# Trowler: Introduction

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This special number arises from the Higher Education Close Up 3 conference, held at Lancaster University in July 2006. The selection of papers for this journal was based on the organisers’ desire to present for a wider audience findings from research into teaching learning and assessment in higher education based on fine-grained data collection techniques and drawing broadly on socio-cultural theory. The organisers also wanted to present research from around the world: hence the choice of the International Journal of Educational Research. The conference attracted delegates from every continent and many countries, and the selection of papers here reflects that diversity.

The papers in this number present “fine-grained” research in the sense that they draw on data collected and analysed in a way which reveals a detailed picture of a small area rather than presenting information which is more superficial, less nuanced, but is drawn from a wider social field. The contrast here is between, for example, in-depth interviews with a small sample of respondents analysed in great detail one of the one hand, and survey research from a much larger number of respondents on the other.

Of course, there is no reason why both approaches cannot be taken within the same study. Moreover, to contrast the two approaches is not to say that one is better than another: research design and methods need to be appropriate to research questions being asked. Although the precise questions being asked are different in each of the papers here, all of them are investigating, in one way or another, a socio-cultural understanding of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. This area of study is most appropriately undertaken taking a close-up approach.

But what *is* a socio-cultural understanding? The term is used here to suggest the following:

* that social interaction leads to some extent to the social construction of reality: in other words that in interacting together people construct their worlds
* that in doing so they develop sets of meanings, understandings, values, attitudes and practices which are to some extent unique to their social situation
* that the interaction with objects (artefacts or tools) is also socially mediated: the objects themselves may influence the nature of social reality in significant ways, while their use is at the same time socially conditioned
* that discourse both expresses social realities and operates to constrain and delimit them: discourse and the construction of reality work side-by-side, mirroring the operation of structure and agency in social interaction
* that individual identity, or subjectivity, is likewise mediated and conditioned by social context
* that historical background, or at least narratives about the past constructed by participants, have very significant influences on social life in the present
* therefore that social context is a very significant dimension of values and practices.
* so, any attempt to generalise across social contexts is fraught with danger. Social research into phenomena related to social interaction must take contextual contingency into account.

In their own way, then, each of the papers in the special number tackles issues around teaching, learning and assessment from this perspective. The first paper, from Paul Ashwin, is a theoretical discussion of the ways in which structure on the one hand and agency on the other have been conceptualise in studies of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. Ashwin’s view is that inadequate attention has been given to this issue and so naïve assumptions are often found in studies in this area. He comments on the papers which follow and the ways in which structure and agency are situated in them.

The second paper, from Shay, examines the judgement-making process that examiners undergo. Building on her earlier work (Shay, 2004) she situates assessment practices within a socio-cultural framework. In this paper she explores the ways in which the tension between the ideology of “excellence” and that of “equity” creates real challenges for academics in the South African environment.

Lindberg-Sand and Olsson’s paper, the third in this special number, also examines tensions in the assessment process; this time between the social realities of teaching and learning processes on the one hand and the rules and procedures associated with assessment in the context of research on the other. The authors explore the nature and consequences of this tension for both university teachers and their students.

The fourth paper, from Knight, Yorke and colleagues, builds on Shay’s paper and argues the significance of contextual contingency in assessment practices and considers the implications of this for the “warranting” function of assessment: the statements about achievement that I used for selection and other functions and which are (wrongly) presumed to have value because of their transferable status as objective statements of achievement.

In paper 5, from Tummons, the ground is example is given of how assessment practices are conditioned by social context, in this case a part-time teacher training course for teachers in post-compulsory education and training. Tummons draws on academic literacy theories in order to show the significance of communities of practice in this area.

Paper 6, from Fanghanel, broadens the focus from assessment to teaching practices more generally. Fanghanel examines the various dimensions of “context” and, using the concept of “filters”, shows how these impinge on pedagogical constructs.she picks up the theme of structure and agency introduced in the first paper and shows how both are significant in the processes she explores. Finally Fanghanel considers the implications of her findings for educational development professionals.

The final two papers in this number both adopt an approach rooted in discourse analysis and academic literacy research. Chrissie Boughey explores the culturally-located character of discourse in a university environment in South Africa, both inside and outside the classroom. She shows the significance of history and background for practices which can lead to success and failure in environments where particular discursive expectations predominate. The ‘culturally-laden social space’ of the university predisposes some for failure and others for success before even one lecture is given.

The last paper, from Case and Marshall, is also rooted in the South African environment. These authors explore the different discourse models drawn on by students to make sense of their learning and to situate themselves as people within that task. Case and Marshall highlight the significance of focussing on the interaction between discourse and identity, rather than on simply the cognitive processes which they engage in during learning episodes.

**Reference**

Shay, S. B. (2004) The assessment of complex performance: a socially-situated interpretive act. Harvard Educational Review, 74, 3, 307-329.