Intentionality in a creative art curriculum


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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Considering the effects of an imbalance between interpretation and intentionality in a creative arts curriculum

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Abstract

This paper highlights inadequacies of a creative arts curriculum that claimed to have been informed by postmodern theories, without careful consideration of how these might or should impact on teaching and learning interactions. In particular, the relationship between intentionality and interpretation addressed in this case study is of concern for educationalists in a postmodern world. At issue is how assessors’ interpretations are responsive to or balanced with student meaning making. Drawing from research conducted at a South African fine art department, the author considers whether a transfer of Barthes’ notion of author to student intentionality and reader to lecturer interpretation is a constructive framework for student learning. In the case studied, flat approaches to the post-structuralist ‘intentionality fallacy’ were found to further exacerbate unequal power dynamics, with detrimental effects on student learning. An argument is made for more ethically aware approaches to the balance between interpretation and intentionality by recognizing that it echoes the relationship between self and other.

Keywords: intentionality, interpretation, assessment, feedback, curriculum

Introduction

Much debated in the curriculum content of cultural studies, the subject of intentionality and interpretation has not been given as much attention in terms of teaching and learning in higher education (HE). Various modernist and postmodernist approaches differ considerably, and these inevitably inform lecturers’ notions, whether consciously or unconsciously. Of particular concern is how such ideas influence teaching, learning and assessment in creative disciplines, such as art, design, music, and creative writing.

In this paper, approaches to intentionality and interpretation in a fine art studio practice (FASP) curriculum and the effects of imbalance in this relationship on students’ learning experiences are examined. Whilst the particularities of this South African case can perhaps not be generalised, the relationship between intentionality and interpretation addressed in this case study is of concern for educationalists in a postmodern world. Informed by the conceptual alignment between critical theory’s emancipatory interest; current notions of the ‘work’ of HE; and contemporary art making, this paper draws from relevant arguments and theories in these fields.

Firstly, consideration is given to how HE studies and contemporary art intersect on the issue of agency and reflexivity. The research methodology of this project is then briefly outlined. The third section is a representation of the data analysis, divided
into findings relating directly to intentionality and interpretation. A crucial concern is the effects of imbalance of this relationship on student learning, which is explored in section four. Of concern is how the relationship between intentionality and interpretation reflects and models relationships between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Informed by such notion, the paper concludes with some suggestion for ways forward. If intentionality is approached as a critical tool (Hughes 1999), it can be utilized to empower the student-artist in his/her quest for meaning making (Freeman 2006). When balanced with interpretations of ‘multiple voices’ from lecturers and the student’s peers, such an approach to value judgments may allow an opening of ‘self’ to ‘other’ (McEvilley 1996), a pertinent concern in terms of the politics of representation and difference in societies facing similar challenges to post-apartheid South Africa.

1. Reflexivity in the relationship between intentionality and interpretation

Barnett (1994) urges university educators to adopt a conception of the ‘dialogical character’ of understanding, where they should ‘help students become aware of understandings that they possess but of which they are unaware’, so as to enable them to construct their own voice. According to Mezirow’s (1981,20) notion of transformative learning, such ‘critical consciousness... increases a crucial sense of agency over ourselves and our lives’. Barnett calls this ‘a process of becoming’, of enabling students to ‘come into themselves’. Fine art educator, Tom Hardy (2006), adds that the student in FASP should develop both a ‘personal voice’ and a critical language with which to speak it.

Through personal reason or what is called criticism, critical reflection (Mezirow 1981) or critical thinking (Brookfield 1995), the adult learner’s existing paradigms are challenged. An holistic understanding of criticality embraces knowledge, self and the world: what Barnett (1994) refers to as ‘critical being in the world’. For the position of criticality to be empowering, and truly emancipatory, it must be internalised and enacted in some way – it must be reflexive. In this conception, human intentionality is posited as having the potential to act both self-reflexively and critically within society.

Dewey (1916, in Brockbank and McGill 1999) contends that the essentials for learning are identical with the essentials of reflection: ideas are tested by the student through application so as to make meanings clear and to discover for his/her own self their validity. This emphasizes the need to engage the student’s personal stance in the learning process in order to enable him/her to take on the role of active agent, rather than passive receiver in society (Salmon in Mann 2001). For students to learn in ways that can be adapted and applied in novel circumstances, they must have some intentionality in the process (Billet 2006).

At the same time, social and cognitive experiences in education represent interdependent dimensions. The process of learning is shaped through interactions between social and individual contributions, yet with individuals playing a highly agentic role in those interactions. This suggests that for transformative learning to
occur there should be an interplay between the individual's meaning making and that of his/her peers and facilitator in the classroom.

*Interpretation and intentionality in artmaking*

The Critique or ‘crit’, the traditional method of assessment in FASP, by its very name could be presumed synonymous with such notions. However, many recent studies on this method indicate that this is often not the case (Percy 2003; Blair 2006b; Hardy 2006). What is often unexplored is how the two dominant streams of thought in Twenty and Twenty-first Century art criticism, modernist formalism and postmodernist discourse-interest, exert conflicting influences on approaches to intentionality and interpretation.

Modernism’s formalist approach is rooted in the Romantic tradition which desired to see the artwork as transcendentally free and beyond contextual influence. In this conception, the *form* or visual surface of the artwork alone is its *content*. McEvilley (1996) makes a number of relevant attacks against formalism’s continued omissions in terms of content and intentionality, with its claims that a ‘purely optical’ experience can account for the art experience. Indeed no justification is given for the separation of conceptual and aesthetic resonances of artwork. Instead McEvilley contends that it is impossible for any reception to exclude elements outside of the physical artwork, and that the artist’s intentions (even if explicitly denied by the critic) cannot be and, in fact, are never ignored. It is partly for this reason that Hal Foster termed postmodern art ‘anti-aesthetic’, to signal ‘that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question... the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart without ‘purpose’, all but beyond history’ (Schiralli 2002,61).

In fact, a postmodern cacophony of voices speak of how any act of representation is saturated with meaning and implied assumptions about ‘reality’, whether Marxist critics’ excavation of political meaning or feminist examinations for gendered assumptions. In this philosophical climate, *différence* replaces identity as the strategy for analyzing or ‘reading’ the subject or ‘text’. Informed by the postmodernist drive for the inclusion of what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) calls ‘little narratives’, which resist incorporation into totalizing histories of cultural representation, FASP students are encouraged to critically explore, develop and exercise their own ‘voices’ in their artmaking.

The shift from formalist ‘quality’ to neo-avant-garde ‘interest’ has been evidenced in the shift from medium-specific to discourse-specific practice in contemporary art (Foster 1996). Instead of art being unknowable and the artist’s process mystical and opaque as before, the postmodern artist is now seen as both subject to social and historical forces, and having ethical responsibilities in his/her image-making. Reflexivity is now considered essential to contemporary artmaking: artists are to extend their socially, politically and historically critical decisions to the physicality of the work and vice versa. Creative activity is no longer considered antithetical to analytical engagement (Freeman, 2006), but rather the artist is a ‘practical intellectual’ engaging actively in critical reflection (Dallow 2003).
At the same time, poststructural theories about the perception and reception of artworks, also inform how the social, historical and cultural context of artworks are assessed (Corner 2005). The artwork is seen as a readable ‘text’ instead of an unbridled experience. Challenges to the author’s claim of his/her intention in relation to the critic’s judgement, led to the ‘intentionality fallacy’ of the poststructuralists. In his essay ‘Death of the author’ (1967), Roland Barthes declares the intentions and biographical details of the author extraneous to the text, because they impose a limit to the uncovering of multiple layers of meaning. He places interpretative autonomy on the reader and suggests that such ‘critical reading’ allows for a balance of power and authority between the author and the reader. A direct transference of literary theory to art criticism may be uncomfortable because it may threaten to reaffirm modernist formalism’s imbalance of power in favour of the critic. Of concern to this paper, is whether a transfer of Barthes’ notion of author to student intentionality and reader to lecturer interpretation is a constructive framework for student learning.

2. Methodology

As tacit values, intuition and uncontested traditions influence assessment (Orrell in Taylor and McCormack 2005), the actuality of assessment processes become sites of research into the theory-in-use (Brockback and McGill 1999). Assessment reveals what the assessor values, transmitting not only what is espoused, but also an ‘act of cultural communication transmitting what the collective ‘we’ intends’ (Boud in Gordon 2004, 63). For this reason, data was collected that focussed on and provided different perspectives on assessment as used in the case studied.

Critical theory offers multi-levelled explanations of social events: the personal and interpersonal; the institutional; the structural, material, ideological and historical (Gibson 1986). Initially intending to conduct a comparative case study across institutions, I realized that a single case study would allow me to mine across these different levels, without sacrificing detail in the name of the general. I was informed by socio-psychological theories of critical discourse analysis, which views discourses as taking place within society, in the interplay between social situation, action, actor and societal structures (van Dijk 2001). Informed by such notions, I collected data from a single case; within the complex context of FASP at a South African HE institution; around the event of the formative assessment method (the Critique or ‘crit’); from a selection of diverse participants, through interviews and questionnaires with 70% of the lecturers, and journals and stories constructed by 11 of the 40 Third and Fourth Year students who represented varying levels of academic achievement. Because discourse is a communicative event, I analyzed social representations of the case studied, including conversational interactions, written texts, body language et cetera. This paper represents a central focus within a large research project (Belluigi 2007)

3. Interpretation of data: The relationship between interpretation and intentionality
Although in this representation of my findings, explorations around ‘intentionality’ and ‘interpretation’ are divided into two streams, these should not be mistaken as mutually exclusive. The issue of student intentionality is first considered, leading into a focus on issues to do with interpretation. The inclusion of student participation in giving feedback to their peers, and approaches to interpretation by the lecturers at this School are discussed. Attention is given to the effects of the practiced curriculum on student learning.

3.1 Student intentionality

When lecturers from this study were asked to indicate the level of importance they ascribed to the student’s commitment to making meaning, four out of five indicated this as important. Mezirow (1981) held that transformative learning will not occur without an investment in meaning making. Meaning making is directly linked to student intentionality, autonomy, creativity and critical thinking. One lecturer expressed in an interview that, ‘I very much believe as an art lecturer you are a facilitator, you are helping to facilitate the young artist’s vision and creativity’.

However what emerged was that the subject of authorship, intentionality and interpretation, and the impact of this relationship on FASP education had not been explicitly discussed by lecturers of this School. Analysis of data collected indicated that no shared understanding of ‘intentionality’ existed, possibly because the majority of lecturers had not engaged with this subject during their own FASP studies. The few familiar with the subject had been taught it from the perspective of reading and not making art.

Mostly student intentionality was broached in a crude, surface fashion, such as by asking students in crits ‘how conscious is that?’, or ‘is this your intention?’. ‘Intention’ here was meant as decision making. In one interview it was conflated with impetus, but in most instances it was separated from the meanings made, intended or read into (i.e. the interpretations of) the work. In the crits I observed, students were rarely questioned on the level of meaning making. Moreover, student learning was not measured against the student’s own standards of meaning making nor that of the studio-lecturer’s criteria. For internal standards to be developed, discussions around the criteria for success would be necessary. But in this School, the rare instances of explicit criteria of projects set by studio-practice lecturers were not taken into consideration during assessments, nor were other criteria discussed. Tacit criteria were communicated in opaque ways, negotiated between lecturers and communicated to students within what emerged as the fluid and fraught arena of the crit.

An exit level outcome of the Bachelor of Fine Art qualification at this School was that students were expected to ‘demonstrate an ability to verbally articulate their understanding of their individual creative aims and intentions’. A lecturer explained why such articulation was sometimes taken into consideration in formative assessments but not summative,

Simply because there is so little to look at, because we provide them feedback and that stuff, it is important at that stage to have a sense of
whether the work fits with the student’s vision of the work, I think there we do take that kind of thing into account.

In fact, the student’s intentionality as image maker, i.e. how s/he made critical choices and amendments to guide or trigger responses in terms of the readers’ interpretations of levels of meaning in the work, was not included in any assessment criteria. Rather, lecturers indicated that the work should be judged as it ‘stands despite/ regardless of the student’s intentions’. While three out of four participating lecturers indicated this aspect of ‘moderate importance’ for formative crits, this shifted to ‘essential’ for summative assessments. Here the form of the work, the artwork as product, was rewarded regardless of whether this artefact was aligned with what the student was hoping to communicate to viewers. For example, if the form was perceived as ‘beautiful’, or was interpreted as critical to a dominant ideology in a way that the lecturers perceived as successful, even if the student did not intend that reading, it could get very good marks. In such instances, the student was left having to decide whether to abandon his/her own desire, to be rewarded by those in power, increasing the potential for an experience of alienation (Mann 2001). My findings confirmed studies which indicate that, when lecturers seem unconcerned with student intentionality or provide feedback unrelated to the student’s learning needs, it may be inevitable that much feedback will be perceived as negative (Taylor and McCormack 2005; Blair 2006a). Writing his story in the third person, one of the participating students felt that ‘the crit seems to have been a bit silly, like they completely missed the point of what he was doing and therefore couldn’t give him any helpful advice’.

This was exacerbated by the method of summative assessment. Whilst many US, UK and Australian art schools have now added ‘production logs’, ‘portfolios’, or ‘creative journals’ as additional methods in their assessment of student learning (Gordon 2004; Eca n.d.; Dallow 2003), most South African schools, including the case studied, have maintained the sole focus of their summative assessments on the artefact or ‘assessment by exhibition’. Although this method is appropriate to the community of practice, such an exclusive emphasis often encourages mastery of the product rather than engagement with the process of learning and artmaking. Freeman (2006) contends that such practice results from ignoring or undervaluing the importance of the student’s conscious and articulate recognition of the limitations, possibilities and strategies for creating work.

**Intentionality and responsibility**

As a way to explain this exclusion of student intentionality from assessment processes, one lecturer felt that ‘the student should be committed to creating scenarios that invite/inspire interpretation, but the meaning is not the student’s responsibility’. While there is little doubt that artworks are open to interpretation, cultural theorists, such as Theodor Adorno (1978), would argue that there certainly is an ethical responsibility that sits squarely on the artist’s lap, and that this should be instilled in artist-students. Relinquishing of responsibility to the reader seems modernist in ethos and may be detrimental to the learning process.
For a curriculum to be transformative each individual student should draw from his/her ‘own diagram of the interacting aspects of knowledge, ‘self’ and action. ‘How do her or his intellectual concerns inform her/his ethical, political, religious and personal life?’ (Parker 2003, 541-2). When asked to indicate whether subject matter students explore should have social/ political relevance, one lecturer marked this as of negative value for summative assessments, and added ‘isn’t the personal political??’ The politics of the psyche and the family are important in both left feminism and Western Marxism (Agger 1992), and perhaps an assumption informing transformative learning. What I would argue was problematic within this case study was how ‘personalising’ a representation without self-critical examination by the student was considered acceptable by lecturers during crits.

A ‘personalised’ discourse was found in both the espoused curriculum and in the theory-in-use. The School publically stated that, ‘BFA students... will find in the Art History and Visual Culture courses various concepts, themes, contentions, arguments, discourses and sites for intervention, which they might want to explore at a personal level in their practical work’ and students are supposedly given the ‘freedom to pursue their personal visions’. This is a doubtful notion considering the nature of feedback given, as I describe below. In one crit, a lecturer provided a student whose artwork was treading on politically incorrect ground with an easy option, instructing ‘personalise it, it is stereotypical otherwise’. The political aspect of the ‘personal’ was left unexplored, and an important opportunity for transformative learning lost. Such occurrences were prevalent, to the extent that is was noted as a dominant feature of the School’s graduates the previous year by the external examiner.

This is problematic in terms of the impact of such responsibility-free education on questioning the ‘self’. This marriage of ‘the self’ to personal expression may be evocative of modernism essentializing of the artist (Addison 2007). Instead, postmodern notions of the personal-political thematic, are fundamentally involved with criticality and a concern for ethical relations with ‘the other’. This critical postmodernism
refuses to dispense with a concept of the subject; instead, together, these theoretical currents suggest a notion of objective subjectivity, of historical subjectivity, and a notion of intersubjectivity (Piccone 1971) that provide a semblance of radical energy in an overstructured, overdetermined world (Agger 1992, 298).

One way to counter such uncritical introspection would be to open up students’ understanding to that of others’ interpretations of their work, as will be discussed in the next section.

3.2 Making interpretations

There can be no doubt that artwork exists in a relationship of interpretation and projection by its viewers. Hearing the perceptions of diverse readers helps the artist shift and re-evaluate aspects of the artwork to more appropriately communicate meaning. Therefore the importance of feedback for an artist-student’s growth and, in turn the development of the artwork, cannot be underestimated. As one of the
participating lecturers described in an interview, ‘artmaking is a form of communication and it relies on an author-viewer dynamic and to deny that part of it is to become incredibly narcissistic’.

Many art educators argue that crits should not be intended as static summative measures of students’ actual levels of development but rather should serve formative purposes (Blair 2006b). Formative assessments are in line with the nature of contemporary artmaking which is about process: research, investigation, play, experimentation and expression. Because feedback is critical to learning through assessment (Taylor and McCormack 2005), it should have as its emphasis ‘the promotion of critical reflection, review, adaptation, confirmation or realignment of focus’ (Percy 2003, 146). These skills of ‘reflection’ are now considered crucial to the artmaking process.

One of the exit level outcomes of this art school’s undergraduate degree was that on successful completion of the degree, students should be able to ‘co-operate with others to pursue the common good. In order to meet this outcome, learners will... be aware that judgements have moral and ethical implications and will act accordingly where appropriate’. Publically the school stated that ‘interaction, collaboration, and critical discourse between students at all levels are actively promoted’. And although one lecturer identified ‘input from their peers’ as the crit’s primary education benefit, observations revealed that peer-participation did not occur in practice. This, despite the responses to a questionnaire where all the lecturers noted it important that the student considers others’ viewpoints and ‘draws from various sources to get feedback (lecturers, laypeople, peers etc)’. The student as an ‘other’ in the teacher-learning dynamic was not given a voice, nor were his/her peers, and even individual lecturer’s voices were plagued by power dynamics. What is of concerns here is that studies have shown that student learning is in part dependant on the nature of student participation during interaction (Terwel 1999). On this issue, that which was espoused and practiced came into sharp relief.

By their third and fourth year, students at this school seemed to no longer participate in crits. This may have been due to the political tensions between staff which played themselves out as ‘mini-soap operas’ during crits, as one lecturer described; due to the hierarchical nature of the crit environment; or because of the lack of value in student participation demonstrated by the lecturers. One student wrote in a journal that, ‘we aren’t even encouraged anymore to contribute to the crit as students, so I find myself getting very nervous, bored and distracted’. Lecturers, perhaps unwittingly, communicated an undervaluing of student participation in formative assessment through their body language and other non-verbal factors. For instance, most often lecturers’ bodies would form a physical barrier between the individual speaker’s work and his/her peers, effectively preventing the student’s peers from being able to see the artwork being critted or to actively participate. When asked about summative assessments, four lecturers out of five indicated that peer feedback had little or no value, with the remaining lecturer perceiving such inclusion as negative. I would argue that students have noticed such attitudes, which serve as an implicit guide as what they too should perceive as important.
Excluding student-peer participation, feedback in this School was provided by all the studio-practice lecturers and the Head of Department. In response to my questions, some of the staff indicated it valuable that lecturers provide readings of their work, because of the diverse perspectives they can present. At the same time, most recognized that often the diversity of feedback is in itself difficult for students to negotiate. As one lecturer explained in the questionnaire:

as staff we disagree on viewpoints about artmaking and what is valued. That one has to ‘find’ one’s way through the messages that are being communicated...[on the one hand] a myriad of possibilities are at [the students] disposal for the artmaking process – they have to make crucial decisions on how these are going to influence and negotiate the reading of their works and the meaning thereof. On the other hand – a surface approach would be to execute what X has suggested – resulting in making art for X (as X is the dominant voice). Thus confusing and alienating signals are sent out to students (both those who are succeeding and those who are struggling).

Data collected from students confirmed such experiences, as reflected in this student’s story:

When the lecturers started talking to me I started to feel so overwhelmed. They all had such different ideas and point of views, [I] was getting so confused. X told me that it needed more, that it was missing something but that X is not sure what, this just made me so upset, how am I meant to know what X wants from me if X doesn’t know what X wants from me! I know that’s the point, that I’m meant to figure that out on my own, but how am I to do that! ... This made me so scared, our crit [mid-year summative assessment] is in a week!

A general lack of self-criticality by lecturers seemed to underpin the formative assessment process. There was no recognition of the constructed nature of interpretation or that it is open to projection, influence and therefore question. Nor was there acknowledgment that as assessors they might be judging rather than offering interpretations of the work. At issue is ‘whether the watcher’s interpretation can be valued above the intentions of the watched’ (Freeman, in Smart and Dixon, 2002:188)? One lecturer reflected on the power of such ‘interpretations’:

X has the overriding say over the work (the students at least have this perception). I explain at length the issues of interpretation and intention in artworks, but if they perceive that X does not like their artwork, they internalize this as their work having no value, which is an educational disaster.

Assessment, by its very nature, creates conversations between the student as speaker and the assessor as an ‘other’ who listens and judges (Mann 2001). Many students indicated how this power dynamic was unsettling and affected their abilities to articulate themselves. In one student’s journal, s/he wrote that ‘I usually end by saying the most ridiculous and pathetic things. I always feel inferior and nervous’. Studies have shown that because of implicit power dynamics, students often feel unconfident to speak or afraid they may be perceived as challenging judgements of
the ‘masters’ (Davies 1997). Moments in students’ stories reflect a sense of being at the mercy of the assessors, such as this student’s description of feedback as ‘the fire from the lecturers proceeds’.

Lecturers acting as assessors have power to ‘forgive’ but require ‘confession’ in the first place (Mann 2001). In FASP, this is where assessors need to be careful and sensitive because students often explore subjects that are not typically communicated in public spaces. In her story, ‘Chloe’ described her anticipation of the confessional nature of the crit, ‘to the best of her ability she tried to describe the frustration of the previous... waiting with baited breath to be torn to shreds by the lecturers’. This interaction created great anxiety for another student, He keeps thinking over and over about how he is going to justify himself to the other lecturers and fears the black stares he might receive in return. He gets a bit of insomnia from the worry. Half the time the idea seems really good to him and then the rest of the time it seems like it really isn’t working. Like a swinging pendulum with infinite energy to keep going his mind oscillates between these two positions every five minutes as he wonders how he is going to convince the lecturers that what he is doing is good. He really just wants affirmation that this is working.

In this School, only formative crits began with the student’s explanation, intended to place the assessors in context. Such representation by the student him/herself was excluded entirely in summative assessments. As discussed before, the perception was that such information was evident in the work itself. Alternatively, it was perceived that it could be accessed via the studio-practice lecturer’s recollections, which s/he may choose to represent during summative assessment because, as one lecturer articulated it, ‘we [the lecturers] are in the best position to articulate what they’re [the students] on about’. A few of the lecturers were uncomfortable with the politics of such representation. Such practice could further exacerbate unequal power dynamics as studio-practice lecturers ‘speak for’ their ‘apprentices’ and thereby partly silence or misrepresent them. One lecturer felt that it ‘influences the way in which other staff would assess the work. This is a problem as I become the ‘public relations’ figure for each student, having to represent each of them fairly and equally’. In this School, such practice continued into external examination.

Four out of five lecturers perceived their personal interpretations important for formative or summative assessment. Despite one lecturer’s claim that interpretation ‘should not be reduced to a personal matter... I would need to recognise that MY interpretation is one of many’, data indicated that, not only did lecturers disregard student peer’s interpretations, but 40% ascribed little or no value to their colleagues’ opinions or viewpoints either. They perceived their individual readings as more important than those of ‘others’.

Political imbalance between lecturers, who were meant to act as assessors, created scenarios where ‘tastes’, preferences and pressures exerted by individuals played a large role. In an interview, one lecturer explained that ‘what one derives a sense of satisfaction from is often different from one lecturer to another’. Such statements suggest that student success depended on determining what satisfied an individual
assessor, rather than facilitating students to develop critical evaluation facilities towards achieving their own aims. From my observations of crits, lecturers offered their likes/dislikes as the only discernable reason or explanation for their feedback. This was often explicitly stated, such as ‘I don’t like...’, ‘I am not convinced...’ or ‘[that’s] irritating me’. This uncritical approach on behalf of the assessors neglected to recognise how artwork ‘exists in a context of both the viewer’s and the artist’s sensibilities, with all the conditioning and acculturation involved in them’ (McEvilley 1996, 43).

In addition, the line between offering interpretations and instructing was often overstepped. Four out of five lecturers responded that it was important that there be evidence in formative and summative assessments that the student applied their suggestions. A coercive manner of providing feedback emerged. One lecturer admitted that ‘the result is that suggestions are made in crits on the implicit basis of ‘do it because I say so’ or ‘do it because I know better’. When social status is used as an educational strategy, as seemed to be the case in the crit practices of this case, it threatens to become indoctrination. According to Mezirow (1981,20),

education becomes indoctrination only when the educator tries to influence a specific action as an extension of his will, or perhaps when he blindly helps a student blindly follow the dictates of an unexamined set of cultural assumptions about who he is and the nature of his relationships.

Against many fine art educators arguments for a developmental emphasis at crits (Blair 2006b), a discourse of ‘assessment as control’ emerged from the data. In a discussion, one lecturer spoke of ‘the doctor’s rounds’ as a way of describing the teacher focus of crit sessions. Another contended that: ‘my own sense of crits - for what it is worth - is that they are the least of all teaching tools. Instead, formal crits are part of a control or check system. They are not where the teaching takes place’. Parker’s (2003, 530) warning that the ‘desire for control... is not and never should be part of any sort of and any level of education’ is apt in crit contexts where having more knowledge as the ‘expert’ or connoisseur can lead to an abuse of power and control.

Sensitivity to this issue is well articulated by Grundy (1987, 69), ‘in a realm where interaction occurs between participants who have unequal capacities for the understanding or meaning-making, the right of the participants to be regarded as subjects, not objects in the interaction is acknowledged’. Agency, and in turn intentionality, is thwarted when the student becomes the executor of the teacher’s instructions. For this reason, feedback should act as proposals of possible readings, not ‘unqualified recommendations’, but rather ‘provisional specifications’ as to how the student could improve (Grundy 1987, 71).

4. Effects on the imbalance of intentionality and interpretation on student learning

Formative assessments are meant to present an opportunity for the student to discuss how s/he has developed in his/her learning from previous projects and crits, with assessment considering ‘individual growth or progress as well as absolute
achievement' (Pratt 2002, 12). Lecturers participating in this research indicated that ‘the learning process of the student’ and ‘the change/ growth the student underwent’ were valued in formative and summative assessment. Such an approach would be aligned with the espoused claim to ‘support’ students on their ‘journeys’. However in the crits observed, opportunities for positive feedback were rarely exploited. Feedback in this public arena was often insensitively handled, possibly because of the latent perception, inherited from how lecturers themselves were taught, that feedback in crits should be harsh, even if demoralising, to prepare the student for professional practice. The results of such approaches to feedback were evident in eschewed perceptions that ‘positive’ crits were simply those without negativity, as reflected in this student’s comment that ‘I think everyone really benefited from the feedback of the staff and students. They didn’t kak all over us, please excuse the French’.

Such environments cannot be presumed to create learning experiences that encourage disclosure. However, if assessment is to be formative, it is necessary for students to honestly disclose their desires, limitations and problems, rather than make strategic presentations to get a better mark (Knight 2001). Misunderstandings of formative feedback, negative experiences or stress interfere with students’ cognitive resources and the resultant level of learning (Blair 2006a), as is reflected in this extract of a student’s story:

> When they finally get to his work he no longer has a clue what exactly it is he wants to say. Suddenly all the attention is on him, and before he even gets an opportunity to speak negative remarks come from X and X, offsetting him a great deal. He tries to explain what he is doing and it feels like everyone is getting lost while he speaks.

When I began this research, I initially intended to draw on student articulation at crits to determine how approaches to interpretation and intentionality affected their approaches to learning (Marton and Saljo 1984). I came to realise that students’ learning experiences influenced their approaches to disclosure and adoptions of certain discourses at crits. Because of this, I then broadened my focus from student approaches to learning to include a consideration of their experiences of learning, and whether these were ‘alienated’ or ‘engaged’ (Mann 2001). Data from students was collected via entries into journals and stories they composed, often in the third person.

Underpinning assessment approaches in this School was an instrumental rationality, found to be concerned more with the ‘what’ of lecturers’ interpretations of the artefacts’ form than the ‘why’ of students’ intentionality, meaning making and learning processes. The crit method, as utilised in this School, did not encourage commitment or engagement with the student’s desire. The majority of students adopted surface or strategic approaches to learning (Marton and Saljo 1984) as a result of the alienation they experienced. As illustrated below, students generally adapted how they articulated themselves at crits, picking up the skills necessary to perform or protect themselves within this social structure. Not only is this potentially detrimental to student learning and self-concept, but is certainly contrary to the espoused aims of this FASP curriculum.
Mann (2001) writes that to preserve his/her sense of ‘self’ it may be safer for a student to disengage by repressing his/her desire, and approaching learning from a superficial perspective. In the excerpts below, two high-achieving students reveal how they had learnt not to treat the crit as a place of honest discloser but rather to approached it strategically:

Personally, I’m learning the fine art (pun intended) of crits. I treat it like a performance, or a presentation, even a lecture. I spend a lot of time scripting what I am going to say, which is great because I can just read the script in the crit and not look at anyone’s face.

It is Wednesday, the day before Beatrice’s long-dreaded crit... Is she to invent a whole new string of fiction that justifies her work or is she to re-tell her previous concoction.

Such students can be seen to have developed a ‘false self’ (Winnicot in Mann, 2001, 13) to survive the assessment practices, resulting in withholding articulation of their intentionality to the assessors. In an opaque assessment system, with a discourse of control that creates power imbalances, what results are student ‘defences’ rather than honest critical discussion of their intentionality, met by instructions and judgements rather than interpretation and formative feedback.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

This paper presented an analysis of approaches to interpretation and intentionality in the assessment practices of the art school studied. Ideally, formative assessment should increase students’ confidence and ‘intrinsic motivation, leading to increased creativity’ (Dinen et al 2005, 165). Indeed, prospective students of this School were told that ‘studying Fine Art at X [the institution] is a wonderful and enriching experience’, with a curriculum that ‘aims to empower students’. This would have necessitated the lecturers having an understanding of what students want to do – because intentionality is linked to personal meaning making. However the stories students revealed suggested that the repression of their personally valued aims and desires could be seen to cause frustration and feelings of alienation, perhaps because of disjunctions between the espoused curriculum and the theory-in-use.

Informed by these findings, I am concerned that if ‘the death of the author’ approach is used exclusively in teaching and learning, it threatens to further emphasise the existing power imbalance between the student-author and the teacher-reader. Post-structural readings of interpretation had been misappropriated in this case, consciously or unconsciously, to suit the interests of the lecturers in power. Privileging interpretation over and above intentionality can have serious repercussions for developing the artist-students’ reflexive ‘voice’. Freeman (2006, 97) cautions that ‘without having some sense of what effect the work is seeking to achieve it can be difficult to determine the work’s effectiveness. Assessment then becomes a matter of personal taste and not analytical consideration’. Clear links can be drawn between the interpretative autonomy of the lecturer and formalism’s silencing of the artists’ voice. Agger (1992) argues that such constructions posit
postmodernism as ideology and not critical theory. Rather, ‘postmodernism as critical theory’ could be seen to redefine the political, where ‘the death of the subject is only temporary. Once we historicize subjectivity, we can rethink the modalities of personal and public life in an energizing way’ (Agger 1992, 297).

Self-reflexivity can act as a tool, particularly in education, to prevent self-absorption or tacit acceptance of myths of creativity which promote elitism and become reductive. Reflexivity is essential in terms of relations with the ‘other’ where it can protect against exclusion, over-identification and assimilation. Such concerns are not only fundamental to understanding how to operate as ‘critical citizens’ but also underpin the relationships between lecturer and student, artist and subject, viewer and artwork, for instance. Jacques Derrida’s (1978) conception of how such relations can be ethical is through reflexivity. Building on Emmanuel Levinas’ ideas, he argues that with the ethical face-to-face encounter there is neither sameness nor radical alterity, symmetry nor asymmetry, identity nor difference in the relation between ‘self’ and ‘other’ (Bernstein 1991). This conception relates fundamentally to the politics of representation which are often problematically centred around polar opposites — such as race in the context of apartheid South Africa or cultural identity in the context of post-war Europe — rather than recognising the slippage, the neither/nor of such dialectical relations (Belluigi 2001). Julia Kristeva’s (1991) analysis (after Freud) is that each person recognizes the difference or foreignness within him/herself as a possible ethical condition of his/her being with ‘others’. This approach to diversity as necessary to becoming critical about one’s ‘self’, is echoed by McEvilley (1996, 129):

By learning to appreciate the value stance of another group than the one we were born into we expand our selfhood. In this piecemeal way we can approach the project of becoming, not universal in a metaphysical sense, but global in a pragmatic sense.

Spaces of slippage between self-other, object-subject, intentionality-interpretation are vulnerable to abuse in the student-assessor relationship, but nevertheless hold potential to engage students experientially in a valid manner. Poststructuralist questioning of the singular identity of the self and its interrelation with the other, perhaps has most educational value with peer-participation in formative assessment (Ajaykumar 2003). Because of imbalance and cultural schisms in most societies, diversity in terms of race, class and culture are where the lecturer often has to be most sensitive. Such sensitivity is by no means limited to this geographical setting. Any FASP teacher can use the ‘multiple voices’ of students’ peers to suggest alternative readings of the artwork-text, making the artist-student aware of how s/he can guide or problematize such readings. This type of critique is defined by Talbot (1998, 139) as ‘critical confrontation’ where

confrontation, public exhibition and critical discussion of work... are vital safeguards against the risks of becoming isolated, self intoxicated and inward looking which arise when one puts value, however justified, on individual expression.

A deep approach to learning (Marton and Saljo 1984) in FASP should not exclude self-criticality or reflexivity, for the student should challenge his/her own
interpretation and meaning-making within the work, balanced with alternate readings such as those presented during critiques.

For this reason, a reconsideration of the role of the assessor in FASP is needed. Lecturers may need to shift their roles from ‘masters’ or connoisseurs of modernist ilk to more balanced power relationships, with the teacher as guide, mentor or critical friend. For this to happen, discussions around criteria or indicators (Knight 2001) for assessment would necessitate involvement of both staff and students. Connoisseurship as judgment in fine art concerns concepts of ‘quality’ and its relation to ‘taste’, which are constructed through the influences of culture, time and place so ‘that no culture’s idea of quality can claim more validity than another’s’ (McEvilley 1996, 127). But whilst postmodernists and critical theorists argue against modernist notions of authority, elitism and influence, Sullivan (1993, 18) warns that teachers who give in to unbridled interpretations where all views are relative, ‘remain entrapped by theory rather than liberated from it’. For this reason Smith (in Gordon, 2004) extends the traditional notion of the connoisseur as ‘expert’ to the critic, who has to work at being a reflexive assessor.

Perhaps because the personal beliefs and expectations of individual assessors are central to the process of interpretation (Smart and Dixon 2002), more transparency and reflexivity is required of the interpreters in this method (Shay 2004). Discussions between assessors and students could actively consider socio-cultural influences on interpretation. This would acknowledge the political nature of ‘a process of meaning-making which recognizes meaning as a social construction’ but where students and teachers are ‘claiming the right to determine meaning themselves’ (Grundy 1987, 116). Brookfield (1995) refers to this as ‘laying bare our pedagogic reasoning’. Such reflexive articulation ‘might be one of the most crucial life-skills we have to offer our students’ (Smart and Dixon 2002, 188). What is essential is that assessors’ judgements are perceived by the institution and students as being trustworthy (Gordon 2004), and that students can identify with valid and ethical traditions in which assessments make sense (Alexander 2005).

Open discussion provides students access to how to interpret feedback. As was evident in this case study, not only do prescriptions create experiences of alienation but they also reduce judgment, thereby removing much educational benefit of that assessment. For this reason, feedback should be designed to act as proposals of possible readings and not instructions (Knight 2001). Students would have to feel that their participations and interpretations are valued and valuable to the learning process. Certainly, negotiated criteria signal to the student the value of their intentions and reflexivity (Freeman 2006).

Hughes (1999) outlines the many potential educational benefits of valuing student intentionality and agency: (i) reduced dependency on teachers to produce the problem, dictate methods, materials and mode of execution, and assess work; (ii) responsibility placed on students to take charge of their own work and establish their own criteria: (iii) increased motivation and a more engaged experience; (iv) allowance for a diversity in the range of discourses, materials, et cetera which should result in a greater variety of artwork. This would allow for ‘a wider, more inclusive,
view of what constitutes art making and a form of assessment which will allow for ‘the little narrative’ (Hardy 2006, 273). Such reconsideration would also necessitate critical engagement with curriculum development through thoughtful evaluation processes, involving realignment of the espoused and practice curriculum. A crucial concern is how teaching-learning-assessment interactions could better practise the postmodern awareness of the nuances involved in meaning making, and how these could impact processes of learning constructively.
Reference list
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