academic programme online, however, hinged on the ability of universities and the coalface academics, to rapidly "convert" traditional face-to-face assessment practices/protocols to the online space. Assessment of learning to determine student success, usually determined through formal, sit-down examinations in confined venues, for extended periods of time (up to three hours or more), was unprecedentedly eliminated as an option. This marked a departure from traditional assessment practice in undergraduate (and some postgraduate) programmes in South Africa.

That university managers and academics were wholly unprepared for the challenges that the online space would present for both pedagogy and assessment is without contention. In the absence of costly proctoring technologies, the issue of test-taker authentication (Rahim, 2020), assessment reliability, and validity presented as serious challenges and have been the focus of much academic energy (research and scholarship). Some disciplines readily moved their objective-type assessments (multiple-choice protocols) online and utilised randomisation techniques to discourage student dishonesty (copying). Disciplines that apply a variety of methods to assess student learning, that value conceptual knowledge and discursive skills development, were found wanting as they struggled to find ways to determine student success.

Two key issues emerge. Firstly, neoliberal ideology at work in South African higher education facilitated the "ease" of transition to the online space with likely deleterious effects on assessment protocols, further nudging assessment regimes in the direction of assessing what is easily measurable. Secondly, the technology afforded by learning management systems (like Moodle) present as effective post-panoptic surveillance mechanism—"the ever-quickening march of technology, colonising more and more life areas and leaving intact fewer and fewer untouched 'indigenous' areas" (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p. 9) like holistic, authentic assessment for and as learning.

The current crisis (of) in assessment presents as opportune moment for academics to review and reflect on normative assessment practices and to reflect on how the neoliberal meta-narrative is enabled through acquiescence. How might we turn around the assessment post-panopticon (in the online space)? How might we imagine a synopticon (Mathieson, 1997), a

situation of agentic exercise of power in which subjects engage a process of surveilling the powerful few (neoliberal higher education governing elites, in this instance), their ideological intent, and how such ideology translates into degenerative pedagogy and assessment conventions—with a view to subverting such manoeuvres? The emerging body of literature of students as partners in higher education (see Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017 for a comprehensive literature review of scholarship), which speaks to constructive ways in which faculty and students construct the teaching, learning, and assessment enterprise, holds much potential for reframing assessment towards more socially just, inclusive, and democratic (Lorente-Catalán & Kirk, 2014) practices in higher education.

When assessment rides the waves of Covid-19: Unmasking alternative imaginaries (Shan Simmonds)

There is no doubt that Covid-19 has exposed the inequities in our education system (Jansen, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020). The pandemic has further exacerbated the crude realities perpetuating South Africa's already stark socioeconomic inequalities. These include social injustices through digital and resource divides that have been detrimental to higher education transformational agendas, including the need to widen epistemic access (du Preez & le Grange, 2020). The emotional impact of the pandemic is also pervasive. The psychosocial well-being of students has intensified as they predominantly remain online, devoid of human contact, creating both a physical and social void and exposing that "the human cost of the Covid-19 period is yet to be seen" (Motala & Menon, 2020, p. 95). We are reminded now, in a time where we must cover our faces with protective masks, that we need to unmask and face the injustices of our education system and seek alternative possibilities. For Soudien (2020), this required being mindful of what our new learning about education (learning, teaching, and assessment) is telling us. Being mindful requires more than a fixation on responding to practical anxieties around continuing business as usual to salvage the academic year, and managing health and safety by prohibiting contact classes on university campuses (Motala & Menon, 2020; Soudien, 2020). For Fataar and Badroodien, it reminds us of our responsibility to ensure that the future of education post Covid-19 provides opportunities for new and emergent imaginaries that "challenge our stances on reciprocity, human dignity, repair and a commitment to equal sharing" (2020, p. 4). Said differently by Soudien, the *systemic shock* of the pandemic has made profound the importance of recognising that learning is complex, and that mitigating this complexity requires "the just and moral step of recognizing that our children, all of them, are different" (2020, p. 17).

The outcry to use the pandemic as a carpe diem moment sounds optimistic and hopeful in a period that has mostly been occupied by fear, darkness, and death. But it remains romantic when imagined in an education system entrenched in performativity regimes that are often not premised on the ideals of social justice. As a wolf clothed in sheepskin, the deceit of performativity fuels the university in all aspects including assessment. As an academic, I continue to face numerous online assessment challenges. The continuum ranges through fostering assessment that stimulates deep and inclusive learning (Soudien, 2020), assessment

that recognises the social dimension in a time when social learning is not entirely impossible but, because it is devoid of physical contact, often comes at a cost—resources, digital literacies, and time (Motala & Menon, 2020)—as well as pressures from institutions for students to perform through continuous assessments with multiple opportunities until they are successful (Simmonds, 2020). In this systemic shock (Soudien, 2020), I strive for equality, fairness, and justice in my assessment practices but experience a constant tug-of-war with assessment as the qualification function of learning (Biesta, 2009). I experience this through (i) institutional priorities measuring my performance as a lecturer, based more on how many of my students pass without acknowledging the meaningful utilisation of my assessment practices for learning and teaching and (ii) some of my students who, for financial reasons (examples include parents' loss of employment) or their frustration with no-contact classes, have resorted to full and part-time employment alongside their full-time studies—sometimes resulting in measurement-driven learning, that is, students not participating in all learning opportunities but simply doing only the assessments needed to pass the module. The possible danger hereof is that assessment is commodified as "the sum of what is known" rather than an exhibition of learning that strives for the continuous becoming of knowing and the productive endeavour for the unknown.

I invest these experiences in Foucault's (1977) idea of *dynamic normalisation* to try and make sense of them. Dynamic normalisation, as surveillance or the awareness of being observed, has the potential to stifle individuality and create conformity. People are normalised when they end up acting, thinking, and being the same for fear of being caught out or punished (Foucault, 1977). As an instrument of power, dynamic normalisation imposes homogeneity and self-governance (Foucault, 1977). As an online lecturer, I am conscious of the need to mitigate a culture of measurement-driven assessment for the qualification function of learning. I feel the effects of surveillance now more than ever in terms of how my institution measures my performativity as a lecturer. What these musings also lead me to recognise is how this could make assessment *representationalist* (Barad, 2007). Representationalism is founded on the premise that "words, concepts, ideas, and the like accurately reflect or mirror the things to which they refer" (Barad, 2007, p. 86). This leads to reflecting on representations like a mirror image where representations have no effect on the objects of investigation in the sense that they are "nothing more than iterative mimesis" (Barad, 2007, p. 88). What this means for the type of measurement-driven assessment that I experience, is that institutions hold assessment at a distance from teaching, learning, and the world to which this could relate and, in addition, students experience assessment as a separate object. For me, this form of assessment depicts inter-action—when representations are "set up to look for homologies and analogies between separate entities" and as a result "reflecting on the world from the outside." Barad's (2007, p. 88)

So, what then are the implications of Covid-19 for the future of assessment? I think Barad's (2007) ideas on shifting our thinking from reflection to diffraction is one alternative pathway. Diffraction is a critical practice of engagement with "a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom" (Barad, 2007, p. 90). What this could entail for assessment is the need for a heightened level of mindfulness. The type of

mindfulness that is not a reactive or descriptive response to the inequalities that have surfaced from Covid-19 but, rather, a deeper engagement that exposes various nuances entangled in thinking about assessment as an opportunity for thinking beyond what is—and to image what could be. Vested in agential realism, diffraction eschews representationalism and advances a performative understanding of different kinds of knowledge-making practice. Here, "performative" is power that produces (*potentia*)—not power that normalises (*potestas*) (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). When power is productive, knowledge-making is the "material practice of intra-acting within and as part of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 90). In terms of assessment, this could invigorate a shift from assessment as a tool to uncover preexisting disciplinary facts, towards assessment with the generative potential to develop different kinds of knowledge such as trans-disciplinary knowledge (Barad, 2007). When assessment is embodied and embedded in this way, practices of knowing "are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 91). When assessment is an enabler for (re)configuring the world and how we participate in it, assessment practices are able to challenge performativity regimes that dehumanise assessment. When assessment is dehumanised, it is detached and preoccupied with keeping students on track of a predetermined path such as using their metric "worth" to determine whether they can attain a qualification. One of the effects thereof is that assessment practices can fall short in locating "bodies, brains and social spaces in their full entanglement" (Soudien, 2020, p. 17)—so that assessment can be a complex entanglement of the material, discursive, and social; so that it can navigate any systemic shock (Covid-19 or otherwise) because it is embraced in all its complexity and as a complicated conversation. As a complicated conversation, assessment is more humane and socially just because it provides a productive space (that is positive, hopeful, and affirmative) to ask difficult questions: "How might one work through and within performativity regimes in ways that are productive so as to imagine vectors of escape from dominant thinking on assessment?" "How might assessment practices be critical of normalising students as the same and, rather, embrace difference to open up alternative pathways for students to become?" "How might dominant individualistic and competitive assessment practices include more collaborative approaches so that assessment could contribute to knowledge-making that is socially just, affective, and mindful?"

Assessment and learning in postgraduate studies (Sylvan Blignaut)

> The danger here is that we end up valuing what is measured, rather than that we engage in measurement of what we value. (Biesta, 2009, p. 43)

In this essay, I will reflect on my experiences of assessment and learning in my capacity as lecturer teaching a research module to Bachelor of Education Honours students, and teaching Master of Education students over many years. Postgraduate studies as used here, therefore, refers to these two programmes. I will present this reflection predominantly from students' views gleaned from teaching the module and my interactions with them. The main thrust of

my argument is that students' conceptions of assessment are informed by instrumental/technicist notions of learning that lead to shallow learning, and which are closely aligned with neoliberal imperatives. The views of students on assessment that they bring to the classroom are largely inherited from their undergraduate years and the tacit/covert messages relayed to them in the neoliberal university.

Assessment has radically changed over the last two decades in higher education institutions in South Africa (Mcfarlane, 2016). As neoliberalism has gained momentum worldwide, South African public institutions have not escaped this hold. It is perhaps apposite to commence this essay with the observation that there is a conceptual link between teaching, learning, and assessment. The idea of assessment in education, generally, and higher education, particularly, links with one of the three central purposes of education as espoused by Biesta (2013), namely, qualification. Assessment is intricately linked to obtaining a qualification in higher education. As far as postgraduate qualifications are concerned, the assessment criteria are uncomplicated, straightforward, and transparent. What is required from students is to produce a treatise, dissertation, or thesis that meets the criteria as prescribed by the postgraduate studies committees of different institutions, and which are largely uniform throughout higher education institutions. To use an analogy from a sporting code such as a triathlon where athletes are required to participate in and complete three disciplines/legs, namely, a swim, a cycle, and a marathon—once the athlete crosses the finish line at the end, they are deemed to have completed the event. In an ideal world, this seems uncomplicated and easy enough but, concealed here, are the vastly different pathways students have travelled just to get to the access point of a postgraduate qualification. I am cognisant of the obstacles some might have encountered in their voyages. A question one can ponder is whether the test is a fair one for all.

In order to successfully complete the event, the athletes have to put in months, if not years of training, which is the same for postgraduate students who must immerse themselves in the literature, engage in extensive reading, and work towards the skills required for the task. Ideas encountered in the classroom should be explored further outside the classroom in order to craft a coherent research proposal consisting of all the elements that constitute it. Generally, the postgraduate students who grasp the task and responsibility required early on are the ones who become successful in meeting the examination and assessment requirements and completing the qualification.

Meeting the assessment criteria for postgraduate studies requires effort, skills, responsibility, and agency from students. There is often a tacit expectation in higher education institutions, especially in the grip/age of neoliberalism, that all students should be successful. Morrow (1994) similarly argued that students require *epistemological access* and agency in order to achieve success in higher education. Epistemological access, as used here, refers to the extent to which students are capable of accessing the knowledge structures that universities offer. It goes without saying that without epistemological access, students will struggle to meet assessment criteria. Morrow (1994) further drew a close relationship between achievement and agency; on epistemological access he continued thus:

> Epistemological access is not a product that could be bought or sold, given to someone or stolen. . . . Epistemological access cannot be supplied or "delivered" or "done" to the learner, nor can it be "automatically" transmitted to those who pay their fees. (p. 40)

Similarly, in postgraduate studies, students should be committed to the task at hand, exhibit curiosity for learning, and set the necessary time aside required to read for such a qualification.

In the classes I teach, I often encourage my students to read, ask questions, and to form peer groups to interact with one another. Recently, when one of my students did not do as well as she had expected in an assignment, she asked me what the point was to interact with peers. She did not say it directly, but what I deduced from this observation was that she expected that all the learning she had to do should come from my teaching because that was my job. This is what Waghid (2006) referred to as a *frivolous notion of learning* and which, I argue, is embedded in neoliberal thinking where students regard themselves as clients who pay for a service. This faith in teaching and the application of technical measures takes us perilously close to the idea of scientism and the idea that we can teach ourselves out of trouble. To meet the assessment criteria in postgraduate studies, students require responsibility or agency, as Morrow (1994) put it. On one occasion, a student who obtained a reasonable pass mark asked me if she could resubmit given that she is a distinction candidate. In some undergraduate modules, students routinely achieve 100% and the expectation is that they can replicate that in the postgraduate research module. Without getting too entangled in these issues, the idea of multiple opportunities is not something I necessarily oppose, and I have no issues about granting second opportunities to students who stumble in their first attempt; but, to extend that to all students who pass is impractical. Also, I am more than willing to engage again with their work—not to attach a numeric value to it but, rather, for developmental and formative purposes, that is, to produce an improved research proposal. It is, after all, an important responsibility of lecturers to assist students with formative and developmental feedback given that they do the epistemological labour to facilitate epistemological access for their students. But, there is also a responsibility on the part of the student to engage in assessment as learning.

In conclusion, assessment in postgraduate studies is contrary to, and not congruent with, neoliberal imperatives that are number based. It is not the main purpose of this essay to provide proposals as remedy, thus, a few ideas will suffice. One strategy that could be implemented to enhance epistemological access is a return to coursework master's studies, which have almost disappeared from South African universities due to the higher subsidy that is earned from the Department of Higher Education and Training for master's studies by research. Taught master's courses scaffold students better intellectually and could enhance epistemological access and simultaneously serve social justice purposes. We need to rethink admission criteria that presently, are based on percentages and consider, rather, a more holistic approach that is congruent with equity considerations such as background, potential, motivation, resilience, tenacity, and so forth. I will not elaborate here on admission criteria

because Lesley le Grange addresses this issue in his essay. We could also learn from the United States where coursework is an important requirement for doctoral studies. Only by subscribing to, and adhering to, time-honoured and authentic assessment practices in postgraduate studies that allow epistemological access can we lay the foundation for rigorous postgraduate studies in South Africa.

I have invoked Morrow's (1994) idea of epistemological access for invigorating lines of flight and vectors of escape from the technicist/instrumentalist lenses with which postgraduate students view assessment in the neoliberal university. However, Morrow's (1994) notion of epistemological access should be expanded because it is restricted to knowledge that forms part of the Western canon. I argue for an extended notion of epistemological access—one that makes provision for all knowledge forms, as has been called for by other scholars (see du Preez & le Grange, 2020; le Grange, 2011) so that epistemological access encompasses epistemic/cognitive justice.

Quantification of assessment: An impediment to quality education (Labby Ramrathan)

The quantification of assessments into grades or percentages that give an indication of the extent to which students and other interested parties have learnt or are competent has largely been within an audit culture in an audit society (Hardy & Boyle, 2011). Shifting outside this culture requires bold steps and acceptance, especially in a social justice framework where the starting points are not the same for diverse constituents of the education system—yet end points (quantification of assessment) become the epistemic access decider. Noting that assessment serves a diverse range of functions including grading and ranking for external stakeholders, providing students with feedback on their progress, and providing feedback to staff on the effectiveness of learning and teaching programmes (Brew et al., 2009), moving out of this quantification culture in educational practices requires a complex process associated with beliefs (Fullan, 2007)—especially in a context where meritocracy has been normalised. In this short essay, I show how complex the shift from the quantification of assessment can be—from a systemic perspective as well as from an individualistic perspective—as I reflect on my experiences in reconceptualising the undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education curriculum at my university.

My attempts in shifting the dominant perspective of quantification of assessment using criterion-based assessment processes initially gained some interest amongst staff and students, but soon thereafter reverted to quantification. I present two examples of such shifts, one at the undergraduate level and one at the postgraduate level.

In reviewing the conceptualising of teaching practice, both in pedagogy and assessment, in the Bachelor of Education degree, I advocated for three categories of assessment. The first category of assessment was a fail, the second a pass, and the third was pass with distinction. The rationale for these categorisations of assessment for teaching practice was a simple one: either one can teach learners in a classroom, cannot teach learners in a classroom, or there are

identifiable qualities that make one stand out as an exceptional teacher (Faull, 2008). The fundamental question that formed the basis of this rationale was: "How can one quantify a pass or fail for a practice-based assessment based in a context influenced by some controllable variables, like knowledge of subject content, and a large number of uncontrollable variables like diversity of learners and learning contexts?" Initially, this shift in assessment for teaching practice was quite acceptable and, after the first implementation of this way of assessment, challenges emerged. Two particular challenges need noting.

The first is that students complained that they were not able to ascertain from the pass or fail categorisation of teaching practice the extent to which they failed or how well they performed. A further concern raised by the students was that they were unclear in what aspects of teaching practices they performed well, and in what they did not perform well. Quantification of the pass or fail would give them this knowing. The second concern was from an institutional perspective. The academic recording system was number based, and a qualitative entry could not be accommodated in the recording system. To get around this, quantifications were needed for a fail, pass, and pass with distinction. A number was then allocated for each class of fail, pass, and pass with distinction.

The second example relates to a deep reflection on the difference between undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and the transition to independent inquiry and learning. As I worked through the policy documents framing programme design to reconceptualise undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within the revised National Qualifications Framework (NQF), I thought deeply about the intended learnings and the assessment thereof across these programmes. Drawing on the level descriptors and purpose of qualifications of the NQF (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2013), there is a transition from exposure to, at the undergraduate level, the knowledge base and established processes of inquiry towards the independent generation of knowledge through inquiry-based processes at the postgraduate levels of study. In this transition, there is a shift in the focus on knowledge and inquiry. In undergraduate studies, knowledge of, understanding of, and critical engagement with, amongst others, established concepts, theories, principles, and processes in established knowledge disciplines were the focus of engagement. The level descriptors include concepts such as fundamental knowledge, sound knowledge, and well-rounded knowledge, suggesting a grading on the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge. In the postgraduate study programmes, amongst others, positionality, process of inquiry, and critical thinking formed the basis of higher order teaching and learning. Concepts such as *intellectual independence*, *development of knowledge at an advanced level* and *demonstrate high-level research capability and make a significant and original academic contribution* captured the intended learning in terms of the NQF (SAQA, 2013). While it may be possible to determine the extent to which students know and can recall existing knowledge and processes within a discipline or across disciplines at the undergraduate level, it becomes more difficult at the postgraduate level to quantify learning, thinking and innovative inquiry processes that could change in a moment, inspired by various stimuli including assessment activities. In the following two examples of postgraduate studies that follow, I first show how quantification of assessment is meaningless to the students' learning and, in the second example, I show how critical

engagement and transition to advanced knowledge and independent learning renders quantification meaningless based on the level descriptors for postgraduate studies of the NQF.

In a research module that I was co-teaching at the master's level, we engaged with the students about the expectations of the module and its assessment. We indicated that 10% of the marks would be allocated to demonstration of skills in referencing in the assessment tasks. They would get either 10% or 0% for referencing, and this could be a determining factor in their pass or fail of the module. The students were highly confused with clear indication of agitation through their facial expressions and questioning. They were reluctant to accept that there would be no partial marks for referencing; that either one knows how to reference according to an established form of referencing technique—or not. We used another example in the form of a sketch relating to late coming of a learner to school. In this sketch, we problematised the ontological notion of *late* from a teacher's perspective based on time, to that of a learner's perspective on how they planned their day. From the teacher's perspective, the learner was late, arriving only at 10h30 to school yet, from the learner's perspective, they were not late because they had planned their day accordingly to arrive at school at 10h30. Through this sketch, the master's students were unsettled from their epistemological understanding of late and, through further engagements, came to understand positionality and ontology in knowing. How does one then assess these master's students' learnings? Can quantification reflect their learning which, in a moment, was disrupted?

These two examples demonstrate the limitations of the quantification of assessment as the basis for quality education in teacher education and, indeed, across disciplines. The normalised discourse as symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) on assessment being a measured quantity that makes certain thoughts, beliefs, and actions about success and quality education legitimate because of the power dynamics associated within an audit culture, both personal and systemic, sustains a view that quality education can be measured, quantified, and ranked. Disrupting these power dynamics may open up new ways of conceptualising assessment. Assessment as learning (Dann, 2012) might be an alternative to the quantification of assessment for quality education. Learning as a result of assessment, which the sketch on lateness illustrates, demonstrates the *yet to be realised* learning. Noting that quantification of assessment has been ingrained within the education terrain, a process of re-enculturation is needed. In this respect, small but significant moves are needed in the way assessments are done within a module/subject. For example, the determination of pass or fail in a module/subject could include a quantification and a qualitative element—initially more quantitative with fewer qualitative elements and gradually shifting the balance in favour of qualitative assessment elements. This gradual shift should also be accompanied by an increasing number of modules/subjects taking similar assessment changes. This gradual shift is possible, as we have seen with the shift away from the dominance of quantitative methods in research to increasing levels of qualitative methods in research.

Fairness in assessment (Lesley le Grange)

Broadly, assessment comprises three types: classroom assessment, examinations and large-scale assessment (Clarke, 2012). Classroom assessment is performed by teachers, and involves the design and administering of assessment tasks that have at least three purposes: to support learning (formative assessment), for the teacher and the learner to gauge how a learner is performing against assessment criteria (criterion-referenced assessment), and to give teachers feedback on the effectiveness of their pedagogical strategies (evaluation).

Examinations are assessments that take place at the end of a learning cycle or grade, or at the end of formal or compulsory schooling. Examinations provide information for high-stakes decisions such as whether a learner progresses to the next grade, whether a learner obtains a school-leaving certificate, or whether a learner gains access to higher education. In South Africa, the National Senior Certificate Examinations (NSCE) results are also used in the calculation of academic performance scores by universities for admission purposes to particular qualifications. NSCE results are also used to classify and rank schools, with some receiving the negative label of "underperforming schools." Clarke (2012) argued that the high-stakes nature of examinations creates a backwash effect on the schooling systems in terms of what is taught and how it is taught. Given its high-stakes nature, the NSCE, which is administered by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is quality assured by the independent quality council for general education and training, Umalusi.

Large-scale assessments are system-level assessments designed to provide information on performance at a system level, and factors relating or contributing to such performance (Clarke, 2012). They are mainly conducted by agencies outside of schools but there are instances worldwide, where large-scale assessments are conducted by panels of teachers and therefore based on teachers' judgement. Large-scale assessments happen at regional, national, and international levels. An example of regional assessments is the systemic testing done by the Western Cape Education Department, which involves the testing of learners' achievements in mathematics and languages at Grades 3, 6, and 9. The Annual National Assessments are an example of large-scale assessments occurring at a national level. Examples of international large-scale assessments are the cross-national benchmarking tests that South Africa participates in, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). External large-scale assessments are focused on how a system is performing rather than on individual learners, and results in schools, provinces, and nations are compared with one another against a norm (norm-referenced assessment). Large-scale assessments involving panels of teachers could focus on learners and could also be criterion-referenced. This background is shared because in this essay, I wish to explore the concept of fairness in relation to the three broad assessment types I have outlined. It is important to bear in mind that the three assessment types have different purposes (Kanjee & Bhana, 2020) and therefore, the importance of fairness may weight differently depending on the assessment type. Fairness might require greater consideration in high-stakes examinations than in large-scale assessments that are

sample-based. Specifically, I wish to explore vectors of escape from the technical manner in which fairness in assessment is conceived and applied.

Reliability, validity, and fairness are core concepts in assessment. In classroom assessments, examinations, and large-scale assessments, reliability is typically improved through focusing on matters such as the number of assessment tasks, the difficulty of the test or task, the wording of items and instructions, as well as clarity and completeness of assessment guides (Reddy et al., 2015). Validity in classroom-based assessments, examinations, and large-scale assessments often narrowly places emphasis on content (curricula) validity, which concerns the extent to which a test is representative of the domain that it is intended to assess.[1] For example, Umalusi, will quality assure all NSCE papers in relation to validity and reliability. Validity should, however, be conceived more broadly. Messick (1990, p. 1) argued:

> Validity is an integrated evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of interpretations and actions based on test scores or other modes of assessment.

In other words, validity inferences should not only be derived from test scores but also from observing actions and behaviours. Of the three concepts, fairness has generally received the least attention but, in recent years, we have seen a growing interest in fairness vis-à-vis assessment (Tierney, 2017; Rasooli et al., 2019). In relation to classroom and large-scale assessments, fairness is generally applied in technical terms in the sense that examiners ensure that learners sit for the same test at the same time, and that the same assessment criteria are used. Mislevy et al. (2013) argued that fairness is improved when aspects of examinations are standardised to reduce variations that would advantage some and disadvantage others. However, I shall argue that fairness should be liberated from the technical manner (standardising) in which it is understood and applied so that it is invoked in the interest of social justice.

The concepts, reliability, validity, and fairness inevitably intersect, but it is important to understand what makes (or could make) fairness different from the other concepts. Tierney (2017) argued that "fairness is similar to validity and reliability in that it is not dichotomous, which means that it is determined by degree" (p. 797). However, he pointed out that whilst validity and reliability are technical qualities, fairness is not, although it is affected by technical quality. He suggested that "fairness is a requirement for the ethical practice of educational assessment, which in turn contributes to the broader matter of social justice" (Tierney, 2017, p. 797). What Tierney (2017) argued may, generally, be the case but Messick's (1990) broader understanding could make validity ethical too. However, the focus here is on fairness. For educational assessment to be an ethical practice that can contribute to social justice, assessment needs to be viewed as a social practice and not as a technology. Fairness in assessment cannot therefore be a technical matter concerned with test construction. Importantly, Gipps and Stobart (2009) pointed out that fairness should be

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1   An expanded view of validity could, of course, be applied to assessment. See le Grange and Beets (2005) for insights on how validity is understood within different research paradigms.

concerned with what precedes the assessment and its consequences, and not only with assessment design.

What precedes assessment and the consequences of assessment, are matters of social justice. The first relates to the educational opportunities learners are provided with, the access they have to resources, the environments in which they learn, and so forth. Studies have shown that factors outside the school have a much greater impact on learner achievement than factors inside the school (Fleisch, 2007; le Grange, 2019). The major variables influencing learner achievement in South Africa include the socioeconomic status of learners, teachers' subject matter (content) knowledge, teachers' pedagogical knowledge, resources, geographical location, and language of learning (Fleisch, 2007). In South Africa's bimodal schooling where a large number of materially poor students underachieve and a smaller number of materially privileged learners perform relatively well, what precedes assessment requires attention. Assessment cannot be deemed to be fair if what precedes the assessment in terms of educational opportunities and access to resources are so vastly different for the two sets of learners. The second, the consequences of assessment, relates to how assessments are interpreted, and the effect that assessments have on learners' life chances. Twenty-eight years into South Africa's democracy, the participation rates in higher education still reflect legacies of apartheid. In 2018, the participation rates for the different population groups (apartheid categorisations) were 19%, 15%, 46%, and 55% for African, Coloured, Indian, and White students, respectively (Council on Higher Education, 2020). This means that the life chances of Black students, in terms of career opportunities and for them to serve as role models in South African society, are significantly more curtailed than is the case with White students. This inequity could be addressed if the results of assessments such as those of the NSCE are interpreted in more nuanced ways. Gipps and Stobart (2009) made a helpful distinction between equality and equity in relation to fairness. Equality takes a mere quantitative approach in comparing the achievement of learners, whereas equity is concerned with the justice of the arrangements prior to the assessment. What might help to improve participation rates of Black students is if equity and not equality becomes the principle of fairness when it comes to how universities interpret NSCE scores and use them as part of their admission requirements. Where universities have applied some aspects of equity as part of their admission criteria this has led to a public outcry, with privileged sectors of society invoking equality as fairness and not equity as fairness (for a review of equity in admission policies of some South African universities, see Matsepe et al., 2020).

If assessment is to contribute to social justice in South Africa, the concept of fairness requires greater attention—fairness that incorporates what precedes assessments and also the consequences of assessments. There are many factors that precede assessments, and which lie outside the ambit of schools. However, there are strategies that teachers can apply in order to promote fairness in classroom assessments. Broadly, these involve ensuring that all learners have equal opportunities to achieve learning objectives, providing a range of assessment tasks that test a range of abilities, eliminating all sources of bias in the curriculum and in assessments, taking cognisance of the sociocultural realities of learners, and bridging

knowledges,[2] and so forth (for more specific strategies, see Reddy et al., 2015). When it comes to public examinations, given the nature of such assessments, efforts to promote fairness is curtailed. However, examiners can reduce sources of bias, provide learners with certain disabilities more time to write, offer examinations in braille, and so forth. The proposal by the DBE to offer examination papers in multiple languages also promotes fairness. Fairness also relates to how NSCE results are interpreted and used by the universities in their admission criteria. In the interest of social justice, NSCE results should be interpreted through an equity and not equality lens. As le Grange (2010, p. 335) wrote in relation to the controversy over the University of Cape Town's admission policy:

> Fairness in the case of university admission policies would mean that one cannot simply apply the same criteria for admitting advantaged and disadvantaged students. The implication is that, in a country which has experienced decades of legal discrimination based on race, and where legacies of disadvantage remain, colour consciousness in public policies is crucial for a certain period of time.

Large-scale assessments involving panels of teachers have greater promise in promoting fairness if such panels comprise a diversity of teachers who serve different communities so that the needs, interests, and values of all learners are included in assessments. This would ensure that assessment is ethical where fairness and validity intersect, if Messick's (1990) broader conception of validity is embraced.

Parting thoughts

This article assemblage comprises heterogeneous parts in which different authors attempt to invigorate lines of escape from the way assessment has become territorialised in contemporary times. The rhizome figuration helps us to understand that, even though in its territorialised forms assessment has the appearance of fixity, it is always becoming. Although standardisation, measurement, quantification seem so entrenched, these practices can become other—can become deterritorialised. We have shown that concepts such as epistemological access and fairness can become other, can be deterritorialised and reterritorialised in the interest of cognitive and social justice.

We noted that this article is a rhizomatic rather than a tree assemblage. The essays are not rooted in a single theory or theoretical framework (taproot of a tree) as is the case with the classic article. The article is a becoming, attempts to be something other, and maps alternative ways of doing assessment. As with a rhizome, as authors we were at times out of step and out of rhythm with one another: four essays focused on higher education, whilst one mainly focused on schooling; some authors focused on undergraduate education and some on postgraduate education; thoughts were generated from broader systemic issues but also anecdotal ponderings; and so forth. The attempt was to produce something new in the interest of social justice. This article-rhizome has multiple entry points, making multiple readings

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2   For more detail, see le Grange (2007, 2019).

possible. The reader is invited to start at any point and the essays can be read in any sequence.

In this article, "as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories, but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialisation and destratification" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). Lines of articulation evident in the essays are that irrespective of the context (higher education or schooling, undergraduate or postgraduate) the dominant assessment culture is technicist/instrumentalist. Essays 1 and 2 articulate how the Covid-19 pandemic is laying bare inequalities and entrenching practices of performativity; all essays articulate the dominance of measurement in assessment, and Essay 4 expands on this by focusing the problem of quantification. There are many more lines of articulation/connection that can be invigorated and we invite the reader to map them. All the authors generated lines of flight from current assessment forms, practices, and concepts that have resulted in homogenisation, normalisation, and dehumanisation.

We do not wish to conclude by putting what we have written in a nutshell for the reader. We have asked questions, and trust that our critiques of assessment practices have not produced variants of what exists but have opened up pathways for something different. We have tried to break out of several frames, and are hopeful that current assessment (research) practices could become carriers of alternative constellations of education universes.

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