DECOLONISING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Formative assessment is of critical concern within higher education, particularly as ‘feedback’ remains a recurring source of student dissatisfaction. In contemporary times, the need to decolonise higher education emerged first in post-colonial contexts of the global south, before becoming a more general debate in contexts which historically were at the heart of empire. Literatures on formative assessment and decolonisation have, however, remained discrete and disconnected. This chapter first makes the connection between decolonisation and assessment, highlighting the need to question dominant (modern) understandings of assessment as ‘objective’ measurement. It then suggests potentially helpful strands in assessment and wider literature to re-imagine formative assessment practices that might support decolonisation agendas, discussing this with reference to the authors’ previous research. It closes by suggesting some modest ways forward that more openly acknowledge the problematics of assessment as a social practice, as well as the need for further research.

Keywords: Formative assessment; assessment; higher education; decolonising higher education; assessment as a social practice; feedback

INTRODUCTION

The development of formative assessment in higher education has been an important concern for several decades. Its relevance has been heightened by the increasing weight given in the international higher education market to national student surveys and the ratings of assessment and ‘feedback’ within those (Winstone, Ajjawi, Dirkx, & Boud, 2021). However, formative assessment is also conspicuous for its absence from discussions of other issues of critical concern in contemporary debates, notably that of decolonising higher education. This
chapter interrogates this absence with the aim of bringing together these two fields, which until now have remained unhelpfully discrete.

We do this by first interrogating the concept of decolonisation, and how this relates to assessment. This discussion takes up post-colonial writers who critique the rise of the west during modern times and how colonialism was integral to this. We further discuss the ways that scientific disciplines emerged during the modern age, informed by epistemological understandings that led to the dominant association of assessment with ‘measurement’ which continues to this day. We note how a major implication of colonisation was the spread of such ‘western’ knowledge systems and education around the world, and how even after colonised states achieved independence, previous colonial powers remained influential in the ways education was developed in many post-colonial contexts, in part because of their continuing authority with respect to assessment.

Our discussion then moves to efforts towards decolonising education, highlighting how these have focused predominantly on the content of the curriculum, and on pedagogy, to the exclusion of questions about assessment. We conclude this section by drawing on Bernstein’s (2000) concept of the ‘pedagogical device’ to stress how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment come together, with the implication that assessment must be considered as part of any efforts towards decolonisation of institutionalised education.

We then turn to the concept of formative assessment. We challenge the frequent reduction of formative assessment to ‘feedback’ and question the theoretical implications of such a conceptualisation. We signal how this fails to attend to the politics of education and importantly with respect to decolonisation, the historical contingencies of the curriculum. Furthermore, by focussing on student–tutor interactions, formative assessment as ‘feedback’ neglects student agency and too readily reduces education to an instrumental and individualised process of ‘learnification’ (Biesta, 2009). We then critique the technical ways assessment is predominantly understood, highlighting how these understandings are supported by myths of measurement and objectivity that again obscure the political nature of education and the curriculum.

In the following section, we signal alternative theoretical frameworks through which higher education processes including assessment can be considered. These more adequately recognise the power relations of education and their implications for the production of student identities. They also recognise that the selection and relay of particular knowledges within education is thoroughly political and socio-historically contingent. We then identify approaches to formative assessment that might offer starting points for moves towards decolonisation. Moving beyond the reduction of formative assessment to ‘feedback’, we discuss calls for attention to the wider curriculum within what has been called ‘sustainable’ assessment, suggesting how such approaches could be developed in ways that support decolonisation.

In the interests of developing a research agenda, we also critique our own research into formative assessment, conducted in a research-intensive university in England (two separate case studies, one a multiple case study of different manifestations of formative assessment across different disciplines at
undergraduate level and the other a study of postgraduate research level student–tutor interactions).

We conclude by stressing the importance of developing a research agenda that brings formative assessment together with decolonisation of higher education and suggesting key issues to be addressed at institutional level to support decolonisation efforts.

**DECOLONISING HIGHER EDUCATION**

Decolonisation is a complex concept. It involves close interrogation of the value systems, knowledges and practices that underpinned the eras of empire and colonialism and importantly, how these – and the deep societal inequalities that they produced – continue to structure contemporary societies, whether in contexts that were once the seat of empire, or contexts that suffered the injustices of colonisation. It will be clear from the outset that decolonisation must therefore be recognised as a political project, involving a quest to address the structural inequalities that were sedimented in the age of empire in an attempt to move towards more just societies.

These inequalities are most obviously related to race and racialisation. Unsurprisingly, definitions of decolonisation often bring race to the fore:

> Decolonization can be broadly understood as an umbrella term for diverse efforts to resist the distinct but intertwined processes of colonisation and racialization, to enact transformation and redress in reference to the historical and ongoing effects of these processes, and to create and keep alive modes of knowing, being, and relating that these processes seek to eradicate. (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016a, p. 1)

Importantly however, following post-colonial writers such as Lugones (2007), Stein and Andreotti then go on to highlight the intersection of race with gender, sexuality and class in colonialism’s ‘binary, heteropatriarchal gender system’. In other words, while race is clearly central to all critiques of ‘whiteness’, decolonial initiatives must also aim to address how race intersects with wider structures of inequality including but not limited to gender, sexuality and class.

Higher education has heightened relevance to projects of decolonisation, given the part it has played in the production and legitimation of (western) knowledges and sciences, as well as in the production and legitimation of local elites in positions of authority within the colonies (Crossouard & Dunne, 2021). With respect to the first, questions about the production of knowledge take us to the epistemological assumptions that were integral to the new ‘social imaginary’ that informed the modern age and its prosecution of colonialism (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016b). Of particular relevance in this imaginary was the search for a ‘universal science of order’ (Foucault, 2002). This underpinned the development of positivist understandings of science which were to provide the founding rationales for the west’s colonisation and exploitation of indigenous peoples. As many post-colonial writers (Go, 2013; Grosfuguel, 2011; Mignolo, 2011; Said, 1978; Smith, 1999) have commented, colonial expansion in the eighteenth and
The nineteenth century was integral to the development of modern societies in the west. Importantly, central to this modernist project was the assumed superiority of western civilisation and its knowledges. Modern knowledge techniques – notably classification and measurement – were used to rank indigenous peoples as to whether human, sub-human, and capable (or not) of salvation (Smith, 1999).

We take up how these techniques are also integral to assessment practices. As Foucault (2002, pp. 62–63) notes, the ‘scientific order’ of the Age of Reason brought the imperative to ‘mathematis[e] empirical knowledge’, including ‘establishing a mathematics of qualitative orders’. Although challenged by post-structural, post-colonial and post-humanist thinking, the ‘objectivity’ that these techno-rational processes supposedly generate is constantly alluded to in everyday discussions of science, and indeed of assessment (see Delandshere, 2001 below). Education remains framed by the ‘age of measurement’ (Biesta, 2009; Broadfoot & Black, 2004), in ways that have been intensified by the ascendency in contemporary times of neoliberal politics. In the global market for higher education, this intensification can be seen in the weight given to national student satisfaction surveys as well as to international comparisons of the quality of institutional provision, presented annually within ‘league tables’ that make visible and further consolidate a deep North–South imbalance. The authority attributed to such instruments adds to the imperative to question the continuing dominance of western academies and their knowledges in a globalised world:

> The globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West’s view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge, the arbiter of what counts as knowledge, and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge. (Smith, 1999, p. 63)

Such epistemological critiques are integral to decolonial critiques of the curriculum. While always a specific selection of knowledge, educational curricula can often assume the ascendency of western empiricisms and ignore indigenous knowledges (Smith, 1999). Although supposedly ‘universal’, western knowledges can rather be considered a ‘provincial imaginary that is forcefully asserted as an objective “view from nowhere”’ (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016b, p. 176).

Attention to the curriculum has understandably been a dominant focus in efforts towards decolonising higher education (as in, e.g. the UK’s National Union of Students’ campaign ‘Why is my curriculum white?’). These arguments have also prompted calls for more inclusive higher education pedagogies (see, e.g. Arday, Zoe Belluigi, & Thomas, 2021; Hack, 2020; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016a). Importantly however, discussions of decolonising higher education have engaged very little with assessment, or with formative assessment. Given the importance of assessment as the key evaluative mechanism that accredits student learning, this seems an omission that neglects the power relations of education and the profound ways that assessment shapes individual life opportunities. Bernstein (2000) points out that evaluation ‘condenses’ the meaning of pedagogic practice. In his depiction of the ‘pedagogic device’, attention to the curriculum (instructional discourses) and pedagogy (regulative discourses) come together with evaluation (or assessment) to act ‘as a symbolic ruler for consciousness’ (p. 36).
From such perspectives, curriculum and pedagogy are inseparable from assessment, and indeed from formative assessment. However, as we have outlined, literature on decolonising higher education has not made these connections. We see this omission as arising because of dominant conceptualisations of formative assessment that reduce it to ‘feedback’ and ‘measurement’, as we now elaborate.

**QUESTIONING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT**

Formative assessment has been defined as feedback that contributes to learning, as opposed to summative assessment, which grades and accredits learning. However, when probed in more detail, such a definition proves to be overly simplistic (Pryor & Crossouard, 2008). In addition to the assumption that all formative assessment is necessarily supportive and beneficent, or indeed that summative assessment is not also ‘formative’, a key issue is the term ‘feedback’ itself. As a metaphor deriving from electronic engineering, it reduces communication to a mechanistic ‘input–output’ model that fails to recognise how all learning – and indeed all communication – involves processes of meaning-making (Biesta, 2004). It assumes language to be ‘transparent’, takes no account of the social relations of learning, nor the power relations that frame it. The level of automaticity implied in the metaphor also allows no recognition of the wider political character of education and its exclusions. For example, Nieminen, Tai, Boud, and Henderson (2021) point out that the tasks on which feedback information is provided are usually examination-style questions or essays that ‘do not aim at “co-creating cultures” but to teach an accustomed set of skills as decided by someone other than the students’ (p. 100). Finally, it narrows the focus of formative assessment to specific tutor-to-student or peer-to-peer interactions and, in consequence, fails to locate this interaction within the wider curriculum.

A further issue is that assessment – and formative assessment – is often seen as a predominantly technical and apparently ‘objective’ process of measurement and grading. Such powerful associations have been traced to the historical development of the psychological testing movement of the nineteenth century (Delandshere, 2001), which was itself associated with the rise of measurement as the dominant episteme of the natural and social sciences that were emerging at that time. The dominance of ‘measurement’ in understandings of assessment lives on to this day, as seen for example in the ‘global anxiety’ provoked by the suspension of high school examinations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and having to rely on (less than objective) teacher assessment (Cairns, 2021, p. 332). The supposed ‘objectivity’ associated with measurement obscures the political nature of education and more generally what counts as knowledge. As Delandshere (2001, p. 119) comments, the associations of assessment with measurement means that ‘[w]hat constitutes knowledge and how we formulate judgements about that knowledge are questions that are rarely raised explicitly in the context of assessment’. Orr (2007) echoes this view, suggesting that assessment remains captured by a ‘positivistic’ understanding of knowledge. Similarly, commenting on the ‘measurement fallacy’ of higher education assessment, Yorke (2011, p. 251)
notes how assumptions deriving from ‘scientific measurement’ masks how grading of student work is a ‘socially constructed’ activity that is informed by the professional judgement of assessors.

Importantly, the episteme that saw the association of assessment with psychological theories of testing and measurement in the nineteenth century is the same episteme that underpinned the development of eugenics and ‘scientific racism’ (Tomlinson, 2019). This gave pseudo-scientific legitimation to racial categorisations of different peoples, marking out lines of superiority and inferiority that were based in differentiation by colour. As Tomlinson (2019, p. 28) notes:

Eugenic theories underpinned beliefs in the inferior intellect of the lower classes and of the colonised. Passion for the classification of supposed races along biological lines developed around the same time as eugenic theories were spreading. A white Caucasoid ‘race’ was supposedly superior to Mongoloid and Negroid ‘races’... The stereotypes of the defective, ignorant and idle lower working classes in England were similar to the stereotypes of lazy and stupid ‘natives’ overseas.

The episteme that invested measurement with objectivity has of course been challenged by a swathe of social theorists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Feminist writers have been especially significant in critiques of the supposed objectivity of modern science’s ‘bird’s-eye’ view of the world (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1988). In relation to education, structural and post-structural theorists have also convincingly illuminated the socio-historical and material contingencies of what counts as truth (Foucault, 1980) or what is conferred distinction in any particular context (Bourdieu, 1984). Post-humanist writers such as Barad (2007) or Braidotti (2013) have also highlighted the socio-material character of all social relations. While there might be disagreements across their different perspectives, all of these writers challenge the strong individualism that is intrinsic to modern understandings of the subject or human agent (Hall, 2021). All of this has important implications for how we might reconceptualise formative assessment.

It is striking, however, that much literature on formative assessment (and its associated concept, assessment for learning) has drawn upon psychological theories of learning. These tend to frame learning in terms of individual cognitive and metacognitive development, without sufficiently recognising the value systems and norms which frame such ‘development’, including their Eurocentric biases. In this guise, formative assessment has become important in arguments for reforms to assessment practices in higher education, but these have predominantly focused on the need for transparency and greater levels of standardisation, in ways that ignore the challenges to modern systems of thought emanating from the writers cited. Indeed, arguably reforms have deepened the attachment of assessment to modern thinking, particularly with respect to the search for universally recognised assessment metrics.

A particular example here has been the implementation of ‘outcomes-based assessment’ across higher education systems around the world, inspired by the logic that all student learning should be framed by explicit learning outcomes to
be achieved in their programmes. By defining these outcomes in advance, assessment of any module assignment is supposed to become a much more transparent process. As Young (2010) comments, the use of outcomes-based assessment has been embedded in the development of international qualification frameworks and has been seen as a key plank in moves to widen participation and make higher education systems more socially inclusive.

On the other hand, questions have been raised about the extent that outcomes-based assessment remains a ‘positivist assessment practice’ (Orr, 2007, p. 664). Different commentators have critiqued both the levels of standardisation and uniformity that the generalisation of such frameworks can bring, as well as the supposed transparency that definitions of outcomes can bring to assessment processes themselves. In relation to the first, the Bologna Process – through which degree structures as well as credit transfer systems have been standardised across many countries in Europe and beyond – has enjoyed an almost surprising success (Huisman, 2019). However, the work it does to align different higher education systems with neoliberal market imperatives has been questioned (Wihlborg, 2019). In relation to its harmonisation of degree structures and assessment credits, the standardisation assumed within the Bologna Process has been critiqued for running the ‘severe danger of creating an illusion of conformity within a reality of undetected and undetectable diversity’ (Elton, 2004, p. 50).

The counter arguments, that assessment judgements depend on a situated sense of academic ‘connoisseurship’, chime with Sadler’s (1989, 2005) insistence that assessment of most student work in higher education draws on academic (professional) judgement about a particular ‘standard’ of work. Importantly, being based largely in tacit knowledge, such a standard is not readily amenable to ‘definition’ through the specification of learning outcomes or assessment criteria. Indeed, such a search for definitional clarity is ultimately misplaced. As Sadler comments, if one is asked about a criterion such as demonstrating a ‘sound level of critical thinking and discrimination’, we are defeated by the very ‘nature of verbal statements, whereby each answer necessarily introduces ‘new verbal terms that in turn call for more elaboration, and so on in infinite regress’ (Sadler, 2005, p. 192). Although Sadler does not associate his argument with any theory of language or communication, this implicitly invokes the inevitable gap between the signer and signified highlighted by post-structural and post-humanist writers, which makes it futile to search for absolute transparency (Biesta, 2004, 2009; Gravett, 2020).

The use of learning outcomes has also been critiqued for their instrumentalisation of learning and its confinement to what has been specified in advance by the educator. Ecclestone (1999, p. 36) highlights how the increased reliance on learning outcomes in higher education creates a ‘subtle form of closure on ideas about what is important in learning’. Although ostensibly to support learners in becoming autonomous critical thinkers, such practices paradoxically act to disempower students, seducing them instead into a ‘self-disciplined conformity’ (p. 39). James (2005) similarly argues for a critical differentiation between ‘the outcomes of learning’ and the term learning outcomes, critiquing the latter having ‘a deceptive simplicity and all the appearance of a concept… which refers
to matters about which there is high consensus, but in reality it is none of these things’ (p. 92).

Formative assessment has played its part in this, having been harnessed strongly to attempts to make what is to be learnt more transparent. As Torrance (2012, p. 324) has noted, despite a rather suspect evidence base (Bennett, 2011), practices associated with ‘assessment for learning’ in English schooling have spread into higher education. Torrance finds this has led to a ‘particularly normative’ kind of formative assessment geared to making learning outcomes and criteria more explicit that he calls ‘conformative assessment’. Rather than supporting learning productively, he suggests this can work in a ‘deformative way’ (p. 324). We return to the potential significance of ‘divergent’ as opposed to ‘convergent’ assessment (Pryor & Crossouard, 2010; Torrance & Pryor, 1998) in our discussion later.

RECONCEPTUALISING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

What then can be done to re-imagine formative assessment in ways that might support efforts to decolonise higher education? What can we learn from the existing literature? From the outset we clarify that we are far from proposing any magic bullets that might radically reconstruct the ways that assessment works in societies around the world, including the major part it plays in legitimising social stratification, and indeed in reproducing social inequalities. As Broadfoot and Black (2004) remark about our contemporary ‘assessment society’, we remain ‘as wedded to our belief in the power of numbers, grades, targets and league tables to deliver quality and accountability, equality and defensibility as we are to modernism itself’ (p. 19). Despite challenges from post-structural, post-colonial and post-humanist thinkers, both education and assessment remain thoroughly captured by a modern ‘mathematics of qualitative orders’ (Foucault, 2002), as well as modernity’s privileging of the autonomous subject (Leathwood, 2005). Both are important in the work that educational assessment continues to do in legitimating as ‘individual ability’ what is ultimately a product of the symbolic violence of pedagogic action. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) state, all pedagogic action is ‘symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power’ (p. 5). With this in mind, a key task for educator’s formative assessment is to recognise the contingencies of these relations and open spaces for critique and – without any delusional optimism – potential reconstruction.

From this starting point, which recognises the magnitude of the task of reworking formative assessment in ways that might support decolonising agendas, in what follows we first address the vital importance of institutional recognition of assessment as a social practice. We argue this to be a critical precursor for critical formative assessment that can attempt to illuminate the contingencies of whatever (academic) literacies are valued in particular disciplinary spaces. We then turn to the importance for formative assessment of designing for student involvement in learning, building upon Lea (2004) and the
arguments Boud (2000) and Boud and Molloy (2013) have made for ‘sustainable assessment’ that – importantly – attend to curriculum design. We nevertheless emphasise the continuing relevance of power relations, even as we highlight the importance of designing higher education programmes to incorporate student perspectives on the curriculum.

A critical starting point for efforts to decolonise formative and summative assessment would be to fully recognise at both institutional and course levels the socially situated nature of all assessment practices. The literature on assessment as a social practice (e.g. Broadfoot, 1996; Crossouard, 2010; Crossouard & Pryor, 2008; Delandshere, 2001; Elton, 2004; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008, 2010; Sadler, 1989; Torrance, 2000) makes it untenable to represent assessment as a question of technical, statistical processes. It lays bare any attempt to do so as a spurious attempt to claim objectivity for what ultimately is a value-laden practice. A critical aspect of this at the institutional level is the way that assessment moderation is defined. Despite the arguments of those cited, assessment moderation in some universities can still be constructed as a question of statistical technique, whereby differences in assessment judgements are assumed to imply a procedural error (Orr, 2007). More positively, other higher education institutions do openly acknowledge the importance of moderation as critical for aligning different assessors’ judgements and part of a process of developing a shared sense of standards. This explicitly acknowledges such differences to be inevitable, rather than an indication of technical error. Such institutional recognition may seem a technicality but is a vital opening towards acknowledgement of assessment as a social practice whose values are contingent – indeed, in Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) terms, a cultural arbitrary – and should be subject to ongoing scrutiny as an effect of power relations.

Such recognition is important for the formative assessment practices of individual educators, to which we now turn. However, although certainly not without agency, we cannot assume an educator to be autonomous in their pedagogic actions. The understandings of agency (and more generally the human subject) implied in post-humanist and post-structural writers require a recognition of the positionality of the educator, rather than assuming that they are free to radically reconstruct and reform their pedagogic and assessment practices. They are part of an assessment regime which is framed by institutional and indeed wider regulations which they have an obligation to work within, as part of a commitment to student equality and the integrity of institutional certification. However, where there is an explicit recognition at institutional level of assessment as a social practice, this opens a window for educators to echo this in their own formative assessment with students.

Of relevance here for our arguments about decolonisation is literature that understands higher education learning to involve socialisation within different communities of practice, whose differences include differences in their literacy conventions. Research on academic literacies highlights the socially situated nature of particular disciplinary practices and associated norms of expression (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998). This approach also usefully highlights the power relations of assessment, which we have emphasised (see Pryor & Crossouard,
2008, 2010). It gives explicit recognition to the *contingencies* of academic practices, which, coupled with an acknowledgement of power relations, can potentially become a practice of critique that disrupts presumptions of universalism, whether in relation to disciplinary practices, or overly generic discourses of teaching and learning.

This ‘academic literacies’ literature does not directly engage with formative assessment, although researchers commenting on ‘feedback literacies’ (see Carless & Boud, 2018) do acknowledge the situated nature of feedback interactions. Relevant here is recent commentary on feedback literacies by Gravett (2020), who draws on post-humanist, socio-material theories to critique the conceptualisation of ‘feedback’ as a ‘binary, dialogic event between individuals’, highlighting the wider relevance of both the student context and institutional context. This challenges naive assumptions that look for ‘transparency’ in feedback and calls for more research into the experiences of different students. To extend these arguments into practices that could support decolonisation, we suggest that an explicit acknowledgement of the politics of education may also open a window for more sustained questioning of the norms that are in play and (in contrast to notions of ‘socialisation’ that imply little critique of disciplinary practices) illuminate in a more political way the processes of subjectification – the production of different subjectivities and identities – that emerge through students’ engagement (Biesta, 2009).

This connects to our previous research into formative assessment in a post-graduate context. This suggested the value of highlighting disciplinary cultures alongside questions of identity. For example, the invocation of students’ researcher identities and attention to the ‘culture of the discipline’ was key in the formative assessment dialogues within a professional doctorate (Pryor & Crossouard, 2010, p. 268). Students reportedly found this valuable, particularly in this case for thinking of their positionalities as researchers, as opposed to professionals. However, while the tutor explicitly encouraged the student to ‘deconstruct the discourse of the degree’, and drew attention to the power relations of assessment, this commentary implied rather than made explicit a similar deconstruction by the educator, which would now be important for formative assessment to work in support of decolonisation. The daunting nature of the task to disrupt student–tutor hierarchies was also suggested by students’ enthusiastic uptake of tutor commentaries on their draft assignments. As the late Diana Leonard noted, even though working at doctoral level, student responses showed an almost alarming acceptance of the authority of the tutor. It would be facile to suggest that these power relations can easily be disrupted.

However, this adds to – rather than detracting from – the importance of designing to ensure that students have spaces for active engagement. This is intrinsic to the arguments cited earlier. Lea (2004) argues for pedagogic design to allow students’ active engagement in the (academic) literacy practices of their field of study. This raises questions about the modes of assessment that students are required to carry out. Cultural historic norms have allowed the dominant modes of assessment, whether essay, examination or presentation, to remain largely unquestioned as appropriate ways to judge a student’s performance.
However, the social biases within such assessment modes should be questioned. Although wary of the extent changing the mode of assessment might disrupt such biases, alternative tasks which expand the higher education assessment repertoire include “observations, clinical interviews, reflective journals, projects, demonstrations, collections of student work, and students’ self-evaluations” (Shepard, 2000, p. 8), to which social media has added further possibilities.

Beyond this, we see pedagogic design as vital to enable formative assessment dialogues, and like Sadler (2010) and Gravett (2020), resist its reduction to ‘feedback’. Attention to curriculum design is important to ensure students’ active engagement in dialogue with their peers and their tutor, potentially in activities that relate to their assessment task, but also to allow their critical commentary on the curriculum and indeed for them to contribute to it. This takes up and extends the arguments made by Boud (2000) and Boud and Molloy (2013) for what they call ‘sustainable assessment’. Their call is for pedagogic design that gives students ‘a key role in driving learning, and thus generating and soliciting their own feedback’ (Boud & Molloy, 2013, p. 698), with overall benefits described in terms of life-long learning. With an eye to decolonisation, we see a deeper justification here; however, that is about an open embrace of the politics of the curriculum which makes it vulnerable to critique. In pointing to the politics of education, we can also recognise the continuing relevance of power relations, rather than seeming to wish these away.

In a general way, we see designing for the incorporation of student perspectives as being vital for any move towards decolonisation. Rather than randomly happening during teaching and learning, this will benefit from a pedagogic design that includes more open-ended tasks that allow students more agency to define their contributions and introduce their own perspectives. In terms of formative assessment, this creates openings for what Torrance and Pryor (1998) described as ‘divergent’ formative assessment, which aims to listen and respond to students’ agendas, rather than constantly privileging the alignment of students’ texts with prescribed learning outcomes (see also Pryor & Crossouard, 2008, 2010). Tutor responses are still integral to pedagogic interactions but can involve an oscillation between convergent and divergent responses. At a more micro level, acknowledgment of the position from which a tutor offers commentary also helps to recognise difference and encourage engagement with the contingencies of knowledge production and its fallibilities.

Case study research into different forms of formative assessment in different disciplinary fields have been conducted in our own university context (Oprandi, 2014). This research illuminated both convergent and divergent approaches. With respect to the first, one study followed a first-year undergraduate biology module using formative assessments geared to ‘right/wrong’ factual responses. In this case, a tutor sought to encourage student ‘self-regulation’ through weekly online multiple-choice questions that would help students to become more familiar with the learning objectives, which in turn would allow them to achieve better grades. This left little space for student perspectives or critique and could be characterised as ‘conformative’ assessment (Torrance, 2017). Here students’ learning is limited to knowing what the tutor wants them to learn with no value placed on individual
perspectives or experiences. Niemenen and Lahdenperä (2021) argue these ‘right/wrong’ assessments create a form of ‘epistemic injustice’ producing self-referential knowledge and knowers. It brooks no questioning of what constitutes valid knowledge and how that knowledge can be demonstrated.

In contrast, in a different study of a first-year undergraduate linguistic module, formative assessment was taken forward by asking students to ‘adopt-a-word’. In this module a student chose a word and applied different linguistic methods for understanding the origins of the word, past and present meanings, in different contexts and in different geographic locations. For example, one student might choose the word ‘jab’. They would then explain the development of the word over time, in the field of boxing and its more recent meaning as ‘vaccine’. The students’ application of linguistic methods to analyse the word was assessed in a number of formative and graded tasks, such as presentations and peer-reviewed essays and submitted in a portfolio of work. This task gave space for them to use the theories and tools provided in lectures and study materials rather than take up what the tutor had told them and recite it. In Biesta’s (2017) terms, the tutor ‘summoned’ the students to take their learning forward, rather than this depending on the tutor’s elucidation.

To some extent, the curriculum design gave opportunities for the students to be experts on their adopted concept and more knowledgeable in the specifics of this than the tutor, thus in some way disrupting traditional tutor–student power dynamics. Opportunities were created for students to articulate their knowledge during seminar tasks and student presentations, thus providing them with natural topic-based talking points and enticing them deeper into the topic. Importantly, student experiences of these different formative assessment tasks were quite different, with the first acting to limit student’s use of their personal experiences and contexts and thus their engagement and contributions to the module, while the second acted to invite students to use their personal experiences and contexts to enrich their understanding in ways that elicited strong engagement.

Nevertheless, in relation to a decolonising agenda, more research would be needed to explore the extent to which the pedagogic relations were deeply troubled, or the curriculum problematised. The emphasis was purely on student centredness and active learning, and there was not an acknowledged critique of education. The insights from this case study only hinted at recognising the politics of education, which seems a critical element in any efforts for formative assessment to work in any way towards decolonisation. With these caveats, we now turn to a concluding discussion of a possible agenda for formative assessment to support efforts towards decolonisation.

OPENING TOWARDS A DECOLONISING AGENDA

We are far from suggesting any magic bullets that could suddenly make formative assessment a mechanism to ‘transform’ higher education. We are highly aware both of the power of assessment and the ways that formative assessment has been harnessed in a mechanistic fashion. We are also aware that calls for
decolonisation can result in largely tokenistic responses (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016a), that do little to disturb how higher education continues to reproduce social inequalities, privileging particular knowledges while misrecognising, and indeed erasing others – a process that De Sousa Santos (2007) calls epistemicide.

We now build on the previous discussion to outline some starting points. What we are proposing is in line with Foucault’s (1991, p. 76) call to make ‘visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant’. In other words, by questioning practices that are often taken for granted, education may open spaces for dialogue about what is going on as a particular, historically contingent set of social practices. This echoes Ball (2019), who calls on us to re-imagine education in a way that ‘places critique at its centre and which rests on the contingency of power and truth and subjectivity’ (p. 134).

The first point therefore is about resisting assessment itself as a ‘historical constant’, and to illuminate instead its historical contingencies. This needs an open acknowledgement of the problematics of assessment and its power relations, including the centrality of professional judgement, rather than obscuring this at an institutional level through overly technical and positivistic definitions of assessment processes and practices.

Recognition at an institutional level of the complexities of assessment potentially allows its social practices to be discussed more openly as part of lecturers’ engagement with their students, their positioning within their assessment community and their disciplinary field. This kind of reflexive engagement will already be happening across many different fields of higher education – and is integral to feminist pedagogies in particular – but may create space for questions about what counts as knowledge in a particular field, and whose knowledge counts. In other words, at a disciplinary level, this may open into productive discussions about how knowledge is constructed within different disciplines, the processes and practices through which the authority of these knowledges has been accrued, and potentially also how these have changed – illuminating their historical contingencies and provisional character. While recognising this as far from ‘revolutionary’, we argue for this to be central to formative assessment practices with a decolonising edge.

This practice of self-critique builds on the arguments of those working for more ‘sustainable’ assessment practices (Boud & Molloy, 2013), by echoing their call for formative assessment to go beyond ‘feedback’ and attend more widely to the curriculum itself. Integral to their arguments is a concern for students’ active engagement. In a similar way, although with a more political edge, student engagement is clearly critical to any efforts towards decolonising higher education. This might seem to resemble the familiar mantras of ‘active learning’ or ‘student-centred learning’, but dialogic/constructivist learning practices can still be instrumentally harnessed into what Biesta (2009) calls ‘learnification’ – where gaining qualifications is all that counts – rather than also opening up engagement with the politics of knowledge and its production. This will depend on the tutor’s framing of teaching activities, both within activities and in their assessment – through, for example, the incorporation of a specific learning outcome that calls for student reflection on how the curriculum and its knowledges relates to a
student’s own experiences. Along with learning outcomes that ask students to engage in theoretical and methodological critique, this can formalise an important opening for student voice and commentary in ways that do not overlook the power relations of assessment, and the production of both student and tutor subjectivities through these relations.

Finally, alongside these openings for student voices, broadening the theoretical lenses drawn upon to consider pedagogic practices beyond those of teaching and learning is vital to support understandings of the contingencies of knowledge production and the politics and power relations of education itself. For the mammoth task of decolonising higher education, it would seem productive to bring together discussions of formative assessment with studies of higher education that attend to its power relations (Ball, 2019; Pryor & Crossouard, 2008), its socio-material and discursive complexities (Danvers, 2018; Gourlay, 2017; Gravett, 2020), go beyond modern tropes of student empowerment and agency (Nieminen et al., 2021), and more openly embrace different ways of understanding and doing. We hope this chapter has contributed to these endeavours in a modest way, and to have at least started a conversation between these different fields of literature. Recognising the ambition of the overall task however, more research is also needed into higher education practices—particularly assessment—to help unsettle how these too often continue to reproduce classed, gendered and racialised difference. This includes the need to research student perspectives as part of efforts to develop formative assessment practices attuned to efforts to decolonise higher education.

REFERENCES


