

Undergraduate Primary Education Students' Experience of Assessment: An
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

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Abstract

The aim of this study has been to uncover and analyse undergraduate primary education trainees' experience of being summatively assessed in their academic work. The ultimate purpose of the study, therefore, is to identify implications for my professional practice, as a university tutor, derived from an understanding of how undergraduates experience the assessment process.

The study is framed by a consideration of current and past thinking on assessment and its purpose in higher education. The stated purposes of assessment are explored within the context of the contemporary culture of 'performativity' as identified by several authors. Students' use of feedback is explored as is the nature of autonomy and independence in learning and the effect that summative assessment has on these putatively 'desirable' attributes of learners.

The chosen approach to the research (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) is justified as a means by which the totality of participants' experience can be explored and analysed. This takes into account the idea of a 'double hermeneutic' where the inquirer's initial assumptions about the topic of the research are openly articulated and explicitly modified as a result of engagement with the data. This study has provided new insights into the previously under-explored area how assessment is experienced. In particular it makes a unique contribution to the understanding and explanation of *how* students' approach to assessment takes the turn that it does towards instrumentalism and *how* communication and relationships in the feedback process become 'anti-dialogical'.

However, although many authors call for 'authentic' assessments that relate to 'real-life', I call for a broader, existential, concept of authenticity to be deployed. The conclusion of the study argues therefore, that in order to break free from the compartmentalised instrumentality of the current assessment regime, we might return to the ideas of critical pedagogy characterised by a love (as in 'commitment') for the whole human being rather than that element which is being assessed and measured.

These ideas, I suggest, could be synthesised with more recent ideas of the 'flipped classroom' to generate a more humanly focussed practice of 'flipped' assessment. However, this is a work for further study and exploration as there remain many barriers to progressing such ideas. Although there is pessimism amongst authors who feel that well-meaning changes will inevitably be subsumed by the current neo-liberal discourse, the study ends with a rallying call to action as to do nothing is not an option.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Aims, purposes and approach to the research

The aim of this study is to uncover and explicate undergraduate primary education trainees' experience of being assessed, summatively, in their academic work. In realising this aim I incorporate a reflexive awareness of my own experiences of being examined. I acknowledge how those experiences have served to influence and shape the prejudices I have subsequently built up around the purpose and value of assessment in Higher Education [HE]. The ultimate purpose of the study, therefore, is to identify implications for professional knowledge and practice derived from an understanding of how undergraduates experience the assessment process. The study reported here explicitly avoids any attempt to suggest or implement improvements to current practices without first seeking full consultation with those who are being assessed. I did not, therefore, start by asking the participants how I may improve this or that aspect of their experience but, instead, I encouraged them to tell the whole story of their experience in as much detail as possible. Indeed, the project's significance lies in the fact that it starts with the learners' stories and does not pre-suppose assessment to be something that is or has to be 'done' to others by gatekeepers who are in positions of authority hold superior knowledge.

Although the representation of participants' voice is a primary concern of this thesis, the immediate implications for my practice are, necessarily, set within the context of the assessment framework extant in my own institution at the time of writing. However, I am also concerned, in my discussion and summary, with how the new knowledge and understanding generated as a result of this project could have wider portent for the long-term direction of higher education assessment policy and practice.

1.2 Professional context

My interest in this topic as a formal field of enquiry arose from several years of thinking, comparing and evaluating experiences from my own point of view as a lecturer in primary education and as someone who has been, and is still being, assessed academically. As such, over eleven years teaching in higher education, I have made many informal assumptions about what might be wrong with the system and why some students' attitudes in this area seem to be, on the face of it, so different from my own. Furthermore, as a course leader and a module leader, I have indulged in plenty of tinkering with systems and trying out new ideas in teaching and assessment. However, when considering and approach to the research reported in this document, I knew I did not wish to embark upon an improvement programme or project designed to implement and evaluate some form of new practice in assessment. My concern

was that the rationale for such an intervention and, indeed, the nature of the intervention itself, may well be grounded in my own deep-seated prejudices, informal theorising and institutional constraints. Ethically, I felt it was important to first explore those prejudices and try to look at assessment practices afresh and from the perspective of those being assessed. The opportunity to carry out formal research led me to consider an appropriate methodological lens that would enable me to explore contextual and contemporary aspects of assessment, expose my own pre-understanding of assessment and, most importantly, reveal how assessment is experienced by the students themselves.

My observation that students seem disposed towards their assessment in quite nuanced and complex ways led me to consider Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an approach 'committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences' (Smith et al. 2009, p. 1). Treatment of the data (taken from interviews) organizes personal accounts of lived experience around a set of themes that represent commonalities of experience. These themes give an account of what was experienced set within the context of time, space and human relationships.

The eight undergraduates who participated in the enquiry were embarking upon the final year of their BA (Hons) Primary Education degree programme. They had, therefore, significant experience of submitting coursework, sitting exams and accumulating grades and feedback over the course of their three and four year programmes. Interview data collected with the participants makes reference to the full breadth of their experience of being assessed from assignment briefings, the process of researching and composing written work through to submission and the feedback and grades subsequently received.

1.3 Thesis structure

The design of the research and presentation of the study follow a methodological path and reporting structure set out by Smith et al. in their 2009 book 'Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis'. Thus, Chapter 2 frames the study and takes the form of a traditional literature review. Here, I discuss assessment and its purposes and then go on to outline the current issues and debates around assessment practices in HE.

In Chapter 3 I justify IPA as a research methodology and define some of the key terms such as the nature of interpretation in the context of phenomenological research design. This leads, in Chapter 4, to an outline of the research process. Here I discuss the nature of interviews in phenomenological

research, how the data was gathered and the techniques used to derive significant statements from that data. Ethics, quality and rigour in phenomenological research are also considered in this section.

In the light of the methodological stance taken, I then, in Chapter 5, give an account of my own engagement with the process of assessment from my personal experience of being assessed at school and at university through to my current position as a university tutor and assessor of student work. The purpose of this self-enquiry is to identify and then acknowledge any pre-suppositions and prejudices I have formed around assessment, its purpose and its usefulness. I go on to re-analyse and re-form these ideas as part of the iterative process described later as the 'hermeneutic circle'. After these preliminary reflections I introduce the research participants via short pen-portraits before identifying three 'master' themes derived from my treatment of the data. Next, I present a series of analytical discussions under each theme and sub-theme where I juxtapose different participants' voices in order to present a coherent, thematized account of their experiences.

In Chapter 6, I assert that the contribution that this study makes to our current knowledge is that it makes a significant addition of data, analysis and evaluation to an under-researched area, that is, the experience of assessment. I identify the need to go deeper into the ambiguous relationship between tutors and students. To do this I call for academics and practitioners to re-explore what the freirian concept of 'love' in dialogical relations might mean for our practice. I identify 'love' (defined by Friere as 'commitment') as the missing (and definitely ignored) link in the quest for authentic and effective assessment practices.

I explore the implications of my findings for my future practice. I acknowledge the short-term limits to change but also note the assertions of authors who make the case that 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions' in that many of the contemporary 'improvements' that have been implemented in HE teaching, learning and assessment strategy have, in fact, been appropriated, subsumed and nullified by the current pervasive and putatively toxic neo-liberal discourse in education (Giroux, 2014). I subsequently argue, therefore, that we might ground our initiatives and interventions in assessment in the humanistic principles of critical pedagogy.

In Chapter 7 I conclude that such a stance requires us to consider and treat people in a more human fashion rather than simply subjecting them to technical actions designed to get them to perform in certain ways and at certain times. In any case, despite the pessimism of some critics, I suggest that to do nothing is not an option – whilst also noting that some reforms may need to be underpinned by major ideological and structural changes in the way HE is envisioned and constituted.

2. Literature review: framing the study

2.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter with a brief outline of the historical context for the use of the term 'performativity'. In an educational context I discuss the possible influence of 'performativity' on our assessment practices. I then explore the purpose and practice of assessment in HE and go on to focus on contemporary issues associated with the feedback given to students. This leads to a discussion on the role of assessment in the development of autonomous learners and a broader look at continuity and change in assessment practices. Finally, I return to the roots of performativity and the need for the researcher to be aware of the assumptions we make which might lead us to perpetuate the dominant neo-liberal discourse rather than transform it.

2.2 Performance and performativity

Any discussion about the contested purposes and aims of contemporary assessment practices has to be seen within the context of the economic and political landscape that has influenced profoundly many of the educational reforms of recent years. The most relevant aspect of this broad agenda apparent, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout this review, concerns the idea of assessment as 'performance' and, in particular, the impact of 'performativity' as it is defined in educational contexts.

2.2.1 Historical context

The idea of 'performativity' was introduced by Austin through a series of lectures given in 1955 that were later reproduced in the book 'How to Do Things with Words' (Austin, 1962). Here, Austin explains that utterances or 'performatives', as he prefers to call them, are in themselves, 'acts' (1962, p. 7). Thus, even though the idea of performativity emerged from the study of language, there was, from the start, a strong connection between performativity and action.

Schechner developed performance theory through the 1970s in a wide-ranging, 'inclusive' sense with reference to a range of world cultures and situated activities that, he argued, are all regulated by codes of performance. His theory posits, that we 'perform' through our activity in everyday life in our 'greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles' (Schechner, 2003, p. xviii) and other observable manifestations of the way we act in society. Performance, as well as referring to various artistic performances, can thus have '...behavioural, technological and economic connotations and can therefore be applied to mean many things' (Locke, 2015, pp. 247-248). Furthermore, states Locke, 'all of these meanings of performance have a "doing" element, delineated by some kind of "event" or

happening that can be measured by time and cost' (p. 248).

Butler (1993) also emphasises the active nature of performance by drawing attention to its role in the reinforcement and communication of identity. Performativity, for Butler, is the 'reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (1993, p. xii). She argues, for example, that gender is not something that we are, but, rather, it is an act of doing rather than a being (Butler, 1999). The idea of performance, therefore, facilitates the study and evaluation of the ways in which individuals speak and act in the world. Such evaluations of the many manifestations of performance are not, however, confined to the academic sphere. Performativity takes on a different complexion when identified as a tool of neo-liberal oppression – particularly with reference to education (Giroux, 2015).

2.2.2 Education and critical studies context of performativity

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) Lyotard distinguished between the terms 'performative' and 'performativity'. He noted a subtle shift in context and language in the way that he deployed the term by stating that the term 'performative' had 'taken on a precise meaning in language theory since Austin' and that he was using it in association with the term performativity in the 'sense of efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio' (1984, p. 88). Simply put, states Locke (2015, p. 248) 'performativity is the quest for efficiency: the very best input/output equation.'

Consequently, McKenzie (2001) sees performance as the dominant mode of assessment and legitimisation in both the human and technological world. He calls performance as 'an emergent stratum of power knowledge' (2001, p. 18), which pervades 'human labour and leisure activities and the behaviours of all industrially and electronically produced technologies' (2001, p. 12). Thus, with reference to the study of education policy and practice, 'performativity' is often used as a term to denote how students and their teachers are required by systems to perform in educational contexts. Importantly, in the drive for accountability, performance is to be measured. Ball (2012, p. 29) has described performativity in this sense as...

...a powerful and insidious policy technology... that links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output.

To obtain such measures and comparisons we are 'required to spend increasing amounts of our time making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it' (Ball, 2012, p. 30). Such

accountability has a clear link with assessment as the measurement of performance and, as Ball had written previously (2010, p. 222), this has led educators, willingly or otherwise, to embrace a performative culture in their classrooms. Indeed, in higher education settings, Macfarlane (2014, p. 338) sees student performativity as 'the mirror image of teacher performativity'. However, whereas 'teacher performativity is widely characterised as an unwarranted assault on the professionalism and autonomy of academics... student performativity is generally viewed as contributing to higher levels of positive engagement' (Macfarlane, 2014, p. 338). Thus Macfarlane (2014, p. 339) cites 'attendance registers, assessment related proxies for attendance such as in-class tests and presentations, the use of anti-plagiarism software and requirements [for students] to sign statements testifying to authorship [of written assignments]' as indicators of a performance culture.

There has developed, therefore, alongside current concerns for student engagement and autonomy a gathering critique of contemporary practices which label themselves as 'student-centred' or, as Holmes (2004), in a pejorative sense, has put it, 'learnerist'. Macfarlane's (2014) problem with learnerism does not seem to be based upon an educational argument but, rather, upon a suspicion that the student-centred learning agenda is being controlled too heavily by those in authority and does not take sufficient account of student voice. In fact, he states that 'There is a wealth of evidence that students prefer to learn in ways that are often labelled negatively as "traditional" or "passive", notably via the lecture method' (Macfarlane, 2014, p. 342). This critique of the teacher-learner relationship taken further and articulated in even stronger terms by Giroux (2015, p. 98) who warns of a 'new authoritarian' age where outwardly common-sense and benign representations of education and the purpose of assessment obscure their invisible and insidious descent into 'communities of control'.

Consequently, there is a sub-text to what follows that raises questions about power-relations and who, ultimately, decides what is 'best' for students.

2.3 Assessment: its purpose

Mansell et al., (2009, p. 8) identify three broad purposes of assessment which can be summarised as being:

- a) to help build understanding on a day-to-day basis;
- b) to provide information on achievements to those outside the institution;
- c) to hold individuals and institutions to account.

Purposes b) and c) imply a reference to the aggregate data generated from *summative* scored or graded assessments such as tests, examinations and coursework or, in other words, the assessment *of* learning. In this sense, assessment may be seen as the measurement of achievement. Purpose a), on the other hand, views assessment as a *formative* process that promotes learning or, in other words, what has commonly become referred to as assessment *for* learning (Black et al., 2003).

In recent years, assessment practice has, in both schools and universities, taken a turn towards giving more prominence to formative approaches. This development can be traced back to innovations in school-based practice inspired and given momentum by Black and Wiliam's seminal work on formative assessment, 'Inside the Black Box' (1998). In practice, Boud (2007, p. 15) suggests, the best way to get an overview of changing practices in HE is to analyse university documentation that sets out how institutions themselves view assessment and how they seek to use it. This, he asserts, will illustrate the 'current assessment discourse'. Boud analysed sections of three assessment policies available in early 2006 which I will contrast with policies that were available in 2016. The policy extract I have chosen below is taken from the same source as one of Boud's exemplars. In 2007 he cited this policy statement from the City University, London:

Assessment is the process by which the University is able to confirm that a student has achieved the learning outcomes and academic standards for the module... and/or award for the programme for which he or she is registered (see Boud, 2007, p. 15)

However, a more recent and updated definition of assessment purpose from the same university largely compiled in 2010 but updated since then reads:

Assessment has a double purpose. It is the summative process by which the university is able to confirm that the student has achieved the learning outcomes and academic standards for the module... and/or award for the programme on which they are registered. *It also acts as a strong formative tool to support and assist student learning and development.* (City University, p. 2, italics mine)

The implication here is that, in the intervening years, the university has either arrived at a more sophisticated understanding of the purposes of assessment, or that has seen the need to communicate

in a more explicit way to stakeholders, that assessment has more to it than offering a summative judgement of outcomes. Boud had argued that the 'dominant discourse' of assessment in HE seemed to 'construct learners as passive subjects' (2007, p.17), but, by 2010, a subtle change in this discourse had apparently taken place, in some institutions, at least. The idea of assessment as a 'formative tool' has emerged with the implication that those being assessed have a more active role to play as the emphasis moves to assessment as an on-going dialogue rather than as a judgement. Other extant policies support this notion. For example, The University of Greenwich (2014, p. 4) tell readers that 'assessment must be designed in such a way as to promote effective learning' and Teesside University state that 'the purposes of assessment and feedback are to... promote learning and motivate learners' (2016, np).

Other university policies (e.g. Plymouth, Canterbury Christ Church, Manchester Metropolitan) also reference the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) who, themselves, recognise that 'assessment serves a number of purposes' (QAA, 2012, p. 5) and that...

...the main purpose is a summative one to enable us to measure student learning through the award of credits which lead to an accredited award. Equally important, however, is the recognition that assessment should also be an integral part of learning and that summative as well as formative assessment can, and does, [in some undefined way], facilitate learning (p. 5)

Despite the inconsistency in their use of language (i.e. if the 'main purpose' is summative then it would be difficult for formative assessment to be 'equally important') the QAA further argue that assessment provides 'a source of motivation... promote learning by providing feedback on performance and help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses' (2012, p. 6). However, as Harlen (2012) points out, the impact that the experience of assessment can have on motivation can have both a positive and a negative impact. Furthermore, there is no mention, by the QAA of assessment data being used, as Mansell et al., (2009), cited at the beginning of this chapter point out, as a means by which institutions can be held accountable or as a means of providing information to those outside the institution such as employers and compilers of HE league tables. The apparent recent clarification that universities have QAA given on the principles of effective assessment practices follows a number of years of criticism from commentators who had been calling for root and branch reform. In 1993, for example, although Atkins, Beattie and Dockrell found significant weaknesses in assessment practice, by 2002 Knight (p.

284) had concluded that during the 1990s the problem was being conceptualised in the wrong way, writing that:

...discussion of methods and their application is sterile without deliberation on (or deconstruction of) assessment-in-curriculum; which is to say that radical thinking is needed about what summative assessment is for, who it is for, what it can do, what it cannot do cheaply and what it ought not to be asked to do at all.

Knight went on to call for a root-and-branch reconsideration of the purpose of assessment in higher education. This would need to look closely at the balance between formative and summative assessment practices because, as Ramsden (1992, p. 176) claimed at the time, 'from our students' point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum'. Brown et al., (1997) further argued that assessment not only defines what students consider to be important but, also, almost every other aspect of their experience as undergraduates. Furthermore, Newstead (2002, p. 3) noted that:

The types of assessment we currently use do not promote conceptual understanding and do not encourage a deep approach to learning... Our means of assessing them seems to do little to encourage them to adopt anything other than a strategic or mechanical approach to their studies.

Elton and Johnston (2002, p. 12) added that high-stakes assessment 'strongly and often unfavourably influences a student's attitude to their learning' and, consequently, as Brown et al., (1997, p. 9) concluded, 'If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment'.

Nevertheless, in the years since the critiques of the 1990s and 2000s there is evidence, in the university assessment policies cited above and in some of the recently reported initiatives and thinking cited below, that practices have begun to change. The change has been given further impetus, it seems, by the yearly National Student Survey (NSS) which, Williams and Kane (2008) argue has, since 2005, led to institutions developing a number of reactive responses to the apparent relative dissatisfaction of students to, in particular, the feedback they receive for their assessed work. The prominence of feedback as a concern for institutions not only stems from its inclusion in the NSS but also from the recognition of its link to assessment as a formative tool.

2.4 Feedback

2.4.1 Feedback and dialogue

Murtagh and Baker (2008, p. 21) have identified a problem with what they term the 'linearity' of the assessment process in that, commonly, a task is set, students engage in that task, the task is marked and, finally, students reflect on their feedback which may, or may not, provide some insight into what they might do to improve performance in their next task. This process emphasises what I would term 'inter-assessment' feedback (i.e. feedback from one assignment which attempts to give advice for improving subsequent assignments) as opposed to 'intra-assessment' feedback where there is evidence of a formative and dialogical process that occurs in support of the production of a single assessed piece of work. In this latter sense feedback can be seen as contributing to what Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 11) describe as 'constructive alignment' where 'we systematically align the teaching/learning activities, as well as the assessment tasks, to the intended learning outcomes'. Here learning and assessment become, almost inextricably, part of the same process. In this process, clear, transparent communication is of paramount importance. Jonnson (2014, p. 840) defines 'transparency' as 'student awareness of the purpose of the assessment and assessment criteria' and goes on to report that this...

...has been shown [through research] to be important for the students, not least since many believe that not knowing what is expected of them has a very negative impact on their learning' (p. 840).

Therefore, Jonnson argues, if we accept that transparency is a means for enhancing student learning, our next problem will be how can we effectively communicate our expectations to the students? Here, again, however, Jonnson is clear that, all too often, students do not sufficiently understand those expectations and that 'many students have problems understanding the meaning of the terms that teachers use, or the criteria that teachers make reference to, even when effort has been made to clarify the discourse' (2014, p. 840).

Thus, when assessment is seen as a formative process that should, by definition, involve dialogue, the idea of 'feed-forward' as well as 'feedback' becomes a key theme to explore. However, the relatively sophisticated and potentially transformational notion of a dialogical education, most often associated in its most radical form with the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, has only recently been explicitly linked by commentators to the purpose and practice of assessment. Thus, Torres and Leite (2014, p. 17) argue that giving feedback on students' work should gradually make way for what they call 'educative assessment' where the focus shifts to self-regulation aimed at, ultimately, 'making students responsible

for the evolution of their training programme'. This, they say, requires a change from a 'regulation logic' (or, as Freire, 1970, p. 84 puts it a logic of 'domination') to an 'emancipation' logic whereby subjects are liberated from the regulation and domination of assessment as something that is done *to* them and harness its educative power for their own purposes. Torres and Leite's argument, however, goes well beyond a call for building more peer and self-assessment into programmes as it raises fundamental questions about the nature of teaching, learning and the content of courses – a point I return to later in this chapter.

Although they do not take their argument to the same radical conclusion as Torres and Leite, Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) have also asserted that feedback is intended to be part of a dialogical response that enables students to:

- assess their own learning and reflect on their development;
- discuss their learning with their tutors;
- understand what is expected of them and what good performance is;
- gain information about their learning;
- think positively about their learning and, therefore, to progress.

(adapted from Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006, pp. 199-218)

Nevertheless, these authors argue that, despite the formative turn taken in assessment practice, feedback is still largely dominated by teachers and, indeed, seen as the responsibility of teachers. Feedback, they argue, is still generally taken by stakeholders to be a transmission process whereby:

[T]eachers transmit feedback to students about what is right and wrong in their academic work, about its strengths and weaknesses, and students use this information to make subsequent improvements.

(Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 200).

The authors go on to assert that this transmission view of formative assessment and feedback is problematic. Firstly, if formative assessment is exclusively the responsibility of teachers, then it is difficult to see how students can become empowered to develop the independence and autonomy discussed at other points in this chapter. Also, it is too often assumed that when teachers give feedback to students these messages can be simply and effectively translated into action. There is evidence,

though, that feedback messages can be complex and difficult to decipher and that students require further opportunities to construct actively their understanding of them before they can be used to regulate performance. Thus, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006, p. 200) assert that 'viewing feedback as a cognitive process involving only transfer of information ignores the way feedback is received and the way in which it affects student motivation'. They imply, therefore, that the feedback experience should be a shared one. Rust et al. (2003, p. 152), state that 'that inviting students into this shared experience should also enable more effective knowledge transfer of assessment processes and standards to them.' This invitation comprises an 'induction into the rules of the... academic community' (Evans, 2013, p. 106). Indeed, Ruiz-Primo (2011, pp. 17-18) proposes that one of the conditions required for formative assessment to be effective is that 'assessment conversations should serve to immerse students into the language, culture, and artifacts of the academic discipline.' This immersion into so-called tacit knowledge or 'connoisseurship' involves 'observation, imitation, dialogue and practice' (Rust et al., 2003, p. 152).

If we fail to engage with this immersion process, Boud (2007, p. 17) warns that students will, inevitably, be constructed as passive subjects having 'no role other than to subject themselves to the assessment acts of others, to be measured and classified'. Carless, (2006, p. 229) adds that the 'asymmetrical power relations inherent in the assessment process risk invoking negative emotions, which may form a barrier to learning from feedback'. However, this objectification and alienation of students seems to have become an almost necessary feature of their experience due to the putative inability of assessors to bring to consciousness and share adequately tacit knowledge. Lejeune (2011, p. 97) expands on the definition of this concept by declaring it to be knowledge, that,

...by its very essence, cannot be formalized [and] cannot be explained using rational language. It is therefore nearly impossible to transfer it to another person except through methods such as observation, imitation, socialization, the use of metaphors or by other training-related means such as internships, work-study programs, buddy systems, mentoring, and job rotation.

Yet, these methods are not, in any obvious way, necessarily applicable to the production of written work for assignments and exams. But, in order to become successful members of their particular academic community, inductees need to learn how to write in a certain way. This process, for many, is difficult enough but the expectations of the academic community can be blatantly inconsistent within

and across institutions. Students can soon learn to their consternation, therefore, that those expectations will often differ from tutor to tutor (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). These 'local discourses' as Knight (2006, p. 440) calls them reflect the fact that diverse communities of practice in academia tend to evolve their own special brands of connoisseurship which are formalised and given legitimation through institutional and departmental policies and protocols. However, Knight goes on to argue that some level of this knowledge is absolutely essential for students if they are to understand whether they are on the right track or not and, consequently, develop the ability to self-regulate their learning and output. Sadler (2013, p. 62) adds that:

Only after students have acquired a sufficient basis of appropriate tacit knowledge can they can understand the content and implications of a marker's feedback. At that point, feedback can be effective as learners become more discerning, more intuitive, more analytical, and generally more able to create, independently, productions of high quality on demand.

The QAA (2012, pp. 5-6), being aware of this problem, cite the barrier of a...

...lack of shared expectations between staff and students about what constitutes good quality work [indicating] that one of the key elements of the assessment and feedback process... involves discussion of, or explicit reference to, the assessment/grading criteria.

Nonetheless, engagement in such discussion with students raises other issues. Connoisseurship is not, it is argued, developed merely by making explicit reference to grading criteria. Indeed, Sabri (2011, p. 3), notes, from her own research, that:

Holistic assessment... often associated with connoisseurship and tacit judgement... [is] the *polar opposite* of analytic assessment which deploys marking criteria [and that] tutors' understanding of the marking criteria's scope for interpretation and flexibility varied widely.

Still, Carless (2006) directs us to engage in 'assessment dialogues' which have the purpose of cultivating, in students, a sense of ownership of their learning. In order to achieve this, assessors have to understand more fully their own role in formative dialogue. Sadler (2013, p. 55) maintains that:

The task of teachers is not to coach students through the production of particular complex responses by offering ongoing judgements about quality together with advice on how to improve them. It is to teach students how to judge quality and modify their own work during production.

The current improvement agenda, therefore, seems to be impeded by an *aporia*. On the one hand we are encouraged into more formative dialogic learning relationships which enable students to grow in autonomy and confidence, but, on the other hand, the knowledge we are required to share through such dialogue is very difficult to articulate adequately.

2.4.2 Feedback: motivation and mindsets

Positive and purposeful engagement with feedback is, according to Gedye (2010), dependent on the mindset of the receiver. At either end of a continuum she describes two types of student: those who believe their ability can be improved, and those that believe it is fixed. For such students, evidence of their assessment performance in negative written comments or in low grades can be viewed as a reflection of their low ability, whereas conversely, those with a more resilient and solution-focused outlook will look to learn lessons from criticism seeing it as an opportunity to improve. A challenge for providers of feedback is helping those with a fixed, fatalistic mindset to believe they can, indeed, improve. In order to do this, students need to be motivated and possess, or develop, self-esteem. Gedye also reports that research suggests that students take less notice of feedback when they are given grades, and grading negatively affects the self-esteem of less-able students. 'Studies', Gedye writes, (2010, p. 40) suggest that focusing on 'low-stakes' assessment with formative feedback, rather than 'high-stakes' assessment accompanied by grades, may help students focus on the learning process and how they might improve rather than confirming levels of performance. Thus, perhaps a more accurate description of effective feedback would be, as mentioned above, 'feed-forward' with the implication that dialogue needs to be cumulative (Alexander, 2008) in that it contains explicit, actionable advice. Indeed, in a review of 37 empirical studies on the topic of feedback published between 2000 and 2011 Li and Di Luca (2014) identify a common concern across the studies around the confusing 'dual roles' of assessment feedback, the confusion stemming from a blurring of the

distinction, in written feedback, between assignment specific criticisms and advice that can be utilised in future work.

The way individual students respond to feedback has also been linked, by Darnon et al. (2010), to their dispositions and attitudes as learners. The authors summarise the development of thinking around ideas of intrinsic motivation discussing a commonly made distinction in the goal orientation of learners. Thus, 'mastery goals' correspond to the desire to progress and improve one's own abilities, whereas 'performance goals' correspond to the desire to outperform others or not to be outperformed by others. They state that:

In this literature, one of the main differences between performance goals and mastery goals is the standard through which competence is defined. Competence can be conceived of either with reference to one's own past performance ... or with reference to the others' performance... According to this framework, when pursuing performance goals, people are concerned with social comparison, which is not the case within mastery goals. Indeed, in this latter case, regardless of what the others' performance is, what is important is the comparison between one's past level of knowledge and one's current level of knowledge (p. 213).

Furthermore, a performance orientation, has also been identified by Smith (2011, p. 92) as being detrimental to students' development as independent learners. He adds a layer of understandable complexity to the debate by pointing out that it is not only learners that exhibit tendencies towards either performance or mastery but that their teachers may also be inclined one way or the other. Such tendencies emanate from, he suggests, pressures to get results and 'teach to the test' which force us towards a seemingly efficient transmission approach to teaching and learning as we seek to 'cram' content into our teaching sessions.

2.5 Assessment and autonomy

The sense in which learners can be autonomous, therefore, needs some unpicking. In the literature, there is no strict differentiation of the principles of 'self-regulated' learning as they apply to children or to young adults entering higher education. Furthermore, the term 'autonomous learner' is used, more or less, synonymously with 'independent learner', 'self-regulated learner' or 'self-sufficient learner'

(Macaskill and Denovan, 2013; Cassidy, 2011; Meyer et al., 2008). These terms seem to characterise a learner who 'is aware of himself or herself as a learner [able to] critically review the integration of new learning and... set his or her own learning agenda' (Garrigan, 1997, p. 169). As such pupils mature, they recognise that learning is their prime responsibility and that the teacher's role is to facilitate and guide the learning rather than to drive and direct it. However, Meyer et al., (2008, p. 2) conducted a review of the literature on independent learning and acknowledged that:

There are a number of different ways of defining and describing independent learning, without there being a shared understanding of how these different definitions and descriptions relate to one another. The literature works with different definitions and this may make it difficult for policy-makers and practitioners to find clear guidance.

Nevertheless, the authors also add that:

There is a consensus in the literature that independent learning does not involve [learners] merely working alone. Instead, the important role teachers can play in enabling and supporting independent learning is stressed (p. 2).

Thus, the role of tutors in facilitating an 'enabling environment' where the conditions for independent learning are consciously attended to and developed becomes the key to promoting autonomy. To illustrate this point Birenbaum (2002) discusses two types of learning activities. One activity is characterised by external prescription and involves the teacher doing learning and thinking activities on behalf of learners as a demonstration. For example, the teacher, whilst demonstrating a science experiment, explains the relationship between concepts and theories, making comparisons and drawing conclusions. The other activity Birenbaum describes involves students performing the actual learning and thinking activities by themselves - described by Birenbaum (2002, p. 120) as 'self-directed active learning'. This, second activity, privileges the process of learning over acquisition of the content. Assessment has a big part to play in the success, or otherwise, of such activity as, quite often, formative and summative assessment activity is driven with reference to objectives based on subject-specific knowledge and skills. Here 'assessment' can be contrasted with 'evaluation' in that assessment is associated with measuring the extent to which a learner has mastered curriculum content whereas

evaluation is more concerned with the learning process itself and the development of meta-cognitive skills (Angelo and Cross, 1993).

It may be, then, that to describe learning as a truly autonomous enterprise there will need to be a shift in our thinking from our current emphasis on the curriculum as a body of knowledge to the 'curriculum as process' (Grundy, 1987). Obviously, this is not a new argument and, in recent years, the rapid progress of technology in a seemingly increasingly unstable world has made many educationalists question anew the purposes of schooling. This thinking is, perhaps, best summed up by Seymour Papert (see Claxton, 2006, p. 1) who has said of the future that:

All skills will become obsolete except one, the skill of being able to make the right response to situations that are outside the scope of what you were taught in school. We need to produce people who know how to act when they are faced with situations for which they were not specifically prepared.

This thinking has been developed further by Guy Claxton (2006, p. 6) who identifies this implied independence with what he calls the 'four dispositions', namely, 'resourcefulness', 'resilience', 'reflection' and 'reciprocity' – a highly practical notion of autonomy which can be summed up together as self-reliance developed around a dialogical framework. Here then, in terms of assessment practice, there is an implicit call for a formative, reciprocal (i.e. dialogical) relationship between tutors and students – the theoretical and moral underpinnings of which link to the emancipatory ideas of Torres and Leite (2014) cited above and, again, underpinned by the earlier, ground-breaking work of Paulo Freire.

2.6 'Meaningful' assessment and the student experience

More recently, a body of research, comment and critique has developed around renewed interest in idea of instating 'authentic assessment' practices (e.g. Larkin, 2014; Brown, 2015; Deutsch, 2016; Chong et al. 2016). Such assessment, state Vu and Dall'alba (2014, p. 778) 'is considered authentic when the tasks are real-to-life or have real-life value'. They are, therefore, as Deutsch (2016, p. 56) puts it 'meaningful'. Nevertheless, even though researchers in higher education have proposed using authentic assessment to replace traditional assessment, 'these practices [have been] slow to be implemented' (Litchfield and Dempsey, 2015, p. 65). Furthermore, although I reflect further on the idea of authenticity in Chapter 5, there appears to be no agreed definition of what 'real-to-life' or

'meaningful' tasks look like. The motivation behind innovation in meaningful practice is that the student experience will be enhanced as they become more fully engaged in the things that matter to them.

However, although much has been written on assessment during the past twenty years, relatively little attention has been given to the student experience of assessment as a whole. Nearly ten years ago, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2007) recognised that experiences of assessment had often been overlooked yet, as recently as 2015, Bevitt reported that, still, little is known about assessment as an experience. Although she points to studies concerning aspects of that experience, such as preferences, mood, motivation, emotion (e.g. Coutts, Gilleard and Baglin, 2011; Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; van de Watering, 2008), Bevitt reports 'significant gaps in the research literature' (2015, p. 103).

Despite attention being paid to various aspects of experience, nature of the relationship between student and tutor at assessment time has, perhaps, received the least attention of all. When Crook, Gross and Dymott (2006, p. 94) did look into this issue they found that a

...striking interpersonal dissociation of author and reader (student and tutor) was apparent in the organisational processes documented [in their research]. This was identified as the source of significant student discontent...

In contrast to this discontent, Gardner and Lane (2010), in a small-scale auto-ethnographic study, report positively on the building of trust, care and the 'ethical responsibility' that develops in a student-tutor relationship. However, although Gardner and Lane identify roles and boundaries, they do not touch on how the relationship is affected by the interpersonal asymmetry identified by Crook, Gross and Dymott (2006) and Carless (2006), that assessment systems apparently magnify. Despite this problematic view, there is evidence, internationally, that academic staff are embracing a willingness for change. For example, Halinen et al. (2014, p. 20), have found from their own research that:

[university] teachers distinctively related the assessment process to a non-hierarchical and communal partnership. They recognised *students as partners* in assessment and were eager to consider changing their practices to support the students' learning.

Although this willingness relates to the Finnish context, how such a non-hierarchical partnership in assessment might be possible in the UK has yet to be given detailed consideration.

2.7 Sector level change?

As I have suggested above, the research of Torres and Leite (2014, p. 26) claims that ‘we are still faced with a certain continuity of the dominant pedagogical culture, where grading is the dominant aspect of teaching, learning and assessment’. The gist of their argument is that even where formative assessment is emphasised there is still a tendency for an instrumental, surface approach to learning and assessment where learner/teacher dialogue tends to concentrate more on the technicalities of passing an assignment rather than on addressing the learning outcomes.

A solution aimed at addressing the dominant culture, described above, is the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) launched in 2012 and rolled out across a number of HE institutions since. This has been the culmination of work, headed-up by Sir Bob Burgess, that published a 2007 report entitled ‘Beyond the honours degree classification’ the HEAR has been developed, in part, in order to play down the status of high-stakes summative assessment as the only route to recognised achievement in HE. Thus, states the final report of the HEAR steering group (Universities UK, 2012, p. 7):

...the HEAR has been designed to encourage a sophisticated approach to recording achievement that better represents the full range of outcomes from learning and the student experience in higher education at the same time as encouraging personal development that is commensurate with a culture of lifelong learning.

The HEAR, therefore, is designed to replace the traditional transcript by including alongside academic achievements information about other awards, prizes, accredited placements and approved extra-curricular activities and roles. Indeed, the authors of the report raise the hope that degree classifications may be, eventually, replaced altogether by the HEAR. However, this hope had, apparently, already eluded the HEAR team by 2007. In fact, in ‘Beyond the honours degree classification’ (2007, p. 33) the authors had, already considered replacing degree classifications but had acknowledged that:

...establishing a replacement system for the current honours degree classification is fraught with critical dangers that would need to be fully

addressed before such a radical change was made [and furthermore] some parts of the sector remain largely unconvinced of the need for radical change.

At a sector level, therefore, it seems that 'we are afraid to change the system because of the risks, but we also avoid looking at it because doing so might entail major effort' (Boud and Falchikov, 2007, p. 3). The current and ongoing debate has intensified as a consequence of the 'massification' of HE (Bloxham et al., 2011). Nevertheless, despite the considerable efforts directed at fundamental reform of the system described above, the system we are left with is essentially similar to the one in place 25 years ago when HE was the domain of an educational elite (Race, 2010, p. 60).

2.8 Summary and reflection

Writing on assessment practice tends to fall into two broad camps. On the one hand, there are those who seek to criticize traditional assessment practices (such as exams and graded written assignments) and propose reformed methodologies that align assessment more closely to a 'student-centred' or 'authentic' agenda (e.g. Zimmerman, 2011; Taras, 2015; Deutsch, 2016). However, this move is, itself, undermined by those with deeper, ontological and moral concerns that view this current trend aimed at transforming students into independent, self-regulated learners as, in itself, hegemonic practice whose agenda promotes 'performativity' in the guise of agency.

Although there is much evidence that research informed practice and innovation in assessment is constantly and widely being trialled across the sector, either on a small scale or as part of larger projects (e.g. the HEAR), wholesale reform of the assessment system itself has not taken place. There is a degree of cynicism amongst authors and commentators as to whether such reform is even possible. For example, Bates, (2014, p. 353), notes that 'approaches to strategy formulation and enactment appear to reflect [the] instrumentalist orientation [of] many mainstream strategic management publications'. He furthermore warns that:

the strategic pursuit of... spectacular gains may lead to the loss of ethics of care [and] a preoccupation with strategy and its accompanying 'toolkit' of targets, standards and inspections diminishes a deeper engagement with the meaning and purpose of education' (p. 353).

Indeed, the reforms enacted by current adherents to the HEAR have left the degree classification system itself largely untouched. Instead, the HEAR seeks to set the summative judgement in the context

of a wider range of relevant activities and achievements that attending university affords students the opportunity to pursue. Even so, these achievements still need to be approved by the awarding bodies as valid ones.

Thus, to return to the opening comments of this chapter on performative culture, it is always likely to be the accusation of the more philosophically inclined commentators that apparent moves towards promoting student autonomy and engagement are necessarily grounded in the promotion of the dominant neo-liberal educational agenda. Consequently, such moves can only deliver success as it is pre-defined and managed by that discourse and, in so doing, can only serve to re-enforce performative culture rather than liberate us from it. Flint and Peim (2012, p. 13) have gone as far as to say that 'education has become the dominant modality of state power' and that...

...all attempts to recover a pure educational space or practice or essence... are only possible by denying the ontological conditions grounding the 'modern' rise and proliferation of educational discourses, practices and institutions.

And, subsequently, we see...

...a new form of society a 'pedagogical society' characterised by the proliferation and ubiquity of the school as a key instrument of [the state's] modus operandi.

Flint and Peim (2012, p. 15) go on to warn that:

There is no doubt, ...that even our most simple statements betray assumptions about grand matters, even though we are often unaware of the necessary commerce between the everyday and the transcendental.

Thus, the use of nouns such as 'self-assessment', 'independence' and even 'student' become problematic if one recognises and accepts as insidious the nature of the 'dominant modality of state power' that is education.

3. Methodological and theoretical perspectives

3.1 Introduction

Here, I present a rationale for the deployment of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a research methodology. Firstly, I discuss broad epistemological issues concerned with the knowledge interests of formal enquiry. I then explain how my research interests and concerns, based upon my epistemological stance, pointed me towards IPA. Next I take a broad look at how and why I chose IPA from other viable approaches. I then examine the broad theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological research and distinguish between two of the different 'traditions' of such research. Subsequently, I justify further my choice to deploy IPA as a precursor to the next chapter that details the research design and process adopted and adapted for this study.

3.2 Considering an approach

It is important to acknowledge, here, as Clough and Nutbrown (2010, p. 39) assert, that methodology is not to be confined to one section, but that the whole project should be methodologically conducted and presented. However, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011, p. 756) themselves experienced supervisors of IPA projects, warn that,

[s]tudents tend to choose the methodology in advance of developing the research aims and questions. The project is then shoe-horned into the methodology, with students failing to understand that they have effectively engaged in the research process in reverse.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 34) go on to advise that the...

...prime reason for choosing IPA over any other qualitative approach should be because it is consistent with the epistemological position of your research question.

3.2.1 Epistemological Issues

A fundamental consideration, for this study, concerns the justification of the design and conduct of the research in terms of the epistemological stance that has informed that design. In this regard, I am aware of myself thinking about what, how and why we assess on three quite distinct levels. These three levels are broadly commensurate with Habermas' (1972) three epistemological categories of 'interest' that humans have in the pursuit of knowledge. These are: prediction ('technical' knowledge), understanding

(interpretive knowledge) and emancipation ('transformatory' knowledge). Martínez-Ávila and Smiraglia (2012, p. 223) explain further that, '[t]he interest of positivism would be to predict, the interest of phenomenology... would be to understand, and the interest of other stances such as feminism, neo-Marxism and more would be to emancipate'.

Firstly, therefore, at the 'technical' level, I might develop, operationalize and test any number of innovative technologies – but only insofar as the underpinning structures, protocols and policies that remain in place allow me to. Moreover, if the focus rested on evaluation and improvement of some artefact or technology, then that technology may very well take centre-stage, driving the research questions and inhibiting, or even driving out, the student voice. The danger then is that, under a veneer of agency, participants actually become unwitting co-conspirators in the maintenance of the status quo – a status quo that can then be re-branded as student-informed practice.

Grounded in Habermas' third, 'transformatory' category of interest, there is a level of critical concern I have towards power-relations and how the culture and discourse of assessment may be constructed as a hegemonic practice. At this level, conducting 'emancipatory' research which would, necessarily, involve *praxis* (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Freire, 1970), or, in other words, informed, committed practical action would be based, I argue, on an assumption that students were being oppressed in some way by the assessment regime. Although I go on, in my conclusion, to suggest that my next steps in research and practice are, indeed, taking a transformatory turn, I felt it presumptive and, possibly, arrogant to make such assumptions at the outset of this project.

On the 'interpretive' level, however, I find myself asking questions relating to the students themselves such as 'how might I get to know and understand their perspective?' or 'how are they affected, intellectually and emotionally, by their assessment regime?' Ultimately, in this study, it is understanding/interpretive level of knowledge and analysis that I am most interested in addressing because, according to Bevitt (2015, p. 107), there is still too little known about the student experience of assessment and, therefore,

...to understand the impact of innovative assessment on students we must build a better understanding of the students experiencing [such assessment].

From this, I would argue that this 'better understanding' will come from understanding the experience itself and, consequently, the main concern of this study lies in understanding the lived experience of those subject to university assessment requirements and procedures.

3.2.2 Methodological issues

In the case of this thesis, although there were strategic and operational considerations, I was initially led to IPA via a process which began with a consideration of what the aims of my research were. Those aims had, themselves, been derived from an issue that had become a concern for me – the effect of assessment on students – and, in particular, my interest in the process of how students tackled their various assignments. Initial reading turned up Bevitt's quote, cited above, and the idea that the 'experience' of assessment was something which might be investigated - something that had the potential to lead to a contribution to existing knowledge on the subject.

My own, existing knowledge, however, was problematic. I was aware that, over time, I had been constantly building and modifying informal theories about some of the issues that contemporary students seemed to have with things such as exams, written communication, using feedback and so on. These theories were established on the reference point of my own, hitherto, unproblematic experiences of being assessed. Such informal theorizing takes place, notes Husserl, in the 'realm of natural thinking' (1964, p. 17). In this realm,

[w]e make judgements... about things, their relations, their changes, about the conditions which functionally determine their changes and about the laws of their variations. We find an expression for what immediate experience presents. In line with our experiential motives we draw inferences from the directly experienced... to what is not experienced. (p. 15)

Although I was not aware of Husserl's assertion at the beginning of this journey, it does imply how such judgements, if left unexplored, may affect the trustworthiness of research process – right from the beginning. Testing a hypothesis (in the category of Habermas' 'technical interest'), therefore, based on my own 'hunches' or prejudices, was not a consideration. Nevertheless, I was aware that such prejudices existed.

It would have been possible, of course, to investigate experience through the lenses of other research methodologies. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) cite grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis as contenders, each offering 'a different view of what might constitute "data", what might be

inferred from it, and what an analysis might seek to achieve.’ (p. 43). However, there are similarities between them as, ‘each of these interpretive approaches addresses questions of meaning and understanding’ (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374).

Grounded theory, developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s, offers a ‘clear, systematic and sequential guide to... fieldwork and analysis’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 43) in its aim ‘to generate a theoretical-level account of a particular phenomenon’ (p. 43). Beginning with no hypothesis and letting the theory emerge from the data is an attractive proposition given the concerns expressed at the beginning of this chapter. However, the deployment of grounded theory in the context of the scale of this research was advised against due to, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 43) point out, such study can often require ‘a very particular approach to sampling’ and ‘work of a considerable scale’. More problematic, for me, however, is that in grounded theory research ‘ideally, the researcher begins a study without any preconceptions. This means that there should not be any expectations about what might be happening in an area of interest.’ (Kwok, McCallin and Dickson, 2011, np). However, I already had a strongly developed position on the topic of assessment and IPA provided a means by which that position and my own changing disposition could be considered, and articulated throughout the research process.

Discourse analysis (DA) and the range of discursive approaches that operate under the banner of DA were also considered. Mogashoa, (2014, p.105) explains that,

...discourse analysis deals with long term analysis of fundamental causes and consequences of issues. Therefore, it requires an account of detailed relationships between text, talk, society and culture.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 44) add that ‘this is likely to be an attractive approach if you are interested in *how* people make use of... cultural... resources and how language functions in particular contexts.’ Although this may have been an informative and productive route for enquiry, I felt that such an approach may not help me to explore my fundamental concern with the fullness of individual experiences ‘the focus of the theory and practice of critical discourse analysis’ being, as it is, ‘on structures of texts and talk. Furthermore, states Mogashoa (2014, p. 111) ‘The general lack of explicit techniques for researchers to follow has been indicated as a hindrance’

Amongst the very broad set of methodologies that term themselves a ‘narrative analysis’ the knowledge sought via the analysis of the content and structures of stories overlaps with both DA and phenomenological methodologies. However, Creswell (2013, p. 76) reports, ‘Whereas a narrative study

reports the life of a *single individual*, a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon'. Although I return to story-telling in Chapter 6 (pp. 108-9) as an empowering approach to assessment, I was, at the outset, very much concerned with listening to different voices heard in the context of the same experience whilst, at the same time, respecting, as far as possible, the values of idiographic research. As an 'insider, I was also concerned with how developing an understanding of these experiences meant to me and my ongoing relationship with my students and my practice.

That said, IPA was not selected solely on the basis of the rejection of other possibilities. I considered a phenomenological lens to be most apposite in terms of the understandings I was seeking to build because, as van Manen (2016, p. 39) argues, phenomenological research attempts to 'grasp attentively the living sense of ... experience', the 'ultimate aim' being 'to nurture a measure of thoughtfulness and tact in the practice of our professions and in everyday life' (p. 31). The practice of phenomenological research and writing does not aim, van Manen adds, to produce artefacts, 'technicalities and instrumentalities' (p. 15). Furthermore, Lester (1999) argues, if we can faithfully represent the experience of others then our own view of the world can itself, be reshaped. This, for me, is a crucial point ethically. I do not seek to understand how students experience assessment so that I can devise new technical instruments or better defend my own entrenched prejudices by challenging the validity of their concerns. Instead, my main interest is in how deeper knowledge of the experience of others presents itself as a moral demand upon me to examine and address my own pre-conceived notions.

A particular approach that respects these considerations is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Described more fully below, and in the next chapter, IPA is a comprehensive and increasingly popular approach to qualitative enquiry that is influenced by aspects of the philosophy, amongst others, of Martin Heidegger. In so doing it is concerned with the nature of 'being' (as opposed to humans as 'beings') and acknowledges the inevitable complexity involved in interpreting the being of others through the lens of our own prejudices. IPA incorporates the term 'phenomenological' as it is concerned, say its originators (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1), 'with exploring experience on its own terms.'

That said, research aimed at gaining unpolluted access to the experience of others is a problematic enterprise. It might seem straightforward, for example, to ask a number of research participants to describe a particular experience they have had but, as Heidegger (1996, p. 4) points out, 'Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought', and, therefore, 'questioning is a knowing search...' Thus, argues Heidegger, when questioning we already bring with us a 'fore-conception', of what is sought (1996, p. 5). Unlike Husserl, however, Heidegger did

not pursue a phenomenological project where the aim was to gain freedom from supposition and, in so doing, uncover essential, invariant aspects of experience.

In the section that follows, therefore, I first give a brief overview of the underpinnings of research that might describe itself as 'phenomenological'. Although I acknowledge the early influence of Husserl whose ideas, particularly on 'reduction' and 'bracketing' still underpin 'transcendental' approaches, I go on to locate IPA in the 'hermeneutic' tradition, a tradition largely influenced by Heidegger and Gadamer.

3.3 Theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological research

Friesen and Henriksson (2012, p. 3) report that phenomenology, as a lens through which human experience can be studied, has in the last thirty of forty years been 'developed in fields such as education, nursing, psychology, and social work'. Scrutiny of the growing body of research in these fields, however, reveals that there are a number of different orientations towards phenomenological research that can be taken. These orientations, broadly described below as 'transcendental' or 'interpretive', have grown from diverging philosophical arguments. The underpinnings of this study are located within the 'interpretive' or 'hermeneutic' tradition.

Many similarly orientated doctoral theses (e.g. Briggs, 2010; Bailey, 2011; Pettit, 2012; McDermott, 2016) are concerned with explicating the experience of those in professional relationships with the researcher – such as clients, patients, students or colleagues - with a view to gaining some insight into how we might better understand where others are 'coming from' and the meanings they attribute to their experiences. Such insight, developed as their study unfolds, calls upon researchers to modify their own values associated with the phenomenon under scrutiny and, ultimately, to modify their practices in order to take into account more fully and authentically the experience of people they interact with in a personal or professional capacity.

Moran (2000, p. 5) puts this idea in stronger terms when discussing the work of Emmanuel Levinas whose phenomenology, Moran explains, is:

...closely attentive to the way in which other human beings inhabit the horizons of my experience and present themselves as a *demand* to me, a call on me to get outside the sphere of my own self-satisfaction, my own pre-occupations.

Essentially, then, taking this approach to my study should enable me to move away from a position of unchallenged prejudice, rooted in the fore-structures of how things are and how things have been.

3.3.1 Descriptive ‘transcendental’ approaches

Commentators such as Moustakas (1994), Moran (2000) and van Manen (2016) acknowledge the pioneering work of Edmund Husserl in the development of phenomenology as a practice. The use of ‘transcendental’ in this context refers to the way we are encouraged to look at phenomena with a fresh eye and an open mind – a study of the subject that is independent from *a posteriori* conditions. In this case, description must precede causal explanation (Moran, 2000, p. 39) the aim being, as Husserl himself (1964, p. 3) explains, to “‘get at” the things themselves’. Although research methodologies claiming to be grounded in Husserl’s phenomenology differ markedly from the IPA deployed here, it is, nevertheless, important to trace the routes of IPA back to Husserl’s approach.

Husserl, was interested in the contents and structures of consciousness and not concerned with idealist or empiricist views on the nature and existence (or otherwise) of an objective reality. For him, phenomenology is a ‘viewing of essences’ - the invariant, essential aspects of the objects of our experience (Moran, 2000). As such, Husserl stated that we must ‘confine ourselves purely to the task of clarifying the essence of cognition and of being an object of cognition’ (1964, p. 18) which will be ‘the first and principle part of phenomenology as a whole.’ (1964, p. 18). Also, he argued that,

...the world is nothing other than what I am aware of and what appears valid in my cognitions... I cannot live, experience, think, value and act in any world which is not in some sense in me, and derives its meaning and truth from me.’ (1964, p. 8).

However, Husserl believed that the project aimed at discerning the essential features of an experience was impeded by pre-understandings and theoretical stances (i.e. the ‘natural attitude’) that form a barrier to our pure consideration of that experience (Moran, 2000). van Manen (2016) goes on to explain (more systematically than Husserl) a number of steps known as ‘reductions’ to be performed in order to lay aside all philosophical, scientific and everyday assumptions that form the ‘natural attitude’. Here, states Husserl (1975, p. 77), ‘we must exclude all empirical interpretations and existential affirmations’ so that ‘our insights [are] free from presupposition.’ This first step of ‘bracketing’ is termed, by Husserl, the *epoché*, (Greek for ‘cessation’). This is a cessation or suspension from the

natural attitude, from the thetic act of positing or position taking by which Husserl (1964, p. 35), would have us distinguish ‘the pure phenomenon’, which exhibits its intrinsic essence as an absolute datum’. In simpler terms, as a methodological process, Finlay (2014, p. 124) explains this by stating that ‘the researcher seeks to be surprised and pushes away any certainty that something “is”: [and] that it has a certain meaning’.

However, as Seifert (2014) suggests, the deepest criticism of transcendental approaches to phenomenological enquiry centres around the notion of the *epoché* and the assertion that it is necessary and, indeed, possible to suspend the thesis of the natural standpoint. More dangerous, for McManus-Holroyd (2007, p. 3) is the ‘disembodied knowing’ such an approach engenders. This is when we respond in our professional practice to whatever we have reduced the phenomenon to, rather than responding to the more subtle complexities of the lived or embodied experience of that phenomenon. McManus-Holroyd uses the medical example of ‘suffering’ being reduced simplistically to ‘pain’ and treated accordingly whilst other factors are ignored. In this study, if assessment were to be reduced, for example, to ‘measurement’, I might be tempted to return to a search for innovative ways to measure attainment more effectively. But, as van Manen (2016, p. 30) warns, by objectifying and depersonalising lived experience, this sort of reduction serves only to rob experience of its ‘existential richness’. Thus, if we abstract from everyday bodily encounters in search of the essence of a phenomenon then the phenomenon is reduced to an ‘object of theoretical study’ (Moran, 2000, p. 232). The importance of this distinction is illustrated by Heidegger who offers the example of the botanist who studies ‘plants’ (i.e. as ‘natural things’ comprising stems, petals, colour etc.) compared to the person who gives ‘roses’ as a gift. In the latter example, the roses become much more than a collection of physical properties – after all, when giving roses, we do not say ‘I am giving plants’ (Heidegger, 1992, p. 38).

3.3.2 Interpretative/hermeneutic approaches

Martin Heidegger in particular, is associated with a phenomenology that takes a different view to Husserl on how we should approach the prejudices of the natural attitude. This view sees humans as “‘always already” *thrown* into [a] pre-existing world’ from which they cannot become meaningfully detached (Moran, 2000, p. 17). Thus, Heidegger rejects Husserl’s sense of bracketing and, in particular, the possibility of *epoché*, which implies that the ‘background noise’ of the world can be somehow eliminated from our enquiries. Heidegger, therefore, favours an enquiry into ‘the manner in which structures of being are revealed through the [already in place] structures of human existence’ (Moran, 2000, p. 197). Thus, phenomenology becomes *hermeneutical* phenomenology.

Hans-Georg Gadamer developed hermeneutics as a theory of interpretation. In a similar way to Heidegger, Gadamer writes (1982, p. 9),

Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word [i.e. pre-judgments], constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience.

In this sense, therefore, prejudices are unavoidable but, furthermore, methodologically essential as they are, Gadamer (p. 9) adds...

...simply the conditions whereby we experience something—whereby what we encounter says something to us. This formulation certainly does not mean that we are enclosed within a wall of prejudices and only let through the narrow portals those things that can produce a pass saying, ‘Nothing new will be said here.’

The question becomes, therefore, how do we become conscious of the biases informing our inquiry, appropriate the tradition to which we belong, and apply consciously fore-understandings to the historical realities confronting the interpreter? (Shalin, 2010). ‘There is’, warns Gadamer (1982, p. 239), ‘one prejudice of the enlightenment that is essential to it: the fundamental prejudice of the enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself.’ However, if we do foreground these biases then, Shalin (2010, p. 12) asserts, ‘we can say that prejudice is an unacknowledged assumption, and assumption is an acknowledged prejudice’.

Gadamer thus picked up on the relationship between fore-conceptions and the phenomenon under scrutiny. There is, necessarily, a dialogue between what we bring to the text and what the text brings to us so that, as Gadamer (1982, p. 269) asserts, we are aware of our own bias enabling the ‘the text to present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against [our] own fore-meanings.’ This implies a very different process to the unilateral one described and promoted by Husserl and, indeed, a very different conception of what ‘bracketing’ might entail. Instead of setting aside supposition as a pre-requisite the enquirer is actively involved in a dynamic, dialogical and iterative process – a process

which lies at the heart of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. IPA thus employs a ‘double hermeneutic’ discussed more fully below, in that the researcher is ‘trying to make sense of the participant [trying] to make sense of x’ (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). Thus, writes Shalin (2010, p. 22) ‘the question is rather how to become conscious of the biases informing our enquiry’ so that we:

...come to terms with [ou]r own prejudices... which bind us to privileged perspectives and serve our hidden agendas. [We]... need to keep in check the tendency to edit out disagreeable facts from our own past and resist the tendency to bury our all too human agency in textual products.

Heidegger, therefore, came to question ‘the possibility of any knowledge outside of an interpretative stance, whilst grounding this stance in the lived world’ (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16). His preferred term for this irrevocable situatedness is ‘Dasein’ (literally ‘there-being’) and, in deploying this term, Heidegger shifts phenomenology from a transcendental practice investigating the structures of consciousness to a more ontologically focused project concerned primarily with the structures of experience, with ‘...existence itself, and with the practical activities and relationships which we are caught up in.’ (Smith et al., 2009, p. 17). Gadamer (1982 p. 282) re-iterates this by saying that...

...we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us”.

Heidegger thus wanted to employ phenomenology as a ‘way of thinking about human nature that remained faithful to the historical, lived, practical nature of human experience.’ (Moran, 2000, p. 228). It is, as a result of this endeavour, that Heidegger connects phenomenology with hermeneutics. He insists that interpretation can never begin in a supposition-less attitude and that the reader of a text must inevitably bring her/his fore-conception to an encounter with the phenomenon in question (Heidegger, 1996).

In the next section, I discuss the key features of IPA as it sits within the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. In the next chapter I elaborate further on how IPA was operationalised for this study.

3.4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

‘IPA is a qualitative approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences.’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 2). It is influenced by and, indeed, draws upon,

the contributions to phenomenology discussed above – especially, but not exclusively, those of Heidegger and Gadamer. IPA is an extensively trialled and examined qualitative methodology described by Chapman & Smith (2002, p. 126) as ‘...a distinctive approach to conducting qualitative research... offering a theoretical foundation and a detailed procedural guide’. More recently, Callary, Rathwell and Young (2015, p. 73) have commented that ‘it is apparent that IPA is rigorous and produces a plethora of rich data’. There is a growing body of work, that includes doctoral theses emanating from the UK and farther afield, that utilise IPA as a means by which to investigate lived experience (e.g. Briggs, 2010; Bailey, 2011; Pettit, 2012; McDermott, 2016). Furthermore, as the methodology has developed, guidance continues to emerge on the design and conduct of IPA aimed at promoting its usefulness and popularity whilst, at the same time, keeping it in line with its theoretical underpinnings.

In the rest of this section, I develop the key features that form the basis of IPA as a methodology. These features are:

- Lived experience (on its own terms)
- Idiography and IPA
- The hermeneutic cycle and IPA

3.4.1 Examining lived experience - on its own terms

IPA posits that experience can be understood by examining the meaning people ascribe to it (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, p. 34). This aim of IPA is based upon a key goal of Heidegger’s phenomenology, to uncover everyday existence, as it is in everyday life that the meanings we attach to our existence can be found. The aim of IPA research is commensurate with Heidegger’s own definition of phenomenology ‘to let what shows itself, be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself’ (1996, p. 30). Lived experience, therefore, as part of the theoretical basis of IPA, focuses on making explicit the perspectives of the participants who, in the case of this study, have lived through or are currently living through the experience of being assessed.

For Heidegger, therefore, our normal, everyday experience of the world, our lived experience, involves us in being generally absorbed in what we do to the exclusion of deeper, meditative thinking about our ‘thrownness’. Thus, Heidegger (1996, p. 337) states:

[Everyday] understanding projects itself upon what can be taken care of, what can be done, what is urgent or indispensable in the business of everyday activity.

In other words, writes van Manen (2016, p. 96), 'lived experience is simply experience-as-we-live-through-it in our actions, relations and situations'. Part of this experience may, of course, involve us in thinking, reflection and decision making so that lived experiences are, therefore, much more than a series of cold encounters with objects, or, as van Manen (1984, p. 40-41) puts it:

The understanding of... lived experience, is not fulfilled in a reflective grasp of the facticity of this or that particular experience. Rather, a true thinking on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of *what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance*. [P]henomenological research [asks] what is it that makes this lived experience what it is?

The implication of this for understanding experience as being 'lived' is that there is a 'distinction [to be made] between "having" a body and "being" a body' (Draper, 2014, p. 2237). In terms of this study, the lived or embodied experience of assessment relates to much more than the cognitive processes involved in preparing a presentation, revising for an exam or de-ciphering feedback. Living the experience rather than thinking it also takes into account the impact of, for example, relationships, attitudes, emotions, past-events and future dreams.

IPA is interested in understanding lived experience 'on its own terms' as an ethical priority. This has implications for the design of the research and, in particular, how experiences are shared through, in the case of this study, interviews. Interviewing in IPA research, therefore, is sensitive to Heidegger's assertion that our questioning is inevitably affected and, indeed, guided, by our pre-understandings. However, at the interview stage, 'we want to find out about the participant's lifeworld, rather than learn more about our own, (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 65) and an interview conducted in a prejudicial mode would privilege the interests and concerns of the interviewer over the aim of enabling participants to share their experiences on their own terms. Therefore, state Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 64):

The participant is the experiential expert on the topic, so that in some instances it may be that the interview moves completely away from the schedule and follows a course set by the participant.

Mackey (2005, p. 184) adds that the...

...utilisation of an interpretative approach requires the researcher to accept and value the descriptions given by the participants as their reality, their understanding of the phenomenon.

Thus, interviews in IPA require a particular sensitivity if the interviewer is to let what is to be seen show itself on its own terms. The next chapter describes the interview process in greater detail.

3.4.2 Idiography, IPA and sample size

A major influence on IPA is idiography. Such an approach contrasts with nomothetic research which makes general claims 'at the group or population level' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 29). An idiographic approach, on the other hand, may be described as having 'emphasis on the particular and individual' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p. 7).

However, in IPA, the idiographic aspect refers to the *process* of moving from the 'examination of the single case to more general claims.' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 9). This might seem contradictory given the apparent 'either/or' choice between nomothetic and idiographic approaches. But, when the authors write about 'general claims' they do not intend that IPA findings should be held up as somehow characteristic of the whole population experiencing the phenomenon. Instead, they propose 'analytical procedures... which allow one to retrieve particular claims for any of the individuals involved' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 32). Phenomenology is about possibility rather than generalizability and the findings of such study should represent but one of an infinite number of possibilities (van Manen, 2016). Charlick et al. (2016, p. 208) further explain that:

Idiography is concerned with the particular, and this operates at two levels: firstly, in the sense of detail [and] depth of analysis; and secondly, with an understanding of how a particular experiential phenomenon... has been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context.

'To achieve this', they add, 'IPA studies utilize small, reasonably homogenous, purposively selected and carefully situated samples' (p. 208).

Thus, even though this study seeks to reveal commonalities of experience, it is an ethical necessity that

I preserve what Ashworth and Greasley (2009, p. 572) term 'idiographic sensibility' in that I attempt to 'thematize lived experience without falling into the trap of objectification' (van Manen, 2016, p. 106). This means that in the analysis and reporting the experience, as far as possible, should not separate those having that experience from the experience itself. Furthermore, particular aspects of experience should be viewed within the context of the experience as a whole.

A regard for Idiographic sensibility, therefore, demands a particular consideration of the size of the population sample. There is consistent agreement amongst authors on this matter. Thus, according to Turpin et al. (1997), for doctoral programmes in Britain it is recommended that having six to eight participants is appropriate for an IPA study. Similarly, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011, pp. 756-7) recommend that an IPA study should utilise 'from four to ten data points for professional doctorates,' whereas Cresswell (2013) suggests a broader range of somewhere between three to fifteen participants to be appropriate for such enquiry. They also add that 'following on from these guidelines, and our experience of student difficulties in this area, there appears to be a clear need for IPA's idiographic commitment [to be realized] in terms of smaller sample sizes' (p. 757). Smith and Osborn (2007, p. 55) explain further that:

IPA studies are conducted on small sample size [because] case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts takes a long time, and the aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims.

Finally, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011, pp. 756) warn that 'students consistently experience pressure to include too many participants [which] necessarily de-emphasises IPA's commitment to idiography.' This study, therefore, utilized a sample of eight participants. The sampling rationale itself is discussed further in the next chapter (p. 40).

3.4.3 The hermeneutic cycle and IPA

The last section established that our presumptions are present in all our questioning and, as such, they predetermine, to a certain extent, what can be discovered. However, this supposed circularity was an impasse anticipated by Heidegger and van Manen (1984, p. 46, italics mine) reasons the 'way out' by explaining that...

...if we simply try to ignore what we already 'know', we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections [hence

the circularity]. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories in order then to simply not try to forget them again but rather to *turn this knowledge against itself*, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.

In this way phenomenological questioning is characterised as being dialectic and cumulative in nature rather than being trapped within a circularity of fallacious reasoning which ‘begs the question’, so to speak. Smith (2007, p. 6) puts this cycle of interpretation into more practical terms, so that:

- I start [from] where I am in the circle, caught up in my concerns [and] preconceptions;
- I acknowledge my preconceptions before [my] encounter with a research participant on the other side of the circle;
- I attend closely to the participant’s story;
- Having concluded the conversation I continue round the circle back to where I started;
- I analyse the material I collected from my original perspective;
- But, I am irretrievably changed by my encounter with the new material;
- I continue in dialogue with the data holding up the new to the old – the part to the whole.

In this process the researcher deploys a double hermeneutic. A distinction is made by Schütz (1963) between first-order constructs of the people studied and second-order constructs of the researcher. By conducting my enquiry I aim to understanding the participants’ meaning level – in other words, their first-order constructs. Only on the basis of these first-order constructs can I make decisions about second-order constructs. Schütz (1963, p. 247) goes on to elaborate that:

The thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men, living their daily life within their social world. Thus, the constructs of the social sciences are, so-to-speak, constructs of the second degree, that is, constructs of the constructs made by the actors on the social scene.

At this stage, if we accept that the world is socially constructed, clarity of language becomes a key concern. Our understanding of each other is a requirement if these second-degree constructs are to be

accurately represented. But, communication is potentially both a means and a barrier to adequately accessing the meaning structure of others. For example, Schütz (1963) explains that if we are to accept that language is socially constituted, then our mental lives are, to some extent, structured by language. In this sense language, to some extent, precedes experience. Thus language, and the 'slippery' meanings we attach to the limited vocabulary we have to hand at any one time don't simply constrain our ability to represent meaning to others – they force our hand. However, a combination of observation and communication facilitates the understanding of the other. By participating in face-to-face interaction, especially if two actors have prior knowledge of one another, Schütz (1963) argues, they are more likely to get their meaning across than if they do not know each other or each other's provinces of meaning.

In the next chapter I set out the design of my research and detail the process of data gathering, analysis and reporting. The chapter also focuses on the nature of my relationship with the participants and how I operationalize IPA ethically and in the context of a research setting that is also my workplace. As such, the next chapter forms a bridge between the theoretical perspectives discussed above and the findings set out in Chapter 5.

4. The design and process of IPA research

4.1 Introduction and rationale for research design

In this chapter I detail how IPA was operationalized for the conduct of this study and subsequent reporting. The overall design of the research draws upon the work of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) who originally developed IPA as a phenomenology-inspired research process. The theoretical and methodological perspectives discussed in the previous chapter underpin the design and conduct of this study. They also influence the structure of the report.

Thus, in summary, the research must have particular consideration for the participants – in the criteria for selection and the size of the sample (covered in the previous chapter). It must also incorporate an appropriate method for enabling participants to share their experiences on their own terms. In the analysis there should be respect for the idiographic nature of IPA in that individual voices and personalities must shine through. Crucially, the role of the researcher should be made explicit in two ways. Firstly, the positionality of the researcher in terms of ‘insider/outsider’ status needs addressing. Secondly, the necessarily reflexive nature of the process of interpretation within the ‘hermeneutic circle’ needs explanation and clarification – especially in terms of how this will appear in the written report. Finally, the criteria (and language) for establishing trustworthiness need elaborating.

I begin, however, by outlining the broad ethical considerations and responsibilities that such a study demands.

4.2 Ethical considerations

In discussing the ethical dimension of phenomenological research Motari (2008, p. 4) highlights the need to uphold a ‘principle of faithfulness to the phenomenon’. ‘In order to succeed’ in applying this principle he cites ‘respect and humility’ as two necessary dispositions. ‘Having respect’, he states, ‘means paying attention to the smallest detail of what is appearing’. However, humility is also required as we acknowledge that we need to be on our guard, in our thrown-ness, not to under-represent or overelaborate on that which discloses itself to us. Murray and Holmes (2014, p. 25) suggest that this is to be done by paying careful attention to the ‘other’ during any interview or dialogue, noting that:

For authenticity of interpretation, the interview should be transcribed with meticulous accuracy, often including, for example, indications of pauses, mis-hearings, apparent mistakes, and even speech dynamics where these are in any way remarkable.

'The interviewer', Murray and Holmes (2014, p. 25) then go on to explain,

is necessarily a participant-observer, and the research scene a site of ethical inter-subjectivity. The subject tells his/her story to be heard, which is to say, felt, understood, and cared about; the story must matter.

Furthermore, states Moran (2000, p. 349), 'the speech of others provokes a response from me and my response is at the same time my responsibility.' It is, therefore, important writes van Manen (2016, p. 115) that we ensure that the 'otherness of the other' is, as far as is possible, preserved and not reduced 'to my own interests in the world'. Murray (2003) further suggests that most informants benefit from having someone to listen to their story and that the very process of telling can help with their own sense-making. Indeed, Heidegger (1971, p. 57) asserts that:

We who speak language may thereupon become transformed by such experiences, from one day to the next or in the course of time.

The considerations above are particular to phenomenological research, yet I also carry ethical responsibilities in more general terms as prescribed by the University's own ethics review and by the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (2011). I acknowledge, therefore, my responsibility towards other education professionals and the wider community of educational researchers (BERA, 2011, p. 5) as I attempt to produce research that has the possibility of being reflected upon and acted upon by others. The ethical approval arrangements prescribed by the University are set out in Appendix 12. This includes confirmation that the study had gained the approval of the university Ethics Committee. The participants gave informed consent (BERA, 2011, p. 5) and had the right to withdraw (p. 6) at any stage in the process. Privacy was maintained through the 'confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data' (p. 7) especially as none of the participants wished to be identified in the final report. All were, therefore, assigned pseudonyms.

Further ethical perspectives are considered as I explicate the design and conduct of the research below. I thus return to the participants, their selection and the nature of my relationship with them.

4.3 The Participants

4.3.1 Recruitment

Englander (2012, p. 19) writes that 'when it comes to selecting the subjects for phenomenological research, the question that the researcher has to ask [her/himself] is: *do you have the experience I am looking for?*' This is ahead of any concerns for the sample's 'representativeness' of a wider population in its traditional sense. Phenomenological study thus utilizes a 'criterion sample' in that participants meet the minimum criteria of having experienced the same phenomenon and are willing to describe those experiences through one-on-one, in-depth interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (2016) and Palys (2008) advise on the approach to such purposive sampling, noting that it is wise to select participants who have not only experienced the phenomenon but who are also able to communicate that experience, by whatever means appropriate, in some depth.

'The phenomenological researcher', Englander (2012, p. 19) adds, 'is not primarily interested in knowing how many or how often one has had a particular experience... and representativeness does not apply until the general structure of the phenomenon is worked out'. van Manen (2016, p. 352-3) agrees with this sentiment and is, furthermore, reluctant to suggest an appropriate number of participants for phenomenological enquiry. Because such enquiry 'cannot strive for empirical generalization', then...

...it does not make much sense to ask how large the sample of interviewees... should be, or how a sample should be composed and proportioned in terms of gender, ethnicity or other selective considerations.

However, commensurate with the advice cited above (pp. 33-35), the sample selection for this study comprised eight of my 'progress tutees' with whom I had occasional face-to-face contact during the year to discuss academic and professional progress. They were recruited during the Spring of 2014 (see Appendix 1), the penultimate year of their study, through an initial discussion where they agreed to take part in principle. They were, subsequently, invited formally to take part in a letter that included further information on the research process (see Appendix 3). Although nine students initially agreed to participate, eight were eventually interviewed as one student, due to her intercalation from study, was not available during the Autumn Semester.

Of the eight students who eventually took part, five were on a four-year programme whilst three were completing a three-year route into teaching. Although the sampling strategy of this study, as described above, was disinterested in the composition of the sample, for the record, two were male and all were between 20 and 24 years old. One female was of British-Asian descent, the rest of White-British heritage. Final year students were selected for their relatively extensive experience of being assessed in variety of ways throughout the duration of their course and had, therefore, relatively rich and diverse experience to draw upon when thinking of a particular experience to relate at interview.

Additionally, the group included one student who, although predicted a 2:2 degree had received, in the previous twelve months, two third-class grades. Two others were also predicted a more secure 2:2, four a 2:1 and one student was bordering on a first-class honours at the time of selection. Anonymised details of individual participants age, gender, course, ethnicity and grade profile are presented in Chapter 5, Table 1. In Section 4.3.3, below, I discuss in greater detail the nature of my relationship with the participants in relation to 'power' and the trustworthiness of the data they provided.

4.3.2 Voluntary Informed Consent

BERA (2011, p. 5) 'takes voluntary informed consent to be the condition in which participants understand and agree to their participation without any duress, prior to the research getting underway'. After having agreed, in principle, to take part in the research participants were asked to sign the consent form reproduced in Appendix 4. By signing the consent they acknowledged their right to withdraw from the interview process and/or refuse to allow their data to be used without giving reason or notice.

4.3.3 Researcher positionality and relationships

Greene (2014, p. 12) strongly recommends 'that positionality be discussed more explicitly in accounts of qualitative research' because 'such reflection will not only provide the reader with a fuller, richer account of the methods employed but will also work to ensure that the participant's voice is heard...'. What follows in this section is a discussion of roles and relationships in the research setting in order to clarify my positionality and link that positionality to the aims and conduct of IPA.

It is overly simplistic, argues Greene (2014), to present the concepts of researchers as 'insiders' or 'outsiders' as a dichotomy. Indeed, Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle (2009) have developed the idea of 'the space between' which challenges this thinking. In my own case, I am an insider in one sense and an outsider in another. As an insider I know the participants, I know the setting and how it works and,

more specifically, I know exactly what (we think) we are asking the participants to do when we assess them. As Greene (2014, p. 3) states:

Insider researchers often do not have to worry about orienting themselves with the research environment and/or participants. Unlike outsider researchers, insider researchers are free from the effects of culture shock; they are able to blend into situations without disturbing social settings.

Furthermore, insiders 'project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study' (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411) and insiders are able to 'understand the cognitive [and] emotional precepts of participants as well as possess a more profound knowledge of the historical and practical happenings of the field' (Chavez, 2008, p. 481).

However, I am an outsider in terms of my knowledge of how assessment is experienced. This is the 'space between' which my research occupies. In phenomenological terms my awareness of being in this space invites me to, as I point out elsewhere in this thesis, 'get outside the sphere of... my own preoccupations' (Moran, 2000, p. 5). As Asselin (2003) suggests, although I might be part [in some way] of the culture under study, I might not understand the subculture. Access to the experience of this subculture indicates the need for bracketing assumptions. I have already discussed Gadamer's and Heidegger's assertion that such assumptions are unavoidable – it is how they are fore-grounded and dealt with that is important. In terms of 'insider membership' Corbin-Dwyer and Buckley (2009, p. 59) impress that:

Disciplined bracketing and... reflection on the... research process, with a close awareness of one's own personal biases and perspectives, might well reduce... potential concerns.

Indeed, they go on, 'one does not have to be a member of the group being studied to appreciate and adequately represent the experience of the participants' because:

The main ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckley, 2009, p. 59).

Still, Rose (1985, p. 77 see Corbin-Dwyer and Buckley, 2009) is clear that...

...there is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one's biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you're leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you're doing.

This is commensurate with the epistemological stance taken in the previous chapter and requires consideration of the notion of reflexivity as it manifests itself the hermeneutic cycle. Reflexivity is 'a technique' that Greene (2014, p. 9) argues is important to develop. In citing Bordieu she calls for 'an active engagement of the self in questioning perceptions and exposing their contextualized... nature.' Of particular relevance, Greene further asserts, are the relations between researcher and participants as one should establish and maintain 'an appropriate degree of both social and emotional distance', as an element of the reflexive process (p. 9).

In the situation where the researcher is also teacher BERA (2011, p. 5) note that such individuals...

...must consider the extent to which their own reflective research impinges on others... Dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly.

In the 'Further Information' sheet (see Appendix 3) under 'What are the potential risks and benefits?' I point out to potential participants that their current assessment regime will not change as a result of the information they provide. They would therefore, not be in danger of saying, or being advantaged by, anything that would or could be acted upon in practice to alter the requirements and expectations of their final few months of study.

Other potential tensions concerned, more directly, my professional relationship with the participants and the trustworthiness of the data they supplied. As 'progress tutees' I was expected to have three scheduled meetings in the year to discuss their progress in general and to give, where appropriate, pastoral support. The formal interviews were, in fact, extensions of the conversations some of us had already been having. As the participants were all enrolled onto a strand of the course to which I did not contribute, I had never marked, nor would I be responsible for marking and giving feedback on, any of their work (which, in any case, was done anonymously).

Furthermore, open conversations about the student experience in general were part of role as progress tutor. I had no reason to suspect that the participants were engaged in relating their experience of assessment in a dishonest way – particularly given the assurances given in the consent process (see Appendices 3 & 4). Additionally, they had nothing to gain by trying to tell me what they imagined I might want to hear. Indeed, the extracts I used to develop themes, as reported in the next chapter, and the interview transcript recorded in Appendix 7, give no impression that the responses were in any way moderated or ameliorated by the participant for the benefit of the participant or for my benefit as their tutor. I have, in reporting their comments, preserved the rather frank and open language and vocabulary used by the participants.

4.4 Interviewing in IPA research

In interviews, participants shared stories relevant to two broad aspects of experience: ‘what are you experiencing?’ and ‘how are you experiencing it?’ Moustakas (1994). Englander (2012, p. 15) writes that phenomenological researchers use the interview as the most relevant method of data collection due to their declared interest in the meaning of a phenomenon as it is lived by other subjects. ‘We as phenomenological researchers’, he argues, ‘are interested in the subjectivity of other persons and thus it seems logical that we would want to get a description of such subjectivity’. Noting the importance of remaining consistent with the philosophy of the particular ‘type’ of phenomenology he goes on to say that ‘the main task is that the interviewer has to keep the descriptive criterion in mind throughout the process’ and that ‘the task is demanding since it requires the interviewer to make constant intentional shifts (i.e., between the subject-subject relation and the subject-phenomenon relation) while staying within an overall single mode of consciousness’ (Englander, 2012, p. 34).

A good face-to-face interview [in studies labelled ‘phenomenological’], states Englander (2012, p. 37), has one main criterion, which is, that the interviewer should seek from interviewees in ‘as complete a description as possible of the experience that she/he participant has lived through’. I sought to facilitate this in my own interviewing by, firstly, following Englander’s advice to have a preliminary meeting with research participants a few days prior to the actual interview. This meeting was used as an opportunity to establish trust with each participant, review ethical considerations and complete consent forms. At this time I also looked at the research question with the participants giving them time to think about the aims of the research and how they might contribute to the process in a constructive and positive way. This strategy, writes Englander, ‘can aid the researcher in getting a richer description during the interview without the need to ask too many questions’ (Englander, 2012, p. 27).

The schedule for the preliminary meetings is set out in Appendix 5. Further to the consent process I provided an explanation of the interview and analysis process including digital recording and storage of data. I encouraged participants, in the days prior to interview, to reflect on their experiences (making notes if helpful) in order to prepare to '*describe what is it like to be assessed*'. I re-iterated that they were not to be afraid to describe what is important to them. As guidance, however, I suggested that they may like to discuss their feelings and emotions around assessment, their relationships in and out of university, the whole assessment process – from briefing to receiving final grades, and any other contextual issues that they felt impacted on their experience such as family life and events that might coincide with assignment or exam preparation. Finally, a date for each interview was set.

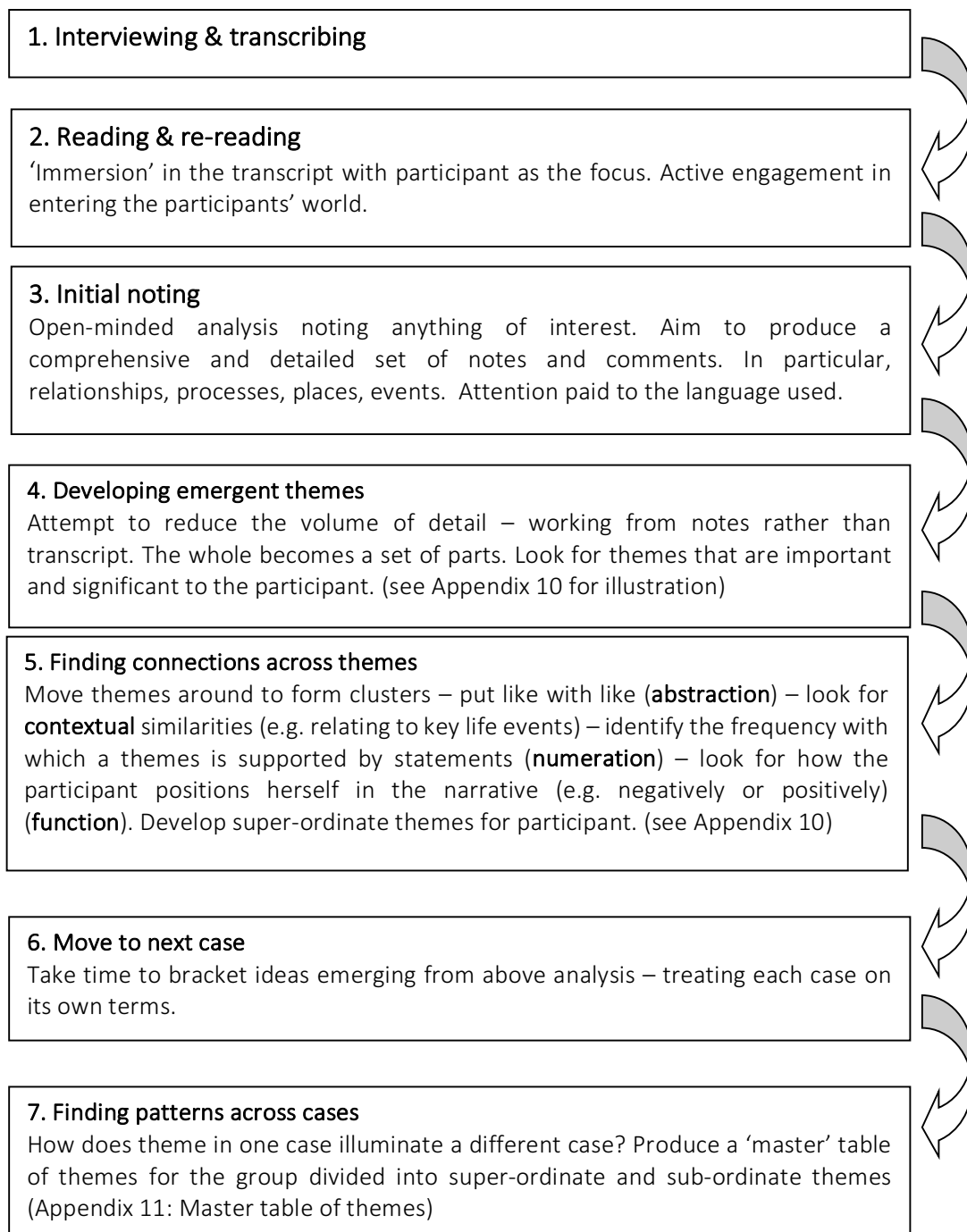
Allowing participants pre-reflection, also enabled me to conduct interviews in a less formal, semi-structured way which gave participants the opportunity to raise issues that were important to them and, perhaps, which I had not considered to be important or relevant. Thus, as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 267) assert, 'the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life; it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness inescapable'. Thus, following the consistent direction given by Englander (2012) and Moustakas (1994) I began interviews by asking 'can you describe, for me, the experience of being assessed whilst at university?' Further prompts were designed, as Englander and Moustakas suggest, to direct participants to expand upon significant 'incidents' and 'dimensions' of the phenomenon. At no time did any prompt or question challenge participants to justify any apparent position, prejudice or inaccuracy I might have detected in their accounts. Appendices 4, 5 and 6 give further details of the information that was shared with participants prior to interview including the interview schedule itself.

4.5 Analysis of the data

Table 4.1, below, represents a summary of the process of analysis in IPA. That process is expanded upon in the sections that follow.

Table 4.1: Summary of IPA interviewing and analysis process

(after Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 56-107)



4.5.1 Reading, re-reading and initial noting

The process of analysis in IPA is described as ‘an iterative and inductive cycle’ that is ‘characterized by a set of common processes’ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 79). However, this can be a complex

and time-consuming activity (Callary, Rathwell and Young, 2015; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). The first step of an IPA analysis is to immerse oneself in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts on a case-by-case basis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 62). As advised by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), the transcriptions, in this case taken from audio recordings, were written down verbatim with attention being paid to detail such as pauses, repetitions and any technical issues such as inaudible or unclear utterances.

The noting process focused both upon the descriptive, linguistic and conceptual content of participants' responses. As I read and re-read the transcripts, dealing with one participant at a time, I highlighted any statements that articulated key objects of concern for that participant regarding such things as 'relationships, processes, places, events, values and principles' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 83). Exploratory notes and comments were made including notes on the possible themes emerging for each individual. An example extract of this noting process is illustrated in Appendix 8. Here I also referred to the etic perspective of my reflective recollections of the interview process itself recorded in writing after each interview (see Appendix 9).

4.5.2 Emergent themes, selection and omission of data

The notes are, subsequently, used to develop the emergent themes. In developing these themes I sought to reduce the total volume of data whilst preserving its richness and complexity. Here the original whole of the interview now became a set of parts as I conducted the analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

At this stage, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 91) remind researchers of the 'I' in 'IPA' and the fact that this is a work of interpretation. The resulting analysis is, therefore, a product of the efforts of both the researcher and the participants. The core goal is to 'produce a concise and pithy statement of what was important' from the exploratory noting which becomes a possible emerging theme. Such themes, state Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 92),

speak to the psychological essence of the [whole] piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual.

As such, although it would appear that some of the participants' responses have been omitted from the final analysis, the aim at this stage is to distill the essential aspects of each theme. Consequently, in

the findings chapter, particular responses, in accordance with the idiographic sensibility of IPA, have been utilized as representative of each theme under discussion. Not all participants contributed to every theme (see tables at beginning of discussion of each theme – e.g. p. 64) and, although not all transcribed data is utilized in the findings, certain passages are omitted for clear reasons.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 80), state that ‘the end’ result of analysis ‘is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking’ and ‘the truth claims of IPA are always the result of subjective analysis’. In this sense they assert the inevitability that the analyst, working within an explicit ethical framework, will make decisions about what participants mean by their utterances. This being the case, the authors go on to assert that ‘there is likely to be a descriptive core of comments [made in the noting process], which have a clear phenomenological focus, and stay close to the participant’s explicit meaning’. To illustrate how decisions were made in the case of my analysis I include, below, an extract from Katy’s interview, which is also reproduced in Appendix 7. This extract has the section that is included in the ‘Findings’ chapter highlighted and italicised:

Yes, OK. We...get introductions [briefings] for essays and things we have to do. They get put out on Moodle so you can look at them if you need to. I do think, if I’m allowed to say, that some are better than others, though. Some of them you don’t get much to go on and some lecturers won’t give you any more help after that [pause] I can sort of understand, though... ‘cos it’s the same for everyone then [pause]. But, if there’s something you misunderstood you might just have a quick question just to clear it up and some lecturers are great and they answer you straight away and some say ‘no’. Can I say this?...***I know some people get an unfair amount of help – I don’t want someone to do it for me or anything like that, but I do need that sort of positive guidance when I’m working ‘cos it makes all the difference.*** I do know it’s difficult, though... there’s a fine line...err... a fine line between someone doing it for you and doing something on your own. I’d want to think that it was my work at the end of the day [pause].

Here the decision was taken to incorporate the emboldened section as I felt it represented the overall gist of what Katy was trying to express in this paragraph. Thus, throughout analysis of all the transcripts, there are many instances of the chosen extracts being concisely representative of a more extensive discourse on that particular theme – which might have cropped up in the same section (like the example above) or may have re-appeared at different times in the interview.

Furthermore, upon analysis, some participants were expressing very similar ideas (apparent throughout the Findings chapter), but not absolutely everything is reported to avoid repetition. This enables the themes are reported as concisely as possible. Finally, some utterances were not considered to be representative of any theme in particular, particularly times where the participant is pausing, stumbling over words, making irrelevant asides, or going off topic and on to organisational and other issues. Also, as Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014, p. 368) advise, some of my own ideas were dropped as their evidential base was relatively weak (such as the ‘plagiarism’ mooted in the margin of Katy’s interview transcript in Appendix 7). This decision-making process, assert Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014, p. 367), ‘is a good example of the hermeneutic circle’ in operation as, eventually, the set of parts will be reunited as a whole in the final write-up. Working primarily with the initial notes, I mapped out interrelationships and connections and identified patterns emerging within the data for individual participants. This process was repeated, on an individual basis, for all eight transcripts.

4.5.3 Making connections across themes

The initial noting of possible emergent themes was consolidated by a process of finding connections across those possible themes. This stage is summarized for illustrative purposes in columns 2 and 3 of Appendix 10. This was not only a matter abstraction - simply grouping like with like, but also took into consideration other means of looking for patterns in qualitative data noted by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Thus, in the analysis, there were also elements of:

- Subsumption – an emergent theme acquiring super-ordinate status
- Polarization – looking for and noting differences as well as similarities
- Contextualization – relating narrative to key life events
- Numeration – frequency of support for a theme
- Function – i.e the function of language used and how it serves to position the participant

In Appendix 10, for example, Holly’s first two comments about knowing ‘where to start’ and being ‘knocked back’ have been *abstracted* and *subsumed* under the connecting theme of ‘confidence’. When the findings are reported in the next chapter the idiographic sensibilities of IPA are respected through the recognition of the sometimes *polarized* nature of some of the comments when they are juxtaposed. For example, Amelia is often at odds with other participants to some extent and this is noted. However, when the *function* of her language is analysed she shares many of the same concerns of the others – only she communicates these concerns in a more equivocal, non-judgmental and generally more positive language. *Contextual* concerns come to the fore in theme three (Changing Priorities) in

particular and *numeration* or the frequency with which a themes is supported can be gauged in **Appendix 11** which summarises the statements utilized from each participant on a theme-by-theme basis.

4.5.4 Patterns across cases – clustering themes

In looking for patterns across the individual cases I asked myself the question ‘how does a theme in one case illuminate a different case?’ Here I recognized that some themes, initially emerging from individual cases, can be considered aspects of a higher-order, super-ordinate theme applicable across a number of cases. The culmination of this lengthy process is represented below, in **Table 4.2**, as a table of themes for the group, showing how the themes are nested within super-ordinate themes. How these particular themes emerged is taken up in the next chapter. Again, Appendix 11 is a more detailed version of this table in that it includes summaries of the quotes utilized to support these themes.

Table 4.2: Nesting of themes

Super-ordinate theme 1	Subordinate themes
Confidence (or lack of) in communication	a) Confidence to make decisions
	b) Value of feedback and marking criteria
	c) Differences in support
Super-ordinate theme 2	Subordinate themes
Assessment as an end-in-itself	a) The instrumental turn
	b) Assessment as a necessary evil
	c) Assessment is not, necessarily, learning
Super-ordinate theme 3	Subordinate themes
Changing priorities	a) Waning enthusiasm
	b) Relationships and events

4.6 Writing-up: process and structure

Although van Manen (2016, p. 41) is generally suspicious of prescriptive formulae for conducting and reporting phenomenological study, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014, p. 7) write that:

In a typical IPA project, the narrative account is followed by a discussion section which relates the identified themes [back] to existing literature. Reflection on the research can be included here, as well as comments on implications of the study, its limitations, and ideas for future development.

The IPA doctoral theses cited in the previous chapter (p. 32) tend to have very similar chapters and sections but differ markedly in how these are organised in the finished report. Here, however, I would like to consider the writing of the 'analysis' section and how this might do justice to the methodological stance of the inquiry. At this point I draw upon the work of Max van Manen (1984, p. 38) who argues that:

The... nature of an experience has been adequately described in language when the description reawakens or shows us the lived meaning or significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner.

And, also, that (p. 64):

The phenomenological method consists of the ability, or rather the art, to be sensitive – sensitive to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak.

Thus, by alerting us to attend to the way the research needs to be received by its audience, van Manen echoes the attributes of 'credibility' identified by Polkinghorne in the next section. Furthermore, van Manen provides advice on the way authors might structure their descriptions. He suggests that we could structure our reporting 'thematically', 'analytically', 'exemplificatively', 'existentially' or 'exegetically' (van Manen, 1984, p. 66-67). As these suggestions are not, he states, 'mutually exclusive' I have reported the findings largely in terms of the themes that have arisen from reading and re-reading the data. However, I have also explicated these themes in existential terms that identify temporal, spatial, corporeal and communal aspects of participants' experience of being assessed.

Most importantly, van Manen (1984, p. 68) is clear that 'language is a central concern... because responsive-reflective writing is the very act of doing phenomenology.' Furthermore, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 109) observe, 'the results section of an IPA write-up is more substantial and much more discursive than the results section of a quantitative report'. If writing is the 'very act of doing phenomenology' then it can be argued that individuals from the intended audience for the research are also intrinsically involved in the continuation of that act through the interpretations they bring from their own reading. The structure of Chapter 5 involves, therefore, a juxtaposition of participants' voices with my own reflections, not only on what they are saying, but also on my changing relationship with my previously stated fore-conceptions and attitudes.

4.7 Identifying and evaluating quality

Study for a professional doctorate makes several explicit and implicit demands on the practitioner undertaking such study. For example, the Contextual Document (Flint and Barnard, 2009, p. 22) for the programme speaks of a 'growing mood of enhanced concern for responsible action'. Furthermore, this responsible action is to be undertaken by a 'researching professional' rather than a 'professional researcher' (Flint and Barnard, 2009, p. 9) implying that research undertaken in this way should inform and shape the practice of the individual and have the potential to do the same for a wider cohort of professionals working in the same field. For this research to be 'purposive', as Clough and Nutbrown (2010, p. 6) put it, it needs to clearly identify the bases for further action. Such proposed action would be, at best, a waste of time and, moreover, potentially harmful if based upon a dishonest treatment of the available evidence.

4.7.1 Trustworthiness

Whereas van Manen (2016, p. 347) still argues that the term 'validity' is appropriate in relation to phenomenological study, he warns that there are concepts of validation that are incompatible with such an approach. 'Qualitative research is not well-served', he adds, 'by validation schemes that are naively applied across various incommensurable methodologies' (p. 347). As an alternative, Collier-Reed, Ingerman and Berglund (2009, p. 341) had previously suggested that:

Making use of 'trustworthiness' as an alternative construct rather than adapting the meanings of 'validity' and 'reliability' makes explicit some basic differences in the assumptions of how the world is constituted.

As such, trustworthiness (or 'authenticity'), note Lincoln and Guba (1985), can be confirmed via the notions of 'credibility', 'transferability', 'dependability' and 'confirmability'. How these criteria might be demonstrated and verified in qualitative enquiry has been explored and developed further by Shenton (2004) whose adaptation I draw upon below.

a) Credibility

Merriam (1998) contends that qualitative research's equivalent to the positivist concept of internal validity, is credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) add that credibility is demonstrative of the fact that the inquiry was conducted in a way that ensured that the topic has been accurately identified and described. In practical terms, Hall and Stevens (1991, p. 25) state, this requires:

...the selection of significant statements... that can be understood by insiders and outsiders, the coherence of the research conclusions that reflect the complexity of the situation, and lack of deception.

Additionally, Polkinghorne (1983, p. 46) has identified four attributes that can assist the reader in the evaluation of credible phenomenological research:

- **Vividness:** Does the research generate a sense of reality and draw the reader in?
- **Accuracy:** Are readers able to recognise the phenomenon from their own experience or from imagining the situation vicariously?
- **Richness:** Can readers enter the account emotionally?
- **Elegance:** Has the phenomenon been described in a graceful, clear, poignant way?

That said, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p. 103) suggest that, in the pursuit of credibility, researchers 'tend to be too cautious' and, therefore, 'too descriptive'. This, they imply, is at the expense of giving weight to participants' use of metaphor, being afraid of closely analysing participants' choice and use of language (particularly at word level) and not having the confidence to take a middle position between what Ricoeur reportedly refers to as 'a hermeneutics of empathy' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Here we are being asked, when undertaking IPA, not only to reconstruct experience in its own terms (hence 'empathy') but to take a more questioning (hence 'suspicious') standpoint and, at times, interpret participants' views in terms of wider, theoretical understandings.

b) Dependability

A concern for the dependability of phenomenological study is important as it allows for consistency of data interpretation and thus consistency in the research findings of an investigation. Care must be taken during the interview itself to ensure that participants are not prompted by leading questions. During transcription of the data it is important that the spoken word is transcribed as accurately as possible, and during constitution of the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes. (Shenton, 2004; Collier-Reed, Ingerman and Berglund, 2009).

c) Transferability

Although 'the strength of the outcome of [qualitative] research may be reduced to that of the insight of others who need to take the results forward in application' (Collier-Reed, Ingerman and Berglund 2009, p. 350), Shenton (2004, p. 69) argues that:

if practitioners believe their situations to be similar to that described in the study, they may relate the findings to their own positions [so] it is the responsibility of the investigator to ensure that sufficient contextual information about the fieldwork sites is provided to enable the reader to make such a transfer.

The problem here, van Manen (2016, p. 351) states, is that ‘phenomenological studies of the same phenomenon or event can be very [legitimately] different in their results’. However, Shenton (2004) asserts that, although each case may be unique, ‘it is also an example within a broader group’ and, as a result, the prospect of transferability should not be rejected out of hand.

d) Confirmability

Shenton (2004, p. 72) argues that an ‘audit trail’ which ‘allows any observer to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described’ is critical to confirm the credibility of qualitative enquiry. Thus researchers should demonstrate how the data ‘was gathered and processed during the course of the study’. To conclude this chapter, Shenton (2004, p. 73) has summarised a set of possible ‘provisions that may be made by a qualitative researcher wishing to address these ‘four criteria for trustworthiness’. The table below illustrates an adaptation of Shenton’s work where those provisions applicable to my own study are addressed in this report.

Table 4.3: Provision for ‘four criteria’ of trustworthiness

Provision for Credibility	Where evidenced
Adoption of appropriate, well recognised research methods	Chapter 3: Methodology
Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants	‘Relationships’ pp. 41-44
Peer scrutiny of project	Supervisor/Director of Studies feedback process
Use of reflective commentary	Chapter 5: Findings
Description of background, qualifications and experience of the researcher	Chapter 1: Introduction, pp. 1-2 Chapter 5: pp. 56-60
Examination of previous research to frame findings	Chapter 2: Literature Review and Chapter 6: Discussion & Conclusion.
Provision for Transferability	Where evidenced
Provision of background data to establish context of study and detailed description of phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made.	Chapter 2: Framing the Study Chapter 4: Research Process Chapter 5: Findings

Methodological description to allow study to be repeated	Chapter 4: Research Process
Provision for Dependability	Where evidenced
Interview & transcription process	Chapter 4: Research Process, page pp. 44-45
Provision for Confirmability	Where evidenced
Admission of researcher's beliefs and assumptions	Chapter 5: Findings, p. 56-60
Recognition of shortcomings in study's methods and their potential effects	Chapter 6, p. 103-4
Use of appendices to demonstrate 'audit trail'	Appendices 1-12
In-depth methodological description to allow integrity of research results to be scrutinised	Chapters 3 & 4: Methodology and Research Process

In the next chapter I present the findings of my research organised around the super and sub-ordinate themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts.

5. Findings

5.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter by giving a descriptive account of my experience of being assessed as a pupil and as an undergraduate. I subsequently reflect on how this experience has led me to forming a number of assumptions about being assessed that influenced my disposition towards assessment practice as I began my analysis. I do this in order to enter the hermeneutic circle as, Geanellos (1998, p. 241) explains, 'in the right way', as interpretation only possible *from* a point of view. This reflexive attitude, where 'the researcher uses... relevant prior experience as an aid to data analysis and/or interpretation of meanings' (Sloan and Bowe, 2014, p. 1300), is respectful of the assertion that there is no pre-reflective stance available to us as we are, in the words of van Manen (2016, p. 208) 'always already submerged in meaning'.

I then go on to present brief pen-portraits of the research participants before illustrating how the themes particular to this research emerged from the data. In the rest of the chapter I set out the findings of my research under a number of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes. Interwoven with the analysis of each theme is an explicit consideration and adjustment of my initial prejudices around assessment that I express below.

5.2 Pre-suppositions and beliefs about assessment

5.2.1 My experience of being assessed

Although I have been subjected, in one way or another, to formal, high-stakes assessment, almost without break for forty years, the journey has been a relatively smooth one. My 'O' level, 'A' level and, indeed, undergraduate level studies were all assessed predominately via formal, written examinations. For example, I keep vivid memories of the summer of 1977, in the garden, memorising pages and pages of notes that had been taken from the blackboard. I did a lot of memorising in those days. In fact, I am still able to recite a number of passages of geography, history, French and German that I have held in abeyance, to be deployed at such time as they might prove useful. Occasionally, in order to keep sharp, I rehearse them.

Whilst my first degree required several written essays and a dissertation, there was also the matter of six three-hour exams to be sat as the culmination of each year. By this stage in my education, indeed, in my life, exams had become a natural, necessary and unavoidable feature. Yes, there were the long and lonely hours of cramming – but, at that late stage, there was also light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. In fact, in the exam room, once I had turned over the paper and located (with some relief) the

questions I felt able to attempt, it was all over. The rest was pure cathartic pleasure as the burden of incarcerated knowledge was lifted and liberated onto the script in blotchy biro. But, then, the anti-climax. After having been examined in this fashion there was no knowing, other than a very general communication that I would be progressing to the next year, how well I had done and how I might improve.

At undergraduate level, any unexpectedly low marks I shrugged off and put behind me as best I could, embarrassed to be associated with the quotidian mediocrity of a 2:2. Communication with the tutors was minimal – with the exception of seminars, which were largely tutor led anyway. Questions were rarely asked by students and even more rarely used by tutors. I was not particularly aware, therefore, of how well my compatriots were doing, what their strengths were, or what the opinion was of my tutors and others of my own ability, progress and potential.

‘You are here to *read* for a degree’, one lecturer liked to remind us – so that is what I did, keeping my academic self, largely to myself. I still keep all the feedback I received from written assignments at this level. Representative of this archive are comments like ‘B++, clearly communicated’, or ‘A-, quite promising’, and, even, ‘this is not exactly what was asked for’. On top of the lack of formative advice, there was to be, during my three years, but one conversation with a tutor about assignments and grades – a conversation I remember well. In my naivety, during my only one-to-one tutorial, I asked him why my mark was ‘only’ a 64 and how the other 36 available marks had been lost and could be made up.

‘Don’t think, for one minute, you’re going to bully *me* into giving *you* a higher grade’, was his somewhat supercilious reply. As an undergraduate that was the first and last conversation I had with anyone about assessment.

5.2.2 Assumptions derived from my experience

As a result of articulating this brief summary of my experiences, I have engaged in further reflection and identified three broad, but interlinked, areas in relation to my current attitudes and assumptions about education in general and assessment in particular. These assumptions concern:

- a) the nature of independent learning;
- b) the source of self-confidence;
- c) the primacy of written communication.

a. the nature of independent learning

Assumption: *An independent approach to learning and assessment is a natural disposition underpinned by a range of skills that need to be developed. However, any attempt to promote explicitly that disposition and teach those skills runs the risk of having the opposite effect.*

I equate independence here with 'self-help'. I suspect there to be a readily discernible culture of 'learned helplessness' that has developed at all levels of English education. I do take responsibility for my part in upholding this culture as there is a fine line to be drawn between promoting independence and autonomy and 'spoon-feeding' – which I have, undoubtedly, been guilty of in the past. Independent learners do seek help – but it is the *sort* of help they seek that is important. Thus, I believe my own autonomy as a learner developed, especially at university, as a result of hardly ever asking tutors anything and being supplied with minimum detail about how to tackle an essay or what might be coming up on an exam paper. In other words, independence was forced upon me – although there were disasters along the way as I misinterpreted what was required of me from time to time.

But, asking for information about what to write and how to write it and what to include or not include can only ever lead to more and more questions. Such questions lead the dialogue away from learning and into the realm of irrelevant technical detail and, just as damagingly, expose tutors to the charge of inconsistency when they give different advice on the same issue. Such inconsistency, however insignificant to tutors is, nevertheless, of great concern to students – the formative part of the assessment process becomes, for students, a search for the thing that a particular tutor is 'looking for'. Thus, in my experience, students will want to know who, exactly, will be marking their work so that they can, as far as possible, tailor that work to the perceived requirements of that person. This, then, leads to a range of questions around academic practices and presentation many of which have absolutely nothing to do with how the learning outcomes might be met such as 'how many references?', 'do I need a conclusion?', 'do you count direct quotes in the word-count?' or 'can I use subtitles?' to name but a few.

Insight, on the other hand, is demonstrated by those few individuals who understand that, to achieve highly, they have to give back in their responses more or something extra than was 'put in' by the tutor. They are prepared to identify inconsistencies in arguments and synthesise ideas in creative and original ways. As I write I still do not fully understand to what extent insight and creativity can be developed or whether they are largely innate qualities that we are born with. What I do believe, though, is that these

are very difficult concepts to ‘teach’ – we can only facilitate their development and there is, necessarily, a great deal of self-help involved on the part of learners as they attempt, through trial and error, to find a credible and original ‘voice’ through their writing.

b) the source of self confidence

Assumption: *The trial and error of becoming an independent learner leads to confidence in decision making. This is the confidence needed to tackle assignments free from the oppression of prescription and ‘content-anxiety’.*

During my own formal education some teachers seemed to have been more of a hindrance than a help. Nevertheless, their callous indifference, sarcastic put-downs through to some of their more robustly physical responses to my ‘stupidity’ have served to make me rather than break me, or so, at least, I tell myself. Furthermore, I can detect in my attitude, when reflecting on the history of my own education, no animosity, no blaming others and no complaints at the unfairness of it all. In other words, I do not, as a result of my tribulations, have any notion of my confidence being suppressed or knocked out of me. I have not retreated ‘into a shell’ or ‘behind a wall’. As a result, these experiences have not helped me to empathise a great deal with some of the concerns of current students. When I am feeling particularly judgemental I make the mistake of assuming that all learners are, essentially alike and, moreover, like me. I therefore assume they should be able to respond to difficulty in a similar way to myself.

Having said that, I do, I believe, treat them with utmost respect and care but I do also recognise that their lack of confidence may be down to the way that they are supported. I need to understand, in a much more sophisticated way, how formative support for exams and other assignments can both help and hinder the development of confidence and independence.

c. the primacy of written communication

Assumption: *Exams and written assignments are much more than tests of short-term knowledge and the regurgitation of facts. They demonstrate the important ability to analyse, synthesise and evaluate in concise and convincing language – particularly while under pressure.*

Despite this belief, I began my HE work in a primary education department that had a very strong ‘no exam’ policy that was very clearly articulated and backed up with evidence for the damaging effect of

high-stakes summative assessment. However, when I moved to a new institution in 2013 exams were still a major part of the assessment regime.

When I asked a course leader at the time why they still set written exams the answer was nothing to do with the relative merits of the exam as a form of assessment but more to do with the fact that they were administratively easier to handle. An anonymous paper I marked in July 2014 which was on, ironically, the subject of assessment, had this comment written at the end:

I'm not been [*sic*] funny or anything but I think it's mad that we have to write about good practice in assessment in an exam after we've just done a module that criticizes the value of summative assessment and grades. I know that you don't make the rules but I've been sat here for two hours regurgitating a load of stuff that I'll probably forget over the summer.

I have to agree with her to an extent about forgetting 'stuff' when I think of the exams I have passed in subjects like physics, geology and French where the vast majority of the knowledge gained has been lost – but I do think there are more things to exams than the regurgitation of soon-to-be useless knowledge. But, they are also an indication of what you're capable of and what resources you can bring to bear to address a problem in a pressured situation. As I have mentioned above, the process and the transferable skills developed as part of this process are at least as, if not more, important as the content. Thus, I believe that if a candidate can convince me of their thesis by way of a well-informed tone and authoritative voice articulating ideas through straightforward English and water-tight reasoning supported by the judicious use of apposite sources then I don't so much care about the 'what' of their argument. In other words, knowledge is, by its very nature, subject to revision and what I value in a learner is evidence that she/he has demonstrated that they understand this and that they have the tools to review and revise their knowledge base in an open and appropriate way.

5.3 Themes and pen-portraits

The findings are presented as a number of sub-themes grouped under three super-ordinate or 'master' themes. The sub-themes emerged from the careful reading, re-reading, notation and ordering of individual interview transcripts (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 91). The overarching super-ordinate themes, on the other hand, reflect a broader engagement in the interpretation process at a conceptual level – a move away from the particular to the general. These themes are:

1. Confidence in communication
2. Assessment as an end-in-itself
3. Changing priorities

During interview, participants did not organize their stories in clearly thematized chapters – a fact that necessitated close and careful scrutiny of the transcripts. Drawing out the above themes was even more problematic as many of the key quotes refer to different, but crucial, aspects of their experience in the same sentence. For example, when Oliver states that...

...the best lecturers – you know what I mean? – the most useful – give you an exact plan of what to write and in what order. Then we just have to go away and do it and concentrate on making it good. It's really helpful when you've got lots of [other] things to do. (Line 15-18)

I could have construed this to be indicative of his lack of confidence to make independent decisions about his work *or* as an example of his perception of effective support (both separate sub-themes below). However, the point here is that the chosen themes are inextricably linked to one another at both a micro (*sub-ordinate*) and a macro (*super-ordinate*) level. The main connections between the super-ordinate themes can be illustrated, in simple terms, by an analysis and emergent synthesis of participants' responses that can be summarised in a succinct statement:

a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of communication and/or participants' changing relationship with assessment over time leads to assessment being treated as an end-in-itself.

This is a hypothesis which I expand upon in my summary of the findings. Before presenting those findings, however, and commensurate with the idiographic aspect of IPA, I present brief pen-portraits of the participants. Their profiles are summarised below. All were taking the final year of their degree – although three were on a new three-year course whereas five, who had started a year earlier, were part of the final cohort taking the established four-year route. Appendix 2 summarises their gender/age/ethnicity profiles and their average grades as they were at the time of writing. I have used pseudonyms for all eight participants.

'Holly' was the youngest participant and, perhaps, least confident in the way she spoke about her experiences. Also, her grade profile up to the time of interviewing was the least strong amongst the group. Nevertheless, these facts give a certain integrity and a sense of sincerity to some of her more

critical comments as, to the listener and reader, she comes across as aware of her own shortcomings and consistently self-effacing. Thus, when she raised the issue of being given different advice from different people (below, p. 78) there was a sense that she didn't want to have to say this – but it needed saying, so she would. It is hard to tell if Holly is, from the evidence, resigned to her fate (i.e. a 2:2) or if she is actively involved in trying to understand how to get the best out of herself and the system into which, in Heidegger's terms, she is 'thrown'.

'Ellie', like Holly, was in the final year of a three-year course. She was well aware that her current grade profile placed her on the cusp of getting a 2:1. Thus, of all the participants, her remarks were the most overtly focused on grades (and how to improve them). Ellie was most vocal on two aspects of the process – understanding grading criteria and marking and feedback. Taken as a whole, Ellie's responses could be seen by some to be contradictory. However, the contradiction seems to emanate from how Ellie has been uncomfortably positioned by the assessment process. On the one hand she is desperate to understand and engage with the process more effectively in order to achieve that elusive 2:1. Then again, on the other hand, she has little confidence in the organization and management of the process in which she is engaged. In this sense she reflects Jack Whitehead's (1989) notion of the 'living contradiction' – being driven and shaped by a forces outside her own control yet, at the same time, aware that she has, in the short term at least, no option but to be actively complicit in the very regime that oppresses her.

'Tom', whilst also, at times, vocal in his condemnation of feedback of the opinion that his relative success (i.e. predicted a solid 2:1) was a result of his own independence and confidence and this had been maintained *despite* the assessment regime and those running it and not because of it. That said, his remarks are consciously balanced as, when he is at his most critical, he follows up with more positive comments. He believes in self-reliance and is not afraid to say that some of his lower marks were 'his own fault'. However, this self-reliance also points to his development of a strategic approach to his assignments. For example, it is essential information for Tom to know who will be marking his work. This, he asserts, will enable him to tailor his presentation to the particular whims of the marker. In this sense Tom also gives away a hint of contradiction in his statement as, although he sees our feedback as 'useless', he is also able, he seems to claim, to discern from feedback and briefings those things that will please certain markers. However strategic and instrumental this might seem, Tom demonstrates an implicit understanding of the importance and use of the ideas of 'tacit' knowledge and 'connoisseurship' discussed in the literature review (see p. 11-14). He is trying to get inside his assessors' heads.

'Amelia' is a fast talker and quick thinker – full of ideas and enthusiasm. She is conscious of the need to reach her potential (her own words) and, from her comments takes responsibility for her own progress. Interestingly, she is the least critical of the respondents in the sense that she speaks more of her own shortcomings than those of her lecturers and/or the system. She talks of her propensity to 'waffle' in her assignments and that she knows when she has not done her best in a piece of work. She is willing to a certain extent to criticize structures and systems – but only in a very mild way. For example, in terms of tutor support she seems happy to simply suggest that it's reassurance that is needed more than anything else.

'Sarah' has a relatively strong profile – but this hides the widest range of grades achieved among all the participants. This results in comments about support, feedback and marking which might be described as scathing. She attributes the fact that her marks for her final two years ranging from 38% to 90%, have been affected by some time spent in hospital. Nevertheless, of all the participants she is, perhaps, the least confident in the system talking somewhat fatalistically about being 'in the lap of the gods' when a piece of work has been handed in. Her view is that assessment ought to be 'fair' and a 'level playing field' – and this would be easier to achieve if lecturers 'talked to each other' and were consistent in their briefings, support, marking and feedback.

'Katy' is focused and generally positive. Indeed, she knows that she could well achieve a first-class honours if she stays on her current trajectory. Her results have improved greatly since her first year and she puts this down to 'having a wake-up call' after a string of poor marks which, thankfully, didn't count towards her degree. Like Amelia she is self-reliant and positive in the sense that she feels confident when she hands in a piece of work that 'it will be fine'. However, she has also noticed that, whereas in her first year no one received a mark above about 75%, people are 'now getting marks in the 80s' for some things. This, she realizes, can have a big effect when it comes to working out averages and she wonders, with reference to the criteria, not only how one achieves such grades but, also, what the difference is between demonstrating 'a comprehensive understanding [of some topic]' and 'a thorough understanding' – as unlocking this could mean a difference of up to 10 marks.

'Lucy' is 'trying not to think' about the final outcome of her studies. She asks for reassurance that the rumours she has heard that, when securing a first teaching post, the classification of one's degree 'doesn't matter'. She is representative of a group of trainees whose classroom practice is consistently assessed more highly than her academic work. Indeed, her previous placement school have told her to

look out for any vacant positions with them which might arise during the year. For Lucy, her enthusiasm for the job and for being in school contrasts sharply with her more stoical attitude to academic work and being in university. This is something she describes as a ‘necessary evil’ during our discussion. Lucy believes that she would be far better off ‘training on the job’ and ‘having more time in school’ and finds some of the academic work and assessment ‘pointless’. On the other hand, she concedes that this is how the system works and that, as a graduate profession, she is required to pass assignments. As she nears completion, however, her thoughts wander to where she really wants to be – in a classroom.

‘Oliver’ was the oldest participant and had had a longer spell in HE than **Appendix 2** suggests. This is because he was forced to repeat his first year after referrals in two modules and school placement. He is conscious of how ‘lucky’ he is to have reached the final hurdle after being given a second chance. Unlike Katy, whose ‘wake-up call’ was not precipitated by factors external to the assignment writing process itself, Oliver spoke of not wanting to ‘let his dad down’. Indeed, it took him some time to reveal to his father that he was actually repeating a year. His mother was complicit in this conspiracy – but eventually the truth came out. There was nothing sinister behind Oliver’s concern for his father’s approval – only a deep respect and love for someone he didn’t want to let down. He also realizes that his studies may have been terminated altogether and that ‘someone, somewhere [in university] obviously had some faith’ in him.

5.4 Super-ordinate theme 1: *Confidence in Communication*

Subordinate themes	Holly	Ellie	Tom	Amelia	Sarah	Katy	Lucy	Oliver
Confidence to make decisions	x		x	x	x			x
Value of feedback and marking criteria	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Differences in support	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

*Table 5.1: Super-ordinate theme 1: Confidence in Communication
(x denotes participants whose comments contributed to each subordinate themes)*

5.4.1 Overview

This theme generated the most data in that I have utilised 38 interview extracts in this analysis as opposed to 33 and 26 extracts for the other two themes respectively. The theme emerged with the least difficulty as most of the comments reproduced below are overtly concerned with information (or the lack, thereof), passed verbally or in written form, from tutors to students. These extracts, I felt, fell into three sub-themes. There were many clear and explicit references to the subject matter of the second two sub-themes and, again, these were not difficult to derive as a sub-set of the super-ordinate theme. On the other hand the sub-theme ‘confidence to make decisions’ was more difficult to discern,

particularly as only one participant actually used the word 'confident'. Nevertheless, communication is an implicit factor in all of the extracts included here (in section 5.5.2) which attest to the uncertainties and barriers participants feel they are faced with when tackling written assignments.

In the rest of this chapter, as part of my analysis, I hold up participants' concerns to my own, previously stated, prejudgements – not to validate or dismiss participants' reflections – but to come, in my concluding chapter, to a new, better informed position from which the professional implications for my practice can be discerned.

5.4.2 Confidence to make decisions

Although, as mentioned, only one participant used the word 'confident' most do mention a certain amount of confusion when it comes to making independent decisions. This confusion is ascribed, by participants, to a lack of clarity and consistency in assignment briefings. However, many, if not all, of their remarks on this issue point more towards not having the confidence to 'have a go'. Such is the 'high stakes' nature of summative assessment that getting it wrong seems to be a constant fear for them. For example, Oliver stated that:

'You sometimes get an assignment that doesn't seem to link to what has been covered in the modules... and so that means you don't really know where to start.' (Line 25-26)

Notwithstanding this inertia it is, for some, simply a matter of getting a project moving and building up some momentum as, in the words of Amelia, *'I'm alright when I get started...'*. However, getting off the ground, for many is just the start of their problems. Amelia sums the struggle of completing written assignments by commenting that:

'It's very difficult, sometimes, to know if you're on the right track or if what you're doing is relevant. I waffle a lot and go off track [laugh] Sometimes you just want reassurance or you just want to know if something you've included is relevant. Lecturers will say stuff like 'that's your decision' as such when you ask them though.' (Line 16-19)

For Holly, however, it's not just the confidence to get things down on paper that is a concern. In fact, it seems that her worries have only just begun when an assignment is complete:

'I'm not very confident and I failed a couple of assignments in year one. I was knocked back and I don't think that I've recovered [long pause] Every time I hand one in now I think oh God!... what if I've failed.' (Line 25-27)

If, as an academic, I were to take this (or similar) comments and derive an action for 'improvement' from it I may very well conclude that, developing Holly's self-assessment techniques might go some way towards addressing the issue. Indeed, there has been a steady dissemination of studies (e.g. McNelly, 2016; Lawson et al., 2012; Taras, 2010) that attest to the efficacy of self-assessment in helping students gain a clearer understanding of their own learning.

Nevertheless, such an analysis pre-supposes many things about assessment – not least that, in its current forms, it is something that may be perfected through clearer communication. It also pre-supposes that experiences like Holly's (i.e. of being 'knocked back' and not recovering) only apply to her experience of assessment rather than her disposition towards life as a whole. In this case, a different approach may be more appropriate. After Holly's interview I had noted, in my reflection, that:

[I'm] beginning to think more and more of the difference between between beings and being, and what I think Kev means by 'the violence of ontotheological enframing' [when we]... objectify, compartmentalise and pathologise etc. Perhaps [we are] addressing the symptoms rather than the cause – i.e. anxieties like Holly's can't possibly be eased by addressing assessment practices... [are we] looking at the parts without reference to the whole?

Interestingly Holly's use of 'knocked back' can be contrasted with Katy's term 'wake-up call' (cited in the next section) when faced with a similar situation. Whereas Holly comes across as powerless, subject to the capricious whims of the system, Katy turns her setback into something positive by asking herself what it is she needs to do. By being pro-active in the face of adversity Katy takes control of the situation – but this doesn't mean that any of the participants are satisfied that this is the only way that their experience will improve. Still, there is an implication that lecturers ought also to take control of some of the inconsistencies they themselves demonstrate in their practice. If such inconsistencies were ironed out, participants suggest, then, in turn, they would feel more confident about how to go about their assessment tasks. For example, Sarah echoes what many students (and their tutors) seem confused about when she says:

'You tell us that our own opinion is important but I've been warned not to [express my own opinion]. When you showed us the learning er... things [outcomes] for CED [Curriculum, Evaluation and Development module] it says there that you've got to articulate an opinion... I think it's, it's probably how you do it that makes a difference – but we're not clear at all - and it's not just me.' (Line 159-163)

This, anecdotally, is an example of an issue that might also serve to support the 'instrumental turn' I discuss later as part of Theme 3. Here is an example of how participants' confidence to make decisions about how they will demonstrate their knowledge and understanding is affected by perceived inconsistency in communication coupled with differences in understanding about what an 'opinion' actually is.

Closer analysis would suggest that demonstrated here is a more basic epistemological question about knowledge and to whom, if anyone, knowledge 'belongs'. The repercussions of asking students to back up their knowledge claims with a reference to someone from whom that knowledge supposedly came, however, produces two problems. Firstly, there is the assumption that an assertion is valid just because it has a surname in brackets with a date after it – where, after all, did the person referred to get her knowledge and so on *ad infinitum*? This apparently infinite regress is noted by Tom, who comments:

'Sometimes you quote somebody who quotes or puts in paraphrase someone else in the quote you want to use... y'know what I mean?... So... then it's difficult to know, as in to decide who to put as the reference.'
(Line 44-46)

Although there are technical rules for handling such situations in assignments, the point Tom is making, however interesting, focuses on technicalities (however important academics think these are) and potentially takes student/tutor dialogue away from the intended learning the assignment is supposedly designed to promote.

More pertinently for students is the second problem – that if we need to back up our assertions and claims then just about everything we write needs reference to a higher, peer-reviewed authority. In attempting to do this, student essays that ought to be convincing, well-informed syntheses of learning

(my own pre-supposition) can become *de facto* descriptive literature reviews as students use citations to *form* an argument rather than *in-form* their own argument. But, the overarching concern for the majority of participants is that they, as Sarah points out,

'[I] want to get it right as there's no second chances on this. I need a structure to work to – sometimes you get one but sometimes you don't. That's when we get confused.' (Line 18-19)

Finally, it is the lack of confidence in the finished product demonstrated by Sarah who goes on to say that:

'Basically, you're in the lap of the gods when you hand something in. I know some people always get good marks – but mine have sort of been all over the place.' (Line 37-38)

So, the view that is emerging is that many of us, participants and tutors, tend to see improved communication and consistency as the means by which a more 'objective' and fair assessment regime may be constituted. However, whether clear language can provide a solution will ever be possible will be addressed further in the final two chapters.

My initial assumptions about the source and nature of self-confidence and independence have been challenged by the findings presented here. Firstly, I was never really aware of how messages such as briefings, advice and feedback are taken by students. For the most part, I have tended to consider my job done when these tasks are completed and I have not considered how these various messages have been received or why it is often necessary to clarify them with further dialogue. The main consideration, from my point of view, has been to ensure that all candidates for assessment have been given the same message (no matter how that message is received).

After Tom's interview I reflected that:

[He] doesn't mince his words. He's clinical in his analysis – and I can't dismiss it. I just wonder now whether what he seems to be asking for is (more consistency at all stages) going to be possible. I really want to be responsive – but these are issues we've been working on for years. Is there a silver bullet? I think not.

The apparent lack of confidence exhibited by the participants could well, therefore, be attributed to our (i.e. their tutors') failure to develop what Barnett (2007, p. 31) refers to as their 'educational being' as a whole. We should promote, he suggests, their courage, bravery, determination, persistence, integrity and sincerity as a priority over how we can best get them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a way that satisfies our rules and rubrics.

5.4.3 Value of feedback and marking criteria

Engagement, motivation and, ultimately, confidence can be influenced, positively and negatively, by the way communication and feedback from tutors is received. In the following extracts, fail grades, comments on work that the student considers untoward and brusque emails from tutors can all be demotivational – at least in the short term. When it comes to making use of feedback there is almost universal agreement that the feedback written and handed back with the original copy of an assignment script is generally of little to no use in any formative sense. Indeed, little attention is paid to what is written unless there is dissatisfaction or puzzlement with the mark awarded. As Oliver announces:

'I don't generally bother with the feedback [pause] look at the mark...go for a drink... and job's a good 'un'.' (Line 115-116)

It is felt that feedback often takes the form of a tutor's self-justification in that it is more of a commentary on, as Tom suggests:

'why you've been given this mark... and don't ask questions about it... rather than how you might get a better mark.' (Line 89-90)

Of all the sub-topics that arose when participants discussed their experiences understanding and using feedback were the issues that seemed to be causing the most concern. Most participants, Holly included, do not have anything positive to say about written feedback. Tom is the most vocal on this issue when he argues that:

'The feedback that we get is crap [laugh] well... not all of it... but a lot of it...it tells you what you've done wrong but you don't get a chance to put it right – unless you fail – but, of course, your marks are capped off then.'
(Line 112-114)

...and that,

'...it makes a big difference who's marking the work. Some tutors mark every single reference and knock marks off if it's not right and some don't seem to be bothered. I always ask who is marking my work so I can get some idea of how to approach it.' (Line 95-97)

Here Tom demonstrates his willingness to understand what is going on and get the best out of a situation that he doesn't think should arise in the first place but, seeing that it has arisen he will, at least, try to make things work to his advantage. A further example of a participant attempting to engage with and understand the marking process is given by Lucy, who comments that:

'I've tried to use the marking criteria but I don't think you can use it as a checklist to check whether you've done it right. I like it when they give us work to mark in lectures – we can start to understand the process a bit better by doing that sort of thing – it's only like what we get children to do in school with success criteria. Good practice.' (Line 45-48)

Katy also is seen to be trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to make some sense of the criteria by which she is to be judged. She reasons that:

'The marking criterias [sic] are next to useless because - what is it they say? [long pause] yes, er... what's the difference between a 'thorough understanding' and a 'comprehensive understanding'. And I heard a story about a PGCE [student] who failed and then handed the exact same piece back by mistake and passed [pause] How mad is that? [laughs]' (Line 122-123)

On the one hand, although they are generally positive about the potential of such criteria to support them (Amelia did refer to marking criteria as 'useful') they still experience confusion and a sense of subjectivity in how they are to be interpreted and, indeed, how tutors might interpret them. Thus Katy, quite logically, asks about the difference between 'comprehensive' and 'thorough' because both denote work in the first-class category – with 'comprehensive' referring to work that is judged to be worthy of 'an *outstanding* first'. Katy had also picked up on this by recognising that:

'Now you can get three sorts of first class mark. My friend gets monk [is disappointed] if she gets a 70 because some people are getting 80 and 85. I think most of us expect at least a 2:1. [lecturer's name] says that a 2:2 'is the new third.' (Line 130-133)

Students justifiably conclude, that if the language of marking criteria doesn't support them in improving their work then neither can it help tutors decide between one grade and another. Overwhelmingly, therefore, students will summarise *all* the modes by which they are assessed (including their teaching practices) as being down to, as Tom suggests 'a matter of opinion'.

Another aspect of the way marking criteria are used at my own institution is the perception among participants by only utilising suggested sources will peg the final grade to a 2:2. This results in students feeling pressured to locate literature that isn't suggested by reading lists. Oliver comments that:

'There is a lot of reading given to us– but you still try to keep away from those things [i.e. sources] because you lose marks if you don't get original quotes [i.e. sources beyond the recommended reading].'
(Line 53-55)

As a result, some are more successful than others at understanding what a legitimate source is and knowing how to find such sources efficiently. Amelia, for example, argued that:

'It [i.e. the putative need to search for 'original' sources] does make you have to go out and find things for yourself but it's still difficult to know what you're looking for. [pause] I do think it's taught me some good discipline with the library and that.' (Line 36-39)

Despite this positive take the outcome of this widely-held perception is that much of the help given by tutors in terms of digitised and printed readings, suggested further readings and web-links to other sources can go largely ignored as students strive to include 'original' sources in their work. This is confirmed by Sarah who argues, in a similar way to Oliver and Amelia, that:

'There's all this reading you don't bother with because you think it's not going to benefit you if you do. Then it's up to you to go out there and get

it all for yourself... but, sometimes... well, more than sometimes... you don't know where to start.' (Line 40-43)

On the other hand, when asked to clarify her approach to using literature in assignments, Katy had a more unproblematic perception of the situation in that:

'I generally tend to use the recommended stuff... unless you can't get it – and quite a lot you can't – but my problem is sorting out what's a good source and what isn't... there's plenty of stuff out there, too much, really and it's juggling all that that's the problem. No one has told me...I've never got feedback that says I've lost marks 'cos I've used the CLARCS pack [course reading].' (Line 143-146)

These differing perceptions may come from contradictory advice or they may come from students' own perception of the marking criteria as given (a question, with hindsight, I might have asked). In other respects, though, participants did speak of contradictory advice and the ensuing confusion this causes. Ellie stated that:

'You can get feedback which seems to contradict what you were told in the first place. They'll tell you to write something, you'll write it and then your feedback says 'why did you write this? It's not relevant.' (Line 71-73)

This is a point supported by others but Katy implicated everyone involved:

'I think I'm pretty independent when it comes to writing assignments – I don't like to rely on anyone. Really, when I know what I've got to do I like to go and do it. I don't like to keep asking for help because that can confuse things...you know.. people tell you different things... we tell each other different things... so, I don't really talk to other people about my work.' (Line 62-65)

When prompted to expand on how her feedback helped her with the production of subsequent assignments she commented that:

'Like I say, I don't pay much attention to it because I feel that you try to put some of those things into your next assignment and [pause] I don't think... I mean you try to but you never know that you got it right because they never tell you.' (Line 98-100)

Here Katy is pointing to a possible lack of continuity and affirmation in the way that 'feedback loop' is closed. Thus, Katy is saying, she may get some feedback and attempt to respond to it through another assignment - but she has no way of knowing that how adequate that response has been. It might be easy to conclude, within the current assessment regime and culture, that this could well be an impossible thing to achieve but I will return in my discussion of these findings to how assessment might be better linked to learning and strengthened through ensuring continuity of dialogue between assessor and assessed.

Overall, however, having interviewed all eight participants there is a clear sense of resignation to some of the issues associated with marking and feedback discussed above. They understand the system for assessing them to be 'given' and, thus, relatively fixed. Although critical they seem largely accepting of the fact that, as Lucy says, 'some of you mark really harshly' or that different lecturers give differing accounts in their briefings, advice and feedback. This sense of resignation is almost an acknowledgement of broader aspects of the human condition. In this case their language implies an acknowledgement of the tension between natural instincts for truth, justice, fairness and objectivity and our natural inability to satisfactorily live up to those maxims. Oliver sums these ideas up when he starts one of his comments with:

'I know you can't do anything about it, but...' (Line 60)

A point that is reinforced by Holly who adds that:

'I know it's the same for everybody, so we can't complain too much.'
(Line 40)

However, the last word on the putative futility of searching for clearer communication goes to Tom who laments:

'...got my best mark for something I did in the night before I handed it in... and that makes you wonder if it's worth putting extra effort in.' (Line 117-118)

Participants' experiences of getting and attempting to make sense of written feedback are echoed in the literature. For example, there is plenty of evidence here to support Murtagh and Baker's (2008) idea of 'linearity' in the feedback process (see p. 10) where the emphasis is on arriving at a satisfactory end-product that can be measured rather than on the formative journey – a process governed by what Torres and Leite (see p. 10-11) term a 'regulation logic'. Misgivings about written feedback and advice are also echoed in the next sub-theme that identifies the on-going support of tutors as assignments are produced as being problematic.

5.4.4 Differences in support

There is, when participants mention the support they receive from tutors, a clear sense of frustration. Different or confusing advice and no advice are the main concerns. In this sense, this sub-theme is similar to the other themes above – but, with a difference that, in the identified statements, students are not particularly betraying a lack of confidence in the system or their own ability to make decisions in explicit terms. They are, however, voicing their observations about how they are supported in the production of their assignments – some of which are critical of that support. Nevertheless, it is here that, despite their frustration, participants are also most positive about some of the help that they have received. Oliver, for example, notes that:

'The best lecturers – you know what I mean? – the most useful – give you an exact plan of what to write and in what order. Then we just have to go away and do it and concentrate on making it good... It's really helpful when you've got lots of things to do.' (Line 15-18)

There is an interesting implication to what Oliver says in that he seems to be suggesting that there is a focus, for him at least, on getting an assignment completed and ready for measurement (i.e. grading) rather than on the learning and greater good the assessment is intended to inspire. This is a theme is taken up in the next section when I discuss assessment becoming an end-in-itself.

Continuing with the more positive statements, Amelia's analysis of support is that:

'I know everyone wants us to do well [pause] but... don't take this the wrong way because I know we moan and stuff but we do appreciate all the help we get... I suppose, it's just that... well, you help us in different ways, I mean ways that contradict one another... do you see what I mean?... It's like some of them [tutors] will answer all our questions and you can email them at night and they get back to us – and that's great. But, others... I... and I understand this... will say like 'no' you're on your own, don't expect any help.' (Line 121-127)

It is interesting that Amelia uses 'us' and 'we' rather than 'me' and 'I'. She could either be implying that her argument is strengthened by suggesting that *everyone* thinks like this or (and more likely given Amelia's conciliatory nature) she is aware of the more negatively critical stance that some students openly take and she is seeking to let me know that, despite this, they are all appreciative of the help they get.

Ellie's comments, when discussing the university's academic support team (known as the 'Learning Hub'), also suggest that support is less about the advancement of knowledge and understanding and more about the technicalities of presentation:

'I've used the Learning Hub in the past and they've been really helpful and supportive. They're good at proof-reading because I always get that on my feedback – so I take it [her assignment] to them to look at before I hand it in.' (Line 12-15)

Lucy goes on to note, with a clear sense of frustration, that:

'You hear different things from different tutors and I do get confused about this – like when you should use the first person – some of you say we should and some of you say we should never... and I'm just like, whatever, I don't care... just tell us the same thing.' (Line 32-35)

However, when participants do focus on the support they get for the content of their work rather than its organisation and presentation there is still concern that different messages are being

communicated by different people. For example, Lucy also accesses the Learning Hub from time to time, but comments that:

'I go to the Learning Hub to get support for my assignments and they're really good. But they seem to say different things to you [course tutors] altogether. Once they told me to be radical and sort of opinionated... well, not opinionated as such but, you know, do things that seem sort of to be against the advice of our lecturers.' (Line 24-27)

Interestingly, it is the participants themselves who hint at a possible solution – or, at least, a way forward. Generally, the participants characterise essays and 'seen' exam papers as assignments that are set with all the support and briefing 'up-front' as it were. In other words, they are told what to do and then it is their responsibility to go away and do it. However, some responses seem to suggest that there ought to be a more formative approach towards the production of written assignments. The comments below could easily have been interpreted in a supercilious way as demonstrative of a lack of confidence but, I include them in this section because they imply that the best support is not about once-and-for-all clear and unambiguous instructions but is characterised by a personal and dialogical relationship with the tutor. Ellie, for example, states that:

'I find it really helpful if tutors agree to have a quick look at your work before you hand it in – or just an opening paragraph or something. Some tutors go mad if you ask them to do it though and they send out snotty rants [i.e. emails]. They're supposed to be helping you.' (Line 35-38)

This perception is corroborated by Tom:

'You forward a paragraph to a tutor to have a look at and some will and some won't. I don't mind but they just need to be consistent.' (Line 100-101)

And reinforced by Amelia who says that...

'...sometimes I get a bit lost and it would be nice to have someone available to put me back on track. But you give out the assignment briefing and have a tutorial and say 'that's it' no more questions. I know it's about fairness and equality, though.' (Line 40-42)

Again, Amelia is quick to point out that, despite her concerns, she understands what we (her tutors) are supposedly trying to achieve. This need for dialogue, which could help students to focus on the learning rather than the referencing and word-count, is not something that can point us towards a quick fix, however. When participants have managed to engage in a formative discussion about assignment content they quickly become reacquainted with apparent inconsistencies. Katy finds that:

'...it's useful to work with my housemate [in the same year group, same course] on assignments and we double check each other's work... Sometimes though, if we're doing the same assignment but we're in different tutorial groups we've had different advice from the tutors. By then it's difficult to know who's right and who's wrong.' (Line 70-71)

Sarah goes on to add that:

'You get off on one track and think that's the right way to go and then you get a spanner in the works... like there's a rumour goes round that lose marks if you don't mention such and such [pause]. That's when you start to have doubts about what you've already done.' (Line 50-53)

More explicitly, Oliver who previously had stated he would like a 'plan of what to write', argues that:

'I can see why we have to go away and do it on our own... 'cos it's got to be your work, but I prefer to have someone to bounce ideas off because, well... sometimes you can do that with your housemates to an extent but we never know if were...y'know... leading each other up the garden path.' (Line 65-68)

The participants quoted here are reasoning for a dialogical approach to assessment whilst, at the same time, also longing for consistency in what they are told. It may well be that in some, if not all, cases the

advice given by tutors and/or the Learning Hub has been blatantly contradictory. However, there does seem to be evidence that some of the conversations that students have with tutors about the content of their writing is driven, to a certain extent, by students' perception that there is one right way to do things – as if there are 'model' answers that exist as platonic forms to which tutors have privileged access. If, indeed, they do perceive this to be the case, then it is clear that there never will be consistency. For example, when Holly reasons that:

'I do sometimes ask more than one tutor for help... all I want to do is get it right... and I need all the help I can get. But... that confuses me more... I have to say because I think I understand and then you ask somebody else and it's back to square one.' (Line 57-59)

Oliver reinforces the point with his reference to the idea of WAGOLL 'what a good one looks like':

'They [tutors] have wildly different ideas about how to go about things and it doesn't help if you're not confident. Those WAGOLL are more useful than anything because you can structure your writing like that.'
(Line 72-74)

Under the over-arching theme of communication, the two sub-themes of feedback and support are the most pronounced in terms of their negative effect on the participants' experience of assessment. Indeed, Table 5.1 (p. 64) illustrates the fact that, from my analysis, every participant had something significant to say on both these issues. As I have noted above (pp. 56-60), my own experiences of support and feedback bear no comparison to the ones described by the students here. As such, I had concluded that, at assessment time, much less 'spoon feeding' of advice, clarification of expectations and prescription in general would be better.

However, my hitherto simplistic view of what independence is and how it is attained has been challenged by the frustrations voiced above. I no longer accept that being left to one's own devices will necessarily result in effective self-reliance, as it may, or may not have done, for me. On the other hand, the task we face in understanding and promoting a culture of effective communication would seem to present a considerable challenge. In a review of research evidence Evans (2013, p. 106) has noted that 'there is much more we need to know about a host of contributory factors to allow us to develop [the necessary] quality' within 'the feedback landscape'. She further states that:

the demands on the lecturer to support student... feedback exchanges are huge and require: accurate diagnosis of academic and social needs, *empathy with and understanding of the student perspective*, and having the commensurate skills to employ appropriate scaffolding tools. (p. 106, italics mine)

This would imply that a much more sophisticated approach is needed to the one revealed by the student perspective explicated above. Despite my previously held view of independence emerging, essentially, from neglect, I have been guilty of what is tantamount to hypocrisy by indulging individual students in extended email and face-to-face discussion about their on-going assessed work. On the other hand, a 'same for everybody' approach that maintains that consistency and fairness can only be achieved through, for example, one assessment briefing and no further dialogue assumes that everybody is the same and that the messages given are the messages received.

Gilbert and Maguire (2014, p. 5) have recently offered, as a result of research and development, a comprehensive approach to assessment briefing that throws light on the experiences my own study has uncovered. In particular, they assert that:

The level of challenge... in assessment should derive primarily from carrying out the assessment task itself rather than from working out what has to be done from the brief... Student cognitive resources should be allocated primarily towards learning, enhancing performance and showing how they have met relevant learning outcomes rather than towards working out what is required in an assessment task.

In developing this theme (Confidence in Communication) it became apparent from the transcripts that the participants had not referred directly to what they considered the purpose or the value of their assessments to be. Although this was no surprise as they had been asked to talk about their experience rather than theorise it, it seems that they are, as noted by Gilbert and Maguire, devoting much of their effort towards working out what the task requires of them. In so doing, assessment has become for them, an end-in-itself. This became next super-ordinate theme as it emerged, from my noting, that there seems to be a significant adjustment made by undergraduates as they shift their efforts towards meeting academic requirements.

5.5 Super-ordinate theme 2: Assessment as an end-in-itself

Subordinate themes	Holly	Ellie	Tom	Amelia	Sarah	Katy	Lucy	Oliver
The instrumental turn	X		X			X	X	X
Assessment as a necessary evil	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Assessment is not, necessarily, learning	X	X		X	X			X

Table 5.2: Super-ordinate theme 2: Assessment as an end-in-itself

5.5.1 Overview

The idea of ‘assessment for learning’ has been taken up briefly in the literature review (p. 7). In this sense, assessment is considered to be an inextricable part of the learning process rather than something that is brought in at the end of a sequence of learning to measure the effectiveness of that process. Participants’ comments in this section tend to characterise assessment, explicitly or implicitly, as something that is detached from learning and, more importantly, from the point of that learning. This is illustrated by the three sub-themes. Firstly, the participants have, for whatever reason, taken what I call an ‘instrumental turn’ where, through time, they have become more and more focused on the technicalities of essay writing. These technicalities include their concerns with fonts, sub-titles, word-counts, citing and referencing, use of the first person and writing at the ‘right’ level. Further to this, and secondly, assessment is portrayed by a number of participants, as something that is an unavoidable part of their experience where they have to take, as Tom says, ‘the rough with the smooth’. In this sense I have utilised Ellie’s phrase ‘necessary evil’ to characterise the theme. Finally, another implication of what participants were saying is that assessment, for them, is not only detached from the learning and professional development that is meant to accrue as a result but it actually runs counter to all that they understand educational ‘good practice’ to be. This is where the fact that they are education students starts to have a bearing on their perceptions. There is a general disdain for exams and all that they entail – cramming, regurgitating and forgetting – and a more than slight irritation that written assessments get in the way of them becoming excellent classroom practitioners.

5.5.2 The instrumental turn

One of the consequences of the participants’ changing relationship with assessment as their studies progress, discussed more fully as the final super-ordinate theme below, is their seemingly rapid shift in emphasis from enjoying the content of their studies to grappling with the requirements of academic writing. It does not take long for the balance of their concerns to become heavily weighted towards the presentation of their work and away from the learning that such work is purported to demonstrate. This theme is differentiated from the third super-ordinate theme ‘Changing priorities’ as it deals with

approaches to the process of preparing assignments and revising for exams rather than focussing on the impact of the events of day-to-day life on attitudes towards assessment.

Thus, when reflecting on her initial perceptions of university study Holly notes that she found the transition to undergraduate academic work quite difficult:

'I didn't do essay type A levels and it was a bit of a shock at first. The modules were all really interesting but what you really want to do is get into school. But then you've got to learn the Harvard and all that stuff.'
(Line 9-11)

Indeed, many concerns voiced about the process of being assessed are weighted towards presentation of the work – especially when the mode of assessment requires, as most do, a written response. For example, Holly goes on to hint that her preparation at school for what lay ahead might have been better:

'I really want to get it right – I had a lot of help in school and you don't get that, well [pause] you know what I mean, it's different. You do get your hand held a lot in school. So now, I suppose, I want to be told what goes where... how to do synthesis... how many quotes you need to use and all that...' (Line 30-33)

Lucy goes a little further and seems to expect her assignment briefings to be presented rather like a formula or a recipe:

'You have to fit your assignments around trying to find out how to be the best teacher you can be and so it's [pause] you know, you have to prioritise things. It's best when they tell you what you need to do for every section and they give you... well, sometimes... they give you a WAGOLL [what a good one looks like] to work from which is really useful.'
(Line 7-10)

Here, Lucy implies that the assignments, as far as she is concerned, are not necessarily anything to do with becoming a good teacher, rather they are more about getting a degree, which is needed as a pre-

requisite to train to be a teacher. This, however, appears to be an opinion which developed in the participants as their course progressed. Oliver described this process by saying that:

'...I mean you start the thing [course] with good intentions but it's not long before you're playing the system, if you see what I mean? [pause]. You want to learn all this new stuff and you're bright-eyed and all that, but... but you realise that there's too much of it all. Y'know, you've got to make choices about your work and you need to know what goes where and how to do it. You don't care after a bit [pause] well, you do, as long as you pass I suppose.' (Line 130-136)

While, Tom gives more detail and colour to the same theme adding that:

'It took a while to adjust to what they wanted [i.e. what lecturers were looking for] but once you've figured that out it's a bit like joining the dots so to speak. I definitely didn't get it right at first but once you get your head fine-tuned to the way they want you to write then things work pretty well. I was really into what I was doing on the course... for about five minutes... then you become like you're on this conveyor belt churning all this crap out.' (Line 90-95)

Indeed, it doesn't take long before students are channelling much of their effort towards the technicalities associated with assignments at the cost of engaging with the actual content. Katy offers possible reasons why this might be the case:

'I was all enthusiastic at first and, really, there's more to it than that... you don't realise how complicated it all is [pause]. It's not just a matter of writing everything you know about x but you've got to use quotes, stick to the word count, use the right font, have a beginning and a middle and an end and all that. If you get those things right then it sort of clicks into place.' (Line 29-33)

A definite shift is communicated in the last three extracts, from an initial enthusiasm with what they're embarking upon to a realisation that things are not going to be as straightforward as they initially

anticipated. This, then, seems to result in their move away from engaging with the content of their assessment to presenting it in a form acceptable to academics. This point can be further illustrated by participants' further comments on how they perceive they are to cite and reference sources in their work. Almost universally do they agree that, on balance, there is too much attention attached to it by tutors. For example, Oliver comments that:

'I can never get it [referencing] right – it depends a lot on the tutor – but all the commas and full stops and brackets do my head in... and they've changed it again, haven't they?' (Line 76-77)

And Tom, discussing his use of direct quotes, adds:

'Sometimes they're too long, sometimes it's not, what is it?... not a valid source like a website [pause] they say to use more journals but they don't tell you what journals [pause] but, sometimes, when I've not done anything differently, there isn't any sort of mention about... of my reference list'. (Line 50-53)

Katy, like Oliver and Tom, has noticed that consideration of the audience is an important factor in the way that she approaches her work:

'Yeh, it definitely pays to know who's marking, I mean I know for a fact that some lecturers don't have a problem with your bibliography at the end but some of them are all over it.' (Line 150-151)

Thus, they have developed a heightened sense of awareness of the particular idiosyncrasies of individual lecturers. This early turn towards paying greater attention to technical details and what 'you need to do to pass' gives a different meaning to the purpose of assessment, in the participants' eyes. Passing an exam or assignment quickly becomes an end-in-itself and, as such, serves no further purpose other than as a means by which one is allowed to progress to the next assessment 'hurdle' as it were. Assessment, in these terms, becomes, as Ellie puts, it 'a necessary evil'.

5.5.3 Assessment as a necessary evil

Katy speaks about having a 'wake-up call' in her first year of study after having experienced early failures and generally poor grades:

'I didn't really know what I was doing back then but [pause] back in the second year I really knuckled under and my marks went up. I did more reading... and I wasn't so tempted to go out. I think I sort of realised that you're stuck with what you get [i.e. degree classification] at the end 'cos my dad got a third – is it a 'Thora' – I think he says [i.e. from Thora Hird] – and he says that it shows he had a good time [at university]. But... I think it's nice to get your potential and get something out of it – it was different for him [pause] he didn't pay anything for his.' (Line 33-38)

Other participants also recognised a tension between, on the one hand, needing to have one's efforts recognised and the need to lead a normal life. Lucy reflected that:

'On one hand I suppose assessment is a necessary evil because you're going to get nowhere if you don't pass... but, on the other, you've got to balance it with everything else [pause]. It's good to keep perspective on things – like a trade-off.' (Line 13-16)

But, this 'trade-off' to which other participants also allude can tend to demote the perceived role of assessment to little more than a chore or, even, a routine procedure such as a visit to the dentist for a check-up. Holly, for example, observed that this characterisation of assessment as something one has to 'go through' suits some, but not others:

'I've had to work at it ... like you know... and I have to make myself do things like revision. Like some people can get away with it and it just seems to go straight in – they're good at exams [pause] I think it means more to me, though. If you've had to work at something then you can be proud of what you've achieved. Some of my friends, well, one of my friends, can just turn up [at exams] and do well...' (Line 10-14)

In the main, though, participants note that assessment periods, whether taken up by revision or writing assignments, are often seen as something that has to be slotted in between everything else that is going on and, the importance they attach to these periods very much depends on one's declared perspective on life or one's particular state of mind at the time. Tom says that:

'To be honest I do enough to pass because in the long run you remember different things – like great nights out, friends, holidays and that. I know you've got to work – but you got to "work to live" not the other way round. I shan't be moaning to my children about what a hard time I had and how I had to fight to survive – it's what you make it.' (Line 120-124)

Paradoxically, Tom's apparent short-termism in his unwillingness to make sacrifices which are more than what he sees to be absolutely necessary at the time is articulated with reference to the future and how he would like to see and represent to others, his past. Oliver, on the other hand, is already thinking about his past when making decisions in the present:

'You might say I've been a glutton for punishment [due to having to repeat a year] but someone, somewhere obviously had some faith in me. Then, you don't want to let anyone down again... but it doesn't mean it's never a struggle to have to do stuff you really can't be bothered to do.'
(Line 110-113)

Constant reflection on the consequences of his previous failure seems to motivate Oliver to confront his ennui as he adds:

'It was my own fault and now I just do it... head down and just do it.'
(Line 117)

Sarah, like some of the others, talks about the difficulty of making a decision to forgo social opportunities more attractive than the solitary pursuits of writing and revision:

'It really depends how I'm feeling. Usually I can think of a million things better to do than revise... and I usually do them as well [laughs].' (Line 4-5)

However, she does 'try to do the right thing' but even then there are distractions:

'My housemates are on different courses and they're always out which can make things difficult... especially when they get back... making a noise.' (Line 7-8)

Lucy notes that it isn't only present social opportunities that influence her will to complete the work in hand. She also comments on her well-developed ability to reason her way out of doing what she ought to do:

'They're saying that your degree doesn't matter [as a trainee teacher] so, really, if you're thinking about that when you're revising then it puts you off working harder. I tell myself... well it's not going to make any difference. Sometimes you put a load of work in and your grade isn't any better – or worse even... so you say: what's the point?' (Line 71-75)

Lucy also addresses this point directly:

'So, really, it depends on your state of mind at the time and what you tell yourself. If it's just something you've got to get out of the way because it gets in the way of all the other stuff then you think [to yourself] it doesn't matter.' (Line 98-100)

There was yet another theme that, for me, was emerging from the constant reading and re-reading of transcripts as I identified this sub-theme. It seemed to me that participants were struggling with the fact that assessment, whether through an essay or an exam, was a largely solitary process. Although Tom acknowledged from time to time that they did collaborate to a certain extent (but considered there to be a fine line between collaboration and academic irregularity) participants tend, in their above comments, to contrast writing and revision with the more social aspects of life rather than with other activities that one might carry out alone. Indeed, assessment is characterised by Amelia as:

'something you have to do on your own so that you can show what you can do without any help.' (Line 43)

It is interesting to note here that on the one hand participants are resigned to the fact that they have to be assessed (preferably on their own, as Amelia asserts) whilst, on the other hand, remaining critical of the way in which exams, in particular, test 'short term knowledge' which has been crammed and then forgotten. Not only is this knowledge forgotten, Tom questions whether it would have been any use to him if he'd remembered it:

'I know we have to do it – but it's pretty pointless.' (Line 119)

5.5.6 Assessment is not necessarily learning

Consequently, when assessment is considered to be a 'necessary evil', its intended connection with learning becomes lost. The extracts in the previous sub-section discuss assessment generally. What they do not mention is reference to the subject matter of assignments and exams and how that might relate to the development of useful professional knowledge. This has implications for the way participants understand the purposes behind their experience. There is a clear sense, from the comments here, that academic assessment, for them, is not fulfilling its purpose of being a reliable indicator of 'who they are' and what they're capable of professionally. Oliver states that:

'I'm thinking now that essays exams and essays aren't a good reflection of what you can do or what you know even. Like you say, it's only a snapshot and we're taught that SATs are not very good – but it's only the same thing, really.' (Line 90-93)

Here Oliver demonstrates that, as a training teacher, he has some knowledge of assessment as it applies to children. The idea that SATs (Standard Attainment Tests) for primary age children only test what a child could know or do 'on the day' is just one of several criticisms of assessment that participants make with reference to what they have learned on their course and in the classroom. Oliver goes on to argue that:

'I'm learning...but not just in doing exams. I think I'm learning most in school and on the ground in a classroom. Learning by mistakes and feedback there... in that place.' (Line 93-94)

And Sarah, when comparing her experience with that of the children she teaches, adds that:

'It's the same for us – it's really stressful and you don't always do your best in that situation. I think, for people like me who are really at home in a classroom... that it's not a level playing field.' (Line 24-26)

Also, as trainee teachers, the participants generally feel that their degree focuses too much on 'academic' success and not enough on the development of the skills needed to be effective in the classroom. Although some make the link between deep subject knowledge and teaching skills the majority see the way that this knowledge is assessed to be irrelevant. Holly voices a criticism that I recognise, as the same argument is brought up, from time to time, by other students, in an institution where written examinations are still a component of assessment:

'The exams only test our short-term knowledge. They're better for people who can remember lots of things of by heart. I'm not good at exams but that doesn't make me a bad teacher.' (Line 77-79)

Indeed, when they discuss their preferences or otherwise for different modes of assessment they often either actively dismiss or, at best, make little recognition of the learning involved and the purpose of a particular assessment type – whether a presentation, an essay or an exam. Amelia observes that:

'I do better in exams – which seems funny to say – I think, well I think you've said... that it might be to do with getting it down without over-thinking things.' (Line 54-55)

Others, when reflecting on the purposes of assessment make a connection between the job they are in training to do and the way their competence is judged. Holly argues that:

'It would be better if teaching practice counted towards our degree because that's what we're good at. I thought at the beginning this is what we'd be assessed on mainly.' (Line 99-100)

However, their teaching competence, currently, is not reflected in their degree classification (as it is at some institutions). Indeed, when discussing what their degree is *for* participants rarely venture beyond

explanations to do with it being a requirement and, thus, a ‘necessary evil’ as described above. When they do reflect on other purposes they sometimes mention the personal satisfaction derived from knowing that their hard work has been recognised. Sarah re-iterates a commonly held view when she says that:

‘I know they say that no one [i.e. employers] cares what degree [classification] you get – but I want everyone to know I’ve done my best...’ (Line 77-78)

Oliver, on the other hand, reverts to the thinking that characterises knowledge acquisition as serving the purposes of the system rather than any greater good that might be achieved through it:

‘Some of the things on the course seem a little pointless... I know they say that you’ll realise later what you did it for... I mean, you realise what you did it for when you get an exam on it – but that’s because there’s an exam on it more than anything else!’ (Line 56-59)

Again, this sentiment is echoed and reinforced by Ellie who adds that:

‘I don’t think that anything I’ve written I would use again.’ (Line 57-58)

Amelia, by contrast, and ever one to see the positive side of things, puts a quite different spin on the purpose of exams in particular:

‘It does show that you could do it again later, you know, even if what you’ve been learning about is not relevant it still shows that you can learn.’ (Line 47-48)

Her argument, therefore, is that the content of learning isn’t as important as a demonstration of the ability to handle that content under a certain amount of pressure. In this sense, she is implying that she sees a wider relevance to exams and essays over and above the re-gurgitation of facts. Indeed, she also states that:

'We know that it's been argued that today's children don't know what jobs they'll be doing and that and knowledge goes out of date and changes all the time. I think I've learned to keep an open mind in my thinking and my work – without being opinionated... I've changed my mind about some things several times... you know, like teaching reading and such... I think assignments are more subtle than facts and knowledge... 'cos...well, it's the way you go about them.' (Line 9-14)

When she acknowledges that she has 'changed her mind' Amelia also acknowledges the dialogic nature of her learning. However, this whole theme – of assessment becoming an end-in-itself – describes practices that are palpably anti-dialogical. I will return to the idea of 'anti-dialogue' in the next chapter, but here I find myself troubled by my previously stated assumption about the nature independent learning in which I imply that assessment is necessarily a solitary affair. As I have said, being told what I have to do for an assignment and then going away and doing it on my own has been a regime that has worked well for me as a student over the years and I have, in private conversations at least, looked down upon those who seem to need 'spoon feeding' as lecturers *and* students tend to refer to support mechanisms. However, what participants describe here are situations in which there is no opportunity for the learner to demonstrate the development of her views on a topic and no opportunity for the learner to experiment with bold and creative thinking without fear of being marked down. They are, in fact, describing assessment as a dead-end that they have to reverse out of – leaving behind, as they go, all the baggage of pointless knowledge that they brought with them to that point. If I am honest with myself, although successful on paper, the same is true for my particular repository of accumulated undergraduate knowledge – in my case on the subject of geography.

This theme is most troubling for me, as my prejudices have been challenged profoundly. I now see the need for authentic teaching learning and assessment practices that do not privilege the high-stakes, summative judgement to the detriment of on-going learning and development but, instead, open up a space for a more reflexive approach where students are more aware of what they are learning, how they are learning, why they are learning and what they would like to learn next. When reviewing the literature (p. 17) I noted that the idea of 'authentic' assessment is receiving renewed interest, but that what constitutes 'authenticity' is open to debate. Vu and Dall'Alba (2014, p. 789), drawing upon Heidegger's particular concepts of authenticity have put forward 'an ontological conceptualisation of authentic assessment' to which I return in the concluding chapter as I draw upon their ideas. For them,

for assessment to be authentic, not only should students be offered, as Brown (2015, np) also argues, ‘opportunities to learn through the process of assessment itself’, but they should also...

...explore possibilities in light of who they are becoming. In this manner, authentic assessment can extend students’ possibilities for being, including being with others (Vu and Dall’Alba, 2014, p. 789).

The final theme emerged from significant statements that relate to participants’ ‘becoming’ in the sense that they evidence how they, and their world, changes through their sojourn in academia.

5.6 Super-ordinate theme 3: *Changing priorities*

Subordinate themes	Holly	Ellie	Tom	Amelia	Sarah	Katy	Lucy	Oliver
Waning enthusiasm	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Relationships and events	X		x	x	x	x	x	x

Table 5.3: super-ordinate theme 3: *Changing priorities*

5.6.1 Overview

This theme explores the experience of assessment at university over time. In so doing it recognises two time-related aspects. Firstly, participants spoke of how their attitude to what they were doing at university had changed over their two to three years of study. Secondly, they spoke about the factors that influenced the assessment experience at any one time such as relationships, illness, social factors and so on.

The overarching concept is ‘change’ and this category includes changes that are internal (i.e. to do with attitude and outlook) and external (to do with factors largely outside the individual’s control). These are by no means mutually exclusive categories and the section also deals with how internal and external factors influence each other.

5.6.2 Waning enthusiasm

When embarking upon their programme of study there is an overall sense of achievement, anticipation, excitement and optimism. The participants, who are on what is a very popular course’ feel ‘special’ and ‘privileged’ to have been given the opportunity to achieve what, for many of them, has been a long-held ambition. And, already, many hurdles have been overcome for them to get even this far. The first two terms in their first year do nothing to change their mind that they have made the right choice and

that the learning is new, relevant and exciting. However, when course requirements mount up and the first pieces of work are handed in and given back, attitudes begin to change. A particular strong influence on attitude concerns the nature and volume of work they are set to do in modules from the beginning of their second year onwards. It is at this stage, when academic demands spar with some of the other pressures mentioned below, that their initial, all-encompassing enthusiasm for new learning can recede, to be replaced by a survival mind-set.

Four participants, Holly, Ellie, Amelia and Katy, spoke of their initial motivation and excitement of having got onto a course for which there had been, in Holly's (conservative but true) words 'more than 1000' applicants. This initial enthusiasm is echoed by Katy, who says that:

'I bought the books on the book list and, like we were told on our IHE [Introduction to HE] module, I made lots of lists and timetables for working and such like [pause]. That all went out the window in intro week... and then you realise what it's really going to be like'. (Line 12-15)

Ellie also goes to make comment about the workload itself by adding that:

'You start out with really good intentions and the first couple of assignments you take really seriously. But, then, the work piles up and after a bit it just a case of getting them in and keeping your fingers crossed.' (Line 7-9)

Indeed, as Ellie suggests, the 'good intentions' can be tested at a very early stage. Amelia, strong, focussed and positive, still notes that the implications of the initial social whirl can take some adjusting to:

'I'd joined up with things, mainly to do with my religion, [i.e. clubs & societies] at the beginning and I did have a lot going on... I think that affected my work quite a bit.' (Line 7-8)

Thus they soon realise that there is going to be more to life than study and that there are, and will be, many opportunities to meet new people and experience new things. This, to them, becomes an

important part of their development holistically. For example, Holly talked about herself as a 'whole person' and, given her relative lack of assessment success, it was important for her to not be defined merely as someone who had scraped through and be seen as a lesser person because of it:

'It's important for me to do other stuff. My family is important [she has been a carer for her mother] and I've got to juggle all these things. It's been very hard [pause] but... but I know my grades aren't the best I can do but I have managed to keep up my commitments [long pause as I ask another question about work] I stopped work before my last placement because I didn't want anything to get in the way. I might work in the shop at Christmas but I'll stop before the next placement 'cos that's the important one'. (Line 136-141)

Holly's struggle can be contrasted with Oliver's journey who, by his own admission, had no one but himself to blame for the false start that meant he had to repeat a year:

'I don't know how I'm still here... I mean I went absolutely bonkers... I mean I was nuts in the first term. I don't think I was ever sober... I was pissed-up, like, in lessons and I'm sure they could tell. I did pull it round a bit after Christmas and I think that's why they gave me a chance. But the damage had been done. We didn't tell my dad for a bit – but it all got sorted [pause] In fact, he's been very supportive – like a best mate...'
(Line 9-14)

Although Oliver's case is extreme it is illustrative of the way young people thrown into a completely new situation can react when they find that they have, generally, much more freedom and responsibility for making key decisions than they ever have had. Amelia mentions that:

'You have to be really disciplined. I lived at home and I've got four brothers and sisters to help look after. I don't know how they survive in XXXX [name of hall of residence] because I've heard it's a real madhouse. I keep up with my work and at least my family go to bed at the right time and let me have some peace and quiet [laughs].' (Line 110-114)

Furthermore, not only do they start to appreciate the wider opportunities that university affords they also start, albeit gradually, to lose their initial enthusiasm for what they're studying and, consequently, how they approach their assessments. This is not only due to the above concerns related to support and feedback but also relates to their perception of the relevance of what they're learning. Ellie notes that:

'In the first year we had to write about the history of children or something. There was Acts of Parliament and stuff about... Plato? I mean it was interesting but had no relevance to what you have to do in a classroom [pause]. I felt confident at the beginning because they make a big fuss over telling you how special you are and how there were thousands of applicants for your one place.' (Line 2-7)

There is evidence that the course is something considered by participants to be 'precious' in that it has been hard won. However, when they become alienated by, in their eyes, learning that lacks relevance, then a bit of the shine wears off. Tom illustrates this point nicely with an extended metaphor:

'[The course is] like a new car... y'know... you treat it with loads of respect and you're scared to death of trashing it... but then you get your first scratch and... after that, you don't care so much anymore – it's just to get you from A to B'. (Line 142-145)

And so it seems, familiarity with the system breeds a certain amount of contempt. Katy echoes Tom's message with an example from real life:

'When you go past the Blue Room (i.e. exam room) and there's first years queuing up stressing about their exam you think – been there, done that, get over it like'. (Line 156-157)

She concludes that:

'You just get a bit blasé about things after a while – it's inevitable, really'
(Line 153)

Nevertheless, there also appears to be a willingness, or a desire even, to be brought back into line by those in authority. Tom's comment below is interesting for a twenty-year old. On the one hand, in other comments, he alludes to his self-reliance, but here he expresses a need to be directed a little more firmly:

'I had to go and see a tutor about something in my DPP [Developing Professional Practice module] assignment and I thought I was in for a right bollocking... but he was really nice about it. Having said that, the bollocking might have been better 'cos I think I needed a bit of a kick up the arse... y'know!' (Line 71-74)

Notwithstanding these needs, participants do acknowledge, from time to time, responsibility for their actions. Katy, when speaking of her 'wake-up call' is careful to confess that:

'It was my own fault so I'm not blaming anyone – but you do do a lot of growing up [pause] I cringe sometimes at what I was like then.' (Line 44-45)

Then again, for Lucy, temptation still creeps in from time to time:

'Even now [i.e. in the final year] when I'm doing revising it's not the best conditions... you put it off and you put it off and you say "right, today is it!" but then something crops up and you nip to town and forget yourself in some retail therapy and then you end up back at somebody else's flat and you say "aw, sod it, I've still got all night!" – and you know it's going to be hell.' (Line 86-90)

In 'forgetting' herself in 'town', an environment far removed from the structured, timetabled and deadline-ruled world of the university, Lucy seeks to free herself and, for a while at least, escape from that formality. However, she also manages to communicate the frustration, or pain, associated with those actions which result in only putting off the inevitable.

Finally, it isn't just their tutors that have helped the participants to stay on the straight and narrow path of commitment to their studies. Katy acknowledges the support of her peers when the going gets tough:

'The people I'm [living] with are really conscientious... I think that helps because they pull me back into line. So they'll... we'll read each other's work, I know you've got to be careful, but we look out for each other like that.' (Line 158-160)

Here is the link to the next and final sub-theme which explores the impact and importance of life-events, relationships among individual participants and the significant others who have had a role to play, directly or indirectly, in their assessment journey.

5.6.3 Relationships and events

Relationships and interactions with lecturers and fellow students are scrutinised in a more critically reflective way during assessment periods. Amelia observes that:

'It's important to get on with the [module] tutor but there are always going to be some that are better than others. I've had a really positive experience, myself... It does help.' (Line 4-6)

There is, for some, a nagging suspicion that certain individuals, adept at canvassing and receiving help with their assignments are being given an unfair advantage. This is a confusing area fuelled by rumour and insinuation but based upon a 'same for all' concept of fairness. It is also confusing because the participants know that tutors are there to help and that they are approachable, but it is unclear to them when 'help' is going too far. For example, Katy comments how:

'I know some people get an unfair amount of help – I don't want someone to do it for me or anything like that, but I do need that sort of positive guidance when I'm working as it makes all the difference.' (Line 88-90)

It is not tutors who are deemed to be at fault when it comes to fairness, however. There is a recognition that the system will usually give students the benefit of the doubt when they ask for assignment extensions or exceptional circumstances to be taken into consideration. Two participants mentioned

situations where they 'knew' that their compatriots had been dishonest. Oliver was more critical of the tutor role, being of the opinion that:

'Some tutors are really soft – there are students who take the piss a bit and they get away with it. It can be demoralising but you have to focus on what it is you're doing and try not to think about them'. (Line 100-102)

Participants' understanding and interpretation of the student-tutor relationship is – expected to be non-judgemental in their pastoral care yet highly judgemental as markers.

Oliver, having repeated a year, was forced to backtrack a little when he said:

'You don't get a second shot at it... well, you do... but you know what I mean... a you can mess up big time and it's good to have someone there who's going to be firm if they have to be – but kind as well'. (Line 114-116)

Further to this, having quickly reflected that he did, in fact, 'get a second shot' Oliver goes on to acknowledge that:

'Tutors are a real support if things aren't going well for you – they're a lifeline sometimes... it doesn't work so well when you have to meet every half term at a set time 'cos there's nothing to talk about. But, when the shit hits the fan in your life you know that they're there 24/7, just about'. (Line 137-141)

There is an uneasiness at assessment time, particularly when exams are imminent that is not just about the essay or exam itself. This uneasiness emanates from the need for stability in all other aspects of life so that one's efforts can be directed and concentrated fully upon the task in hand. Holly 'keeps her fingers crossed' but Sarah, for example, who was hospitalised in her second year commented that:

'There's never a good time to do an exam [pause]. You're very sensitive to anything that can put you off – I don't know if that's because, ultimately, I suppose want to be [put off] – anything to get out of doing it. It sounds awful, but when I had to have my appendix thing I was worried I'd get behind at first – but everyone [university staff] was so nice and told me not to worry and, then, it was like the pressure was taken off and I could concentrate on getting better.' (Line 10-16)

Sarah's comment here is, in a way, rather similar to Lucy's 'retail therapy' remark above – except that Sarah's illness was, obviously, an involuntary event. However, unless illness knocks one out altogether, the most insignificant things can leave a lasting mark on one's record. Holly notes this by saying that:

'I think I'm quite good, but some things that get in the way are sort of little things and they have... they seem to have, a big effect... like you get a cold or you've had a row and you can't stop thinking about that'. (Line 122-124)

Some participants feel the need to lead more orderly lives when revising or writing. They seem to have a heightened awareness of their everyday behaviour which can become quite methodical, yet, at the same time, disturbing for them. Holly also admits that:

'I fuff about a lot – making tea, putting the washing on and that. It's like I'm fighting something all the time'. (Line 63-64)

Oliver also struggles to get started with the work in hand:

'I find it really hard to get on with it... everything seems to get in the way and then you get distracted by the slightest thing. Once I get going and I'm resigned to my fate, as it were, then I'm about OK.' (Line 5-7)

Some distractions that impede essay writing and exam revision are one-off disruptions, some minor, some less so. From my own experience of dealing with requests for extensions these include power-cuts, flat tyres, a variety of IT issues, right through to illnesses, bereavements, divorce and pregnancy. Again, from my own experience, a flood and even a volcanic eruption have also been cited by trainees

as having an adverse effect upon their academic performance. However, the participants in this study do not share anything on topics, such as those mentioned directly above, that could be described as major life-affecting events. Tom, for example, sets the tone as he recollects one of the more mundane diversions from writing and revision:

'The fire alarm went on the morning of us assessment [module] exam and it was funny cos' it was like a big relief in a way – they were all sparking-up [cigarettes] outside in their peejays and draggin'on 'em like mad... with like all black rings round their eyes and messed up hair'. (Line 23-26)

Despite the apparent banal nature of everyday life, Lucy observes, in the same way as Holly above, that the smallest things can have undue influence and effect:

'I did have a big bust up last year and I know it's not right to make excuses – but it does affect how you get on. You think "please God, not now!" But at the end of the day it says whatever on your certificate and it's printed there forever – but it's not, like, the whole story is it? Anybody looking at it to give you a job makes a judgement about you, though.'
(Line 130-134)

Here it is interesting that she talks about the 'story'. I suspect that, like Lucy, when we look at the various certificates and awards we may have accumulated that we do recall the story – a struggle, sometimes – whereas, if I were to look at Lucy's certificate, even though I know her, I would just see a grade. As I have noted, this is something recognised, to a certain extent, by the Higher Education Achievement Record (see pp. 19-20) notwithstanding the fact that the summative grade classification system remains in place.

The last remark in this section comes from Katy who sums up her experience with revision and writing by saying that:

'You definitely need to be in the zone' (Line 164-165)

If we can take the 'zone' to be a focus of mind, or a sense of singular purpose then the comments cited above suggest that need to get in it, and then fight, mostly with your own nature - but often with other, external influences - to stay in it.

I had not considered, before conducting the interviews, my own assumptions about the impact of wider life on the assessment experience and, indeed, the impact of assessment periods on wider life. Furthermore, I had not considered the nature and impact of students' relationships with their tutors in terms of the pastoral support tutors provide. I would argue that the extracts recorded above relate to the being of each participant in its fullness – rather than to what Barnett (2007, p. 30) refers to as their 'educational being'.

For me, one important point raised by exploring this theme is that it is impossible for individuals to compartmentalise their lives so that learning and assessment can take part in a vacuum, as it were, unaffected by everything else that is going on. Moreover, despite initial enthusiasm, academic pursuits, although clearly always important, do not take centre stage in the complex lives of the participants – and this means compromises have to be made and the consequences lived with.

Another important point centres on this distinction I have made in the way that the participants relate to their tutors. In the first theme, Confidence in Communication, I specifically referred to comments that characterised the academic relationship between students and tutors, that is to say, comments about assignment briefings, feedback and academic support. Here, though, participants do allude to a relationship where tutors offer positive encouragement and care in more general terms. I noted, after reflecting on Sarah's interview, that:

[She] draws a clear line between pastoral help and support – which she values highly, and academic support – [of] which she is quite dismissive. This might be patronising [of me] but this I find a v[ery]mature attitude in that she is able to distinguish and keep separate [the] human aspects of relationships from the professional.

I am drawn, as a result of the discussion relating to this third theme, to the work of Ronald Barnett (2007, p. 30), previously cited above, who has questioned whether assessment in higher education is 'an impossible mission'. He also argues that:

A genuine higher education holds the promise of the attainment of authentic being... The authentic being offered by higher education is that state of being in which a student becomes her own person.

However, this pursuit is inhibited, Barnett goes on to argue, by the fact that higher education is a zone in which the personal dimension becomes displaced. Thus, to combat this displacement we should be actively involved in the development of a student's whole being. Part of this process, as Johansson and Felten (2014, p. 17) point out, involves 'intentionally and carefully' helping students to move 'beyond the eagerness and excitement of new experiences' so that they can better understand and come to terms with the 'disorientation' and 'discomfort' that their new life might bring. Indeed, the authors argue, 'students don't often anticipate how [university] experience will change them' (2014, p. 17). An important lesson from this is that we should give explicit credence in our work to the solicitude that the participants here value greatly. Our caring, in the sense of a concern for our students' future well-being, is an important, but possibly overlooked, aspect of what Barnett (2007, p. 30) describes as the pedagogical relationship. Such a relationship, where we, in the words of Heidegger (1996, p.115), 'leap ahead' of our students in their 'existential potentiality-for-being' is characterised by much more than a concern for their eventual grades.

5.7 Summary of findings

Here, I return to and expand upon the brief summary of findings statement I articulated near the beginning of this chapter (p. 61). In so doing, I bring the parts of the analysis back to build a picture of the whole experience of being assessed as described by the participants in this study. To recap, I suggested that:

a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of communication and/or participants' changing relationship with assessment over time leads to assessment being treated as an end-in-itself.

Firstly, in my analysis, I explored the issue of communication. Here, I discovered a certain amount of disquiet among the participants who tended to be critical of the various forms of communication that exemplify the whole process of being assessed – from the briefing, subsequent support and then, to the feedback, usually written, itself. Although help and support are, apparently, abundant, many participants still display a lack of confidence in making independent decisions about different aspects of their work. This is the most contradictory element of the findings – although there is evidence that,

when participants note that they have been 'spoon fed' at school and at university, they also acknowledge that this has had a negative effect on their confidence and ability to complete tasks independently.

Furthermore, throughout those periods when they are being assessed (i.e. when they are revising, taking exams or preparing essays or dissertations) there is a range of factors that influence the final outcome. Participants unanimously report feeling motivated by the very fact that they have secured a place on a popular course leading towards a professional qualification. This motivation, however, wanes somewhat due to a number of factors. For some, if not all, university quickly becomes much more than the single-minded pursuit of a qualification. Social commitments have to be balanced with work. On top of this, a certain amount of cynicism creeps in directed at the assessment process. Students realise that the system is far from perfect and they evolve an instrumental or superficial approach to their exams and essays. This cynicism develops from their questioning of the relevance of what they're being examined on, their suspicion of the marking and grading system, and their sophisticated and reasoned (as trainee teachers) opinion of the validity of high-stakes, summative assessment regimes which, they tell us, only test irrelevant short-term knowledge 'on the day', as it were. On 'the day', however, a number of 'every-day' happenings are perceived to have undue influence – fire-alarms, relationship troubles and illness to name three mentioned in this study. These things are only problematic, though, insofar as they are enshrined anonymously within a particular grade of classification which one carries, like a scar, for life. All of these factors, when brought together, lead to assessment becoming, for these trainees, an end in itself.

In the next chapter I discuss the possible limitations of this research but I argue that, despite such concerns, I make a valuable contribution to knowledge in an area that is relatively poorly addressed by research. I then discuss possible next steps and the implications for my future research and practice.

6. Contribution to knowledge and implications for practice and policy

6.1 Introduction

I begin this chapter by discussing the practical limitations of this research. I then argue the case for the unique contribution to our knowledge of the experience of assessment that this study makes. In so doing, I relate the findings back to existing literature and research identifying commonalities and the possible gaps exposed by my research. The implications for practice are discussed followed by a consideration of modifications to practice already made at a local level as a result of this research. I go on to discuss research still necessary in order to validate those modifications.

The implications for assessment policy at a local and sector level explored and suggestions for the direction of future research are made. The section concludes with a discussion about how the outcomes of this study might have an impactful message to a wider HE audience.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

The aim of this study has been to uncover and explicate primary education trainees' experience of being assessed in their academic work. The findings have provided some valuable insights into what students feel about that process, how they approach it and how it has affected them. I have already set out the criteria for trustworthiness (pp. 52-55) and how those criteria have been met in this study to give credibility to those findings. Furthermore, the companion to this report, Document 6, outlines more of the operational difficulties associated with mobilising IPA as a methodological lens through which to examine experience. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of that endeavour, in the iterative process of writing, reading and re-writing, has been to stay consistent with the particular ethical sensibilities of phenomenological research (see Chapter 4, pp. 38-9) in the way that I have treated the interview transcripts. This is particularly difficult as it is all too convenient, in the process of academic writing, to reduce the human beings involved to 'worldless subjects' (see p. 111), that is to say, to the mere data I most emphatically do not want them to become. Consequently, there is a sense in which I do not see this study as representing the finished product or fulfilment of a particular episode in my own journey. It is, rather, a way-marker or a stepping stone. The strength of my continued learning and professional development will be grounded in the recognition of the inevitable flaws and human fallibility that are exposed in my current analysis and language of analysis. This recognition should be foregrounded to aid, rather than hinder, my next steps.

Moreover, although the interviewing and analysis process was time-consuming and carried out diligently, I acknowledge that the findings of any one IPA study reveal just one of many possible, yet legitimate, interpretations of the embodied experience (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 2016). Furthermore, Brocki and Wearden (2006, p. 88) have pointed out that interpretation in IPA is 'bounded by participants' abilities to articulate their... experiences adequately... and by the researchers' ability to reflect and analyse'. This raises the concern that, if the findings of IPA are seen in this way, as contingent and only tentatively conclusive, then how might any subsequent actions, or recommendations for action, be justified?

This would be problematic if I were to assert that the findings of this study clearly demanded a very specific course of practical action. However, in relation to professional practice, van Manen (2016, pp. 68-70) notes that '...phenomenology tends to foster ethical sensitivities... and tact in professional activities, relations and situations', the aim being 'not to create technical intellectual tools or prescriptive models for telling us what to do or how to do something effectively' but rather 'to open up possibilities for creating formative relations between being and acting'.

It is, therefore, how I might create and sustain such *human* relations in our practice of assessment that I am interested in developing, ahead of any new 'prescriptive model' for assessment. My main argument is, therefore, that as practitioners, we should begin to understand and pay greater heed to the ethical sensitivities engendered by our care for them as human beings.

6.3 Contribution of the findings to knowledge and connections with existing literature

This study has provided new insights into the previously under-explored area how assessment is experienced. In particular it makes a unique contribution to the understanding and explanation of:

- a) *how students' approach to assessment takes the turn that it does towards instrumentalism and,***
- b) *how communication and relationships in the feedback process become 'anti-dialogical'.***

This has been achieved by the consideration of the assessment experience in its wholeness rather than by addressing the parts in isolation. Thus, although there are studies that explore the assessment experience as it relates, specifically, to *emotions* (Schutz and Lanehart, 2002; Falchicov and Boud, 2007; Spangler et al., 2010), to *feedback* (Beaumont, O'Doherty and Shannon, 2008; Nicol, 2010; Carless,

2011) and to *self and peer-assessment* (Meldrum, 2002; Carbone et al. 2015), Bevitt (2015, p. 103) observes that:

While research has examined how... methods of assessment impact on approaches to learning, less attention has been given to the impact on... the overall student experience. This is an important limitation, given the pressures in UK higher education to maximise student satisfaction.

This study, therefore, is able to make a unique contribution to knowledge because it examines assessment as an experience in terms of the wider context in which it is situated. An exploration of lived experience must, van Manen (2014, p. 105) asserts, take account of the 'primordial dimensions' of that experience. As such, this investigation was not dictated by a pre-conceived idea that experience can be effectively studied in narrowly defined terms directly relating to academia's conceptual objectifications of the elements of the assessment process. Indeed, the strength of IPA lies in its facility for enabling participants to disclose a range of what van Manen, (2014, p. 105) calls 'non-conceptual meanings' that might have been missed had the aim been to objectify and improve particular aspects of practice. It was the deployment of IPA that enabled the elicitation of contextual detail and it was the process of thematization that drew out the common patterns relating to the experience of assessment.

As a result, I would argue that the most significant theme emerging from this study is apparent through the super-ordinate theme, Confidence in Communication, concerned with the frustrations that result from the participants' unsatisfactory experience of student-tutor interaction. At the heart of these communication difficulties, and despite research contributing to an ever-more sophisticated and progressive view of assessment, the process of being assessed is, for these participants, dominated by ambiguous, awkward and ill-defined relationships between assessor and assessed. The theme of communication is also addressed in the literature by those who report on projects aimed at building greater transparency, particularly through the use of rubrics, into the process of assessment (see Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Howell, 2013; Jonnson, 2014; Dawson, 2017). Nevertheless, this study reinforces Jonnson's (2014) argument, cited on p. 10, that there is a general issue with students' awareness of what is expected of them – a situation not helped by the ambiguity of some of the terms tutors use and the consequent lack of clarity. Although Sambell (2011) takes a relatively optimistic view that such tacit knowledge can be shared effectively through communities of practice she admits that this is by no means a simple endeavour. Sambell (2016, p. 4) goes on to argue for 'authentic' assessment tasks as ones 'which seem more meaningful to students' and which...

...may be based on tasks with an external 'real life' basis [offering] students the chance to tailor their assessed work to issues which particularly interest them, with students importantly becoming co-creators of assessment, as well as co-creators of learning.

Thus, research findings and other learned comment can tend to frame assessment-related communication problems narrowly in terms of the different forms of feedback and how we might successfully apprentice students into the connoisseurship of tacit knowledge (e.g. Thornton and Gascoigne, 2013; Bloxham and West, 2004). In other words, the solutions have a tendency to be framed in terms of how *they* (the students) might be helped to enter into *our* (their tutors') world. The dangers associated with such practice are highlighted by Webster (2004, p. 6) in his Marxist reading of the relationship it fosters, when he warns that:

Just as the factory or office worker [is] made less human by [this] process... separated from their true, full potential, turned into a tool for *someone else's* purposes and profits, so the student becomes the object, the plaything of *someone else's* freedom to think, separated from their potential as a free subject, as a distinct individual and member of the human species.

The result of all this being that the student develops 'no intrinsic interest in the essays and the notes that they produce - the academic wage-labourer being interested only in the pay- cheque at the end' (i.e. the certificate) (Webster 2004, p. 6). My findings suggest that the communication *impasse* cannot be addressed superficially via some new feedback technique without first addressing the fundamental relationship between the stakeholders. It is the very nature of this relationship we need first need to understand, clarify and nurture. In so doing, we should make more effort to enter *their* world and understand the situation from *their* perspective. This study has served to illuminate that perspective.

6.4 Implications for assessment practice: dialogic assessment

Earlier in this thesis, whilst discussing the underpinnings of phenomenological research (p. 27), I noted that a distinguishing feature of approaches describes as 'phenomenological' is the acknowledgement of the need for us, as researchers and educators, to 'get outside the sphere of our own... pre-occupations' in order to be 'attentive to the way in which other human beings... present themselves as a demand to me.' (Moran, 2000, p. 5). The appropriate methodological response to this call is a dialogical one. In making just such a case, from an ethical-phenomenological perspective, Halling et al.

(1994) describe dialogical practice as, at once, being grounded in community and creating community. In this model knowledge is co-constructed, emphasizing the view that ‘what is known grows out of the interaction between people that, in turn, leads to a deepening of community based on shared understanding’ (p. 111). Meanings are discerned ‘through the process of dialogue rather than following predefined procedures or steps’ (p. 111). Here, ‘the other person challenges each one of us to become aware of and bracket our assumptions’ (p. 126).

The idea of dialogic assessment is not new and is, most often, referred to as part of the ongoing debate around the formative feedback process. It can be contrasted with feedback that might be considered ‘one-way’ or, in other words, a monological transmission from teacher to student. Price et al. (2013, p. 43, italics theirs) define dialogue, for the purposes of formative assessment, as ‘an interaction between parties *with the intention* of generating a shared understanding.’ Incorporating this definition, the so-called ‘Osney Grange Group’ of writers and researchers meeting at Oxford Brookes University in 2009 set out, in five clauses, and Agenda for Change in formative feedback practices. The first clause states that:

It needs to be acknowledged that high-level and complex learning is best developed when feedback is seen as a *relational* process that takes place over time, is *dialogic*, and is integral to teaching and learning. (Price et al. 2013, p. 41, italics mine).

There is a tendency of studies to concentrate on how such assessment might be conducted (e.g. Laurillard, 2002; Sambell, 2011; & 2016 Nicol, 2010; Brindley and Marshall, 2015) rather than on what first needs to be understood about the conditions required for such an approach to be successful – especially in terms of human relationships. Indeed, although the Agenda for Change describes the process as ‘relational’, Price et al. (2013) are careful to point out that this term does not refer to personal relationships but to the relational nature of dialogic exchanges themselves and to the changing relationship the student has with the content of her learning.

Given the arguments I make here and elsewhere about the way our technologies may reduce those we teach and assess to ‘worldless subjects’, I would argue that a more sophisticated concept of dialogue needs to be adopted which has something to say about the fundamental human relationship between teacher and student. Here, I propose that we reconsider urgently what Freire’s concept of ‘dialogue’ might mean in formative assessment terms. When Freire states that ‘education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction’ (1970, p. 53), he implies that we should first address the

nature of our roles and the relationships we form. Yet, Freire has more to say. 'Dialogue cannot exist...', he goes on to assert, 'in the absence of a profound *love* for the world and for people' (p. 70, italics mine). For Freire, however, the concept of love that has become distorted – which perhaps explains why the writing and research cited in this study assiduously avoids any mention of it. For Freire, love is 'commitment to others' (p. 71) and such commitment cannot be defined in purely professional terms and terminology. It is a personal commitment.

6.5 Implications for my own practice and further research: 'flipped' assessment

Although the conduct and findings of this study are, currently, being re-produced and edited for submission to a peer-reviewed journal, there is also a need to investigate further, and more closely, how I might ensure that any resulting practical implications can be effective and sustainable in the current educational climate.

In my own work, although the context from which the participants were reflecting was one where there had been many new initiatives and experimentation with practice around assessment, the overall effect has been to entrench, in their minds at least, a particular social structure. This structure has the tutor firmly in control of every aspect of the learning experience. 'Dialogue' is seen by some participants in this research as the process of wresting information from a tutor on what knowledge is acceptable and legitimate and how that knowledge has to be presented in order to pass an examination or coursework assignment. This is a distorted and, ultimately, self-defeating induction into 'connoisseurship'. Furthermore, it constructs knowledge as fixed and does nothing to encourage learners to construct, explore and justify new ideas of their own. It is in this way, as Freire put it, that 'reality', remains untouched.

With this in mind, critical educators have, for many years, discussed and developed the idea of a 'problem-posing education' that 'affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming' (Freire, 1970 p. 65). This, broadly speaking, describes an education that starts from individual experience, problematizes structures and practices and attempts, through dialogue, to create new realities for individuals free from oppression (Shor, 1987). The importance of this approach is that its emphasis is on building and maintaining relationships amongst co-dialoguers in a culture, as Freire re-affirms (1970, p. 72) of 'love, hope, humility and trust'.

Recent steps in my own research and practice have involved an investigation of the possibility of a 'flipped assessment strategy' based upon the the dialogic assessment practice described above.

'Flipped' in this sense refers to the attempt to address Freire's teacher-student contradiction by flipping the 'poles of the contradiction', as he puts it, 'so that [we all] are simultaneously teachers *and* students'. To this end, I have adapted the ideas of 'self-study' (Samaras, 2011) and 'story-telling' (McDrury and Alterio, 2002) where learners produce an account, constructed over time, supported by reflective journal entries, group dialogue and individual tutorials, of how their professional learning and beliefs have been affected and changed by *all* their experiences. Thus, not only do they analyse significant incidents in their classroom practice, they contextualise their analysis with further reflection on their reading, lectures and wider concerns such as illness, social commitments, separation, divorce and bereavement and so on.

This approach evidences the dynamic construction of forward looking new knowledge rather than the knowledge that Freire terms 'motionless, static, compartmentalized... predictable [and] completely alien to the existential experience of the student.' (1970, p. 52). In this sense, flipped assessment can be an authentic, liberating practice, if conducted in the freirian spirit of hopeful enquiry, humility, trust and, even, love. Consequently, it is the *conduct* of this initiative that I aim to investigate further – as there is nothing particularly new about the idea of story-telling or self-study as a vehicle for reflective practice. I aim, therefore, to focus further research on what 'love' can contribute to our assessment practice and whether it is, as Freire suggests, the missing link that has stymied and stalled our attempts at progressive reform.

Anecdotally, the signs are good. Engagement in the process of self-study does appear to redress the formative/summative imbalance as, although students are still, through this context, subject to final grading, the conduct of tutorials and discussions was firmly focussed on their life, learning and development rather than on the technicalities of passing the assignment. In this process, I also feel the teacher-student contradiction was addressed and the grade (I marked all the papers) naturally reflected how they had educated me – not how well they told me what I already know. However, these claims obviously need further investigation and closer analysis if they are to be borne out – this is particularly true if 'love' (as 'commitment') is to be separated from favouritism or bias. Furthermore, there are still barriers to overcome if flipped assessment is to become accepted. Regulatory frameworks and assessment criteria will need to accommodate the principles of such practices – as will policy at a local and national level.

6.6 Implications for policy makers and a wider audience

Although universities have, over the last decade or so, intervened to shape a more formative approach to assessment, it is still unclear what the overall impact has been. ‘Well-meaning as these interventions are’, state Nicol, Thomson and Bresnain (2014, p. 102), ‘there is little evidence that they have had any effect on [either] student satisfaction [or] student learning’. There is still, nevertheless, a steady stream of reporting on relatively small-scale initiatives to improve practices in assessment, especially ones which implicitly value assessment as a formative, dialogic enterprise and one requiring the active participation of those being assessed (e.g. Carbone et al., 2015; Hamer et al., 2015; Barker and Pinard 2014; Boud and Molloy 2013).

In the short and medium term, however, there are quite severe institutional and regulatory constraints on the implementation of radical reform in assessment. For example, despite there being an on-going debate about grading and associated problems such as grade inflation (Caruth & Caruth, 2013, Bachan, 2017), we seem to be stuck with the current degree classification system. More flexible, however, are the possible modes of assessment which, in recent years, have been characterised by ‘constructive alignment’ – the alignment of learning outcomes with appropriate types of assessment. In the short term it would be possible to make the focus of any formal written or oral assessment a first-person meta-cognitive, reflexive account of learning through dialogue (as I describe above) rather than on the disembodied re-presentation of prescribed knowledge through an examination or essay.

Such initiatives have been underpinned and given impetus by a more sophisticated understanding of the curriculum-as-process that has emerged in the 21st century. This technological turn (see Sterne, 2003) has seen thinkers such as Claxton (2006) and Dweck (2006) explore how and why we might promote, in learners, certain attitudes and dispositions towards learning. So, today, the various small-scale research projects mentioned above and other, larger projects (e.g. the widely emulated SCALE-UP project originating at the University of North Carolina) that do not see assessment as a necessarily separate or distinct aspect of the learning process continue to report positive outcomes for learners. Indeed, the idea of assessment as inseparable from learning has been trialled and reported on, recently, across a wide range of formal educational settings (e.g. Gupta, 2016; Dann, 2014, Rourke, 2013).

However, there is a risk, identified by Hayward (2015), that...

...if innovation [in assessment] is ever to become sustainable and not

remain a series of endless cycles then we have to recognise [that] the prepositions, 'for', 'as' and 'of' may reflect different assessment purposes but the *raison d'être* of assessment *is* learning. (p. 38, italics mine).

This is the observation that after new practices are adopted, they either fall from the agenda after a while only to be re-discovered, re-packaged and re-marketed at some later date (such as the re-emergence of phonics teaching in schools) or, as Hayward (2015, p. 38) also identifies, the innovation gets subsumed by the dominant culture and survives in the form of an 'unreflective mantra' of those things we do without monitoring their purpose and efficacy. In this way, structures of domination and power are reproduced and reinforced rather than challenged – and, as a consequence, in the maelstrom of constant change, nothing really changes.

Feenburg, (2009, p. 33), sheds further light on the processes that may be at work in perpetuating an instrumental approach to assessment practice. He writes that 'we seek and find affordances that can be mobilized in devices and systems by decontextualizing the objects of experience and reducing them to their useful properties' and further states that:

this involves a process of de-worlding in which objects are torn out of their original contexts and exposed to analysis and manipulation while subjects are positioned for distanced control.

This 'de-worlding' is a tendency, Feenburg argues, for 'modern societies' to subject human beings to 'technical action' in order to manage them. This, I would argue, is an accurate reflection of the student experience of assessment described above. The implication all too obvious here is that such 'de-worlding' is that *any* project, however well meaning, can become colonised and shaped by instrumental reasoning and action. Such reasoning, as I noted earlier, constructs learning and assessment as the replication of desired behaviour and, as such, pre-supposes a very particular relationship between teacher and learner that Freire (1970, p. 60) termed 'oppressive' and 'anti-dialogical'.

There are, therefore, many dangers and pitfalls associated with any improvement agenda. The findings of this study may have a useful and impactful message to a wider HE audience if they can contribute in a cumulative way to the ongoing debate. Draper and Nicol (2013) have some comprehensive and

useful advice concerning impactful and sustainable change in assessment practice from an individual level right through to sector level. Here they distinguish between research projects and 'change' projects arguing that, to achieve any impact, recommendations from research must be translated into change projects. The aim of such projects is to persuade people to change their practice – they key word, here, being 'persuade'. In order to achieve this persuasion, the authors argue, change projects must be sufficiently resourced. They do, however, argue that transformative and lasting change does not have to be managed at an institutional level and that 'many of the most far-reaching change initiatives have been driven from other levels' (p. 190).

At my current institution, therefore, the opportunity has arisen to resume the 'self-study' project briefly described above. An ongoing revalidation of teacher education courses has enabled me to influence the inclusion of a 'significant incidents' module in the Primary PGCE course. In this module, trainee teachers will be introduced to the principles and conduct of self-study and storytelling and be supported, in a dialogical setting, by tutors and each other, to produce a critically reflective narrative of their professional development journey. The project will also enable me to resume my research into the nature of professional relationships described above. At an institutional level there will be the opportunity to present the findings of the project (and my ongoing research) at the teaching and learning conference later during the academic year 2017/18.

At a sector level, the Higher Education Academy's HE assessment symposia, due to be held in the first half of 2018, presents further opportunity to share and indeed modify my findings and thinking. This wider audience of colleagues from national and international HE institutions, all motivated by the need for change and innovation in practice, will enable me to understand and incorporate other perspectives into my thinking and practice. To this end I am currently involved in reproducing this research as a paper for publication and as a conference presentation suitable for such audiences.

7. Conclusion

As I suggested in the introduction, my concluding thoughts continue with the slightly different epistemological approach taken in the previous chapter. Thus, in terms of Habermas' categories of knowledge seeking interests (see pp. 22-23) I now discuss the possible implications for policy and practice in more transformatory/emancipatory terms by continuing to draw upon some of the ideas and terminology of critical pedagogy. Thus, rather than looking backwards, I look forward, towards the future, in a spirit of possibility. I feel this turn is necessary in order to become, remain conscious of and, ultimately, break free from the instrumentalism and calculative thought that impedes dialogue. Edgar (2006, p. 21) notes that 'as administrative systems [university assessment regimes, for example] intrude more and more into everyday life' and...

...the instrumentalism inherent in systemic activity begins to erode the communicative skills that are grounded in, and that serve to maintain, the lifeworld. Good intentions may be perverted by the system and the possibility of challenging the system through communicative rather than instrumental reason, is inhibited.

Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984), which Edgar draws upon here, characterises reason not as being grounded in instrumental or objectivistic terms but, rather, in an *emancipatory communicative act*. As such, communicative acts should be underpinned by an 'anticipation of freedom from unnecessary domination' (McCarthy, 1981, p. 92).

This study uncovers clear evidence of a struggle between human beings and the structures and instrumentalism that inadvertently turn their experience of assessment into a 'necessary evil' indicative of powerlessness. There is a well-documented debate originating in the 1990s by David Hargreaves criticism 'that educational research was poor value for money, divorced from educational practice and often of an indifferent quality' unable to produce practically relevant knowledge (Rodrigues, 2008). The counter to this argument (e.g. Hammersley, 1997) argued that the search for such 'practically relevant knowledge' was producing exactly the sort of 'narrowly instrumental view' that characterises teaching, learning and assessment as experienced by the participants in this study. Although this study seems to confirm that things do not seem to have changed there is a deeper significance to the findings that has arisen from the interpretative-phenomenological approach taken.

Thus, there is a need, evidenced by the experiences presented here, to consider in what ways the fundamental relationship between assessor and assessed can be better understood and re-conceptualised. Again, the contribution that this study makes to our current knowledge is the identification of the need to go deeper into that relationship accompanied by a call to re-explore what 'love' as a commitment might mean for our practice. Also, as I have touched upon earlier, authenticity in assessment will require a more sophisticated consideration than is suggested by its current portrayal in some of the literature. Authors currently tend to characterise authenticity as congruent with 'real life' assessment tasks which are meaningful in themselves (e.g. Deutsch, 2016; Vu and Dall'Alba, 2014). But, a return to the idea of authenticity in its wider, existential sense, as the individual's pursuit of meaningful living and fulfilment (Barnett and Deutsch, 2016; Guignon, 2013), rather than the assessors' pursuit of meaningful measurement, may be a surer foundation for deeper and lasting change.

The term 'assessment' necessarily refers to an act of judgement. Although the literature identifies a range of purposes for assessment (see p. 6) the underlying theme is always judgement. In university 'high-stakes' testing the end-point of this measuring is a grade or classification that sums-up three years of study as a number. Those subject to this regime are all too aware of its shortcomings. They may be unaware of the 'de-worlding' process that constructs them as the objects of 'technical action' – but they implicitly allude to these ideas when they describe assessment as a 'necessary evil'. Furthermore, they *are* aware of the problematic relationships that develop between assessor and assessed – a relationship that is unequal and 'anti-dialogical' in that one side is seen to hold all the power and all the knowledge.

Paulo Freire also reminds us that 'the answer doesn't lie in the rejection of the machine – but in the humanisation of the man' (1974, p. 31). *De*-humanisation, Freire argues, like the 'de-worlding' discussed above, occurs when human activity is separated from the 'total product'. Thus, the act of assessment when separated from the act of learning has the power to dehumanise and indeed, from the findings of my own study, seems to do just that. Furthermore, when the act of learning diverts us by its seeming arbitrariness and irrelevance from the business of seeking to lead a meaningful existence, from our very being, then we can become, at the very best, cynical in outlook and at worst, existentially nihilistic. The participants in this study did not exhibit such an extreme world-view – but there was certainly plenty of cynicism.

Thus, although we, as education professionals, have tried, and still try, to characterise assessment *as* learning, the locus of control and power has not yet enabled students to leave behind their status as objects to assume the status of agents and masters of their own destiny. Ultimately, just as we claim we can trust human beings to take control of their own learning, so too must we trust them to take control of their own assessment. In order for them to do this, any act of assessment ought to enable and edify those assessed in the process of *becoming more fully human* instead of taking the form of a retrospective and narrow judgement of what was known at a particular point in time. Thus, as Rogers suggested in *Freedom to Learn* (1969), the facilitation of learning and assessment is as much about the teacher's attitude and the establishment of open and trusting relationships as it is about implementing some new strategy, technique or policy. It is possibly in this way, by being mindful of attitudes and relationships that we might, through our well-meaning reforms and interventions, avoid simply reproducing the dominant structures of power described by Hayward above (p. 110).

However, it is very difficult, in the present age, to imagine a higher education system where regular summative judgements on performance were not made and data pertaining to those judgements were not collected in order to hold institutions to account. As long as this is the case, and current structures stay in place, then we can only ever tinker with things as they stand and run the risk, described above, that all our efforts be subsumed and rendered sterile by the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, despite the pessimism of those who protest that our reforming efforts are all in vain, we should heed Dylan Thomas' (1952) call and not 'go gentle into that good night'. Granted, attempts to re-frame the communicative relationship between teachers and those they teach and assess have not caught on and gained widespread acceptance – but notable and on-going projects in emancipatory and humanistic pedagogy initiated by the likes of Freire, Shore and McClaren (Nouri & Sajjadi, 2014) still tantalise and attract those who seek to re-ignite and kindle dreams of social justice in dark times. It is for this reason that we must continue to promote reform and, in so doing, rage passionately 'against the dying of the light'.

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Appendix 1: Timescale of research

Recruitment of Participants	April - May 2014
Literature review	July 2014 – August 2014 Update: August 2015 Update: September 2016 Update: March 2017
Preliminary meetings, consents and interviews	October – November 2014
Data Analysis	January – April 2015
Write-up	Sept 2015 – November 2015 Revision June – November 2016 Post-viva amendments May-Dec 2017
Submission	January 2017
Post-viva re-submission	January 2018

Appendix 2: Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Year*	Level 5 Grade Average
1	F	20	White British	3	53.4%
2	F	21	White British	3	55.9%
3	M	20	White British	3	63.0%
4	F	24	British Asian	4	65.4%
5	F	21	White British	4	66.1%
6	F	22	White British	4	69.6%
7	F	22	White British	4	60.7%
8	M	23	White British	4	57.8%

*All students on final year of either a three-year or four-year course

Appendix 3: Letter and information for participants

Dear...

April 2014

Further to our recent tutorial conversation I'd like formally to invite you to participate in my research project. The study will look into final year students' experience of being assessed whilst at university.

The process will involve an initial discussion about the purpose of the research followed by an interview which will be open-ended – but will probably last no more than an hour in total. Before the interview we will discuss the ethical framework – particularly around confidentiality - and you will be asked to sign a consent form. Discussions and interviews will take place during the autumn term (i.e. Semester 1).

Would you now take time to read the information on the back and confirm that you're still willing to go ahead?

Many thanks for your important support and help,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Paramore'. The signature is stylized with a large, looped initial 'J' and 'P'.

John Paramore,

Associate Principal Lecturer

Leeds Trinity University

PTO for further information

Further Information

1. What is the purpose of this research

I'm doing this research as part of my doctoral study. I've been interested in assessment at university for a long time. As you know, I do a lot of work with some of you helping you to improve your grades and so on. However, I've never really discussed with any of you, at length, what your overall experience of being assessed is like. Hopefully, working together, I can come to understand your experience better so that, perhaps, in future, this knowledge can be used to inform assessment practice and policy.

2. How/why have I been chosen?

We are scheduled to meet relatively regularly and, therefore, we have time available at mutually convenient points in the first semester of your final year. Because you are entering your final year you have had significant experience of being assessed upon which you can reflect.

3. What will my involvement be? What will I have to do?

We will meet just prior to formal interview in order to discuss the research further and to give you time to think about the topic. The interview itself will last for between half an hour and an hour and, with your consent, will be recorded digitally

How will the information be used?

It will be used in a research report which will be submitted as a requirement towards my doctoral degree. Some of this information may also be used in articles submitted to academic journals for publication. All of it will be anonymous and cited data will not be attributed to specific individuals. The information collected is unlikely to be acted upon in a way that, say, information gathered from staff-student consultations or module reviews is acted upon.

4. What are the potential risks and benefits?

The consent form will indicate that the information collected from interview will not be used beyond the purposes cited in question 4 above. It is important that when reflecting on your experiences you don't mention the individual names of other students or tutors – particularly in a negative light. Although highly unlikely, it would be possible for you to be un-professional in a way that could mean that you behave in a manner which does not show respect for the Leeds Trinity Community (as stated in the Student Charter).

The potential benefits for you, as final year students, are likely to be intrinsic. In other words, there is not likely to be a change to the assessment regime you are currently experiencing. However, you may, hopefully, come to understand yourself better as a learner and you may also be satisfied, whatever your experience of assessment, that there is a dialogue going on which aims to continue to ensure that systems are fair and fit-for-purpose.

Appendix 4: Participant consent form: students' experience of assessment

Read carefully the information below and initial the box next to each statement if you understand and agree with it. Then sign and date at the bottom of the page.

	Initials
I agree to being interviewed by John Paramore as a participant in the above study.	
I understand that the interview will be recorded and stored digitally for the duration of the study.	
I understand the findings of this research will be written up as a thesis and may contribute to other academic publications and presentations.	
I acknowledge that all information I share will be treated confidentially and not used for purposes other than those stated above.	
I acknowledge that I can withdraw from the research at any time and without reason. I have the right to refuse to allow any information I have shared to be used.	

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Researcher:

John Paramore,
Address here

Appendix 5: Pre-reflective meeting schedule

Considerations and schedule for preliminary pre-reflective meetings:

1. Explanation of the interview and analysis process including digital recording and storage of data.

Key issue: *the interview will be semi-structured and the interviewee will be encouraged to describe in as much detail as possible their experiences (hence pre-reflective meeting).*

2. Go through the consent form and obtain participant's signature;
3. Encourage participants, in the coming days, to reflect on their experiences (in writing if it helps – but this is not to be 'handed in') before the interview date;

Key Question: ***Describe what is it like to be assessed***

Reflect on:

- *what is important to you*
- *your feelings /emotions;*
- *relationships and support (in and out of university)*
- *how you experience the stages of assessment – briefing, revising/writing, exams, tutorials, hand-in/marks & feedback;*
- *contextual issues – i.e. other significant events & issues which take place during assessment periods*

4. set a date for the interview.

Appendix 6: Interview schedule

In the interview:

- Describe, for me, the experience of being assessed whilst at university (as opposed to being on placement). Start from the initial briefing and take me through to when you get your feedback and what you might do with it.

Possible further prompts (examples of other, more spontaneous, prompts can be found in the transcript example in Appendix 7):

- Can you expand a bit on that particular point?
- To what extent is that experience typical?
- What feelings are involved in this experience?
- Do you experience exams in the same way as you do preparing essays? What are the similarities/differences?
- What other things affect your experiences outside the process of assessment itself – relationships, social/family life, illness?

Appendix 7: Katy interview transcript

Interviewer	Line 1	Hi Katy!*
Katy	Line 2	Hi John!
Interviewer	Line 3	<p>Now, we met, what, a week or so ago and we've talked through the purpose of today. You've been thinking about that whole process of being assessed, in essays and exams – what you've experienced and how you experienced it. As you know this isn't like the sort of interview you see on telly or in... in a police station – erm... the idea is to give you the freedom to talk about what's important to you. As we get into it I might ask you to expand on some things – but my input will be minimal.</p> <p>To start us off, you've thought about the experience of being assessed at university – not on teaching practice..., sorry, placement but on your academic work, assignments and exams – can you describe that experience for me?</p>
Katy	10	<p>[pause] Well, yes, I thought I'd start at the beginning 'cos I've been on <i>bit</i> of a little journey... as you know [laughs]. Seems like a long time ago, I was just thinking last night how different everything seems.</p> <p>[long pause – 20 seconds, paper shuffling, cough]</p> <p>So, yeh, when I got here I went straight down to Blackwell's – no messin' about - and I bought the books on the list and, erm... like we were told on our IHE [Introduction to HE] module, I made lots of lists and timetables for working and such like [pause]. That all went out the window in fresher week... and then you realise... erm... what it's really going to be like. So, that threw me a bit... I suppose... having more to think about... juggling with stuff [pause] that's what I got wrong, I think, at the beginning... sort of re-adjusting and stuff. School is so different, y'know, and you do do a lot of growing up fast... [long pause]</p>
Interviewer	18	When did you actually start having assess... assignments to do and things like that? Tell me about what that was like.
Katy	20	<p>[long pause]...So, we had to do a couple of presentations before Christmas which were a bit easy if I'm honest – but it gives you a sort of false sense of security like... [pause]. When we had to write stuff for assignments I came a bit unstuck, I suppose it's fair to say... well, the first one was a bit of a disaster to be honest [pause].</p> <p>But yeh... I did get knocked back a bit in my first year...erm.. I wasn't paying enough attention to proper referencing or presenting it properly but once I got that sorted then it gets easier for you. It's just a bit of a pain more than anything [pause] 'cos you think it's alright to just get on and do it – but they pull you up on stuff... and that's right that they do 'cos you've got to get it right... but, like I say, it's a bit of a drag – but I suppose attention to detail is a good thing in the long run...</p> <p>And I think, more than anything, it was all adrenalin and enthusiasm and less using my head. You launch, well, I launch myself into stuff... And I was all enthusiastic at first and, really, there's more to it than that... you don't realise how complicated it all is [pause]. It's not just a matter of writing everything you know about whatever but you've got to use quotes... stick to the word count... err... use the right font, have a beginning and a middle and an end and all that... If you get those things right then it sort of clicks into place...eventually, but I didn't really know what I was doing back then but [pause] back in the second year I really knuckled under and my marks went up. I did more reading... and I wasn't so tempted to go out. I think I sort of realised that you're stuck</p>

		with what you get [i.e. degree classification] at the end 'cos my dad got a third – is it like a 'Thora' – I think he says? [i.e. from Thora Hird] – and he says that it shows he had a good time [at university]! But... I think it's nice to get your potential and get something out of it – it was different for him [pause] he didn't pay anything for his.' That makes a difference to things... knowing about the debt and that – but you put it to the back of your mind as much as you can. When you find the balance it's OK, I mean some people sort of struggle with that more than others, to be honest errr...yeh... it's, well..it's not that bad as I'm making out, probably... [long pause]
Interviewer	41	What caused you to 'turn the corner' so to speak?
Katy	42	So, like I say, I think, I think it's about finding your feet isn't it – it's good... it's a good thing that your first year marks don't count... or I would be in trouble, I might not be here now! Having said that though it <i>was my own fault</i> so I'm not blaming anyone – but you do do a lot of growing up [pause] I cringe sometimes at what I was like then... Y'could say I got with the wrong crowd – but that... that might not be fair in many respects – I don't know... like I said... growing up. But, like I say, you're paying for...in the long run, you're paying for it so you've got to pull yourself into line 'cos nobody'll do it for you – it is down to you at the end of the day... I suppose you've just come out of school and you're, you've suddenly got responsibility for everything... At home, at home you've got your, well, I imagine a lot of us have got family behind us and they do some of the things like shopping and cleaning and washing [laughs]... don't get me wrong, you wipe that out if you want. It's alright - I'm not saying I'm lazy... but it's a lot to take on at once. I think it depends, as well, who you're sharing with and what they're like – it does have an effect [pause]. Sorry, what was the question again?
Interviewer	54	That's OK, Katy, that's really useful – we were talking about your shaky start. Can I ask a bit more about the actual process of revising or writing an assignment? How do you go about it – preparations, reading and the actual writing.
Katy	57	<p>These days I do like to just sort of get on with it [pause] if I can. You get something like an essay to do and you do... your first thought is...well, I've got loads of time and you do, well for a bit... you procrastinate - my favourite word – but I like to get on with it – you don't know what's round the corner either. I've done that thing where you say to yourself, wey... I've got ages yet, so you put it to the back of your mind ...</p> <p>But yeh, I think I'm pretty independent when it comes to writing assignments – I don't like to rely on anyone. Really, when I know what I've got to do I like to go and do it. I don't like to keep asking for help because that can confuse things...you know.. people tell you different things... we tell each other different things... so, I don't really talk to other people about my work.</p> <p>If I think about it, though, you can't help talking – I say I don't, but... I don't know [pause] to be honest it's useful to work with my housemate [in the same year group, same course] on assignments and we double check each other's work. Really though, it's just for obvious stuff like XXXX is a bit dyslexic – so it's that sort of thing, really – spelling and what not.</p> <p>Sometimes though, if we're doing the same assignment but we're in different tutorial groups we've had different advice from the tutors. By then it's difficult to know who's right and who's wrong. I mean that's when it's better not to talk about it 'cos it only makes things worse... if you disagree or one says one thing and she says the other [pause].</p>

		<p>I do prefer to go off on my own, anyway – especially if it’s an exam. I definitely work better on my own... I know some of my friends revise together... but... but... I like to organise myself... you know what I’m saying?... Like I know what I need to do... or what I want to do... and it might not be the same for the others, the other people you’re working with... I don’t... they might not want to do what I want to do, y’know? [pause] Sorry, I’m not making a lot of sense! What I’m saying is we do help each other... but I know where to draw the line...</p>
Interviewer	79	<p>No, I think you are [making sense] – I can see what you’re saying. You’ve spoken a bit about how you do (or don’t) work with your friends. Can you just add a bit about how you have experienced the support from university for, in, completing your assignments or revision?</p>
Katy	82	<p>Yes, OK. We...get introductions [briefings] for essays and things we have to do. They get put out on Moodle so you can look at them if you need to. I do think, if I’m allowed to say, that some are better than others, though. Some of them you don’t get much to go on and some lecturers won’t give you any more help after that [pause] I can sort of understand, though... ‘cos it’s the same for everyone then [pause]. But, if there’s something you misunderstood you might just have a quick question just to clear it up and some lecturers are great and they answer you straight away and some say ‘no’.</p> <p>Can I say this?...I know some people get an unfair amount of help – I don’t want someone to do it for me or anything like that, but I do need that sort of positive guidance when I’m working ‘cos it makes all the difference. I do know it’s difficult, though... there’s a fine line...err... a fine line between someone doing it for you and doing something on your own. I’d want to think that it was my work at the end of the day [pause].</p> <p>I’ve got to say everybody, I think everybody, does want you to do your best so I know it’s hard for you [i.e. lecturers] to treat everyone the same – but it does need to be fair, I think [pause]. I’d be happy, I think most of us would be happy either way – but once, I think once you start giving help I should think it’s difficult to know who’s had what and all that. Is that OK?</p>
Interviewer	97	<p>That’s good, thanks Katy. I wonder, when you get your work handed back and you get your mark and your feedback – can you tell me a bit more about that experience?</p>
Katy	98	<p>Like I say, I don’t pay much attention to it because I feel that you try to put some of those things into your next assignment and [pause] I don’t think... I mean you try to... but you never know that you got it right because they never tell you. You’ve sort of moved on by then and there’s something else to think about [pause].</p> <p>In any case, it doesn’t say much sometimes and there’s one who you can’t even read – but I think that’s been sorted now. I’ve, when I’ve handed something in I’ve sort of already moved on... on to the next thing ‘cos you’re sort of busy and that’s the past.</p> <p>What I do think is bad is that we don’t get anything back for our exams... well, you can if you ask, but it’s hassle and, like I say, you’ve moved on anyway after a few days so it’s really not worth it at the end of the day [pause] personally, I’d rather not see anyway – if you’ve done alright then you can move on... and, if you haven’t... you’ve still got to move on... because... I don’t think, I don’t think sometimes there’s enough time to be looking back... I like a fresh start... I don’t mean that you shouldn’t learn from mistakes and that but it can be hard to understand</p>

		what the mistakes are and then... if you do [understand] you've got to... got to know what you're gonna do about it.
Interviewer	112	You've mentioned your grades a little bit – could you just talk... tell me a little more about how you respond to your grades, what effect they have on you and how the grading system works for you... and marking criteria and so on?
Katy	115	<p>So, yeh, so at first... trying not to repeat myself... at first I think I knew I was capable of better, a lot better, because of all the stuff I've already said... and now I'm, I think I'm on track and I'm doing alright... I've... I don't, I still don't find it easy – but I think I know what I'm doing and I'm conscious that I, I mean you never know, but I'm on for a first if I keep it up [pause]. I do get a bit frustrated if, y'know, I only get sixty-something [pause] and you can't see why it was any worse than something else you got a first for... were you wanting... did you want me to mention the marking criteria? [pause – no audible response from interviewer].</p> <p>The marking criterias are next to useless because - what is it they say? [long pause] yes, er... what's the difference between a 'thorough understanding' and a 'comprehensive understanding'. It's really a matter of opinion that is, isn't it? It's really subjective – I know they might mean something to you if you're marking the work... you've err... you've got lots of other work to go on as such... and that probably helps... I suppose... I wouldn't normally use the mark sheet... you know that sheet they highlight... to sort of plan my work... I don't think you can do that, really [pause].</p> <p>Anyway, I think I feel confident about my work... definitely confident enough to not really bother with that side of things. I was... err... thinking about this before, actually, there's this thing about having to get a 2:1 or it's a disaster and then they changed the system, I think... last year... Now you can get three sorts of first class mark. My friend gets...err... **** [inaudible, sounds like 'monk' – i.e. is disappointed] if she gets a 70 because some people are getting 80 and 85. I think most of us expect at least a 2:1 [lecturer's name] says that a 2:2 'is the new third' and don't go there sort of, I suppose, the way things are... but that's a bit silly as well... it's not like when you graduate you get, y'know, 'A-Star'... should be happy with a first... I know what she means, though, 'cos it does affect your averages when you work it out – which is another thing 'cos I get different every time – but if you've got 80 that's like 10 more than 70 and it... err... makes a difference at the end of the day.</p>
Interviewer	138	Thanks for that Katy. I wonder if we could just back track there a little? Could you tell me a bit more about reading and using reading for assignments in particular?... Sorry, I don't think we got to that earlier. What's that been like for you?
Katy	141	<p>Oh, sorry, that's me waffling on... Sorry, I do tend to go off the subject... I've never done this before – I did get ready for it... do you mean quotes and things? [inaudible response from interviewer].</p> <p>OK, so I generally tend to use the recommended stuff... unless you can't get it – and quite a lot you can't – but my problem is sorting out what's a good source and what isn't... there's plenty of stuff out there... too much, really and it's, it's... juggling all that that's the problem. No one has told me...I've never got feedback that says I've lost marks 'cos I've used the CLARCS pack [provided course reading]. I know it says you're supposed to use so many original sources that you've found yourself... but... it depends a lot on the module and who the tutor is [pause]. They say stuff [in feedback] like 'do more reading' and, y'know, I think how much do you want me to do, how many hours in a day?</p>

		<p>But, yeh, it definitely pays to know who's marking, I mean I know for a fact that some lecturers don't have a problem with your bibliography at the end but some of them are all over it.</p>
Interviewer	152	Has that been your experience throughout the course?
Katy	153	<p>Mmmm, well... yes, I suppose, for me, you just get a bit blasé about things after a while – it's inevitable, really'. At first, like I say, it's all exciting, then it's commonplace sort of, I think you don't cotton on how much you've changed – I mean, thinking about it for this [interview] I was looking back and it's like now when you go past the Blue Room [i.e. exam room] and there's first years queuing up stressing about their exam you think – been there, done that, get over it like... worn the t-shirt.</p> <p>The people I'm [living] with are really conscientious... I think that helps because they pull me back into line. So they'll... we'll read each other's work, I know you've got to be careful, but we look out for each other like that. I think, as well, that... well like I say, it's alright for us like we've got the same attitude, really, so that really helps when you've got to knuckle down. I'm not a bad influence but I think if I didn't have the other two there I might be a bit more flaky than I am already. We don't, it doesn't mean we all peak at the same time, sometimes you're struggling and they're, they seem OK and... but it's the other way round as well to be honest. I'm buzzin' and they're like, can't be bothered, can I be bothered? and that. It's like you definitely need to be in the zone. If you're not it's hard slog – but it's nearly over and looking back again it's not, I mean it's not that bad. End of the day and I know we're not talking about it, but it's my teaching that matters – that's what I concentrate on...</p>
Interviewer	168	Thanks for that, Katy. Well, it looks like we're just about out of time, really – and I know you've got things you need to do. Is there anything more you'd thought about or wanted to tell me that you've not had chance to?
Katy	171	Erm... no, I don't think so... thanks, thanks a lot.
Interviewer	172	Well, I'll call the meeting to a close, I'll switch off and say thanks very much for your help and contribution to this – they're much appreciated. Thanks again.

Appendix 8: Initial noting and emerging themes: example extract from ‘Katy’ interview

Possible themes emerging	Transcript Extracts (from line 47)	Exploratory Comments
<p>Getting started?</p> <p>Mis-communication?</p> <p>Theme emerging about individuals and original work/plagiarism etc?</p> <p>Clarity of communication again?</p>	<p>These days I do like to just sort of get on with it [pause] if I can. You get something like an essay to do and you do... your first thought is...well, I've got loads of time and you do, well for a bit... you procrastinate - my favourite word – but I like to get on with it – you don't know what's round the corner either. (line 47+)</p> <p>But yeh, I think I'm pretty independent when it comes to writing assignments – I don't like to rely on anyone. Really, when I know what I've got to do I like to go and do it. I don't like to keep asking for help because that can confuse things...you know.. people tell you different things... we tell each other different things... so, I don't really talk to other people about my work. (line 50+)</p> <p>If I think about it, though, you can't help talking – I say I don't, but... I don't know [pause] to be honest it's useful to work with my housemate [in the same year group, same course] on assignments and we double check each other's work. Really though, it's just for obvious stuff like XXXX is a bit dyslexic – so it's that sort of thing, really – spelling and what not. (line 54+)</p> <p>Sometimes though, if we're doing the same assignment but we're in different tutorial groups we've had different advice from the tutors. By then it's difficult to know who's right and who's wrong. I mean that's when it's better not to talk about it 'cos it only makes things worse... if you disagree or one says one thing and she says the other [pause].</p> <p>I do prefer to go off on my own, anyway – especially if it's an exam. I definitely work better on my own... I know some of my friends revise together... but... but... I like to organise myself... you know what I'm saying?... Like I know what I</p>	<p>Time-management – Katy has got better at it? 'Round the corner' interesting comment – from experience?</p> <p>Problems with relying on other people? – or just a pragmatic & efficient approach? Gets confused by mixed messages.</p> <p>Contradicts herself? Perhaps just proof-reading? Almost guilty feeling coming across from some of them – it's like they think communicating with each other is cheating.</p> <p>Sounds exasperated here – or frustrated, at least.</p>

	<p>need to do... or what I want to do... and it might not be the same for the others, the other people you're working with... I don't... they might not want to do what I want to do, y'know? [pause] Sorry, I'm not making a lot of sense! What I'm saying is we do help each other... but I know where to draw the line...</p>	<p>Goes back to her original point about liking to do things on her own. I identify with this – perhaps they shouldn't all do the same assignment. Saying it's better not to talk is a blow for dialogue!</p> <p>Interesting perplexity – drawing the line etc. She's obviously struggling, like I do – you develop one line of thinking and other people only mess it up with different approaches and ideas – then your own, clear (to you) thinking, becomes confused rather than clarified.</p>
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Appendix 9: Copy of reflections on the 'Katy' interview.

[As this was the first interview] This might be a difficult process to get the 'right' data from if that's the right word. Listening back, Katy does describe the experience – but slips in and out of the Cartesian 'I think-ness' K [supervisor at the time] keeps accusing me of.

[Here I refer to 'Phenomenology of Practice by Max von Manen] 'Personal views, interpretations and reflections' are in danger of taking over from 'experiential detail' as I lead her away from the particular towards the general quite often – and not the other way around. This I will be more aware of during the next and subsequent interviews.

Having said that there is good evidence of the 'what' and the 'how'. It will be interesting to see if early recollections of a 'false sense of security' due to relatively easy first assignments becomes a common theme.

There is also a good sense of personal responsibility coming across in what she says. Again, will this be a commonality? I have tended to dismiss this quality as being non-existent in today's fee-paying students: need to possibly reconfigure my ideas - or certainly be more alert to this quality in individuals.

My experience [as a student] of never being aware that marking criteria existed seems to be just as problematic as Katy's experience of it as [being] 'useless' I think she says. There is still, it seems, a lack of transparency even when we are all supposedly at pains to make things transparent. This chimes well with the connoisseurship stuff.

Next time: Focus the interviewee on the specifics of 'what' and 'how' as opposed to the general 'areas' upon which I would like them to comment.

APPENDIX 10: Illustration of analysis process

1. Reading & re-reading...	2. Example extracts from Initial noting/developing emergent themes (descriptive, linguistic, conceptual comments)	3. Connections across themes (exemplar individual super-ordinate themes)	4. Master/super-ordinate theme 1 for group (representing commonalities across cases)
...of transcript – Appendix 6 has quotes used highlighted	done by hand highlighting/annotating an A4 transcript pasted onto landscape A3: Appendix 7 is a typed up version	grouping of margin notes into possible common themes – looking at A3 annotations	relevant transcript extracts contributing to each theme printed, cut and pasted & annotated ready for write-up – see exemplar
Holly	Link between assessment and module – where to start? (decision making/confidence?) ‘Knocked-back’ – no confidence in finished product ‘same for everybody’ consistency in communication/feedback all in the same boat – therefore playing field level frustrated by mixed messages: ‘back to square one’	confidence feedback/communication support	Confidence in Communication a) Decisions b) Feedback/criteria c) Tutor support
Ellie	Contradictory advice/ feedback – ‘tutors go mad’ ‘leaning-on’ learning Hub for support? Asking for ‘pre-marking?’ Confusion over feedback contradictions Use of hub for proof-reading rather than structure/organization Unclear about nature of support (as are tutors?)	Feedback concerns Confidence in support Use of support systems	
Tom	Focus on technicalities – how to decide what to do Feedback – crap Markers – realizes there’s a difference Best mark: night before Like throwing a dice (confidence again?) Communication/support consistency – fairness/equality	confidence in own decisions feedback /communication concerns support	
Amelia	Support to stay on track needed Reading lists/sources/ independence/confidence	confidence/independence feedback	

	Consistency of support/contradictory advice– searching for dialogue Reading decisions lack confidence: ‘need reassurance’ ‘don’t know where to start’	support consistency	
Sarah	Confusion about how to express ‘own opinion’ No second chances – high stakes nature of assessment – needs a structure: ‘you don’t know where to start’ In the lap of the gods – helplessness/outside her control? Effect of the rumour mill – being swayed too heavily by external factors?	Confidence Helplessness (or lack of independence?)	
Katy	Marking criteria useless (tacit knowledge) Expectations & absurdity of marking/grading (‘3 sorts of first’) Confusion over use of recommended reading – miscommunication issue? Avoids communication to avoid further confusion! (feedback loop is not closed) Reinforced the above – who’s right, who’s wrong?	Communication/feedback	
Lucy	Written criteria of limited use Contradictory advice from different sources	Use of criteria/support	
Oliver	Doesn’t bother with feedback – mark is what matters Instrumental approach Needs to be given a structure/skeleton – doesn’t see this as his job? ‘Bouncing ideas’ – looking for dialogue? ...but – needs a WAGOLL to work to (is this contradictory?)	Confidence in decision making	

Process in brief:

- a) Interviews transcribed
- b) transcripts pasted onto A3 and did initial noting/ possible themes for individuals around margins (column 2)
- c) Looked for connections across those themes (for individuals: column 3) - to construct individual super-ordinate themes
- d) Looked for commonalities across cases (super-ordinate themes for group: column 4)

Appendix 11: Master table of Super-ordinate themes for group

Theme 1: Confidence in Communication	Line
a) Confidence to make decisions	
<i>Amelia: Sometimes you just want reassurance</i>	
<i>Holly: I was knocked back</i>	17
<i>Sarah: You tell us our own opinion is important, but...</i>	26
<i>Tom: ...it's difficult to know, as in decide</i>	159
<i>Sarah: I need a structure to work to</i>	46
<i>Sarah: you're in the lap of the gods</i>	18
	37
b) Value of feedback & marking criteria	
<i>Oliver: I generally don't bother with feedback</i>	115
<i>Tom: don't ask questions about it</i>	89
<i>Tom: it makes a big difference who's marking</i>	95
<i>Tom: The feedback we get is crap</i>	112
<i>Lucy: I've tried to use the marking criteria but [don't think you can]</i>	45
<i>Katy: The marking criterias are next to useless</i>	122
<i>Katy: there are three sorts of first class mark</i>	130
<i>Oliver: there is a lot of reading given to us – but you... try to keep away from those things because you lose marks</i>	55
<i>Amelia: it's difficult to know what you're [ie tutors] looking for</i>	
<i>Sarah: you don't know where to start</i>	37
<i>Katy: generally tend to use the recommended stuff</i>	43
<i>Ellie: You get feedback which seems to contradict what you were told</i>	143
<i>Katy: I don't like to keep asking for help because that can confuse things</i>	71
<i>Katy: I don't pay much attention [to feedback]</i>	63
<i>Oliver: I know you can't do anything about it [apparent inconsistency in marking]</i>	98
<i>Holly: I know it's the same for everybody</i>	60
<i>Tom: I got the best mark for something I did the night before</i>	40
	117
c) Differences in support	
<i>Oliver: The best lecturers... give you a plan of what to write</i>	15
<i>Amelia: You help us in different [inconsistent] ways</i>	123
<i>Ellie: I've used the Learning Hub in the past</i>	12
<i>Lucy: They seem to say different things</i>	25
<i>Lucy: You hear different things from different tutors</i>	32
<i>Ellie Some tutors go mad if you ask them [to look through work]</i>	37
<i>Tom: I don't mind but they just need to be consistent</i>	101
<i>Amelia: it would be nice to have someone available to put me back on track</i>	40
<i>Katy: we've had different advice from the tutors</i>	71
<i>Oliver: I prefer to have someone to bounce ideas of</i>	66
<i>Holly: I think I understand and then you ask somebody else and it's back to square one</i>	59

<i>Oliver: The tutors have wildly different ideas about how to go about things</i>	72
Theme 2: Assessment as an end-in-itself	
a) The instrumental turn	
<i>Holly: but then you've got to learn Harvard</i>	11
<i>Holly: I suppose I want to be told what goes where</i>	32
<i>Lucy: you have to fit your assignments around [everything else]</i>	7
<i>Oliver: it's not long before you're playing the system</i>	131
<i>Tom: it's a bit like joining the dots</i>	91
<i>Katy you don't realise how complicated it all is</i>	30
<i>Oliver: all the commas, full stops and brackets do my head in</i>	77
<i>Tom: they don't tell you what journals [to use]</i>	52
<i>Tom: some lecturers don't have a problem with your bibliography</i>	151
b) A necessary evil	
<i>Katy: you're stuck with what [degree] you get</i>	34
<i>Lucy: assessment is a necessary evil</i>	13
<i>Holly: I have to make myself do things</i>	10
<i>Tom: I do enough to pass</i>	120
<i>Oliver: a struggle to do stuff you can't be bothered to do</i>	113
<i>Oliver: head down and just do it</i>	117
<i>Sarah: I can think of a million things better to do</i>	4
<i>Lucy: you say: 'what's the point?'</i>	75
<i>Lucy: it depends on your state of mind</i>	98
<i>Amelia: something you have to do on your own</i>	43
<i>Tom: it's pretty pointless</i>	119
c) Assessment is not necessarily learning	
<i>Oliver: exams and essays aren't a good reflection of what you can do</i>	90
<i>Oliver: I'm learning most in school</i>	92
<i>Sarah: You don't always do your best in that situation</i>	25
<i>Holly: exams only test our short term knowledge</i>	77
<i>Amelia: I do better in exams</i>	54
<i>Holly: it would be better if teaching practice counted towards our degree</i>	99
<i>Sarah no one[employers] cares what degree you get</i>	77
<i>Oliver: some... things on the course seem a little pointless</i>	56
<i>Ellie: I don't think anything I've written I would use again</i>	57
<i>Amelia: even if what you've been learning about is not relevant...</i>	47
<i>Amelia: it's the way you go about them</i>	14
Theme 3: Changing priorities	
a) Enthusiasm wanes	
<i>Katy: that all went out of the window in intro week</i>	14
<i>Amelia: I joined up with things</i>	7
<i>Holly: It's important for me to do other stuff</i>	136

<i>Oliver: I went absolutely bonkers</i>	9
<i>Amelia: you have to be really disciplined</i>	110
<i>Ellie: I felt confident at the beginning</i>	4
<i>Tom: you get your first scratch and after that you don't care so much</i>	144
<i>Katy: been there, done that</i>	157
<i>Katy: you just get blasé</i>	153
<i>Tom: [a] bollocking might have been better</i>	73
<i>Katy: you do a lot of growing up</i>	44
<i>Lucy: you put it off and you put it off</i>	87
<i>Katy: they pull me back into line</i>	159
b) Relationships & Events	
<i>Amelia: it's important to get on with the tutor</i>	4
<i>Katy: I know some people get an unfair amount of help</i>	88
<i>Oliver: Some tutors are really soft</i>	100
<i>Oliver: it's good to have someone... who's firm</i>	116
<i>Oliver: when the shit hits the fan... you know that they're there 24/7</i>	141
<i>Sarah: everyone was so nice</i>	15
<i>Holly: you get a cold or you've had a row</i>	124
<i>Holly: making tea, putting the washing on</i>	63
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<i>Tom: the fire-alarm went off</i>	23
<i>Lucy: I did have a big bust up last year</i>	130
<i>Katy: you definitely need to be in the zone</i>	164

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25 July 2017

Dear John

Re: : Professional Doctorate Ethical Approval Confirmation

Thank you for submitting an ethical approval application.

I am pleased to confirm that your ethics application has been approved.

Student's Name	John Parramore
Supervisor's Name	Andrew Clapham/Helen Boulton
NTU ID	N0215282
Course	EdD – Doctor of Education
Date Notification sent to student	14 August 2014

Should you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me either by telephone on +44 (0) 115 848 8154 or email ntuprofdadmin@ntu.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely



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