**Title: Taking Foucault seriously in educational assessment: a case study in South African Education**

**Abstract**

Assessment policy reform has led to the adoption of a “participatory” framework of assessment in South African higher education. Using a Foucauldian theoretical lens, this article explores the relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control. Empirical evidence is drawn from assessment practices observed in certain lectures in a South African University and interviews with lecturers. Data is analysed through a Foucauldian lens wherein he forges a connection between disciplinary power, control and regulation (Foucault, 1980). The paper then describes the technologies of disciplinary power that play out within the participatory assessment practices and demonstrates what these technologies of power do to assessors and students when they become involved in it. The paper argues that participatory assessment in some respects epitomizes progressive educational themes yet, when studied with an eye toward power reveals deep contradictions and paradoxes.

**Keywords**

*Participatory assessment; disciplinary power; higher education; Michel Foucault; Panoptic power*

**Introduction**

This article explores the relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control. It particularly reaffirms the use of Michel Foucault’s theory on disciplinary power to provide an interpretation of this relation. Employing a theoretical framework which is grounded in a conception of power based on the work of Michel Foucault (1977), the paper highlights some of the tensions evident in *participatory* assessment practices in a South African University.

Postmodernism and its ancillary wave of radical changes such as progress in information technology have called for a fundamental paradigm shift in the philosophy, structure, and contents of educational policies worldwide (Mockler, 2004). In line with this, assessment policy reform has been a common trend on both international and local levels, resulting in significant implications for practice (Chisholm and Wildeman, 2013; Berry and Adamson, 2011). In traditional processes of assessment, the assessor was typically seen as a detached ‘eye’ and viewed the testing event from an objective distance, outside the universe of the person assessed (Dikli, 2003). That distance was seen as vital to assuring the objectivity of scores awarded. Assessment traditionally was regarded as the sole responsibility of the educator, consisted of marks and tests alone, was treated as a once-off test or examination and relied heavily on the awarding of scores (Geyser 2000, 5). In terms of power relations, traditional processes of assessment were accompanied by a fundamental element of domination between assessor and assessed.

The behaviourist perspective has been criticized on account of its preoccupation with *measurement* rather than *learning* itself (Gipps, 2011). A mass of recent empirical work concurs that assessment practices which follow the principles of behaviourism focus on the product and ignore the process of learning, thereby de-contextualising learning (e.g. Black & Harrison, 2001; Barootchi & Keshavarez, 2002; Orsmond et al., 2002; Coffey, 2003; Lee & Gavine, 2003; Waddell, 2004; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005; James, 2006; Lambert & Lines, 2000; Wilson, 2005; Gardner, 2006; Earl, 2003; Chisholm and Wildeman, 2013). On account of their belief that learning is an active social process, which builds on previous knowledge, experience and skills, scholars have drawn strong links between assessment and the constructivist model (e.g. Black et al., 2006; Wilson, 2005; Banks, 2005; Clarke, 2005; James, 2006; Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002; Lutz and Huitt, 2004). From a constructivist perspective, the notion of assessment is broadened to include methods that are more ‘dynamic’ and “authentic”, catching the formative notions of the learner in action, rather than merely trying to measure in a de-contextualised way, what has been learnt (Gipps, 1999). The magnitude of the constructivist influence on assessment is evident in the literature: in fact, it appears to have revolutionised the character of assessment (Shephard 2000, 1).

The constructivist approach to assessment is accompanied by a different set of power relations. It displaces the traditional element of domination of the assessed by the assessor, and offers in its place, more egalitarian roles (Lutz and Huitt, 2004). Recognition is given to the role of both assessor and assessed as equally important *participants* in the highly complex context of learning. The learner takes on a new empowered role as a critical assessor, moving from being a: “…*passive, powerless, often oppressed, subject who is mystified by the process to an active participant who shares responsibility in the process, practices self-evaluation, reflection, and collaboration, and conducts a continuous dialogue with the teacher* (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996, 7)”. Similarly, the assessor moves from the traditional dominant position in the relationship and takes on a role of mentor or coach who provides opportunities for the learners to use what they already know in order to understand new material (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996). The literature on participatory assessment centralises learner-centeredness. The argument is that learner-centred tasks such as group work, discussion, and learner presentations, give students greater access to public discourse and one another (Hallinan, 1989; Stodolsky, 1988; Bossert, 1977; Metz, 1978, cited in McFarland, 2001).

The South African education system has not been exempt from global influences: its assessment trajectory mirrors international trends in its move from “behaviourist” to “constructivist” approaches. When South Africa became a democracy in 1994, it began a process of transforming its historically “flawed” educational system (Wilmot 2005, 1). The White Paper on Education and Training (DoE 1995, 17) expresses such a vision. One of the policies introduced, in the hope of transforming the education system, was Outcomes-based Education. Within the outcomes-based framework, assessment is characterised by democratic, collaborative and self-directed inquiry. These policies envisage empowerment through learners becoming self-regulating and active participants in their own learning (DoE, 2000). The University of Johannesburg, like other higher education institutions in South Africa, has developed its Assessment Policy (2017) using the principles, definitions and interpretations which are based on the conceptual frameworks developed by South African legally constituted bodies, namely, the NQF (National Qualifications Framework) and SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority) and the Council for Higher Education (CHE), including the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and the Department of Higher Education (DHET). In consideration of the policy developments in Higher education in South Africa, there is a commendable effort that has gone into transforming power imbalances that existed in past teaching learning and assessment practices.

A significant body of recent research focuses on the impact, in practice, of policies directed at transforming power imbalances (Spaull, 2015). While useful insight has emerged from these studies, they predominantly focus on the macro-level of practice in South Africa. The way in which lecturers interpret and enact power relations at the micro level, offers a unique contribution to the much needed picture of educational change in South Africa. However, very little research energy is in fact dedicated to this end, indicating a gap in the literature. This paper works to close this gap by generating the problematic of power in *participatory* assessment practices in higher education. The current study adopted a qualitative approach in recognition of the possibilities that it provides for a deeper understanding of the power relations that accompany assessment practice. The study was conducted at the University of Johannesburg, located in the suburbs of a very large, metropolitan city (Johannesburg) in South Africa, with a human population numbering in the millions.

The significance of this paper lies in its contribution towards an understanding of power relations in *participatory* assessment practices in higher education. Moreover, this paper contributes to such understanding from a unique empirical base: it shows how power relations are central in the micro-level enactment of pedagogy. An understanding of power relations in pedagogy enables new points of intervention to be explored. It also has the potential to make a substantial contribution to educational theory, policy, and practice. With that said, the aim of this paper is both diagnostic and critical. Through recourse to empirical data this study diagnoses a problem with newly introduced assessment practices in South African universities in order to critique their purportedly progressive aims.

A compelling approach to examine the micro-practices of power in assessment was found in the work of Foucault (1977). Foucault encourages the examination of how knowledge and power effect the constitution of our selves (Hoy 1986, 12-13). Foucault’s argument is that an analysis of the relations between knowledge and power provides awareness of the manner in which they constitute our subjectivities. Such awareness helps us to “challenge” and possibly “transfigure” these subjectivities by strategically rupturing the very mechanisms that lie at the root of their creation, namely the relations of power (Harwood, 2006, 122). In Hoy’s (1986, 7) words, we would allow ourselves to “*think and act differently*”.

Foucault (1977) argues for the study of power at the extremities of the social body on account of the fact that important action occurs in the everyday relationships in which people and groups experience power. Foucault (1977) offers a conception of power which *demonstrates* how the power relations inherent to pedagogy govern and regulate bodies. From Foucault’s (1977) perspective, power is not simply the imposition of one will on another. Its subtleties and nuances are taken into account in a way that acknowledges that there is much more going on than the imposition or reproduction of broader societal power relations. In applying Foucault’s theory of productive power to assessment a perspective that accentuates fluidity and change is suggested. Using a method derived from Foucault’s work, this paper attempts to unveil the technologies of power within the micro-practices or everyday experiences of lecturers and their students in participatory assessment. There are two stories that work concurrently in this paper: a local study of assessment in university lecture rooms, and a discursive study of the value of a Foucauldian analysis of power for new assessment practices in South Africa. Foucault's analysis of power provides a method for a study of power operating in *participatory* assessment practices. In turn, the study of power offers an analysis of the patterns of power currently determining lecturers’ and students’ experiences of participatory assessment and constructing their images of self, others, and the world. In presenting such an analysis, we can contemplate change.

Three key questions guide this study: 1) What kind of power relations exist within participatory assessment practices? 2) Is it possible for lecturers to act and think differently about their assessment practices? 3) How can lecturers create openings in assessment which will allow their students to grow and develop?

**Materials and Methods**

Research in the field of education appears to be now dominated by qualitative studies, reflecting a positive response to the earlier gap voiced by several scholars. There has been a shift from the quantitative focus of the 1900’s which looked largely at behavioural components of pedagogy, while qualitative studies were given minimum attention. The current study adopted a qualitative approach in recognition of the possibilities that it provides for a deeper understanding of the power relations that accompany assessment practice. The study was conducted at the University of Johannesburg, located in the suburbs of a very large, metropolitan city (Johannesburg) in South Africa, with a human population numbering in the millions.

The questions and concerns raised in this paper are addressed through qualitative data generated from two primary sources. The first data source is video observations conducted within the lecture rooms of three lecturers who taught Communication Skills to students, pursuing a national diploma in Engineering. The second data source is interviews which were conducted with the lecturers who reviewed the videos and discussed their actions. The key participants in this study were three lecturers and their respective students. They are given pseudonyms: Mary, Jill and Thom. Observations were conducted during the Communication Skills lecture periods weekly, over a total period of three months. Although there were many lectures that were primarily teaching-based, these were included in the observation. Transcripts that dealt more specifically with assessment issues, were given a stronger focus. The size of the classes varied slightly, with an average of about 50 students, per class. Although a small sample limited any possibility for generalizability, this case study research dug deeper and looked more broadly than would be conceivable with some commonly used quantitative methods. Data which was reduced from video-recorded observations and interviews with the lecturers resulted in the identification of themes and “concepts” (Bazeley, 2009). When clear themes were evident from the analysis of the data, an attempt was made to determine, in a more contextualised way, the object of the particular practice of power, the specific way in which the technique of power was enacted, the direction of the exercise of power, and any reactions or consequences evident. The themes in this paper are therefore suggestive of the configurations of power inherent in *participatory* assessment practices at the university, and the kinds of subjects it produced.

Foucault’s (1977) notion of disciplinary power, and its operation in the *Panopticon*, is used as the main method to examine how power works in everyday situations of participatory assessment at the University of Johannesburg. Foucault (1980) describes disciplinary power as circulating rather than being possessed, productive and not necessarily repressive, existing in action and functioning at the level of the body. Foucault (1980) argues that disciplinary power often operates through ‘*technologies of self’*, that is, individuals are active in their own subjection. He points out, that unlike the sovereign power of earlier periods, disciplinary power functions at the level of the body: “*In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives* (Foucault 1980, 39) (emphasis added)”. Foucault (1980) elaborates on the invisibility and pervasiveness of disciplinary power in modern society: “*The eighteenth century invented, so to speak, a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body rather than from above it*”.

Central to Foucault’s (1977) notion of disciplinary power, is his description of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. This was a system of surveillance originally designed with penal institutions in mind, but that has become a metaphor for the much broader and subtle intrusion of observation and record-keeping techniques into more and more areas of social life (Foucault 1977, 200-209; Foucault, 1980). The basic idea of the panopticon is straightforward: a central tower or structure has windows on all sides, and it is in turn surrounded by a ring of cells occupied by the inmates, the open sides facing inward. Observers can look out in any direction, at any time, to see what any inmate might be doing. Furthermore, since the inmates cannot see into the central observation tower, every window or observation point does not, in fact, need to be staffed all the time; the possibility of being observed has a deterrent effect even when inmates are not in fact being observed. And, still further, as inmates become accustomed to this environment, and to the routine of assuming that they are being observed at any/every time, it becomes less important for the observation tower to be staffed at all; the structure of the environment is what exerts control, as people internalize changes to their habits and movements without remembering the original circumstances that necessitated them. The panoptic condition becomes part of the identity of an inmate (“*a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy*” (Foucault 1977,200)). Foucault argues that with practice, the panoptic mechanisms of surveillance tend to become more pervasive: for example, few people even notice any longer how frequently they are monitored through partially hidden video cameras (from the bus, to the bank, to the store, to the parking lot, to the elevator). This is one of the central themes of Foucault’s (1977) book, *Discipline and Punish*: that as the mechanisms of surveillance and control become subtle and ‘humane’, they become more extensive; they actually become more controlling in their effects, but with less complaint. Foucault’s (1977) work goes on to draw interesting parallels between the “school” and the “Panopticon”. Speaking about the ‘school’ as instrumental in defining relations within the institution and in the classroom, Foucault (1977, 202) highlights its creation of certain subjectivities, as well as the way in which it organizes space and time according to particular discourses. His ideas suggest that classrooms are very similar to the Panopticon in architecture.

In terms of Foucault’s (1977) ideas on panopticism, architecture is regarded as integral to political power. Burbules (1997, 4) highlights Foucault’s point that the panopticon “is not a simple physical structure, machine or spatial arrangement” - but “a way of life.” He cites Foucault’s idea that: As people become more visible, the omnipresent circumstances that observe and record their lives become less visible. The idea is conveyed that, as people accept that they are being watched, they change their habits. Foucault (1980) argues that the panopticon is aimed at the generation of self-surveillance by the people being observed within the tower. He speaks below of the precise panoptic surveillance carried out through the watching of guards by each other: “*You have an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust because there is no absolute point. The perfected form of surveillance consists in a summation of malveillance* (Foucault, 1980, 158)”. As Foucault puts it, the guards are not being watched only for what they do wrong; more importantly, they are being watched for what they do right. Multiple actions in this analysis support Foucault’s ideas on panoptic power.

Foucault’s concept of *disciplinary* power is persuasive for the purposes and aims of my study because it explicitly helps me to shift my analysis of power from the ‘macro’ realm of structures and ideologies to the ‘micro’ level of the bodies of students and teachers. Foucault’s conception of the Panopticon provided me with a valuable framework which is cognisant of the silent and subtle role the structures of the school and the classroom play, in defining classroom interaction. Recent studies also make a compelling argument for the use of Foucault’s (1977) model of panoptic discipline when investigating the micro-practices within school settings. For example, Nemorin (2017) and Taylor (2014) were, through Foucault’s (1977) model of panoptic discipline, able to reveal a range of surveillance processes at play within the school setting. Foucault’s tool box of concepts helped these researchers to illustrate how forms of disciplinary power were “encountered and experienced” by a range of stakeholders within the school context. Similarly, Gore (2002, 5) derived a set of “coding categories” from Foucault’s work, to identify the “micro-level techniques of power” in play in her study.

Compelled by this research, I use Foucault’s (1977) model of panoptic discipline as a means to identify points of departure from panoptic modes of surveillance in participatory assessment practices in higher education. Therefore, using panoptic constructs, the following issues within *participatory* assessment practices are explored: What forms of discipline does *participatory* assessment authorize? Where and how is this discipline applied? What educational opportunities does it foreclose? What suggestions are made by participatory assessment about the movements of individuals? In my endeavour, I listened to the voices within the struggles and searched for what they wanted to say. Rather than exploring the individual attitudes, beliefs, and motivations behind the struggles, these factors are explored as a collective- specifically examining how and why they worked.

This research project adheres to the basic ethical principles of scientific research as outlined by Terre Blanche et al. (2006). The first principle is autonomy and respect for a person’s dignity. Each of the volunteer participants (lecturers) filled in a consent form in which they expressed their voluntary consent to participate in the research project. The consent form ensured utmost confidentiality, an aspect that was reiterated verbally at the start of the interview process. The second principle is that of non-maleficence (ibid. 67): the lecturers were reassured that no harm would come to them during the research project. The third principle beneficence, was not applicable to this research project as no risks were evident. The principle of equality and fairness was treated with seriousness and every effort was made to uphold this principle (ibid. 67).

**Results**

In this section, I present an analysis of problems, of problématiques (Rabinow, 1984) within the phenomenon of participatory assessment. These “problems” are presented through a deconstruction of critical discourses drawn from the assessment experiences of the participants as a whole. It should be borne in mind that it was not my intention to find solutions to these “problems”. Rabinow (1984, 343) cites Foucault’s view of this complexity in genealogical work: “…*you can't find the solution for a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people*”. Following a Foucauldian philosophy, my perspective of “problems” does not imply that methods, techniques and processes in participatory assessment are bad, but that they may be “dangerous”. My inquiry therefore does not try to unearth any concealed meaning. It does not work to provide options for freeing ourselves from the dominant ideology. Instead, as everything is “dangerous”, this paper problematizes participatory assessment in the present, using history as a resource.

The analysis revealed that the assessment practices conducted in the classrooms of the three lecturers who participated in this study, consistently took on an ambiguous character. Three patterns of struggles were identified and are used as principle organisers in this section of the article: *1. Forging a new identity: safe versus risky roles; 2. Accountability: learning versus measurement and 3. Outward performances: a disguise of inner struggles.* This is followed by a discussion on Panoptic power in action.

1. *Struggles with a new identity: safe versus risky roles*

The analysis illustrates that all three lecturers Mary, Jill and Thom experienced considerable struggles in their attempts to integrate the expected new assessment subjectivities into cohesive forms. A very clear struggle that all three lecturers experienced was that of being caught between the conflicting subjectivities of “safe” and “risky” roles as assessors. From the spectrum of lectures that Mary presented, it was noted that she only focused on peer-assessment activities in two lecture periods. Despite reflecting a longer plan (of four periods) for peer-assessment in the Learning Guide for her module, Mary deviated from this plan and eventually administered two written traditional tests instead of the scheduled peer-assessments. In an interview with Mary, she explained that the “*peer assessments were taking up too much of time*” and that she needed “*to get marks before the end of the semester*”. In the two lecture periods that she dedicated to participatory forms of assessment, Mary states: “*I made a concerted effort to nurture my students into the new culture of assessment*”. In the first lecture she informed her students that she would be using peer-assessment strategies and explained to them the importance of making “*responsible judgments about each other’s’ work*”. Mary also made certain changes in terms of the classroom dynamic: she asked her students to move to a peer they preferred to work with. What followed, was what Mary described in an interview as a “sense of disorderliness in the lecture room”. Video material showed that students seemed to take up more casual seating positions with their peers, often sitting on top of desks or on the floor. In addition, the noise levels in the venue increased as students chatted to each other on account of the peer-dynamic of the task. There were often bursts or shrieks of laughter, which caught Mary’s attention and disapproval (which she made reference to, in the interview). Mary confirmed in an interview after viewing the video footage that she was “*flustered by the heightened student activity*” and she felt uncomfortable with the “*new atmosphere of boisterousness*” that had set in the lecture room. She walked around the lecture room several times, repeatedly asked her students to “*become more orderly*” and to “*work more quietly*”.

Mary’s engagement with the students related mostly to matters of bringing students to some standard of “*order*”. In the events that followed, Mary showed visible signs of an increasing sense of frustration from her repeated, unsuccessful attempts to get her students to become more orderly. She commented in an interview that she felt the need to “*control*” her students because “*they were becoming increasing impossible…*”. In the second peer-assessment lecture that was scheduled in Mary’s teaching, a similar pattern of behaviour played out. On reviewing this particular video clip, Mary explained that “*it is difficult to be a facilitator*… *I feel that my students need structure*…*they don’t have the skills to figure things out themselves*…*they need someone to be in charge of the lecture*…” One got the sense that Mary was trying to forge a new identity of “facilitator” in her assessment endeavour, but her efforts were diverted by the stronger pull towards her traditional role of lecturer “in charge”. On finding the new role of facilitator “risky” in that it led to her loss of control of her students, Mary opted to revert to the “safe role” that she had established with traditional practices of assessment.

Jill’s practice reflected a similar pattern of identity struggles. She explained in her interview that she “*had ambitious plans*” to conduct peer-assessments over two lectures, but “*could not see them to completion*” and that she resorted “*eventually*” to traditional method of “*testing*” in its place. Video material showed that in Jill’s class, there was a concentration of peer activity particularly at the beginning of the lesson; a thinning out of peer activity towards the middle of the lesson and a diminishing appearance towards the latter segments. Jill initiated her peer assessment activity with a discussion on the task requirements and explained what she expected of her students. On reviewing the video material, she commented that the students were required to assess the work of the person sitting next to them. It was observed that she used the physical space in the lecture room, differently from Mary. She explained in the interview that she “*did not allow*” her students to move around the lecture room during the peer assessment task, as “*things would become too chaotic*”. Jill even threatened to stop the activity if students did not cooperate with her: “*well if you guys can’t do this in an orderly way, I’m going to have to stop it…. Ok*? ….” . Video footage showed that Jill’s class became rowdier, on account of the conversations that the peer assessment brought forth. Jill walked around the room, watching the students. Students raised a few questions which appeared to revolve around gaining clarity around how they should “award marks” to their peers. Jill explained how marks should be awarded. Two students expressed a dissatisfaction with their peer’s marking. One student called it “unfair” and the other asked the lecturer to “*re-mark*” his task. Jill responded as follows: “*this is not the point of peer-assessment… look at the criteria again please….and try your best to give your peer the correct mark*”. In the interview, Jill confirmed the suspicion that she was “*frustrated and irritated*” by such a request. During the interview, Jill explained that she felt the “*need to deviate*” from the participatory assessment plan with which she initially laid out in her plan (Learning Guide). She said that she was “struggling” with the new “*expectations and demands of assessment*”. As she stated, “*it’s so hard to keep a focus on prepping students for the exam, and still doing peer assessment… you need so much patience…I don’t know if I have the time or the energy…. the old style is so much easier….I give them the test and they do it*!..” Like Mary, Jill seemed to be struggling with the demands and risks of losing control brought on by the new role as assessor. Her comments and actions point to her preference for the “safer” role she was traditionally accustomed to.

As with Mary and Jill, Thom also deviated from his scheduled plan of two peer-assessment tasks. In the one peer assessment lecture that he did go through with, Thom explained to me in an interview that he “*wanted to create a positive peer-learning atmosphere, but my student’s distracted me*…*threw me*…*from my plans*”. He went on to explain that he expected this response in a way: “*this was not unexpected*… *this is new to all of us*…*its natural to resist*”. As the activity progressed, a sense was conveyed that Thom was not pleased with events in the classroom. In the interview after he had reviewed the video footage, Thom confirmed that he felt “*frustrated*” by the high level of “*disruption*” brought on by the peer engagement. Thom seemed to adopt a different assessor stance from the other two participants. Unlike Mary and Jill who walked around their venues, Thom remained throughout the lecture in a fixed position at the front of the lecture room. Thom explained in the interview that he felt he had “an advantage” in this position because he “*had a bird’s eye view of everything*”. He explained that he was more comfortable being “*outside of the discussions*” and that he wanted to “*give students freedom*” to enjoy this new mode of learning and being assessed. Thom often raised his voice at the class, requesting “*order*”, as he stated, “*you guys over there, you need to control your noise*”. The peer-assessment activity, which was in Thom’s terms, “*somewhat rowdy*” continued until the end of the period. Thom remained at his desk at the front of the class the entire time. He commented in the interview following a review of the clip, that he was “*pleased with the way the peer activity had panned out*”. I came to understand from Thom’s further responses in the interview that his experience with participatory assessment was far more complex than it seemed on the surface. For one, in a peculiar way, Thom was reluctant to have me attend any more of his classes, and when I queried this he replied: “*I thought I presented a very good peer assessment class for you last week, and that you have all the data you need*”. Another peculiarity was that Thom did not continue with peer-assessment strategies as he had planned. As in the case of the two other lecturers, Thom returned to administering traditional tests perhaps. He mentioned in the interview that he found the new practice “*strange and uncomfortable*”.

As can be seen from the participants’ behaviour and interview responses, the new assessment activity brought into all of the lecturers’ classrooms a distinctive amalgam of apprehension and anxiety. It was clear that the peer-assessment activities, in all three cases, culminated in a complete loosening up or rupturing of order and structure of the lessons. The themes and concepts concentrated at this point suggest a neat splitting of the ethos of the lessons into two segments: the one characterized by strong structure and smooth lesson mobility - the other by disorder, uncertainty and tension in lecturer-student relations. The issue of why all three strongly structured and productive lessons suddenly loosened up in such a strange way was perplexing. In examining the possible contingencies to this situation, an interesting paradox is presented.

A paradox emerges from the struggles the lecturers faced in incorporating and adjusting to new assessment practices. It was apparent that the unique social demands of the new assessment practices interfered with the order and formality that the lecturers had established in their traditional classroom arrangements. All three lecturers found the power relations brought on by their new roles as assessors, rather intense. They subsequently rejected these practices for those that secured their dominance over the relationship between themselves and their students. The impression was conveyed that the lecturers commonly struggled to embrace a new subjectivity of “intermediary” in their roles as assessors. This role comes across as an extreme to their existing (or “old”) subjectivity of lecturer “in charge”. In the face of the risk posed by the new roles, all three lecturers opted for the familiarity and safety of their traditional roles – a choice which ensured their positions of being in control. This paradox makes apparent the relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control. The lecturers appeared to become part of the process by which they disciplined their students, and they themselves were controlled by the same forces (Foucault, 1977). From a Foucauldian perspective, such displays of behaviour can be seen as forms of social control, and perhaps likened to a two-edged sword; the students are controlled by the lecturers, but both lecturers and students are controlled and shaped by other forces in ways much subtler and difficult to detect.

1. *Accountability: learning versus measurement*

The analysis revealed that all three lecturers and their students emphasised work that scored in some way towards the accumulation of “*marks*”. Understandably, some activities in the classroom do count for marks while others don’t. It is also natural that students react more seriously towards those that do count. What made the responses in this analysis peculiar was the concern students expressed about the high-stakes value placed by the lecturers on the activities. This is clearly illustrated in Mary’s case and further exemplified in Jill’s classroom.

Mary’s lesson reflected several characteristics of participatory assessment: She shows encouragement and support saying “*let’s be positive*”. She also demonstrated a keenness to engage in a co-participatory relationship with her students: “*we… together*”, “*we all judging*”. When certain students complained about the “*unfairness of their marks*” Mary gave them an opportunity for “*extended negotiation”*. One got the sense that Mary’s practices were overtly democratic and true to the spirit of the participatory assessment philosophy. However, the analysis was at the same time suggestive of other intersecting and co-implicated discourses. From events that took place later, I came to learn that although Mary offered her students an option of “*extended negotiation*”, she did not actually make herself available for this. From the discussions I had with students, they made it known that they had not engaged in any discussion with the lecturer after their peer-performances. Understandably, as this lesson continued some time later, it was quite possible that Mary might have forgotten about the plans for extended negotiation with the students. In an interview following the review of this video clip, Mary made known her anxiety about “*getting marks in*”. She spoke about how important student’ marks were in the “*grand scheme of the semester mark*” and that “*time is my enemy*…*we only have fourteen weeks*”. Mary conveyed the sense that the production of “*marks*” was a strong priority for a lecturer. Thus while Mary expressed an intention of working in co-participatory ways with her students, in reality, she sustained a polarized relationship with her students, returning very quickly to her distinctively traditional role. At this point in the analysis the discourse of participatory assessment intersected forcefully with the discourse of “*marks*”, throwing the former completely off course.

Jill made repeated and explicit references to the “*examination*”, suggesting that it represented something of high value to her. For example, she states in class, “*guys…you must remember this for the exam hey*” and “*exams are around the corner, so pay attention to this*…”. In an interview after she reviewed the video clip, she stated: “*I have to get my marks sorted before the exam, I mean if my students don’t have enough opportunities for a proper semester mark, they may not get entry into the exam*….” From this perspective, the power produced from the discourse of “*examination*”, may have been put to positive effect by Jill, in that it provided a focus and sense of purpose to her teaching. The literature on participatory assessment supports this idea in that it speaks of the “examination” (Black, cited in Brookhart, 1999) as an aspect of assessing which retains a certain significance. However, the literature clarifies that it should not be the *only* aspect that determines whether a learner would pass or fail; it is should be given in conjunction with formative assessment on an on-going basis. Thus, while Jill’s references to the examination might have come across as regular to the functioning in any classroom, there were compelling illustrations of her treating it as an important *event* which was decisive in terms of passing or failing. As the example below illustrates, there were clear instances where Jill used the discourse of examination as a subtle strategy to control her learner-interest levels: “*Ah I know (emphasis) this stuff… I’m doing this for you! … And you need this for exams*…” In this situation the sacrificial appeal on Jill’s part is noted when she says, “*I am doing this for you, not for me*…*YOU need to pass this exam*…” Evidently, Jill used the exam to discipline her students into obedience. She projected it as a high-stakes event or a “need” only she could fulfil. In drawing attention to the personal sacrifice she was making for the students, she seemed to be manipulating them. Understandably, lecturers need to be creative about the ways in which they maintain learners’ interest levels in class activities. However, the act of holding learner-interest at the cost of learner freedom, can be perceived as dangerous.

A second paradox emerges: lecturers’ seemingly engaged in participatory assessment yet preoccupied with the task of awarding *marks*, over that of developing students’ human agency. We noted the concerted effort made by Mary, Jill and Thom to integrate their students into the new culture of peer assessment and the frustrations all three lecturers experienced in these endeavours. The lecturers appeared to be caught between conflicting subjectivities: one of dealing with students’ responses to the new methodologies with sensitivity, tolerance and the spirit of nurturing and another of being able to provide rigorous accounts or schedules of marks to the University. In the face of these conflicting forces, one can understand the lecturers’ rejection of participatory techniques for traditional methods of assessment. Perhaps they found it easier to use traditional testing methods -having practiced and experienced such trends in the past. Participatory assessment practices on the other hand might have come across not only as new and foreign, but far more demanding in terms of time and engagement.

The situation portrayed above, is not unusual in educational contexts. The literature suggests that summative assessment is often a predominant factor in current assessment practice - a situation difficult to avoid - given the current, stratified, nature of most education systems (Brookhart, 1999). Due to the fact that summative testing is difficult to escape, the literature suggests that the teacher takes on the duty of reducing possible negative effects that summative testing may have on learning (Brookhart, 1999). In this light, it was important to determine whether Jill attempted in any way to minimize the possible harmful effects of summative testing on her students’ learning. Apparently, things took this course in Jill’s classroom: she often gave her students typical answers they could reproduce in the examination. Jill was explicitly “*teaching to the test*” and made no apparent effort to reduce the negativity of such practice. Clearly, certain “external” forces of schooling (accountability) had subtly worked their way into the internal discourses of Jill’s classroom. Jill had, during the course of her lesson, moved away from learner-centred activities to teacher-centred tasks.

There was much evidence to suggest that all three lecturers attempted learner-centred assessments, but deviated from this goal, opting to return to lecturer-centred tasks. Understandably, they needed to regain control over access to discourse and it was an easier strategy to monitor their students’ behaviour. Alpert (1991) explains how this can easily happen in any teaching context. She notes that during lecturer-centred tasks, acts of open defiance are more observable, accentuated, and inappropriate, thereby incurring more severe sanctions from the lecturer (Alpert, 1991). In no way do I suggest that lecturer-centred tasks are better formats of teaching and assessment. What is argued here is that learner-centred tasks also have costs - they appear to diminish classroom control and create opportunities for students to breach and undermine class lessons. Hence, rather than claim that any one of these formats is better than others, this analysis has simply attempted to show the relationship that various formats of teaching and assessment have to learner opposition.

The emerging relations of power in this analysis suggest a duality: On an explicit level there was the suggestion of participatory relationships between the lecturers and students. Yet on an implicit level, the lecturer-student relationship came across as largely traditional. The power relations that emerged and the subjects that were formed in this analysis are reflective of the “non-egalitarian” and “asymmetrical” elements of power-relations Foucault (1980, 88-89) writes about.

The relation between participatory assessment practices in higher education and social control came to light in this part of the analysis through the metaphorical idea of “policing”. The forms of accountability that both lecturers and students experienced in the study showed that they were being policed. The social control took the form of covert and overt external expectations from the University and beyond, in terms of expected records of marks, expected norms for student and lecturer conduct, expected exemplifications of assessment competence (e.g. semester marks, examinations, etc.). There were clearly subtle indications that deeper concealed forces of power were at play.

1. *Outward performances: a disguise of inner struggles*

The analysis suggested a further set of power plays, which were indicative of deeper inner struggles with dangerous consequences. In all three participant’s experiences, new forms of assessing were started but never completed as planned, giving way to old practices of testing. In discussions with a group of students from the three classes, I came to learn that the peer work did not take place “normally”, occurring only when I was present in the classroom. A practice which drew particular attention was the verbal emphasis given by certain lecturers to the particular terms used within the new assessment approach. Jill often spoke in a louder tone of voice whenever she mentioned the word “assessment”. This pattern of verbal and non-verbal behaviour was also in evidence in interviews. There was a strong sense that Jill was literally drawing my attention to her interest in the new assessment practices.

Thom engaged in a peculiar behaviour of repeating the word “group-work” during his lectures. One of these episodes was when he stated, “*Er…please listen*… … *can you tell me by putting up your hand*… we’ve worked a lot in *groups*… remember last term there was a lot of *group-work*… also now there’s a lot of *group-work*… *so what 1 want to know just by putting your hands up if you got it right… what have you learnt most about group-work*… *what have you enjoyed what have you not enjoyed and what do you think group-work includes*?” In this short segment of his lecture, Thom mentioned the words “group/group-work” six times. Although these repetitions could simply be incidental, there were suggestions of deeper concealed forces of power at play.

The possibility existed that Thom and Jill were demonstrating (by repetition and emphasis) to an observer like myself, that they were fulfilling assessment policy expectations as assessors. There is an undeniable pressure that emerges from Policy discourses for lecturers to embrace change. By making obvious their compliance to participatory assessment practices, lecturers would be suggesting their professionalism and receptivity to change. From this perspective, one can see how the peer-activity might have been “forced” into the lesson to “window dress” to me, the external observer, that they were embracing change. The result was that the peer activities were seemingly conducted for my benefit and the whole “participatory assessment” experience was a part of a charade. The lecturers’ persistent “outward” attempts, to convey their acceptance of participatory assessment, certainly hint at the possibility of subtle but powerful forces of social control. This form of social control seems to exist as a complex form of internal pressure brought on by my role as observer. The lecturers’ peer- assessment practices then came down to a power play with me caught in the middle.

A third paradox emerges from analysis, revealing a trend where, when observed, the lecturers’ commonly set up the scene to show their openness to using participatory techniques of assessment. However, when they believed that they were not being observed, they reverted to their traditional practices of lecture-centred assessments and traditional testing. It is natural for any lecturer to want to be seen by their colleagues as progressive and pro-change. In this case, it may have been about bringing their assessment practices into line with the new participatory practices advocated in current curricular policy documents. My presence in the lecture rooms compounded this complexity in the sense that participants felt compelled to show me their receptivity to the changes currently advocated. From this perspective, all three lecturers’ “peer-work” comes across as a form of “window dressing”- it was for them, a tool to reflect (to an outsider’s gaze, such as that of mine) that they were progressive and open to participatory teaching/assessment methodologies. The paradox revealed is that the lecturers’ “showed” one thing but “did” the opposite in practice. This inconsistency can be seen as an outward manifestation of inner conflicting identities: lecturers experienced a push towards a progressive new role of facilitator/mediator/care-giver, yet succumbed to the *pull* back to the safety of their traditional practices.

**Discussion**

Many sites within the analysis were strongly suggestive of the technologies of Panoptic power that Foucault writes about. The following four patterns, are used as principal organisers of how power circulated in this site: 1. A concentration of surveillance accompanied the practice of participatory assessment; 2. Covert forms of surveillance deviated lecturers’ plans for assessment and 3. the physical classroom served as a significant site for the panoptic plays of power.

1. *A concentration of surveillance accompanied the practice of participatory assessment*

A noticeable concentration of surveillance, was opened up by the use of peer-assessment in all three lecturer’s practices. For one, a higher level of surveillance was conducted by lecturers in the form of observing behaviour and actions of students. The peer-assessment activities also necessitated higher levels of scrutiny and judgement on the part of the students of each other. In the respective peer-assessments, the students were expected to understand and make judgements of each other’s ideas. The new assessment routine seemed to expose students who were limited in their skills and knowledge or could not provide efficient feedback. The architectural structure of the lecturer’s “peer-assessment” experiences revealed important dimensions and limitations for their student’s freedom. While the structure of peer assessment seemed to offer many productive spaces for learning, it seemed to limit the sharing of information, the kind of knowledge that could be shared, and the communication between individuals.

Evidently, the same device that promised new opportunities for interaction as well as the exploration and sharing of new knowledge, also facilitated larger amounts of surveillance and documentation of students’ lives. Burbules (1997, 5) raises an interesting dilemma we face in educational contexts: One can avoid using such devices, in order to resist having our freedom compromised in one sense - but only at the expense of giving up the other kinds of freedoms and opportunities that those new technologies make available. Burbules (1997) raises an important point for this study: assessment that does not rely heavily on surveillance techniques, may have fewer implications for panopticism and more suggestions for freedom. However, the kind of freedom suggested above may only be gained by giving up new opportunities for learning offered by the new forms of assessment.

1. *Covert forms of surveillance deviated lecturers’ plans for assessment*

The analysis conveyed a distinctive sense that the lecturers’ behaviour was subject to a covert form of “external” surveillance. There was much adjusting and re-aligning of aims and purposes in their different activities, suggesting that lecturers were constantly engaged in a form of self-surveillance. Jill’s behaviour, in particular, suggested an intense awareness of the external gaze. She demonstrated this particularly during the video-recording of her lesson. Jill approached me at the back of the room and whispered “*are you getting everything, Cind?*” In a discussion that I had with Jill immediately after her lesson, she asked, “I hope you managed to get all that group-work?” At another point in this discussion, Jill mentioned the following: *I’m gonna be doing a huge group-work thing with my students, you’ll see lots of OBE stuff… please come*. While Jill’s apparent concern for my research implied her desire to cooperate with me, one got the implicit sense that it might have also had something to do with what was being recorded about her practices. Perhaps the hidden dimension to Jill’s “concern” was her desire for me to record as much of her new assessment practices as possible.

Foucault’s (1979) idea that the technologies of power, often disappear into the ideological frameworks of the institution, had resonance in this analysis. The lecturers seemed aware of being watched and so employed techniques of self-surveillance to comply with the expectations of the *external* gaze. The external gaze in their case could be constituted by the accountability lecturers faced in terms of university regulations? These gazes served as panoptic “guards” of the new assessment methodology. It could be argued that Mary, Jill and Thom were self-monitoring or conducting disciplinary actions upon their own bodies. This self-surveillance took place without any visible factors of control, giving support to Foucault’s (1979) idea that the technologies of power, often disappear into the ideological frameworks of the institution.

It was intriguing that Jill went to lengths to satisfy the expectations of an external gaze. This suggested that she had reconstituted herself as a conforming, successful practitioner of the participatory assessment philosophy. The analysis found that the university’s surveillance was so enveloping that even when there were no physical surveillance mechanisms present, lecturers’ practices were regulated. The lecturers appeared to display assessment practice in ways that would be regarded as ‘correct’ in assessment documentation. It seemed as though the surveillance system had created a context where the lecturers became an additional driving force of the external accountability system rather than governors of their individual potential. My presence as a possible representative of the new methodology was possibly also inherently panoptic. From this perspective, my role as “guard in the tower” of a new “will to truth” (participatory assessment) was a strong possibility. Thus, in an unintended way, through my well-intended research needs of observing lecturers’, together with the participants’ trust, I reinforced the strength of the accountability system.

1. *The classroom became a site for panoptic power.*

There was much evidence in this analysis to suggest that the physical classroom served as a significant site for the panoptic plays of power. The positions relative to their students, that lecturer’s adopted during their peer-assessment activities had a lot to do with the different plays of power in evidence. The arrangement of classrooms remained implicitly hierarchical in all three cases.

From various “externalized” positions, we saw the respective lecturers regulate activities in time and space. For example, during her group- assessment activity, Mary walked around the room from group to group, listening into activities without getting involved. In a subtle way, her role remained external. She opted to circulate among her groups of students surveying their work, instead of joining in the fun with them. Whereas she may have entered the world of the students, she preferred to adopt an external stance. Thom’s physical position in his class was also intriguing: for most of his assessment activity, he remained at a fixed position in the front of the classroom. Thom seemed to stand away from his students in a suggested position of authority. In a subtle way, Thom constructed a position of power relative to his students- that of being “higher” than them. The social system of both Mary’s and Thom’s classrooms may have worked to establish relationships and hierarchies. We acknowledged that such relationships are perhaps a natural part of any classroom and vital to the productive functioning of any lecturer. It could be argued that both Thom and Mary take on certain roles because they are fearful of the loss of control which can come with co-participatory roles. This point is vital in terms of participatory assessment. *Participation* in assessment suggests a state which depends on a reciprocal flow of communication. From the discussion above, it would seem that a true, communicative dialogue with equal giving is rather challenging to attain.

The technologies of power in existence at this site, often overlapped each other and occurred sequentially. The result was a set of conspicuous imbalances on the surface and oppositional discourses in existence beneath the surface, of assessment practice. In one dimension, there was the tension experienced by lecturers of embracing new and strange practices of teaching and assessment versus the pull towards the comfort zones of their traditional practices. In another dimension there was the tension of lecturers’ embracing progressive ideas about assessment versus their personal feelings of accountability in terms of fulfilling mark requirements to the University. In yet another dimension, there was the University’s expectation for lecturers’ to change to new methods of teaching versus lecturers’ personal beliefs and values about how this should happen. All of these experiences occurred against the background of strong personal circumstances and challenging contextual factors. True to Foucault’s ideas, this paper illustrates that at no stage were any of the sites in the study free of power. Foucault (1980, 141-2) argues that we cannot escape power: *It seems to me that power is* *'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it, that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in*... For these reasons, this study finds full support for Foucault’s (1977) view that power circulates and is in constant operation. This study therefore endorses Foucault’s (1977, 143) concept that we are always *“inside some disciplinary machine, always inside some net-like organization where we can be subjected to the effects of power and act as vehicles for its articulation”*.

**Conclusion**

Foucault’s insights on Panopticism have been invaluable in the goal of examining the power relations which existed within the participatory assessment practices of lecturers at University of Johannesburg. The power in participatory assessment at this site was found to exist primarily in its disciplinary form, underscoring intense contradictions and paradoxes. The lecturers’ experiences of p*articipatory* assessment practices were complicated by several power struggles, which moved them out of balance. The analysis showed the totalizing hold those in power can have over individual bodies and provided an understanding of how multiple realities operate upon bodies to render them as subjects.

While this paper recognises some of the “dangerous” ways that subjectivity is constructed within participatory assessment practices it acknowledges that we can never return to the traditional system of assessment. Nor can we use a form of participatory assessment that may liberate us from the panoptic effects of power. This paper does not use Foucault’s work to project an exclusively negative critique. Following Roth (1992), who advises of the danger of being “*seduced by the Panopticon thesis and concepts of total surveillance*”, this paper recognises certain restrictions. Roth (1992) cautions an over emphasis of the Panopticon metaphor. His point is that lecturer and student accountability is necessary, if we wish to make progress and not repeat our mistakes. This paper acknowledges Roth’s (1992) point, and in its treatment of power relations, does not intentionally obscure the positive effects of the participatory assessment approach by emphasising its negatives.

Following this inquiry, alternatives are indeed possible in participatory assessment. This paper advocates a vision of the role of *participatory* assessment as one which acknowledges the importance of relationship between the assessed and the assessor. For stronger coherence in participatory assessment, lecturers need to strategize aspects of their roles. Assessors need to value the relationships with students and create opportunities to not just listen but to actually hear their voices. For positive effect, lecturers need to be opportunistic in class and take advantage of learning moments – in this sense I mean “free moments” that occur spontaneously in classrooms that can create a special significance for learning. For lecturers, this entails judging the needs of the students and the situation and making the best judgment for it, even if this judgment may not meet the prescribed rules the lecturer has set out for the class or that have been established by tradition within the institution. The paper argues further that conscious attempts need to be made by assessors to question the notion of accountability and find ways to avoid being dominated by the “system”. Furthermore, assessors need to better understand the concepts of choice, voice, and multiplicity of roles within the discourses of participatory assessment.

In cognisance of Foucault’s (1979) view of power as *productive*, this paper does not suggest that we try to change the power relations in participatory assessment, nor should we see such formations as negative. Following Foucault’s philosophies this paper argues that we strive for a detailed understanding of power. This involves a better understanding of the concepts of choice, voice, and multiplicity of roles within the discourse of *participatory* assessment. It makes sense that in gaining knowledge of fragile points in our pedagogical practices, we may be able to intervene into the truths about participatory assessment. Although we may not be able to prevent our *participatory* assessment discourses from generating non-productive power, we can, actively cultivate an awareness of the dangers.

Foucault’s theory, model of Panopticism and method constructed for this study have been relevant and effective in the examination of power in participatory assessment practices. As a critical take-away point for lecturers in their practices of participatory assessment, this paper argues for a view of the self as engaged, open to possibilities, being mindful of hidden possibilities, and maintaining vigilance against oppressive power relations.

**Declaration of interest statement**

I declare no conflict of interest.

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