Critique and Care in Higher Education Assessment: From Binary Opposition to Möbius Congruity

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Abstract

Using a poststructuralist lens, this paper interrogates, theoretically, the battle between two discourses of assessment in higher education namely, care and critique, a context generated binary structure. This apparent incongruity emerged as students considered critique they received from me as uncaring, and I interpreted their responses as a lack of care for intellectual growth. In this paper, using discourse analysis strategies, I unravel the emergent discourses by drawing on Žižek's rearticulated notions of the Lacanian Real. Superficially, it appears that critique and care are oppositional stances, but a deeper interrogation reveals the hidden aspects of care in critique and critique in care, and demonstrates that language constructs differences and masks the nature of reality of a singular phenomenon and, more specifically, its paradoxical nature. I argue that a Cartesian plane masks the inherent violence and beneficence of both critique and care and is inappropriate in capturing the fiction of difference. Hence, a metaphor, based on the special characteristics of a Möbius strip is deployed to represent the complex reality of discourses of care and critique.

Keywords: Higher education, assessment, discourse analysis, critique, care

Introduction

As a teacher in a higher education setting, teaching at Master's level can be both intellectually exhilarating and inhibiting. Unlike work with youngsters in school, postgraduate students are often mature, learned, and competent,

and they can and do question teaching practices, challenge explanations, and dispute assessment of oral and written outputs. Disputes about assessment in particular have the potential to erupt and to rupture relationships between teacher and student in unanticipated ways. The contestation around assessment is not unexpected as it is a record of learning and has serious implications that can impede a student's success. This means that when a dispute is not resolved because the explanations for a grade are unconvincing, or the criteria are spurned, or the assessor's ethics are viewed with suspicion, then there is potential for antagonisms to arise. In this paper, I reflect on an antagonistic occurrence concerning assessment and how I tried to make theoretical sense of it.

The occurrence concerns students' reactions to the assessment of the first assignment submitted for a research module. Students linked the critique of the assignment to a lack of care whilst I, the assessor, linked critique to intellectualism. The dissatisfaction set up care and critique as an oppositional binary, not in the way that is usually understood, for example, as pure and impure or male and female; rather it is a context-generated binary structure, or as MacLure (2003:10) might describe it, an 'unfair pair'. In this paper, I interrogate the discursive realities of the responses to assessment from a poststructural perspective.

The particular poststructural perspective shaping arguments in this paper has been described as 'a thorough disruption of our secure sense of meaning and reference in language' (Williams 2005) and regards meaning making as an elusive, impermanent endeavour, circumscribed by language with a 'floating surplus of meaning and undecidability' (Andersen 2003:51). To describe it differently, words are not eccentric or concentric meaning holders. Meaning is dispersed radially or along a range of perspectives, contexts, and contingencies. Clarity of communication is assumed by senders rather than realised by recipients. Consequently, a poststructural approach searches for and identifies surplus ascriptions of meaning with the intentions to disrupt and disturb the ways in which language constructs and structures reality. In this instance, the agenda is to destabilise the taken for granted positive values imputed to the language of care and the language of critique with respect to assessment in a higher education environment.

Premised on the idea that language is insufficient to convey unambiguous meaning or to capture reality, I argue that reality is experienced

in multiple, contested, diverse and partial ways by individuals and, furthermore, sets up a terrain for a discursive combat to destabilise the meaning ascribed to care and critique. The struggle to fix meaning to discourses of care is contested and destabilised by discourses of critique, and *vice versa,* and following the discourse analysis strategies of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Žižek (2002), I propose that language, which gave the semblance of critique and care as a binary, masked their oneness and added a level of complexity to my relationship with students. Consequently, this paper uses the dissatisfaction voiced by students to provide deep insights into the thinking of an assessor. What follows then are not descriptions and explanations of what assessment is, what kinds of assessments were deployed, how assessment was practiced or how content was related to assessment. Instead, it theorises the initial reactions to assessment by five students as a nodal point of constitutive discourse. There is no data for this paper. The event is deployed here as an opportunity to theorise the nature of expressed realities from diametrical positions of a teaching and learning relationship. Thus it is an analysis of moments that are transitory, ephemeral and ambiguous.

The importance of pursuing theoretical explanations is linked to a dearth in the literature about conflict and contestation between assessors and students. Though there is recognition that assessment has both cognitive (Bloom & Krathwohl 1956) and affective (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia 1964) components, the bringing together of the two for discourse analysis is uncommon. That is not to say that conflict with regard to assessment is not researched, rather it is the propensity for resolution and reducing dissatisfaction (Sharpe, Reiser & Chase 2010; Smith 2009) and for problem solving approaches (Kramer 2009) without examining the nature of reality portrayed by conflict that distinguishes the offering here as well as the contribution it proffers to scholarship in the field of higher education assessment. More common in the literature are studies about student perceptions of assessment (Fernandes, Flores & Lima 2010), feedback (Hendry, Bromberger & Armstrong 2011) and refining of assessment tools (Hessler & Taggart 2011; Sharpe, Reiser & Chase 2010). There are also studies that indicate that assessment is connected to gender (Murphy 1991; 2000), and though the conflict theorised in this paper involves female students and a female assessor, this line of theorisation is not pursued. The

explanation, I believe, extends beyond gender. What this paper offers through the reflections of an assessor is a description of the nature of the conflict from multiple perspectives, the discourse analysis thereof and discussion beyond practice, policy and psychology of assessment in higher education.

Background and Context of the Care and Critique Binary

The students who took the module Discourses in Educational Research comprised seventy-six, including many successful professionals, holding positions of authority, leadership and status in education or allied fields. One can assume that they are outstanding learners as the criteria for admission to the degree requires evidence of prior learning accomplishments.

I have been teaching the module for five years and have been co-teaching it with a male professor for the past two years. We regard this module as the most challenging of the three research modules we co-teach. Students were alerted to academic writing requirements and the challenges of mastering research discourses during the early stages of the module as well as the multiple opportunities to resubmit tasks to improve their grades. The ability to critique published works and discussions in class were a key outcome of the module, which explains the reason it emerged as one component of the care and critique binary.

Students were required to complete a compulsory assignment. The task required an essay-type answer demonstrating an ability to craft an argument substantiated by evidence from practice and published scholarly work. Assignments were assessed by both teachers and returned with written comments and marks. Approximately half the class received an assessment below fifty percent, meaning they failed to satisfy the performance criteria. Five students consulted me individually to discuss the comments made on their scripts. This was followed by phone calls and a barrage of emails accusing me of ‘not caring’, which became the second component of the care and critique binary.

In summary, the content of all communications from the five students made reference to their previous successes both in studies and in their professional capacities. They held me accountable for the low assessment and ignored both the written critique of the task and discussions

thereof. The responses were discussed in class without revealing the exact words or who the complainants were with the aim of demonstrating how a teaching and learning incident can be theorised. Many expressed surprise, in particular, at my stance to intellectualise the discussion and my intentions to present an analysis at a conference, further evidence, perhaps, of my uncaring attitude.

Though my colleague and I assessed the assignment with remarkably similar statistics of a fifty percent failure of scripts assessed, none of his 'failures'[1] complained to him about the grade they received. One explanation is that I was the primary teacher of the sections that comprised the foci for the first assignment. I was also the person who provided feedback on the assessment. With regard to gender, all five complainants were female. The literature indicates that assessment is gendered and perhaps there is greater expectation for leniency and caring from female teachers (Murphy 1991). Choosing not to rely on Murphy's explanation, I considered instead, the possibility that this group of students represented a wider dissatisfaction with grades received which, perhaps, were not articulated for various reasons. There are many reasons for students' silences, for example, lack of agency, asymmetrical relations of power, cultural differences, acceptance of the authority of lecturers, or fear of reprisals. It seemed unfair, therefore, to base an analysis on the most obvious category and inspired a search for explanations that transcended gender. My suspicion of widespread dissatisfaction was substantiated by the attendance of many students at two presentations at conferences[2] where I presented early versions of this paper. I invited them to use the opportunity to critique my reflections. Their critique of my biases was used substantially to refine this paper.

For a while anger, prevented the five students from exercising the option to rework the task and to resubmit it for assessment. Eventually, they did rework the task and 'passed' the assignment and the damaged

[1] The notion of failure is used guardedly and I acknowledge its contested nature, which is not possible to discuss in depth within the scope of this paper.

[2] The first presentation was delivered at UKZN's Fourth Annual Teaching and Learning Conference. The second presentation was made at The Faculty of Education's Annual Research Day.

relationships were harmonised. In this paper I focus only on the initial responses through Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse analysis strategies and Žižek's (2002) conceptions of the Real. In the next section I provide an outline of discourse analysis and the Real.

Discourse Analysis and the Real

The discourse analysis strategies deployed in this paper have been influenced by the oeuvres of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Žižek (2002). These were chosen in the first instance for meta-analytical and theorisation possibilities and, in the second instance, because their approaches to discourse analysis is anti-essentialist, discursive, disavowing of determinism and draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis and critical Marxist traditions (Andersen 2003; Phillips & Jørgensen 2006). Coherence is therefore conceivable. Furthermore, Phillips and Jørgensen (2006) regard the combining of components from a variety of different discourse analysis perspectives as appropriate. They argue thus:

> *(M)ultiperspectival* work is not only permissible but positively valued in most forms of discourse analysis. The view is that different perspectives provide different forms of knowledge about a phenomenon so that, together, they produce a broader understanding (Phillips & Jørgensen 2006:4 italics in original).

A detailed discussion of discourse and the Real is beyond the scope of the paper. Below, I explain the elements deployed for analytical purposes.

Discourse and the Real

The Real and discourse are interconnected through associations and mediations of language. Discourse is an effect of language and plays a key role in the generation of illusions because the language that is available is inadequate to articulate reality accurately. Indeed, ways of talking 'do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations, but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them' (Phillips & Jørgensen 2006:1).

Creating reality can be interpreted to mean that talking is more than communication or expression, it is a 'constitutive force' (MacLure 2003:4). There are, however, power differentials that arise, resulting in a struggle to establish a hegemonic reality, which are supported by subject positions. The subject position, for example, of an expert tips the balance in her favour to hegemonise meaning. Changing reality, it seems, is possible '*(o)nly by achieving a revolution in language'* (Williams 2005:134 italics in original).
Discourse then is closely linked to the notion of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notion of hegemony, though influenced by Gramsci (1977), digresses at the level of operation. Their aim is to uncover hegemonic relations at the level of systems rather than individuals. Hence the idea is not to demonstrate that the students or tutor exercises hegemony. Instead through strategic analysis, 'the general hegemonic relationships in society, and conditions for the transformation of hegemony' (Andersen 2003:55) is revealed.

Discourse is also connected to Žižek's notion of the Real, appropriated from Lacan (1981), positing that defining reality, meaning or intention is not possible as language, which as an order of symbols, is a confounding medium (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000). From this perspective, communication changes reality, meaning and intention, and creates a schism between the reality of thought and the reality conveyed by speech. Žižek's notion of the Real is best captured in this description:

> In the endless complexity of the contemporary world, where things, more often than not, appear as their opposites – intolerance as tolerance, religion as natural common sense, and so on ... (Žižek 2009:1).

His standpoint is that there are limitations to accessing the Real. To substantiate the claim of inaccessibility, Žižek (2002) deploys two conceptions of the Real, namely, the Desert of the Real and the Passion of the Real. The former refers to lack and emptiness that is not so easily discernible in the use of terms and concepts. In his words,

> On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat,

> beer without alcohol .... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare (Žižek 2002:11).

The result is fuzziness, and the use of false terms that obfuscate thinking. What meanings do terms convey and what meanings are not conveyed? And what explains the substitution of the actual with its appearance? And how is it that appearance is not detected for its falseness? One explanation may be that terms are empty signifiers (Laclau 2000) deprived of their accompanying meanings such that anyone can attach their own, resulting in a battle for hegemony. This 'absent fullness' (Laclau 2000:192) arises from the Real, which, as has been explained, is impossible to define through the medium of language.

In combination with the Desert of the Real, the Passion of the Real, which Žižek appropriates, with a twist, from Badiou (Žižek 2002), is the desire and eagerness expressed by individuals to know 'real' reality. The twist is the subversion of desire as a false desire. For Žižek, the desire is an illusion, masking fears and avoidance:

> The problem with the twentieth-century 'passion of the Real' was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real* (Žižek 2002:24) (italics in original).

So, how are discourses of care and critique understood within the context of antagonistic stances of assessment? In this section I argue that both these concepts have essentialised meanings garnered through disciplinary power, namely, care in psychology and critique in philosophy. The conscription of these terms by disciplines reflects their hegemonised status and it is their hegemonic status that I challenge, and their meanings that I disrupt.

Care and the Critique of Care

The imbrications of care in education have a long history, having been

extolled as a necessary and desirable value (see e.g. Branden 1994; Maslow 1954; Noddings 1984; 1992; Purkey & Novak 1984; 1988). Specifically, psychological theories attest to the pivotal need of caring for those we teach. Humanist theorist Maslow (1954), who developed the hierarchy of needs, argued that all persons have needs, and that human needs are not homogeneous as there are crucial basics that are peculiar to each person for the attainment of self-actualisation. From Maslow's perspective (1954), four categories of needs have to be met for self-actualisation, namely, physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem. Self-actualisation is exemplified by personal growth and free will. For example, a strong concept of self can only be attended to after basics like nutrition, safety and security are met. Thus self-esteem and confidence are results of feelings of belonging and love. Based on the responses of the students I taught, one can infer that they needed the experience of care to engage critique.

Caring experiences are also supported by the work of Noddings (see e.g. 1984; 1992). She asserts that the role of caring is vital in education. Noddings' donation of the concepts of engrossment, motivational displacement and receptiveness (1984), has influenced educational practice and emphasised caring as the basis for education with special sensitivity for the feelings of those we teach. In general there is consensus that good teaching is exemplified by caring. The negation of caring, by implication is undesirable in teaching situations.

At face value, and from a dissenting perspective, the tyranny of care of the majority as experienced by the assessor appears impossible to counter. Confiscated[3] by psychology, packaged and presented as a human value and conscripted to service education, what critique can be lodged against care? Let me attempt an explanation.

Many of the theories of caring were developed for children and

[3] The notion of confiscating a concept, to hold it hostage for a particular interpretation is appropriated from Schmitt's (1996) deployment thereof. He explains the effects of confiscation apropos the example of humanity thus, 'To confiscate the word humanity, to invoke and monopolize such a term probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be the outlaw of humanity' (1996:54).

youth attending schools. Its universalisation and extension to higher education may appear logical, but a closer look reveals paradoxes. One must ask how it is possible that students taking a masters class are not at Maslow's (1954) level of self-actualisation. Is self-actualisation always deferred, never attainable because of a never-ending reliance on others? Perhaps it points to self-actualisation as being context-dependent; implying that a positive sense of self is not transferrable from one context to another. Furthermore, as the humanistic approach is subjective in nature, there is no control over how individuals choose to experience the care that is offered. Additionally, the students taking masters level study are themselves teachers who have to care for children and should, one assumes, understand the tensions of an assessor's role. So what explains their demand for caring? It appears that the subject position of learner is resurrected and that of teacher is sublimated. Or that caring is symbolic and symptomatic of a communication meant for the assessor not captured by discourses available to students. In that case caring comprises surplus meanings outside its everyday use.

However, the issue of subject positioning is more complicated from Atherton's (2010) perspective. Atherton draws attention to a three-way relationship comprising teacher, subject (discipline/content) and learner, and how the dominance of one of the three changes depending on the approach, which should, by implication, not lead to regression to child-subjection positions. Atherton's model looks at three conceptions of dominance and the teacher-learner-subject triad. First, the traditional, cognitive approach is dominated by disciplinary content which is interpreted by the teacher for the learner. Second, in the apprenticeship approach, the teacher is a dominant influence selecting and choosing content and skills to be acquired by the learner. Finally, teaching advanced learners, as in the case at hand, requires a dominance of the learner and the subject with the teacher guiding the learning process. Thus, the relationship between student and discipline is stronger at this level and of far less consequence than is the relationship between teacher and student. This is not to say that caring is devalued in higher education. It may just be as Attwood reports, that higher education is not characterised by 'sheer carelessness' (2010) or as O'Brien (2010) posits, that university teachers care but are seldom able to communicate caring effectively.

Much has been made of a caring relationship in the literature as if

there are only two individuals in this relationship. Perhaps this is the influence of family psychology and the appropriation of the parent-child as a metaphor to frame the bond between teacher and student. Should the same metaphor apply in a higher education setting, particularly when assessing learning competence and trap mature, adult students in a child-subject position in need of love? It may be prudent at this juncture to question the assumptions governing teacher-student relationships.

Suppose that this relationship in the first instance is between ideas, not people. That is to say that the assessment of the task is not an appraisal of the person, but of the ideas they present. Secondly, all tasks are externally moderated which means that the invisible presence of another is part of the relationship, albeit as a surveillance measure to assess the assessor. In effect, this means that there is a double surveillance, by students and moderator and a double assessment, of student and assessor. Thirdly, the relationship is simultaneously (a) comparative and developmental as students compare their assessment with peers, and, it is assumed, learn and develop; (b) public and personal as everyone is aware of everyone else's performance and of their own and, (c) surveilled and self-reflective. The relationship of care, from this perspective, appears to be far more complex than the literature suggests. The complexity arises from gaps created by theorising care in education as a decontextualised, ahistorical and universal value. It is not a straightforward relationship between persons only, and more importantly, it makes apparent that caring has to be broader to include a caring for thinking, not just narrowed to human emotionality.

One can conclude that the demand for care masks the violence within, a violence marked by an eternal need and dependence on externals, a need that cannot be satisfied. Care then comes across as a tyranny, with a hegemony framed by emotional discourse and a marginalisation of, and an uncaring for, the discourse of the intellect. These claims can only be made if one accepts that the discussion to this point is clear and unambiguous. There are, however, indications that the demand for care is discursive, multiple and complex. The result is fuzziness around the meaning of care, and a disruption of its identity.

Care of and Critique of Critique

The notion of critique deployed in this context is drawn from the

philosopher, Immanuel Kant and the theorist, Michel Foucault. Kant sees critique as a form of critical inquiry into conditions with the aim to

> discover the source of this condition and expose the condition of its possibility and at the same time to clear and level a foundation for the scientific edifice (Kant 1999:12).

Kant's approach exposes the limits of ideas, weak arguments, lack of evidence and unsubstantiated claims. Kant considers it vital that the gaze of the critique is not so much on what is, as much as 'what ought to be' (1999:12). In other words, the ideas students presented in the assignments were intended to open up thinking to differences, possibilities, scrutinising assumptions and doxa, and moreover, to consider the conditions and effects of possibilities. From Kant's point of view, the comments given in the assignments were meant to develop thinking abilities and refine their academic writing skills. The demand for and focus on critique was interpreted as a tyranny of 'what ought to be' and ignored what was given. It is not surprising therefore, that critique was reduced to its semantic neighbour 'critic' in the minds of students.

If Kant's deployment of critique appears generous despite its narrow focus on 'what ought to be', then Foucault's (1994) version of critique, as contestation from contingent positions and values, is radical. Foucault views critique as a means of contesting, and in some instances, rejecting what is, that is, what has become an established truth (Rabinow 1984). Critique allows such established and received truths to be interrogated for the underlying assumptions, knowledge bases and practices to expose not only how power operates, but how the limitations of not knowing the hidden forces results in practices and beliefs of colonised minds, which Foucault refers to as governmentality. Critique is not in search of harmony, its mandate is to expose the conditions and practices of oppression and subjugation. Critique, in this instance, can have emancipatory effects for those oppressed and debilitating effects for oppressors. Let us examine then how Foucault's notions play out in the arena of a classroom in a higher education context.

There is undoubtedly an unequal power relationship between teacher and students with power tipped in favour of the teacher. It is the teacher who

chooses the contents of the module, designs the tasks and defines the criteria for assessment. It is the teacher who works with ideas of critique, and determines what counts or does not count as critique. Writing about the power issues of teaching the language of English, which applies to assessment as well, Peim (1993:48) asserts,

> [T]he valorization of certain kinds or forms of writing above others is likely to indicate that other forms are being excluded or devalued. The grounds of inclusion are hardly ever likely to be explicit.

Despite the concerns of power raised, one could argue that there is a greater good at work and, therefore, the expectation by teachers that students recognise and value the communicated truths of assessment can be justified. The justification, nevertheless, does not explain why critique is received as a negation of the self, as an attack on the person, and as wilful lack of care. Why, one could ask, is its utility value sublimated? Goleman (1996) in *Emotional Intelligence* suggests that passion and reason are interconnected and that the artificial separation of the functions of both obfuscates the symbiotic relationship between them. It is his contention, that reason is more valued in some places, like school, and that the importance of passion has been 'hijacked' (Goleman 1996:13-29) by educational agendas to the detriment of intellectual development. His argument is clear and emphatic, passion is as important as and an equal of reason. Goleman is not rejecting reason in favour of passion as he concedes that critique is necessary and desirable, but he promotes a notion he terms 'artful critique' (1996:153), a message that he argues

> has the opposite impact of destructive criticism: instead of creating helplessness, anger, and rebellion, it holds out the hope of doing things better and suggests the beginning of a plan for doing so (Goleman 1996:153).

Here one sees a semantic slide from critique to criticism, enabling recognition of the hegemony of an interpretation that highlights its negative characteristic and veils what I regarded as the hidden work of caring in critique. Once again, as in the discourse of care, the normalised, taken-for-

granted interpretation of a particular connotation eclipses other interpretations. As long as assessment is connected to meeting care needs rather than intellectual needs, the core outcome, learning, is marginalised. Yet, if, we accept Goleman's thesis, the enhancement of the intellect apropos critique should simultaneously raise the happiness level of the individual. The discourse of critique suggests otherwise. The dominance of emotional responses subverts the intellectual project of assessment and becomes the core around which discourse is organised. But what if emotions are crucial, and more importantly, absolutely necessary for intellectual development? I turn to the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1994) to provide insight.

In his work with individuals who are brain damaged Damasio shatters the myth of a separation between cognitive and sensory or emotional processes. Carefully selecting individuals who cannot feel emotion but whose cognitive abilities remain intact, Damasio was able to demonstrate that cognitive functioning cannot be separated from emotional involvement. Research subjects could objectively and rationally analyse choices but could not make decisions. What Damasio's work revealed is that intellect works in 'convergence zones' (1994:182) where cognitive and sensory structures intersect rather than in isolated cortices. From this perspective, the demand for students to receive critique unemotionally is counterproductive, ironically working against the intentions to develop students' intellectual abilities.

On reflection now, there appear to be a number of reasons for students' responses to critique. Firstly, the notion of critique was not communicated theoretically. Whilst in my mind I worked with a Kantian perspective, the students were responding from a Foucauldian one. Secondly, the criteria for what counts as critique were not as clear as I thought they were. Thirdly, critique has an endemic violent characteristic resulting in its semantic relative, critic, to be mistaken for and identified with critique, especially when appraising the quality of a piece of work.

Thus students' participation, worth and evaluation of learning were governed by an authoritative other with power to 'pass' or 'fail' students. Indeed, within the context of a higher education environment, with a professor and a doctor representing knowledge power, what were the possibilities for student emancipation through critique? And what were the possibilities for students to critique the notion of critique? Undoubtedly, these questions relate to issues of power which is entangled with and

complicates assessment, especially as critique appears to be what it is not.

The Passion of the Real on a Cartesian Plane

Discourses, as explained earlier, are effects of language that are neither neutral nor essentialist, and are fundamentally discursive. Here I consider the possibilities having cast a gaze at an issue arising from assessment, and thereby, examine, retrieve, and expose the nature of discursive reality. What has been established thus far is that care and critique appear to be what they are not. Due to the hegemony of meanings ascribed to both, care was received as good, desirable and useful, whilst critique was cast as harmful, undesirable and negative by students. There was, similarly, hegemony of meanings by the assessor viewing critique as useful and care as harmful to develop students' intellect. Depending on which side of the binary one supports, it is not apparent that inherent in care is an element of violence, and in critique, an element of caring. Consequently, notions of care and critique were essentialised and fixed in the minds of students and teacher.

The antagonism between the students and myself, it seems, operated on a false Passion of the Real (Žižek 2002). The students' need for emotional comfort and my need to develop their intellect resulted in identical effects, that is, negative perceptions of each other fuelled by meanings fixed to care and critique. By basing our demands on what each considered to be desirable, and denying the hidden violences inherent in care and critique, we engaged each other in ways that impaired the teaching and learning relationship. The denial displayed by both sides of the antagonism is a classic example of Žižek's (2002) argument that it represented nothing more than avoiding the Real. The Real that students were avoiding was the consequences of the gaps and limitations of their thinking and acknowledging their failure to demonstrate competency while I used an aseptic, impersonal stance packaged as professionalism to avoid acknowledging the pain I caused to students.

This false Passion of the Real was coupled by a desire for the Desert of the Real (Žižek 2002). The students and I understood the aims of the course, that is, to develop them into critical thinkers and researchers and the emphasis on critique as a core skill and value in educational research. There was, seemingly, a desire to acquire these skills and values by students, and to

teach skills and evaluate their competencies by myself. However, the antagonism made apparent how our desires exemplified the Desert of the Real. Let me explain.

Real critique is painful, and Real caring is merciful. Students wanted competency in a way that preserved their emotional well-being and I wanted them to accept critique in a way that recognised its potential for intellectual development. This meant that the students and I sought 'decaffeinated'[4] versions of critique and care. In other words, critique deprived of its malignancy and potential to hurt feelings, and caring deprived of its emotional elements and presented as concern for the intellect. Decaffeinated critique would valorise work done, ignore gaps and limitations and produce the illusion of competent learners. By contrast decaffeinated caring would deny the need to be merciful. Decaffeination would, therefore, be the means to cleanse care and critique of their dangerous elements.

Decaffeination and the False Passion of the Real do not take into account that there is an alternative explanation. It is possible that in asking for care, students were engaging in a critique of the way the task was assessed, and, perhaps, even challenging the unstated rules of 'good critique'. My response to intellectualise the discussion could have been, likewise, a display crafted to mask my emotions.

On a Cartesian plane, the binary operates as a duality of the mind comprising reason (critique) and emotion (care). The analysis indicates that this duality is an illusion as critique is a form of care and the request for care is a form of critique. As a false duality it has the potential to confound communication and fractures relationships between students and teachers. With respect to assessment, should students and teachers remain on the Cartesian plane, the impasse between them will not be transcended in the classroom. For that purpose a topography, different to a Cartesian plane, is required as will be argued in the next section.

From Binary Opposition to Möbius Congruity

The paper began with students and assessor positioned on opposite sides, a

[4] Žižek (2008) used the description 'decaffeinated' to describe a watered-down version of Marxism.

binary opposition. The paradoxes arose because critique and care were set up in discourse as essentialised notions, whilst discourse analysis revealed that care and critique are alike in many ways and resemble each other. Both are tyrannical when demanded, harmful in some respects, and useful in other respects. They are, in a sense, synonymous as caring and critique can be retrieved in both. Furthermore, based on Damasio's (1994) work, caring and critique are not isolated functions located in discrete sectors of the brain as all thinking that is activated operates in interconnected ways within the brain. The arguments suggest that the Cartesian plane is inadequate to capture this reality. Consequently, a topographical metaphor based on the unique characteristics of the Möbius strip is a suitable alternative to capture the nature of reality (see also Agamben 1998; Žižek 2005; Amin 2010) presented by the complexities and paradoxes of care and critique.

The Möbius Strip is a special surface that comprises one side and one edge only formed by a single twist of a strip before joining the ends. This surface, I argue, represents in a visual form the reality of the discourses of care and critique. The Möbius surface is appropriate because its 'fixed' points are ambiguous and arbitrary enabling the arbitrariness of language to be represented. The arbitrary nature of language is rendered invisible by hegemonic and monopolised interpretations that simultaneously veil and sublimate alternatives. The surface of the Möbius unfixes essentialised meanings and interpretations. For example, to establish whether a point is on the inside or the outside of the strip, traversing its length is necessary and reveals its singularity because inside and outside are fictions, they do not exist on the special topography of the Möbius strip. Likewise, differences between critique and care are fictions invoked in and through language. Harmony and antagonism about assessment are, similarly, fictions, appearing to be what they are not. So what could this mean in practice?

Assessment is necessary as a measure of learning, as an evaluation of teaching and as a vital procedural requirement for obtaining credentials. The uses of assessment in higher education are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. One can conclude that there are perplexities related to assessment bedevilling those who teach and those who come to learn in higher education spaces as assessment can produce a complex web of challenges with potential to generate conflict in general and to antagonise the relationship between students and teacher in particular. Crucially, learning

can be destabilised if we continue to regard assessment as an objective, neutral and unemotional set of procedures. Thus there is an urgent need to reconcile the uses and the perplexities of assessment. Moving away from a Cartesian plane and working with the Möbius topography, I want to argue, may provide the means to harmonise the incompatibilities of critique and care in assessment.

Harmonisation begins with acknowledging that good intentions of assessment are often not communicated unambiguously and that ideas cannot be conveyed objectively as recipients make meaning subjectively. The Möbius terrain is a reminder of the vulnerability to ambiguity of words like care and critique, reflecting a poststructural reading as captured by Peim (1993: 54):

> Words may mean things, none of them contained in the words themselves without reference to other words – other chains of meaning. According to the logic of this position all meanings are always deferred: that is they are not present in the statements that produce them, but are generated by a movement or 'play' – an interplay between the present word(s) and the absent, but invoked 'meanings'.

The task, it appears, is to close the gap between the use of language and the interpretation of language by opening up discussions for sharing multiple interpretations and, perhaps, to begin a dialogue about how different interpretations can be incorporated in assessment. Furthermore, it is evident that binaries create traps of fixed ways of thinking, and since assessment lends itself to creating binaries, e.g. pass and fail or good and bad, assessors will need to consider how binary structures can be destabilised without compromising the importance of assessment in teaching and learning. The Möbius Strip has potential for use as a tool for dialogue and to destabilise fixed points of views.

Acknowledgements: The final version of this paper would not have been possible without the inputs of those who cared enough to provide critique – the students who inspired the paper and the two anonymous reviewers.

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