

# USE OF ASSESSMENT FORMS TO EMBED SOCIAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES THROUGH DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

**Pulane Molomo**

*Dr., Central University of Technology (South Africa)*

## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the extent to which assessment embed social justice principles in affording students with different learning abilities equal and fair opportunities to develop their intellectual abilities and remove ignorance. The aim was to establish if forms of assessment recognised principles of fairness and equity to build students' capacity to think critically and to make meaningful decisions that contribute towards a just social order. The study adopted a mixed method approach. Semi-structured interviews were used to enlist eight academic staff views on the matter. Data obtained from interviews were systematically sorted and categorised into common themes. A structured questionnaire was distributed and responded to by twenty students and data obtained from the instrument were analysed statistically. The study found out that some forms of assessment developed students' abilities by promoting a balanced, and equal opportunities. The acquisition of social justice principles enhanced learners' ability to think critically and to challenge social injustices and challenges that threatens their right to human dignity, development by instituting social change. The findings also demonstrate the importance of recognising students' learning styles and abilities through using forms of assessment in a balanced and fair manner. This study concludes that students' success after pedagogic encounters depended on balancing forms of assessment and developing their analytical thinking abilities. Such methodological skills and knowledge enable them to eliminate ignorance and social inequities. The study provides further insights regarding the use of assessment to cater for diverse students' aptitudes to advance humanity. It can be concluded that assessment creates critical thinkers who challenge practices and policies that threaten human dignity and perpetuate inequalities.

**Keywords:** *Assessment, digital platforms, equal opportunities, students learning abilities, social justice principles.*

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## 1. Introduction

Communities that experienced insufficient knowledge are faced with social imbalances deterring social justice principles to be realised. Ignorance and lack of powerful knowledge (Young, 2013) led to erroneous endorsement of decisions that eroded freedom, equality and limited human development in certain countries (Rawls, 1971). Whilst Bhui (2016) points to historical social and political events which manifested into unjust social inequalities and unequal distribution of resources particularly the development of human capabilities. Young (2013) points to social injustices that disregarded human rights principles deterring the acquisition of powerful knowledge. According to Young (2013) epistemic knowledge referred as powerful knowledge is accessed and distributed in universities gives people power and the ability to think critically. Arguably, assessment as the driver of learning should embed social justice principles by using fair measures that reaches out to all students. Young and Muller (2013) indicate that knowledge that matters gives people the power to enter complex debates that challenge social limitations and stifle innovation. Arguably, assessment that is geared towards knowledge that matters (Young, 2013) needs to be used to deepen the ideals of freedom, power, and equality (Ruger, 2010). Higher education institutions being grounded in the cultivation of democratic citizenship, thus have the obligation to promote emancipatory values (Rawls, 1971) by developing all students in a fair and balanced manner. Assessment being used in various institutions of learning, and cuts across all faculties and programmes need to be administered in cognisance of principles of equity and fairness to prepare students to attain social power Garret-Rucks, 2016. Arguably, Alvarez (2019) alludes to the relationship between social justice, teaching, learning and assessment which impact on just development of students' capabilities. However, other forms

of assessment used in digital platforms do not adequately unearth students' capabilities to enable them to construct liberated spaces, that preserve human dignity, social values and counteract exploitation practices (OECD, 2013). Since educational institutions are perceived as instruments for social justice, assessment as the key component in the acquisition of knowledge and skills needs to develop students' capabilities to enable them to ascend academic and social positions that correspond to their aptitudes, regardless of their family's wealth, background, or social belonging (OECD, 2013).

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Rawls (1971) place emphasises on the principle of equality as a key component of social justice whilst Reisch (2014) perceives social justice theory as a combination of many theoretical groundings. This paper is grounded in social justice principles to uncover some of the overlooked aspects of lived experiences eminent in people social spaces which reveals ignorance and power in deliberations (Rawls, 1971). The claim is that people who do not possess knowledge and methodical rules, operate from a limited view of justice because they enter deliberations out of ignorance which deprives them of their social rights (Rawls (1971).

## **3. Literature review**

### **3.1. Equity and social justice and Equity**

Nussbaum (2011) points out to that the idea that there are deep seated social inequities that can best be addressed by developing certain levels of thinking. Since theories of justice are perceived as very diverse, assessment is expected to afford students with different abilities, a fair opportunity of epistemic success described by Rohs and Ganz (2015) as an opportunity to access power. Plural grounds encompassing equal and fair opportunities for students with different learning styles and abilities beyond political social situations (Sen, 2009) should be created through assessment. As elucidated by (Young, 2013) challenges of poverty which perpetuate inequalities and social disorder should not only be tackled by the state but, it should be a shared responsibility that needs everyone's contribution particularly those with knowledge that gives power. Assessment in driving learning is thus critical towards realising social justice principles regarding what and how students learn in a manner which elicit critical consciousness (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

### **3.2. The concept of learning and assessment**

Boud and Falchikov (2007) state that assessment, rather than teaching, has a major influence on students' learning. To that effect, assessment should trigger debates that deepen knowledge and promote social justice principles by providing all students with different potentials equal opportunities to develop (Hayward, Simpson and Spencer, 2005). Although digital platforms are seen as presenting various opportunities for assessing students' learning abilities (Anderson, 2008). However, other forms of assessment do not adequately develop students' abilities. In educational settings where assessment is used to develop intellectual capabilities, assessment can bring a synergy between the idealist world and the real social world by developing capabilities that enables critical judgement to challenge social inequalities (Nussbaum, 2011). Educational institutions being perceived as engines for social justice are thus expected to provide education which enables society to ascend academic and social positions that correspond to their aptitudes, regardless of their family's wealth, background, or social belonging (OECD, 2013).

## **4. Aim of the study**

The aim was to investigate how forms of assessment commit to fairness and equality espoused in principles of social justice by affording all students the opportunity to develop different abilities.

### **4.1. Research questions**

1. Are principles of social justice embedded in forms of assessment?
2. How effective are forms in developing students' critical thinking abilities?

### **4.2. Research objectives**

1. To find out the extent to which forms assessment embeds principles of social justice.
2. To establish the effectiveness of forms of assessment in developing students' critical thinking abilities.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. Research design

This study adopted a mixed method approach to collect data to bring about rich data an objective element to the findings. The quantitative, non-experimental information about students' responses on how assessment embeds social justice principles were collected by means of a 4-point Likert scale and analysed statistically whilst participants were interviewed using semi structured questions that were transcribed and manually coded into themes (Patton 2015; Denzin & Lincoln 2012, Du Plooy et al., 2014). Permission to conduct the interviews was sought from the institution concerned.

### 5.2. Sample and sampling

The study sample was limited to selected cases which might impact significantly on the phenomenon under investigation (Awang & Noryanti Muhammad, 2012). 20 respondents were provided with quantitative questionnaires which consisted of 10 questions about digitally administered assessment whilst 8 staff members were interviewed using an interview schedule.

### 5.3. Methods

A 4-point Likert scale analysed statistically was used to obtain quantitative data whilst qualitative data was collected by the researcher using semi-structured questions to obtain data about ways in assessment encompasses forms of assessment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### 5.4. Data analysis

Data obtained through the Likert scale were analysed statistically whilst qualitative data obtained from participants were recorded, transcribed, and analysed systematically from content into codes, patterns and emerging themes were analysed using content analysis (Saldana, 2016).

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Responses from a questionnaire

Presented from statements 1-10

**+ Statement 1: prefer digital or sit in administered assessment**

60% of respondents strongly preferred digital assessment whilst, 40% preferred sit in.

**+Statement 2: preference of short/multiple choice to essay/or a combination type questions**

30% preferred essay type questions, 60% preferred a balance of the two whilst 10% preferred short multiple questions.

**+ Statement 3: A balance between essay and short questions embeds principles of fairness and equity**

80% strongly agreed whilst 20% disagreed.

**+Statement 4: assessment should embed social justice principles**

90% of the respondents strongly agreed whilst 10% disagreed

**+ Statement 5: Forms of assessment can cultivate students' capacity to deal with social challenges**

A relatively high number of 80% of the respondents strongly agreed to the statement, 20% agreed whilst 10% disagreed to the statement

**+Statement 6: Some forms of assessment prepare students to recognise unjust practices**

80% of the respondents strongly and 10% disagreed.

**+Statement 7: Assessment should develop social consciousness amongst students**

60% of the respondents strongly agreed, 20% agreed, 10% disagreed.

**Statement 8: Students act unjustly by plagiarising during digital assessment**

50% agreed whilst 50% strongly disagreed.

**+Statement 9: Assessment needs to relate real social injustices challenges**

80% strongly agreed, 10% disagreed.

### **-Statement 10: Forms of assessment' have the ability to liberate minds**

40% agreed 50% disagreed whilst 10% strongly disagreed.

## **6.2. Findings emerging from qualitative data**

The following themes emerged from analysing participants' responses on interviews

- ✚ Analytical capabilities are developed through assessment
- ✚ Assessment embeds the capacity towards challenging social injustices.
- ✚ Balanced forms assessment maintains principles of fairness and equity.

## **7. Discussion of the findings**

The findings have revealed the importance of assessment in the process of realising students' capabilities, whether it is administered digitally or physically. The element of objectivity, in reducing students' copying and unethical conduct has been cited as some of the advantages of multiple-choice or short questions and a flaw in the administration of essay type questions. Participants in favour of case studies and essay type questions were of the belief that such questions stimulate creative and analytical thinking which prepare students to challenge social unjust practices and thus embed social justice principles. Others indicated that case studies, briefs and essay type questions carry more weight in terms of developing capabilities that contribute towards enhancing social justice principles. Whilst others reflected on the use of both forms of assessment which include both short questions, essay type or case studies as a way of embracing a just balanced form of assessment to reach out to all students and develop diverse capabilities particularly critical thinking abilities. As corroborated by (Young, 2013; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) the development of high intellectual levels of thinking not only gives power but it awakens social consciousness. Since most of the participants indicated that case studies/briefs/essays are effective forms of assessment in building students' capabilities to prepare them to act responsibly in the civic space by engaging in deliberations that enable them to acquire power and equality. Essay type questions and case studies were also reported as being able to link content to real life contexts effectively and in that way eliciting social justice principles.

## **8. Conclusion**

Assessment has a direct contribution in shaping the society for the better. Therefore, it needs be administered in a just manner which resonate with social justice principles to unearth different abilities amongst students who come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Furthermore, social justice principles are to be determined on how facilitators' professional judgements are transformed in using assessment as an enabler for unearthing students' potentials and bring social awareness. Students also have the responsibility of using digital assessment in an ethical manner to develop their thinking abilities that will give the power of engaging from a position of power. As a result, forms of assessment need to consider epistemological, pedagogic and social justice implications in developing citizens who will use their intellectual' capabilities to challenges unjust practices.

## **9. Implications**

The implication is that both forms of assessment are important. However, some technological innovations need to be implemented to curb students' copying and unethical conduct. The vision of justice encompasses accountability as a balancing act for all participants involved in assessment which implies that both facilitators and students should consider prepares students to uphold social justice principles.

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