Assessment for Social Justice: the role of assessment in achieving social justice

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This article provides a rationale for *assessment for social justice*, through which a greater focus is given to the role of assessment in achieving the social justice aspirations of higher education. It takes inspiration from work on assessment for learning to propose that as assessment is a powerful driver of how and what students learn, we should also consider its potential to drive a commitment for greater social justice within and through higher education. The article provides a critique of procedural notions of social justice which I argue have implicitly influenced current notions of fairness in assessment. Greater reflection on the possible flaws in such procedural notions is a starting point for rethinking assessment in social justice terms. I then draw on two alternative conceptualisations of social justice – the capabilities approach and critical theory – to consider the ways in which key assessment issues would look differently through these alternative lenses. The article does not aim to establish a prescriptive list of practices around the notion of assessment for social justice, but rather upon debate and a greater appreciation of the implications of how we conceptualise justice and the attendant influence on what may be considered appropriate assessment policies and practices.

Keywords: Assessment, social justice, capabilities approach, critical theory

# Introduction

This article provides a rationale for the concept of *assessment for social justice*, through which a greater focus is given to the role of assessment in achieving the social justice aspirations of higher education. Assessment for learning is an established idea within higher education, based on the evidence that assessment is one of the most powerful drivers of student learning and thus can be harnessed as a means to improve such learning. Therefore assessment for social justice rests on a simple observation: if assessment is the key driver of how and what students learn, then it must also be fundamental to the relationship between student learning and social justice.

Boud and Falchikov (2007) state that ‘assessment, rather than teaching, has a major influence on students’ learning’ (3). Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999) describe assessment as ‘the single most powerful influence on learning in formal courses (413). Maclellan (2001) refers to assessment playing ‘a subtle, complex, and enormously important role in the students’ experiences of learning’ (308). Similarly, Taras (2008) argues that assessment ‘has been shown to be the single most important component that influences student learning and education in general’ (289). It is on this basis that I suggest that those who, like me, are committed to greater social justice within and through higher education need to pay much greater heed to the role assessment has to play in achieving such goals.

*Assessment for social justice* is a two-pronged concept: it refers both to the justice of assessment within higher education, and to the role of assessment in nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society as a whole. Examples of the former may include the justice of summative assessment based solely on a traditional exam, the extent to which groupwork marks reflect individual as well as joint student effort or the capacity of pre-determined learning outcomes to allow diversity to flourish. Examples of the latter may include the integration of ethical and technical know-how, abilities to understand multiple perspectives and a professional commitment to ongoing learning. The extent to which these two aspects – justice within and justice through higher education - are inter-twined will also be discussed.

Social justice can be a nebulous term, and one used so broadly and without clear definition as to lose all meaning. Notwithstanding evidence of the increased marketization of higher education (Bok, 2005; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009) pledges to social justice, wellbeing and civic responsibility feature in the mission statements of most universities and in many government policy statements. However, robust and purposeful links to social justice require more than the right words and must necessarily rest on firm, albeit multi-faceted, theoretical foundations. Therefore this article focuses on the implications for assessment of alternative theories of social justice. I suggest that current assessment policies and practices rest upon implicit, and hence unreflective, assumptions about the nature of social justice. In particular traditional, and until recently dominant, contractarian/procedural notions of justice have been pervasively influential in society as a whole, and no less within the fields of education and assessment. Therefore in developing the rationale for assessment for social justice I draw upon two alternative approaches to the nature of social justice: critical theory and the capabilities approach.

Social justice does not figure prominently in the higher education assessment literature, however, the notion of fairness certainly does. Fairness is, in many respects, the byword of ‘good assessment’ in the eyes of many policy makers, students and teachers. However, I suggest that the ways in which fairness is often understood rest on procedural notions of justice: ensuring the right procedures will ensure students are assessed fairly. This notion of fair process has become a ubiquitous part of the assessment literature, such that any notion that there might be an alternative way of considering the relationship between assessment and justice may seem absurd. Hence, by demonstrating the basis of current thinking on assessment within the socially-dominant, largely procedural, approaches to social justice I intend to highlight the more radical possibilities offered by alternative conceptualisations.

Critical theory and the capabilities approach are not the only alternatives to proceduralism, but they are the conceptions of social justice that have influenced my thinking. My hope is that other researchers will then bring their conceptions of social justice, and perspectives on critical theory and capabilities, into this discussion. Any notion of assessment for social justice cannot be a prescriptive list of practices or even of set base principles. Instead, this must be a notion that can deal with, and embrace, variation arising from contextual differences, historical aspects and personal normativities.

In the next section I demonstrate the ways in current research, policies and practices in the field of higher education assessment rest on implicit notions of procedural justice. I then contrast this procedural approach with the possibilities offered by both critical theory and capabilities approaches to social justice, and highlight five key areas of debate, which I offer as heuristic spaces to enable further work on the notion of assessment and social justice. I conclude with reflections on taking this project further.

# Rawls, procedure and the shortcomings of current approaches to assessment and justice

John Rawls’(1971) seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, is often credited with reinvigorating debate about the nature of social justice in the late twentieth century, and reinterpreting the contractarian ideas from their foundations in the European Enlightenment into a modern context. This approach rests upon establishing the foundations for justice, and a view that if these foundations are established well, then we can reasonably assume that a just society will flourish. Rawls works on the assumption of a state in which people are ‘free, equal and independent’ as they establish these foundations. On this basis any differences between citizens, notably the pursuit of their own differing interests, are also brought into a situation of mutuality. For citizens are assumed to share a mutual disinterest about how their own position is directly affected by decisions on justice and to share a mutual interest in a rule of law that prevents any one person’s interests dominating another.

These twin notions of fair procedure and mutual disinterest are replicated in key tenets of what currently ‘counts’ as good assessment. Mutuality is mirrored in assessment by notions of academic credibility and quality standards. Thus while all students are assumed to pursue their self-interest of obtaining good marks, it is also in their self-interest for there to be a disinterested assessment procedure which ensures that the interests of other students do not dominate their own. In addition, the credibility deemed to arise from such a system has an added benefit of improving the status of one’s achievements.

The notions of validity and reliability are at the fore of many discussions of fairness and assessment. For example, Taras (2002) considers fair assessment in terms of unambiguity: ‘students perhaps have the right to demand coherent and logical educational processes that are not detrimental to their learning’ (501) . The emphasis in much of the assessment literature is often on ensuring neutrality or objectivity in terms of assessment tools, rather than broader issues of equity (Leathwood, 2005). Thus the image of ‘justice as blind’ is powerful within these procedural notions of fairness.

Such is the reigning faith in proceduralism and ‘fair’ assessment that we continue to move more and more resources into shoring up such procedures rather than addressing underlying issues. As a consequence all the limitations associated with procedural approaches to justice have become ingrained in assessment practices encouraged by unreflective acceptance of the virtues of proceduralism. And yet, as Sadler (2007) observes assessment policies can sometimes lead to the opposite outcomes as those intended. The resources that go into shoring up a system of extensive procedural checking must necessarily be diverted from other activities which may be more effective in promoting student learning (Bloxham, 2009).

Finally, Rawls’ theory of justice is based within the discrete entities of existing nation-states. This has important implications in an assessment context because of the assumption of sameness that underpins Rawls’ work, and associated assumptions about who participates in the *free and equal* decision-making processes on justice. Current assessment research and practice tries to balance on the thin wire between the view that we should treat all students the same, and wanting to encourage individuality. But there is an illusory quality to this idea not least because recognition of individuality, or difference, tends to be limited to a set of agreed (and agreeable) facets. As with Rawls, difference is only accounted for in terms of certain characteristics (in his work within a defined nation state), thus the extent to which difference and individual identity is truly accounted for in most assessment practices is somewhat constrained. For example, many institutions embrace internationalisation and yet resist rethinking the curriculum and assessment in light of a more diverse student body (perhaps perceiving it as an attack on quality standards). Moreover, where there are attempts to incorporate difference or diversity into assessment practices they often fall into traps of either over-essentialising identity or of treating people in terms of charity arrangements – as exceptions to the norm.

Moreover, it is clear that there is not free and equal participation in decisions about assessment, and yet we continue to present assessment practices in this idealised, fair procedural way. This is exemplified in the way in which pre-determined learning outcomes are presented as a transparent contract between students and teachers. This is misleading on a number of levels. Firstly, students rarely make any contribution to the formulation of these contracts/learning outcomes. Secondly, the same is true of many teachers, constrained from change by tortuous bureaucratic processes, and the implications of this exacerbated by a system in which courses (often the large undergraduate ones) are passed between academics as though a burden of which everyone has to take their turn. Finally, students are often informed (if they are at all) about learning outcomes by a page in a course handbook or a slide at the start of a lecture. Without the opportunity for true engagement with these, and particularly a chance to engage in developing an understanding of the relationship between the learning outcomes and assessment practices, students cannot be said to be party to an informed contract.

There are several critiques in the literature of these procedural assumptions underlying established assessment practices. Stowell (2004) considers the way in which notions such as fairness involve ‘social and political value judgement at a number of levels’ and are therefore ‘impossible to define objectively’ (506). Similarly, Leathwood (2005) emphasises that ‘assessment systems are rooted in academic cultures and institutional habitus’ (315). Focusing on the practices of exam boards, Stowell (2004) argues that ‘the taken-for granted cultures and practices which determine the operation of assessment boards’ (496) can actually lead to unfair outcomes for students, including unintended biases. Indeed, ‘impartial processes do not guarantee just outcomes.’ (497). Hansen (2011) explores the way in which certification regimes play ‘an essential role in the regulation of social life and, in the process, assume multiple functions. They delineate the very meaning of education and skill, for without public means of verification, one cannot substantiate a claim to either’ (32). Leathwood (2005) reminds us that ‘the values of the white, masculinist establishment and a capitalist economy remain dominant within the wider education system and within our universities’(317), and this clearly includes assessment regimes. Indeed, despite the often ‘taken-for-granted status’ of assessment, Leathwood (2005) also notes that it actually can:

provide a rationale and legitimacy for the social structures and power relations of modern day societies, and for one’s place within these. It is concerned directly with what is taught and what is valued within our education systems. It can influence not only how we see ourselves, but also our social relations with others and how we see them (307-308).

My aim with *assessment for social justice* is to take these critiques further and to consider the possibilities for a strong and radical relationship between assessment and social justice. This section has considered the first part of this project, which is to bring the largely procedural assumptions about ‘fair’ assessment to the surface by demonstrating their inherent links to Rawlsian/contractarian approaches to social justice. In the next section I aim to lay the foundations for an alternative to the current, mainstream practices by firstly outlining very different conceptions of social justice and then considering the implications of these for assessment.

# Alternative conceptions of social justice: the expanded possibilities of assessment for social justice

The capabilities approach and critical theory offer alternatives to dominant procedural notions of social justice, however neither body of work is homogenous nor without internal debates. The capabilities approach to social justice is most associated with the works of Nussbaum (2006, 2011) and Sen (2007, 2010). Both authors reject any ideal-type approaches to social justice and instead emphasise the complexity and multi-faceted nature of people’s lived realities. Key here is justice in terms of any individual’s ability to fulfil their potential within whatever social context they live. Nussbaum explains that while ‘theories of social justice should be ‘abstract’ they ‘must also be responsive to the world and its most urgent problems and open to changes’ (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 1). Overly idealised and abstracted theories have been guilty, she argues, of failing to confront some of the most serious problems facing the world. Thus Nussbaum offers a list of capabilities to represent common aspects of a fulfilled life, and yet which allow room for contextualisation in different settings. Similarly, Sen (2010) argues that a fixation on the nature of perfect justice removes attention from present and real experiences of suffering and injustice. He states: ‘justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live’ (18). Sen is particularly interested in notions of choice involved in moving towards greater social justice, based on the realities of an imperfect world of limited resources.

Critical theory broadly refers to a long tradition of thought from the early twentieth century onwards, reconsidering Marxist and other social theory in the contexts of the new emerging social orders. Of particular relevance to this article is the work of Fraser (2003b, 2007) and Honneth (2003a, 2003b) both of whom are committed to a reinvigoration of critical theory in the twenty-first century context. Honneth has done so by asserting the fundamental importance of recognition (and hence also mis-recognition and the denial of recognition) to social justice. Fraser has argued instead for a dual notion of social justice with emphasis on both recognition and redistribution to reassert the central importance of economic aspects, which she argues have been lost in an ongoing drift away from the Marxist roots of critical theory. In addition, Fraser (2007) has more recently added a third strand of participation to her formulation of social justice, which she argues emphasises the political dimension.

The five themes which I outline below are influenced by these two alternative approaches to social justice and these four thinkers in particular. I suggest these conceptions of social justice open new possibilities for assessment policies and practices and in the next section I offer an outline of key issues that will underpin the development of *assessment for social justice* in practice.

## Assessment and social justice: procedure and/or outcome?

The distinction between procedural or outcomes-based approaches is a significant one, and hence it is the lynchpin for my development of assessment for social justice. Nussbaum (2006, 2011) and Sen’s (2007, 2010) work on the capabilities approach has been paramount in highlighting the importance of this distinction. Nussbaum (2006) describes the debate in these terms:

Although the following analogy may strike some fans of procedural justice as a bit unfair, it seems to the outcome-oriented theorist as if a cook has a fancy, sophisticated pasta-maker, and assures her guests that the pasta made in this machine will be by definition good, since it is the best machine on the market. But surely, the outcome theorist says, the guests want to taste the pasta and see for themselves (83).

Sen (2010) is clear that such alternative approaches to social justice do not necessarily dismiss the importance of good procedure, but rather move the focus beyond it. Critical theory looks to unearth the hidden and overlooked aspects of lived experiences, and thus also places the outcomes of how people actually live to the fore.

The relevance of this distinction between proper procedures and lived realities harks back to the earlier discussion on fairness. While there has been considerable attention paid to setting up systems to ensure ‘fair’ assessment these are, arguably, based on false assumptions that any such procedural certainty is possible. As Stowell (2004) notes, ‘impartial processes do not guarantee just outcomes’ (497). Similarly, Bloxham (2009) outlines the false assumptions about what forms of reliability and accuracy can be achieved in marking which underline many current procedures. Sen (2010) makes the point the other way around: ‘sometimes a very dubious procedure could end up, accidentally, yielding a more correct answer than extremely rigorous reasoning’ (40). Leathwood (2005) observes a ‘somewhat contradictory trend’ emerging between ‘the demand for ever more reliability and comparability of assessment outcomes’ and concern to ‘foster student learning’ through assessment (312).

A pre-occupation with process can befall students as much as academics. Research by Norton (2004) suggests that where students become overly-obsessed by the procedural aspects of feedback or advice, it can give rise to a prescriptive approach which inhibits learning. Rather than being empowered by advice given, students may become more dependent, obsessing over details such as how many references they ‘should’ include and so on. This occurs because such details are easy to proceduralise, whereas the real focus of student work – engagement with knowledge – is not. A focus on procedure in assessment thus leads students away from the most important aspect of what they should be doing – critical engagement with complex knowledge.

If the engagement with knowledge is not simply a technical or procedural act, then neither can be our assessment of that engagement. Eisner (1985) acknowledges this with the notion of ‘connoisseurship’ and assessment. This reinforces assessment as a social practice which one learns and develops through engagement with the task, and interaction with others. The task of assessment must be learned through experience rather than a rule book. This is not to say there are no rules, but rules are insufficient in themselves.

Moreover, rules are themselves social constructions. Critical theory is useful here for highlighting the hidden assumptions which underlie dominant social practices. The decision as to what does or does not get included in an assessment rule or procedure is itself a socially-constructed one reflecting many values and assumptions. Similarly, there is a normative social element to what gets included in the “fairness” equation – and a more complex commitment to social justice requires bringing these assumptions to the surface for scrutiny and debate.

## Assessment and social justice: how do we deal with difference?

In an earlier section I argued that a procedural approach leads to a constrained tolerance of difference: only certain differences in particular contexts are allowed for. In addition, this can lead to some forms of difference that are not included being treated as abnormal exceptions or charity cases. I suggest that a preoccupation with fairness as sameness is one of the major factors constraining assessment playing a greater social justice role. The notion of charitable exceptions is inherent in the very notion of “special circumstances” by which a student may be granted different treatment if able to establish they have a medical condition, family bereavement or other factors deemed beyond their control. However, this again rests on an ideal-type assumption about the “normal” conditions under which students live, study and complete assessments. So illness is a socially-acceptable reason for deserving different treatment, however, differences in economic class which lead some students to have to work long hours of paid employment in order to go to university, or to go without useful aids such as laptops, books and even heating, are not deemed reasonable grounds for different treatment. I am not suggesting that we introduce more grounds for special circumstances nor abandon the practice altogether. However I am highlighting that these supposedly ‘fair’ systems are themselves highly selective and based on socially-constructed notions of what should and should not count, and these may deserve rethinking. There is no ideal-type point of reference as is implied by current systems, and by procedural notions of justice.

Both Sen and Fraser address the social justice implications of over-essentialising identity. Sen (2007) writes, ‘many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity’ (xv). Sen is not arguing against difference, but rather problematizing it by rejecting simple, single or reductionist notions of identity:

The main hope of harmony in our troubled world lies in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions around one single hardened line of vehement division that allegedly cannot be resisted. Our shared humanity gets savagely challenged when our differences are narrowed into one devised system of uniquely powerful categorization (Sen, 2007, pp. 16-17).

In her capabilities approach Nussbaum hopes to reach parts of society inadequately dealt with by the procedural approaches. She also sees it as overcoming the shortcomings of utilitarian approaches to social justice that focus on aggregating notions of satisfaction. In so doing, Nussbaum (2006) argues, these approaches inherently marginalise those who do not gain prominence in the aggregate. Moreover, aggregation ignores tendencies for ‘adaptive preferences’ (making do in the circumstances). Thus she argues: ‘Contentment is not the only thing that matters in a human life; active striving matters, too’ (73).

Fraser’s (2003b) concern with identity-essentialism also harks back to the earlier discussion of procedure or outcome. While sharing the focus of Sen, Nussbaum and Honneth on lived realities, rather than proceduralism, Fraser makes a distinction between affirmative approaches and transformative ones based on the implications for identity. Thus ‘affirmation targets end-state outcomes, transformation addresses root causes’ (74). Both consider lived realities, rather than simply procedure, however, affirmative approaches run the risk of reifying collective identities: differences within groups are nullified and solutions to “group problems” solved by repeated layers of ‘surface reallocations’ (77) which sustain notions of deficit upon the group identity. Fraser illustrates the difference in terms of possible approaches to heterosexism. She describes gay identity politics as seeking ‘to enhance the standing of an existing sexual orientation’, while in comparison “queer politics” is transformative by seeking to ‘destablize the current grid of mutually exclusive sexual statuses’ (75).

This notion of transformation and a focus on root causes is also pertinent to the issue of anonymous marking. The move towards anonymous marking was based upon persuasive research which showed a demonstrable difference in grades given depending on whether the marker thought the candidate was male or female (Bradley, 1984). Nor are such problems confined to gender, but can arise based on ethnicity, class and sexuality. Thus a procedure was put in place to ensure greater justice. However, introduction of a better procedure does nothing to address the root problem of gender bias itself. Consider other professions where such biases might also exist. We cannot solve the problem of different treatment based on gender in medicine by hiding the identity of the patient: it can only be addressed through bringing the problem into the light and through challenge and education. The injustices of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality or age may be partially contained by assessment procedures that inhibit their full realisation during marking, but the prejudices, and hence injustices, still remain and can become manifest in many other aspects of higher education, and society.

Anonymous marking cannot differentiate between sameness that is helpful (eg. consistent standards of treatment) and sameness which is unhelpful (eg. essentialising or denying identity). Theories of learning often place great importance on student individuality in terms of different approaches to learning. Similarly, research has shown the degree to which students value personalisation within a learning environment (McLean, Abbas, & Ashwin, 2013). In the context of feedback this is highlighted through the notion of feedback as a dialogue with students (McArthur & Huxham, 2013) and feedback as an integrated part of the learning experience such that the cycle is only complete when a student has submitted work which demonstrates they have addressed the issues raised (Taras, 2002). Anonymous marking provides an impermeable barrier to any true ongoing feedback dialogue or loop.

The repercussions of how identity, sameness and difference are dealt with in an assessment context are huge. Again, serious tensions in current approaches are easy to observe. On the one hand there is an acknowledgement of student diversity through increasing emphasis on student voice and on the personalisation of learning and teaching interactions (McLean et al., 2013) and yet the prevailing system of ‘fairness’ structured around pre-determined learning outcomes and constructive alignment cannot truly deal with individual differences. Indeed, the logic of fairness and justice inherent in this system is to negate differences: it is the level-playing field approach to justice. As such it is an uncontextualised notion of justice that denies all context and temporality. Students line up at the same starting place and have a clearly defined and common finishing line – but all other factors are ignored in the name of fairness. Of course there are exceptions – but as Nussbaum and Fraser demonstrate– these are dealt with in terms of charity: exceptional circumstances and benevolent exemptions.

Forced to conform by an assessment process to an essentialised group identity, undergraduates are not only frustrated in bringing individuality and personalisation to their learning, but this impacts on the social justice outcomes in two ways. Firstly, it is a form of injustice to the student – it is again a mirage of fairness where conformity masquerades as process. Secondly, it enculturates a notion of conformity as civic responsibility, hence doctors can go on to expect patients behave a certain way, lawyers expect their clients to accept procedures - rather than have a right to challenge, resist and subvert within a society that is perpetuating injustices.

## Assessment and social justice: how perfect can it be?

This third question flows very much from the previous two. One of the appeals of procedure in an assessment context is building in checks and balances to ensure students get the correct mark. For this to work, assumptions of sameness and a ‘level playing field’ are required. This notion of checks and balances is not unreasonable, and is entirely consistent with thinking of assessment as a social practice. However, what is not reasonable is to perpetuate myths that assessment can in any way be “perfected” by procedure or any other means.

Rawls was himself committed to the ‘art of the possible’ in his conceptions of social justice, seeing no value in any notion of social justice that cannot be considered possible (Bankovsky, 2013). However, what distinguishes Rawls’ approach from capabilities or critical theory is the role of idealised, perfect notions of social justice in working towards any reality. This is addressed directly by Sen (2010) who states: ‘if a theory of justice is to guide reasoned choice of policies, strategies or institutions, then the identification of fully just social arrangements is neither necessary nor sufficient’ (15). Similarly, Nussbaum’s (2006) work suggests that a pre-occupation with putting in place the ‘right’ conditions for social justice may actually obscure our understanding of the multiple circumstances that can prevent or impair different people’s experiences of (in)justice in a society. This can be understood from a critical theory perspective as the submersion, and hence pathologisation, of very real social problems and disparities. Thus even where Fraser (2003a) and Honneth (2003b) consider the dialectic between the immanent and the transcendental – what currently exists and what could exist, they do so in terms lived realities, not idealised types.

Many academics still talk about ensuring their students have the ‘right’ marks and some even try to back-up such claims in exam boards by proudly producing bell curve diagrams of their marking distribution as evidence of its *perfection*. Thus their approach to assessment falls victim to the pervasiveness of normative approaches to marking, masquerading as criterion-based. This is process as illusion.

Highly differentiated grading systems perpetuate this myth of marking precision. The more one attempts to categorise different students’ work into different levels of achievement by giving an exact mark (eg, 60% or 65%) the more one has to rely on highly detailed marking criteria. Thus one has to specify more precisely the features of an assignment of one mark and not another. This can be mediated to some extent by only marking within grading bands (eg A, B and so on). A better approach still comes with the practice at doctoral level whereby a much broader marking band is used such that one either achieves the PhD level or one does not. This is essential at doctoral level because of the very criteria of originality inherent in what it means to research at this level. Thus the relationship between sameness and difference (and how these are understood in terms of fairness) is completely different at doctoral level than at undergraduate. The associated features of the way in which one learns at doctoral level, driven by this assessment approach, should also be features of undergraduate learning:

In doctoral education it is the norm to emphasise that a student must make an original contribution to their subject area. Also commonplace at that level is an approach to learning based on an iterative process of exploring, trying out ideas, trying again, critiquing and correcting work along the way. In other words, at the doctoral level – the highest level of formal education, we allow students to fail and try again as a natural part of the process towards making their own contribution (McArthur, 2014, p. 173).

As Sen (2010) emphasises, limited resources (of all types) lead to decisions between choices. There may be several alternative choices, and each one may have a valid, albeit different, claim to being just. Thus there is seldom one perfect solution. Many academics know this dilemma when faced with a student who produces something entirely unexpected. We have to squeeze and push and pull to try to find a way to match it to expectations, learning outcomes and criteria that had simply not anticipated this original engagement with knowledge. So we fudge, and find a way. But what of the other students who did not dare, or did not conceive of their own power, to transcend our expectations?

## Assessment and social justice: how do the social and economic spheres inter-relate?

Both the capabilities approach and critical theory highlight the complex inter-relations between economic and social factors that shape our lives and the nature of social justice. Hence social justice cannot be attained by a procedural distribution, or redistribution of wealth or resources, but involves a dialectic between the social and economic on many levels. This impacts on understandings of assessment at a fundamental level because it connects with beliefs about the very purposes of higher education. If social justice involves an interaction of social and economic factors, then connecting assessment solely to the economic realm (as in employability and/or preparation for work) is unreasonable. While work is important to wellbeing, there is more to wellbeing than the economic exchange value of our labour.

In Nussbaum’s work the interaction between the social and economic is evident in the list of capabilities she presents, and the insistence that these cannot be traded one for another. She describes these capabilities as ‘part of a minimum account of social justice: a society that does not guarantee these to all its citizens, at some appropriate threshold level, falls short of being a fully just society, whatever its level of opulence’ (Nussbaum, 2006, p. 75). Sen’s capabilities approach is slightly different, and does not rest so heavily on such a list of capabilities, but he also addresses the social and economic relationship through the notion of scarcity (Sen, 2010). Economic scarcity necessitates social choices – and there is rarely any one, perfect resolution to the criteria upon which such choice should be made. Thus complicated and messy issues of judgement are as unavoidable as they are necessary.

Critical theory, with its roots in Marxist theory and notions of alienation and commodification clearly holds with this inter-relationship of the economic and social. However, Honneth and Fraser have debated the way in which the inter-relationship should be conceptualised (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Fraser (2003b) argues that unless we tease apart notions of recognition (culture) and redistribution (economic) then the latter gets lost. This is particularly important in the context of reinvigorating critical theory, according to Fraser, and the associated need to return economic issues to the front table of debate. Describing her theory of justice, Fraser states: ‘Without reducing either dimension to the other, it encompasses both of them within a broader overarching framework’ (Fraser, 2003b, p. 35). It is not that there is no inter-relationship between the economic and social, according to Fraser, but that such a relationship should not mean that the two are collapsed together:

Simply to stipulate that all injustices, and all claims to remedy them, are simultaneously economic and cultural is to paint a night in which all cows are grey: obscuring actually existing divergences of status from class, this approach surrenders the conceptual tools that are needed to understand social reality (Fraser, 2003b, pp. 60-61).

In contrast, Honneth argues that recognition must be the primary focus, but in so doing issues of redistribution are brought under its umbrella. He justifies this against Fraser’s approach by arguing that ‘even distributional injustices must be understood as the institutional expression of social disrespect’ (Honneth, 2003a, p. 114). By bringing notions of recognition to the fore, argues Honneth, many of the hidden, every day and pernicious aspects of injustice are more likely to receive attention. For example, forms of depravation not covered by organised movements such as trade unions are overlooked.

So the first major implication of this area of debate for assessment for social justice is that we must move to forms of assessment that do not reinforce a narrow conceptionalisation of the economic purposes of higher education. As I have discussed elsewhere (McArthur, 2011) ‘the problem for higher education is not the trend towards it having an economic role, but rather the narrowness of the way in which that role is conceptualised’ (738), and particularly its disarticulation from the social realm. Therefore, ‘what “the economy” looks like, and what it means to people’s lives, interactions, thoughts, beliefs and relationships, may look very different depending upon where one is placed within that economy’ (738). A major problem for the way in which assessment in higher education has become so intricately linked to the employability agenda, and even to graduate attributes, is this conflation of the economic perspectives of those who thrive within the current economic arrangements, and those who do not.

## Assessment and social justice: who should make the decisions?

The final debate underpinning assessment for social justice lies in understanding the relationship between those who decide on what is just and those who are affected by such decisions. Nussbaum’s work is particularly important here. Nussbaum (2006) positions her capabilities approach as offering a solution to some of the more intractable problems within Rawls’ theory of social justice, and particularly the issue of those people excluded by the initial assumption of sameness in the concept of *free, equal and independent*. Nussbaum argues that contractarian approaches, such as Rawls’, conflate aspects of ‘by whom’ and ‘for whom’. As such, there is an assumption that the parties who design the principles of social justice do so on behalf of human beings possessing the same features as themselves. But what then of those who are different, featuring mental or physical impairments that mean they are unable to participate in the processes of establishing the principles of justice? Thus, Nussbaum argues, the contractarian approach cannot accommodate the interests of such people under the umbrella of justice, and instead relies on notions of charity or compassion to protect their interests, as previously discussed in terms of the ability to accommodate sameness and difference.

Fraser’s (2007) ‘all-affected’ principle of social justice is also relevant. Fraser developed this principle as part of her response to globalisation, which she regards as potentially a positive force for greater social justice – and in contrast to the nation-state foundations of a Rawlsian approach. The ‘all-affected’ principle is key to a transformative approach to social justice decision-making according to Fraser:

all those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it….what turns a collection of people into fellow subjects of justice is not geographical proximity, but their co-imbrication in a common structural or institutional framework, which sets the ground rules that govern their social interaction, thereby shaping their respective life possibilities, in patterns of advantage and disadvantage (25).

Applied to assessment, this distinction of ‘by whom and for whom’ raises a number of issues. Clearly it is questionable the extent to which students currently have a say in assessment practices, including establishing the perceived fairness or justness. Some may argue that this is how it should be, as students have too much ‘self-interest’ involved to make reasonable decisions about what might be just assessment for all. Thus in Rawls’ terms, students are protected by the mutuality of disinterest. However, in work I have done with a colleague on sharing control with students in the design and implementation of a course, we found that the students were strongly motivated to try to develop assessment systems that would be fair to students with different aptitudes and preferences (see McArthur & Huxham, 2011). Thus rather than mutuality being achieved through the ideal-type assumptions of disinterest, it was fostered through the open acknowledgement and engagement with the potential differences in student preferences and needs. Typical comments included:

I’m still a bit iffy about the [take home] exam … I know some people don’t like exams but I feel I do fairly well in them as proven by my recent exam results I got today … However, I’m happy to go with a majority so that everyone has the best and equal chance to do well.

However, our work with students also highlighted the constraints on their genuine participation in assessment decisions, reminiscent of some of the issues raised by Nussbaum. For our project to succeed, we had to build in opportunities to enable the students to learn about different assessment methods before they could make an informed decision. For example, their final decision to go with a ‘take home exam’ only arose out of this process as this was not an option they were previously aware of. How this can be built into other courses, particular where a high level of modularisation is still in place is difficult to imagine. Part of the solution may lie in the notion of ‘meta assessment’ and interesting work undertaken which demonstrates the benefits for students being actively engaged in learning about assessment processes and the application of assessment judgements (eg. McDonald, 2010). It is also important to acknowledge that teachers themselves do not always have a great deal of say in how assessment is done. Local practices can impose heavy constraints on the introduction of new assessment strategies, and the time constraints of quality assurance processes can also make it hard to adapt assessments once in place.

The two prongs of assessment for social justice are particularly evident in discussions around ‘by whom and for whom’. The points above are largely centred on the justice of students’ experiences of assessment. However, another set of issues emerges if we consider the broader social justice implications. For clearly the nature and results of assessment practices within higher education has significant effects for the wider society where students go on to apply the knowledge and dispositions nurtured by such practices. An obvious example is medicine – to what extent does the way in which medical students are assessed lead them on to work in ways that further social justice in society as a whole? What say should those who are affected by doctors’ practices have in the assessments that have shaped how those doctors learned?

There has been some moves to address just this issue within health fields with the involvement of patients, carers and other parties in the assessment process (eg. see Crisp, Lister, & Dutton, 2006). Again, the answer is not simply about rolling out such initiatives across all disciplines, and justifying this in terms of “stakeholders”. This would be wrong on a number of levels. Among these is Honneth’s (2003a) warning of the danger of focusing on visible, and in that sense privileged, groups to the detriment of the many others who may be influenced by the ways in which our graduates learn to engage with knowledge and to apply this within society. There is simply no easy way to address this issue of who has a say in assessment policies and practices, and who is affected by them, and this returns us to the imperfect nature of assessment. Those familiar with critical theory, and particularly early writers such as Horkheimer and Adorno, may perceive a familiar pessimism that is often ascribed to their work. I reject this view and instead see their work as based on ‘not so much hopelessness as a rejection of false hope’ (McArthur, 2012, p. 423). Thus, in this last of five aspects of debate underpinning assessment for social justice I reiterate that the aim is not to perfect assessment practices, nor to guarantee greater social justice by linking into assessment for learning. However, each of these five issues, as the basis for reflection on our own practices and assumptions could contribute to movement towards assessment that is both more just for those who participate and foster greater social justice through the ways in which those students go on to live and work in society.

# Future Directions

This article has sought to establish the rationale for assessment for social justice and to consider the ways in which different theories of social justice suggest different ways of approaching assessment. Hence, it is aimed partly as a critique of current assumptions about justice and fairness in assessment, and particularly unreflective adherence to procedural notions of justice. Drawing on the capabilities approach and critical theory I offer no easy solution to rethinking the relationship between assessment and social justice, for the key premise is one of engagement with these issues and not one, clear way forward.

My gaze has been deliberately focused at a general level and I do not wish to deny that there are already many examples of just assessment and more innovative responses to some of the issues raised. However, this article seeks to offer a framework through which these examples can come together as part of a larger discussion with a solid theoretical foundation in conceptions of social justice.

My aim is to encourage debate both around the ways in which I have conceptualised the key issues in assessment for social justice and to encourage other perspectives, other theories and experiences in other contexts to be brought into the discussion. As much as anything else, assessment for social justice is an ongoing commitment to problematizing issues of justice and assessment rather than the pursuit of enduring solutions.

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