Anti-oppressive Assessment Strategies for Design Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This editorial aims to contribute to the discussion opened by the editors of this special issue by making visible the power dynamics that are implicit in evaluation strategies. It is argued that, by uncritically evaluating students, we not only reproduce patterns of social stratification but also legitimize them. Three strategies are proposed that could contribute to the adoption of liberating forms of assessment in the field of design education: self-assessment, freedom of format, and free assessment weighting. Beyond their instrumental value, it is emphasized that these strategies make power relations visible, opening a way to subvert them.

Evaluation strategies are not neutral. Never. On the contrary, they are social and disciplinary constructs that embody certain values, cultural norms, and hierarchies of knowledge (Hanesworth et al., 2019, p. 99). Nor are assessment strategies innocuous. Never. They are meant to fulfill political and social functions related to control, the perpetuation of social disparity, and the legitimization of particular forms of knowledge — the ones of the socially powerful groups (Filer, 2000, p. 44).

It is evident that evaluation strategies are intrinsically linked to power. In fact, by defining criteria, scales, and modes of evaluation, we are exercising control over two of the five spheres of social existence that Quijano identifies as contested spheres in the 'mesh of relations' of power: "subjectivity and its material and intersubjective products, including knowledge" and "authority and its instruments, of coercion in particular, to ensure the reproduction of that pattern of social relations and regulate its changes" (2014, p. 289). As instructors, we cannot ignore that, by making use of our power to grade students' work, we exercise a form of institutional power (Reitenauer, 2019, p. 104) and put into practice disciplinary mechanisms that combine "the deployment of force and the establishment of truth" (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). Likewise, we cannot ignore that the traditional mechanisms of evaluation carry implicit "coercive power relations" that "reproduce existing patterns of social stratification" (Cummins, 2003, p. 39).

And the truth is that we not only reproduce patterns of social stratification through assessment and grading strategies but also legitimize them.

Patricia Broadfoot is clear in this regard:

> The provision of a competition which is apparently open and fair suggests that those who are not successful in achieving their aspirations will accept the rational selection criteria being applied and, hence, their own failure. In so doing they acquiesce not only in their own defeat but in the legitimacy of the prevailing social order. To this extent, the provision of an apparently fair competition controls the build-up of frustration and resentment among the least privileged. (1996, p. 10)

Today, the political and social functions of assessment technologies are more evident than ever. One needs only look at the values implicit in prevailing assessment strategies in universities (and even further, at the values embedded in the development of curricula and learning objectives) to see that they revolve around two economic market values: 'increased productivity' and 'value-added' (Spademan, 1999, p. 26). From this economistic perspective, "the purpose of assessment is to create an on-going, evolving process to measure the 'value-added' by a course or a program, as well as to produce 'improved performance, effectiveness, efficiency' and 'increased productivity' in students and teachers alike" (Spademan, 1999, pp. 26-27). Whether we like it or not, neoliberal education promotes "corporatized academic practices" (Crabtree et al., 2020, p. 56) relentlessly governed "by market metrics and rationality" (Brown, 2011, p. 113) that place their emphasis on "the development of human capital for economic growth" (Walker & Nguyen, 2015, p. 244). In this context, assessment practices serve a very specific function: they "are the vehicle whereby the dominant rationality of the corporate capitalist societies typical of the contemporary Western world is translated into the structures and processes of schooling" (Broadfoot, 1996, pp. 68-69).

But this goes further. When evaluating students in the traditional way, we are not only codifying rules and disciplinary norms (Hanesworth et al., 2019, p. 99) that reproduce certain patterns of social relationships but also influencing students' subjectivation processes: more than a hundred years ago, Charles Cooley, famous for his 'looking-self-glass' theory, taught us that we build our individuality from the feedback of others, internalizing the judgments they make about us (Ruggerone & Stauss, 2022, p. 7). So that the effect of an evaluation — as well as that of the comments we make in a studio course, for example — far exceeds the scope of the contents of the subject taught. For Broadfoot, there would be a "'panoptic' surveillance, in which individuals learn to judge themselves as if some external eye was constantly monitoring their performance" (1996, p. 68). And this eye is essentially disciplinary and oppressive: it only "encourages the internalization of the evaluative criteria of those in power, and hence provides a new basis for social control" (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 68). As Illich points out, every time

we submit a student to our own standards, what we are teaching that student is the following: to apply that same rule to himself as a measure of his own personal growth (1973, p. 19). To such an extent that it will no longer be necessary for us to put him in his place, but rather he will place himself in the assigned slots, he will settle into the niche that we have taught him to look for and, in the same process, he will also place his companions in their places, until everyone and everything fits (Illich, 1973, p. 19).

Is there anything more oppressive, more opposed to the autonomy and self-realization of the student, than to impose their value according to our own criteria?

Fortunately, this form of oppression has been subverted. For decades, various authors have called for the implementation of strategies to reverse it: Reitenauer (2019) proposes articulating mechanisms of 'self-grading for liberatory learning'; Hanesworth, Bracken, and Elkington (2019) propose an 'assessment for social justice' typology that specifically addresses the problem of students who are systematically marginalized by normative practices; McArthur (2016) elaborates an alternative conceptualization of "assessment for social justice" based on critical theory and a capabilities approach; Walker and Nguyen (2015) promote a humanistic 'socially just approach to assessment' based, also, on human capabilities; Boud, for his part, (2000) calls for the implementation of 'sustainable assessment' methods; and Godwin and Ward-Edwards (2018) advocate 'participatory assessment'.

All these strategies promote autonomy, critical thinking, and fairness. Using Freire's words, they do not make students 'passive' so that they 'adapt' to the world of oppressive minorities (1997, p. 54), but conceive learning spaces as vehicles for transformation, both individual and social. In what follows, an attempt will be made to underline some ideas that could contribute to adopting liberating evaluation strategies.

SELF-ASSESSMENT, FREEDOM OF FORMAT, AND FREE WEIGHTING

One of the most widespread anti-oppressive assessment strategies is self-assessment. For Reitenauer, self-assessment operationalizes "education as the practice of freedom," allowing students to empower themselves in all aspects of their learning, from their feelings to their reflection on their doing (2019, p. 104). Walker and Nguyen emphasize that developing the ability to self-assess is crucial for students to become reflexive and self-regulated, as well as to acquire the ability to make 'informed judgments' and act based on these judgments (2015, p. 247). But these capacities are not acquired spontaneously; they require institutional support (Boud et al., 2013, p. 943). And, more importantly, they are developed through the

collaborative work of 'communities of judgment' (Walker & Nguyen, 2015). The idea of 'communities of judgment', which Walker and Nguyen (2015) attribute to Boud, can lead to radically subversive practices, as it reverses the orientation to individualism and reclaims the communal. Let us not forget that it was precisely the orientation to individualism that "made possible changes in the whole range of social institutions and legitimating ideologies in (...) industrializing societies" (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 70). Re-communalizing judgment can become a very effective way of detaching it from its current function: to control, reproduce, and legitimize an unjust social order. For this to happen, it must be the students who set the criteria for assessment. As Boud, Lawson, and Thompson point out, students must engage with the criteria and the standards to which these criteria will be applied, as this is central to developing judgmental skills (2013, p. 943). Otherwise, if we make students self-assess against our criteria, we will only be encouraging "the internalization of the evaluative criteria of those in power" (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 68).

Another anti-oppressive assessment strategy, especially valid in our field, involves not imposing delivery formats on students. As King (2018) proposes, inviting students to use their preferred format (videos, infographics, essays, comics, presentations, etc.) in each of the deliverables allows each student to demonstrate their learning in the best way. As a personalization mechanism, this format freedom subverts another of the oppressive mechanisms of traditional assessment strategies: "education (...) has been shaped by the efforts of elitists to establish impersonal methods of control" (Broadfoot, 1996, p. 74).

A third strategy is not to impose a fixed weighting for each assignment. Thus, the power to decide which activities are more 'important' and deserve greater time investment (King, 2018, p. 451) rests with the students. This allows them to develop the ability to discern which knowledge matters and who holds it (Taylor et al., 2018, p. 45). It is, in a way, a matter of 'cognitive justice', that is, safeguarding the right of different forms of knowledge to coexist — and to account for that knowledge — without threats of subordination or oversimplifications (Taylor et al., 2018, p. 39). It is also about promoting, through dialogue about hierarchies, a change in power relations (Taylor et al., 2018, p. 40). In this case, the power that we tend to hegemonize by assigning the value that each work has.

These three strategies facilitate disruption. For Godwin and Ward-Edwards, disruption is fundamental to stimulating processes of self-transformation (2018, p. 423). In this sense, these strategies are expected to make visible the dynamics of power and privilege that are often 'inscribed' in assessment strategies. Beyond what is explicit in them, they are expected to operate (along with many others) as catalysts that make power dynamics visible, opening a way to subvert them.

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