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Building on the Past for the Future:
Assessment For Learning as a Field of Exchange

Abstract

Standardised testing does not recognise the creativity and skills of marginalised youth. This paper presents the development of an innovative approach to assessment designed for the re-engagement of at risk *youth who have left formal schooling and are now in an alternative education institution. An electronic portfolio system (EPS) has been developed to capture, record and build on the broad range of students' cultural and social capital. The assessment as a field of exchange model draws on categories from sociological fields of capital and reconceptualises an eportfolio and social networking hybrid system as a sociolcultural zone of learning and development. The EPS, and assessment for learning more generally, are conceptualised as social fields for the exchange of capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The research is underpinned by a sociocultural theoretical perspective that focuses on how students and teachers at the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC) develop and learn, within the* zone of proximal development *(Vygotsky, 1978). The EPS is seen to be highly effective in the engagement and social interaction between students, teachers and institutions. It is argued throughout this paper that the EPS provides a structurally identifiable space, an arena of social activity, or a field of exchange. The students, teachers and the FLC within this field are producing cultural capital exchanges. The term* efield *(exchange field) has been coined to refer to this constructed abstract space. Initial results from the trial show a general tendency towards engagement with the EPS and potential for the attainment of socially valued cultural capital in the form of school credentials.*

How do we assess the capacities, skills and resources of 'at risk' youth who have not succeeded in conventional schooling? By definition, a high proportion of adolescents who have *dropped out* of school have already been judged as underperforming according to conventional educational assessments (e.g., standardised tests, grades and examinations). Many have experienced homelessness, disrupted family life, and disenfranchisement from basic social services and community institutions. Yet many also have developed demonstrable "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992; Murphy, & Hall, 2008), skills and abilities or repertoires (Tilly, 1995; Rogoff et al. 2007) which are not recognised as a contribution towards certification, and are not 'counted as knowledge'.

The research is being conducted at the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network (EREAFLCN). This network incorporates flexi-schools (registered non-state schools) and at present there are five Flexible Learning Centres (FLC) and seven outreach programs in Queensland, Australia. Recently the organisation has been approved to expand nationally. The EREAFLCN maintains an ethos of social and learning environments which enable the emancipation of young people who have been disenfranchised from education. The research described in this paper takes place at the EREAFLCN school (FLC) in Deception Bay (an outer suburb of Brisbane).

The young people have become disengaged from mainstream or regular schooling for a variety of reasons. Some have dropped out due to family or social pressures and some have *been expelled* for disciplinary reasons. These young people arrive with identifiable forms of cultural capital which have not been recognised in previous educational settings. Some have musical abilities, some are involved with Hip-hop culture (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), or Goth culture (Hodkinson, 2002), some have computer gaming abilities; some are

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members of sub-cultural groups such as BMX, Skate and Surf cultures. All of these young people however, have some kind of cultural capital, forms of repertoires or funds of knowledge other than the curriculum prescribed versions of cultural capital. The recognition of unique forms of cultural capital is not currently incorporated in mainstream educational institutions that rely on standardised testing regimes or the "universal features of schooling, including classification, grading, curriculum, surveillance and credentialing" (Olson, 2003, p. xi) which produce the forms of cultural capital that are valued by societies.

In this research, funds of knowledge, skills, abilities and repertoires are seen to be the products of social and cultural practices and experiences that are constitutive in the identities of young people from different social backgrounds with varied socio-political histories and are salient, valuable, negotiable forms of cultural capital. It is argued that these cultural capitals can be exchanged for forms of cultural capital that are produced through mandatory curriculum and that in this way the young people at EREAFLCN can re-engage with education and/or employers. An important aspect of the research is however, the notion that certified credentials, which are so highly valued in global social systems, can be attained through an assessment for learning process which does not use official curriculum as its starting point. This assessment for learning process emanates from collections, or exhibited evidence of, students' inherent cultural capital.

Objectives

The study aims to observe and analyse the implementation of a digital assessment for learning model that documents forms of cultural capital including particular funds of knowledge that young people bring to flexible learning. Assessment for learning is conceptualised as a field of exchange. The intention is to record and document instances of students converting their funds of knowledge into the forms of cultural capital valued by Australian society such as credentials, that is, recorded grades, assessment results and certificates.

The research problem is to enable youth to use this new model to document their capital in ways that can be assessed and converted, or exchanged in the fields of education and employment. The problem calls for a new and original means, a new community of learning, a new method of assessment, a new culture (Tobin & Llena, 2009).

A largely online community, a third space, has been developed based on assessment for learning approaches (Wiliam, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004; QCDA, 2009). This is a hybridised electronic portfolio and Content Management System (CMS) and Social Networking System operating together as one. An integrated section or area of the program functions as an eportfolio and this incorporates several important eportfolio design features described in Jafari & Kaufman (2006). The aim is to provide a dynamic work space for students and staff at the FLC. Students work is uploaded, negotiated, re-worked, recorded, transferred for both restricted and public access. The tool provides the context and space for the creation of culture and negotiation and modification of identities through a field of exchange. By observing, interacting and recording transactions in this space a record of staff and student engagement with assessment for learning opportunities is being documented.

Standpoints

The Electronic Portfolio System (EPS) and assessment for learning more generally are conceptualised as a social fields for the exchange of capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1990). The

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research maintains the conception that students and teachers at the FLC develop and learn in a sociocultural sense, within the *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978). This system is seen to be highly effective in engagement and social interaction between students, teachers and institutions, in all the possible combinations and instances that this paradigm presents. It is argued throughout this research that this paradigm is the structurally identifiable space, which delineates the arena of social activity, or the field of exchange, and that the students, teachers and the FLC within this field are producing cultural capital exchanges. Due to the field's essentially electronic nature the term *efield* has been coined to refer to this constructed abstract space.

The research has constructed a model that incorporates sociocultural development and learning theory into an educational programme of development, learning, and assessment in the EREAFLCN. A sociocultural approach entails the recognition and inclusion of the concepts of social-historical and cultural-historical context related to the individual in interpreting and enacting assessment for learning theory and practice.

Assessment for learning refers to formative and interactive assessment used to improve learning. It incorporates negotiation and analysis of students' work in classroom practices. Black and Wiliam's (1998) found that, assessment for learning is effective in virtually all educational settings that endeavour to teach content, knowledge and skills. The important elements of assessment for learning include "feedback focused on helping students to improve [and] sharing criteria of quality" (James & Pedder, 2006, p. 110); and a conception of assessment as an interactional exchange. Incorporating sociocultural theory into assessment for learning approaches recognizes and realizes historical, social and cultural factors in activities that aim to improve learning for the students at the FLC.

Methods

This multiple case study (Yin, 2009) will involve an in-depth exploration of six students' forms of cultural capital and the ways in which this capital can be utilised in a digital assessment for learning process. Data from interview transcripts, observation notes and school documents are being analysed and categorised in relation to the main research questions. A set of analysis questions have been adapted from a model of *Critical Sociocultural Analysis* (Moje and Lewis, 2007). To analyse and evaluate data in this study, however a sociocultural approach which incorporates Bourdieu's theories of structuralist sociology has been incorporated into the Moje and Lewis (2007) model. Bourdieu's (1993) concept of *field* describes a space where habituses negotiate and struggle to obtain capital and this process can be seen as a form of capital exchange. In this study the field of exchange is conceptualised as taking place in an assessment for learning context and data analysis questions reflect this theoretical aspect.

Data sources

The data consists of interviews, observations and document examination. For the purposes of analysing transcript texts, a method described by Moje and Lewis (2007) as a "hybrid" discourse analytic perspective and refer to as "Critical Sociocultural Analysis" (pp. 15-24) has been adapted and is used in this research.

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Observational data is being collected by the researcher in classrooms or computer rooms at the Deception Bay site. The field-note outline developed by Gutierrez and Vossoughi (2010) provides a useful basis for the development of a field-note outline for this research.

Documents from the EREAFLCN are being analysed primarily for descriptive information about students. Information such as gender, age, address, parents/guardians names occupations, and so on, are available, but also information about previous schools attended by students and academic achievement can be obtained. Some of these categories will be used for column headings in the cases component in the NVivo research data computer software to create linked matrixes or webs of information that will help develop the case studies.

Results

The research is underway at the time of writing this submission. Preliminary analysis of interviews and observations has shown a willingness by a significant number of students to engage with other students and staff at the FLC in the efield. Instances of negotiation around students' productions and artefacts have been recorded to date, but as was anticipated, many of these instances are part of an ongoing discussion and form an evolving narrative. Students have uploaded items such as songs or music recordings, photographs, artwork, writing, PowerPoint files, and video recordings. Early indications show students' cultural and social capital can be documented and 'performed' in the efield. Several students have ambitions for the attainment of specific certificates or credentials and are concentrating their efforts towards those goals. Other students are simply presenting their artefacts with no pre-determined goal in mind.

Some resistance towards participation in the efield has also been encountered. Participation by students has been hindered by factors such as a perception of additional workload being undesirable, low levels of general and/or IT literacy skills, a reluctance to exhibit personal information and artefacts on an intranet system and a general lack of enthusiasm for a *new gadget* that is not fully understood. Interestingly, participation by staff has also been hampered by many of these same factors. Some staff have mentioned time constraints, lack of IT skills, perceived additional workload and lack of training or assistance as integral considerations in their hesitancy to engage with the efield.

In general the results from the establishment of the efield at the FLC have been impressive. A significant number of students and staff have created user accounts and most of these participants have engaged in regular, or at least irregular, communication and activities performed in the efield. This is seen to be the initial process in a developmental discourse that progresses towards the attainment of school credentials.

Significance

The study is the first study in Australia to develop *assessment for learning as a field of exchange* in education, or educational re-entry settings. It is unique in the utilisation of sociocultural principles in the development and evaluation of an assessment model.

Re-entry and flexible education programmes rely heavily on government funding, but are often unable to account for successful student outcomes in reporting requirements and systems. The paper calls to policy makers and researchers to engage in a cross-national discourse around practical systems for equity in assessment and seeks to provide a pathway

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for disadvantaged youth which circumnavigates many reforms developed from an emphasis on accountability, standards, measurement, and high stakes testing, but can still grant access to the attainment of credentials.

The system developed in this study will be able to track student achievement and provide data for reports that are required in funding budget allocation. The incorporation of sociocultural theories in the design of an assessment model will provide a new and unique approach to the evaluation of student outcomes and provide educational and work pathways for marginalised, educationally disengaged young people who would otherwise have exited educational programmes with no significant benefit or positive outlook. To obtain preferred study or employment options students require credentials (Lois & Dimitriadis, 2008) and the research in this project will provide a system that can produce highly relevant credentials. This is pioneering work in the field of flexible education in Australia however the need for the attainment of socially valued cultural capital in the form of school credentials is an international quest to which this research can contribute.

The model produced in this research will be aimed at delivering visibility and recognition through an engaging instrument that will enhance the prospects of marginalised young people and produce a new method of assessment for these students.

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