Learning in a comfort zone: cultural and social capital inside an outcome-based assessment regime

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Despite numerous problems with outcome-based assessment systems, claims that they enhance learners’ motivation and autonomy resonate with research interest in how young people develop cultural and social capital. However, research has not yet explored the ways in which assessment systems affect the forms of capital embedded within them. This paper applies concepts from a growing body of work on social and cultural capital in education to data from a study of assessment policy and practice in the Advanced General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) in two further education colleges. It evaluates how norms, practices and dynamics created by the GNVQ assessment regime interacted with other factors in students’ lives and the learning programme itself. These interactions shaped cultural and social capital inside a learning ‘comfort zone’ and affected students’ motivation and attitudes to learning. The article evaluates the implications of these factors for the types of cultural and social capital that may be on offer in different assessment regimes. In particular, it raises questions about the extent to which social and cultural capital are empowering or constraining, and offers ideas for further research in this area.

Introduction

Competing and controversial aims underpinned the development of the Advanced General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) between 1992 and 2000 (see Edwards et al., 1997; Ecclestone, 2002). Two radical aims underpinned its outcome-based assessment regime. First, designers hoped that it would demystify a body of knowledge and skills and make it publicly accessible as a basis for students and teachers to negotiate learning and assessment activities. Second, this motivating approach to assessment would offer students who might not otherwise stay on in further education a qualification that had parity of esteem with well-established, high-status advanced general qualifications (A levels). More broadly, the aim of democratizing knowledge and skills within post-16 qualifications underpinned the outcomes movement throughout the 1980s and 1990s (see Jessup, 1991; McNair, 1995). The Advanced GNVQ was transmogrified as the Advanced Certificate

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of Vocational Education (ACVE) in reforms to England’s post-16 curriculum in 2000.

The ambition of such aims in the advanced curriculum, and their fate over the past ten years, make it important to know more about the legacy of GNVQ’s outcome-based assessment regime for the quality of learning currently on offer to young people in vocational qualifications (see also Hodgson & Spours, 2003). Previous evaluation of how the Advanced GNVQ outcome-based assessment regime affected formative and summative assessment practices in two further education colleges suggests that learners and teachers created and worked within a subtle but powerful ‘comfort zone’. This comprised a complex mix of expectations and motivations, teaching and assessment activities and relationships. The comfort zone protected teachers and students from the confusing changes that were arising from repeated political attempts to reform the GNVQ assessment regime between 1992 and 2000, and from a parallel restructuring of the further education sector. In a political context of regulation and uncertainty, a comfort zone was central to the implementation and effects of GNVQ assessment on young people’s learning experience in the case study colleges (see Ecclestone, 2002; Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003).

Building upon the notion of a ‘comfort zone’, this article draws upon three bodies of educational research. One evaluates the complex social, personal and educational factors which shape children’s and young people’s ‘learning careers’ and ‘learning identities’ as they progress through an increasingly prescriptive education system (see, for example, Bloomer, 1997; Filer & Pollard, 1999; Pollard & Filer (in press). The second uses Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field to explore the evolution of identity in formal pre- and post-16 education (see, for example, Grenfell & James, 1998; Ball et al., 2000; Bloomer, 2001). The third uses the concept of social capital to explore group and community influences on post-16 educational achievement in informal settings (Baron et al., 2000). Concepts from this research can illuminate the complex and subtle ways in which an assessment regime socializes young people and offers or withholds certain forms of cultural and social capital.

Analysis in this article derives from a previously published case study of young people following an Advanced GNVQ between 1998 and 2000 in two further education colleges in the north-east of England (Ecclestone, 2002). The article evaluates the ways in which the assessment regime, external conditions and individual agency interacted to shape dispositions to learning for the sample as a whole and for two young people in particular. The first section summarizes how other researchers have applied concepts of ‘cultural and social capital’, ‘habitus’, ‘horizons for action’ and ‘field’ to the educational experiences of children, young people and adults. It relates these ideas to the notion of a comfort zone in GNVQ. The article then explores how cultural and social capital might be codified in different types of qualification and, in particular, the outcome-based assessment regime of Advanced GNVQs. The third section summarizes the methodology from the earlier published study that underpins this article and highlights new interpretations of data from the sample of young people in relation to the concepts outlined in Section One. It then shows how two well-motivated, high-achieving Advanced GNVQ students
developed their cultural and social capital during a two-year course. The final section discusses the implications of theoretical analysis and interpretations of data for the potential of outcome-based qualifications to develop young people's social and cultural capital. It also suggests ideas for further work in this area.

1. Cultural and social capital

Related notions of cultural and social capital, and Bourdieu's ideas about habitus and field, enable researchers in the sociology of learning to explore the interplay between structural conditions, human agency and identity. More specifically, the concepts enable researchers to evaluate the effects of this interplay on dispositions and activities within education programmes and career decision-making (see, for example, Grenfell & James, 1998; Hodkinson et al., 1996; Bloomer, 2001; Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003). Previous bodies of research, such as the 16–19 Initiatives Programme sponsored by the Economic and Social Science Research Council between 1989 and 1992, have also analysed broader factors in young people's socialization and identity formation through vocational training (see, for example, Bates, 1991). More recently, the Identity and Learning Programme illuminates the complex interplay between primary pupils' identity as learners and their home and sociocultural contexts, over many years as they progress from primary education through to secondary schooling. This programme, led by Andrew Pollard and Ann Filer, illuminates how sociological influences on pupils' identity and learning strategies become increasingly complex through school and life experiences (Filer & Pollard, 1999; Pollard & Filer, in press). Finally, a project on learning cultures in further education colleges in the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme is beginning to reveal how students and their teachers form new vocational identities and dispositions within very specific sites of learning (see, for example, Colley, 2002; Colley et al., 2002).

Taken together, these studies illuminate the subtle ways in which cultural capital and social capital are, simultaneously, outcomes and sources of cultural reproduction. For Bourdieu, cultural capital comprises behaviours, dispositions, knowledge and habits internalized through socialization, accumulated through investment in education or training and objectified in cultural goods and artefacts (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital enables the cultural judgement of dominant groups to be presented as universal and selectively endowed, thereby legitimizing its domination (Baron et al., 2000). In education, cultural capital comprises knowledge about material and structural conditions and about the opportunities that different courses and qualifications offer for advancement (see, for example, Ball et al., 2000). It also requires knowledge amongst teachers, parents and peers, and other people involved in students' lives (such as employers, welfare and guidance agencies), about how to 'play the system', both through the education system as a whole and inside the procedures and practices of a learning programme. It is important to recognize that generating appropriate forms of cultural capital in diverse contexts involves time, effort and material and psychological resources and that these resources are unequally distributed and developed (Reay, 1998). As a result, learners do not have
equal opportunities for developing cultural and social capital, thereby creating inequality and differentiation in achievement both within and between learning programmes (Bates et al., 2001; Bates & Wilson, 2002).

Intertwined with cultural capital, the notion of social capital has been applied to lifelong learning policy and practice by Baron et al. (2000). Social capital comprises the actual or potential resources that individuals can mobilize through membership of organizations and social networks. Such resources, particularly those of trust and reciprocity, are gained, used and fought over in different social fields:

A network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relations that are directly usable in the short or long term. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249)

Analysts such as James Coleman and Robert Putnam are optimistic that social capital can be a basis for social and economic good. In contrast, Bourdieu sees it as a basis for reproducing inequality (see Baron et al., 2000, for discussion). In complex ways, social capital is generated and used differently in various contexts. It can be institutionalized within particular fields, for example, in clubs, the family, a formal learning group, all pupils achieving a Level 2 in National Curriculum tests, all GNVQ students achieving Distinctions on a regular basis within a group, and so on. Researchers can therefore use social capital as a heuristic tool to explore relationships and their effects within specific communities and informal and formal learning contexts (see Baron et al., 2000; Ecclestone & Field, 2003).

The notion of ‘habitus’ illuminates the ways in which cultural and social capital are generated and used by viewing human action as constituted by ‘a dialectical relationship between individuals’ thought and activity and the objective world’ (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 14). People’s dispositions towards action, and their responses to specific situations, cannot be divorced from structural conditions but nor are they a simple matter of ‘biographical determinism’ (Grenfell & James, 1998, p.15). As a complex form of socialization combined with individual agency, habitus offers a construct for representing how human knowledge and action both express and realize the dynamic of structure in social contexts. In education:

The habitus acquired within the family underlines the structuring of school experiences (in particular the reception and assimilation of the specifically pedagogic message) and the habitus transformed by schooling, itself diversified, in turn underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences (e.g. the reception and assimilation of the message of the culture industry or work experiences) and so on, from restructuring to structuring.
(Bourdieu, quoted by Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 15)

In post-16 students’ progression through education programmes, habitus can be used to explore ‘relationships between common cultural expectations and learners’ behaviour—thus cultural capital is both an objective condition and a social construction’ (Bloomer, 2001, p. 437). These conditions and dynamics construct forms of capital in unexpected or idiosyncratic ways. Students’ habitus, inculcated through formative life and educational experiences, interact with external conditions within specific spheres of action (Nash, 1999). Habitus incorporates multiple, overlapping identities and dispositions which make up a person’s life and the effects of different
learning experiences as people progress through schooling into formal education later in life (see, for example, Crossan et al., 2003; also West, 1995).

In Bourdieu’s conceptualization, habitus cannot be understood without reference to ‘field’ as the structured arenas of social action. This is because of the reflexive relationship whereby:

On the one side, ... the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of immanent necessity of a field (or of hierarchically intersecting sets of fields). On the other side ... habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s practice. (Bourdieu, quoted by Waquant, 1989, p. 44)

Integral to habitus and field are ‘horizons for action’ where systems of social relations construct individual dispositions and responses to educational experiences. These systems encompass networks set up by individuals as well as interactions between individuals, institutions and other groups. Fields are:

bounded spheres identifiable in terms of shared areas of activities and contain and connect with other fields and various levels. Each is lubricated by forms of knowledge that are only partially consciously known, have their own self-referential legitimacy, and to a large extent, operate in a tacit manner. (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 25)

Relationships between fields and horizons for action simultaneously determine and reproduce social activity in diverse forms. Different fields, such as formal learning programmes, are sites where learners can create and reproduce cultural and social capital. However, the interactions between field, habitus and the reproduction of different forms of capital are fluid: interactions reform and revalue both these processes. More specifically, it is possible to see the field of an assessment regime as having its own culture, namely the ‘socially constructed and historically derived common base of knowledge, values and norms for action that people grow into and come to take as a natural way of life’ (Hodkinson et al., 1996, p. 148).

Concepts summarized here offer a basis for exploring interactions between the demands of an assessment regime and two students’ habitus and horizons for action within the field of an Advanced GNVQ course. However, the concepts set up particular methodological tensions. Two are especially relevant for this article. First, the tension between structure and agency makes it difficult to account for the effects of external conditions and individuals’ ability to determine courses of action and outcomes. External conditions include life history, class, gender, race and culture and affect habitus and the forms of social and cultural capital that students, teachers and families bring with them to a learning programme. Institutional culture and ethos are also important external conditions, as are the political processes of designing and regulating an assessment regime. Second, social and cultural capital, habitus, horizons for action and field are not merely heuristic devices: they are also dispositional and material outcomes for students, learning programmes and qualifications. The article uses the concepts in both ways but aims to delineate these uses at appropriate points in the analysis. Nevertheless, the final emphasis is on students’ social and cultural capital as key outcomes of factors discussed in the article. Finally, trying to capture the complexity and fluidity of these interactions
between structure and agency in young people’s lives requires reflexivity about the difficulties involved, particularly in navigating between ‘simple realism’ and authentic, rich accounts (see, for example, Hodkinson et al., 1996; Ball et al., 2000). Like other studies in a case study research genre that uses the concepts outlined so far, the article strives to reconcile these tensions.

2. Cultural and social capital within qualifications

Different qualifications and their assessment regimes codify cultural and social capital in both overt and implicit forms, reflected in struggles over useful or important knowledge and skills, subsequent syllabuses and assessment criteria, and the selection (and exclusion) of certain stakeholders to design them (see Ball, 1990; Raggatt & Williams, 1999; Ecclestone, 2002). Through such struggles, the UK’s confusing and complex qualifications system offers diverse interpretations of knowledge, skills and attributes as ‘desirable’ cultural capital. Notwithstanding some scope for teachers and students to influence pedagogy and assessment, post-16 qualifications also offer or exclude particular processes. Combined with local practices and institutional cultures, these processes affect the forms of cultural and social capital that learners might develop, together with the habitus and horizons for action that emerge within learning programmes.

Although qualification structures and pedagogy shape social and cultural capital, it is important not to overplay their effects. Education and training experiences form a small part of the opportunities and inequalities created by other external structures, such as work, family, leisure and peer groups, and broader ones of class, race and gender (see Ball et al., 2000; Bates, 1998a, b; Helsby et al., 1998). Within society as a whole, qualifications offer different exchange values and reflect social, political and educational attitudes to ‘high’ and ‘low’ status knowledge and skills and thereby to cultural capital (see Young, 1998). State-regulated curricula, such as the National Curriculum, general and vocational qualifications in secondary and post-16 education, are all underpinned by ideological battles amongst stakeholders and interest groups over what counts as important cultural capital. This capital becomes codified as knowledge, skills and attributes within individual subject domains and types of qualification. Social capital can emerge through teaching and assessment activities but may be more explicit in qualifications that seek to encourage self- and peer assessment since these demand high levels of trust and reciprocity and investment in the idea of a community of practice.

The sheer complexity of qualifications in the UK makes it important to understand how policy processes affect the cultural and social capital on offer and, in turn, how these are mediated by everyday teaching and assessment processes. However, while policy, pedagogy and assessment practices are powerful mediators, socio-economic conditions and cultural expectations determine their value and currency and the types of learners who have access to them.

Recent developments in post-16 qualification design and policy have aimed to change public and professional perceptions of value by claiming that low status vocational qualifications must have parity of esteem with high status academic ones
Learning in a comfort zone

(see also Hodgson & Spours, 2003). Repeated technical adjustments to assessment systems to increase access and achievement in different types of qualifications reflect attempts to operationalize this claim. Through the 1990s, the goal depended largely on outcome-based assessment regimes that revealed knowledge, skills and attributes embedded within them and specified publicly the basis for high standards of achievement. Supporters of this approach criticize how employers, teachers and examining bodies possess cultural capital in the form of ‘inside knowledge’ that they usually do not share with learners. Working with the same public assessment specifications is supposed to enable learners and teachers to engage with this knowledge on an equal footing. Although such processes do not invoke notions of capital directly, they aim to make the cultural and social capital surrounding assessment processes more transparent in order to intervene in teachers’ and students’ practice (see, for example, Jessup, 1991; McNair, 1995). In theory, outcome-based assessment also erodes restrictive recruitment and progression in education and employment, replacing them with meritocratic processes. In a similar vein, attempts to codify tacit knowledge and competence in order to reveal and redress inequality of opportunity have a long history in vocational education and training (see, for example, Evans, 2001).

Despite the positive intentions behind such activities, liberal and social justice educators are sceptical, arguing that outcome-based assessment produces reductionist learning and instrumental accountability rather than meaningful empowerment, let alone useful capital (for example, Hyland, 1994; Bates, 1998a, b; Bloomer, 1998). From this perspective, an outcome-based approach is fundamentally incompatible with negotiated learning and genuine ownership and generation of knowledge, promoted by liberal humanists such as Lawrence Stenhouse and Carl Rogers. These counter-arguments appear to be vindicated by the way that recent qualification policy has produced prescriptive, politically controlled assessment regimes. Yet epistemological and political reasons for problems with these regimes are complex. For example, there is a need to mollify competing interest groups who all want their outcomes included in a qualification. Processes for defining and amending the specifications begin to sideline, then silence, questions about what forms of capital are desirable, who has access to them and which agencies are legitimate stakeholders in debating and resolving such questions.

In addition, attempts to codify and assess cultural capital are fiercely contested through different layers of policy. My earlier study of the chaotic political development of Advanced GNVQs illuminates enduring struggles in the UK, and especially in England, between interest groups in education that Ball (1990) has characterized as ‘vocational modernisers’, ‘liberal humanists’ and ‘cultural restorationists’. The history of general vocational and work-based training qualifications shows that codifying cultural capital is contested by a competing array of groups with very different ideological perspectives and educational traditions (see also Raggatt & Williams, 1999). These groups include: employers’ representatives, Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) awarding bodies, professional groups, the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (merged into the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 1997). Different
agencies then mediate the outcomes of these disputes. In post-16 education, for example, inspection bodies, curriculum support and research agencies (such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency and the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education) and awarding body officials add further layers of interpretation about desirable curriculum content and pedagogy to interpretations of the public specifications amongst teachers and students.

Outside mainstream qualifications, some constituencies want to certificate their own interpretations of desirable skills, knowledge and attributes. In adult and community education, for example, national awarding bodies such as the National Open College Network and NCFE1 codify the cultural and social capital that community groups and providers of courses see as important as a basis for recognizing achievement through certification. Supporters then bid for this to have a legitimate place in a national qualifications framework. Since qualifications are powerful currencies in economic, social and occupational progression, a logical political strategy for promoting the idea of lifelong learning is to impose formal parity of esteem and then to promote the market currency of certificates and qualifications. Yet, this elides certification that might merely offer a motivating recognition of achievement with qualifications that are a genuine passport to skills, jobs and education. One effect of outcome-based assessment regimes and technical definitions of parity is to remove debate about whether the diverse forms of cultural and social capital in certificates and qualifications can ever have genuine parity of esteem in an increasingly differentiated, stratified education system.

Different assessment regimes finally emerge from these pressures to influence pedagogy and assessment activities in formal learning programmes and to offer implicit and overt forms of cultural and social capital. For example, the first two models for GNVQ (1993 and 1995) promoted an ethos of collaborative learning through locally designed projects that required students to work inside and outside an education institution and to create new contacts within a local community in order to initiate and complete projects. In these characteristics, GNVQ followed a series of alternative post-16 curricula through the 1980s, such as the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education and the Technical Vocational Education Initiative. This tradition ensured their support from large numbers of teachers in further education colleges. The designers of GNVQ also hoped that peer and self-assessment would help students internalize a set of criteria for standards of work and develop the ability to accept robust feedback on their work. Such activities imply a community of practice and require trust and reciprocity, where students need to draw on familiar networks and to build new social capital by venturing into unfamiliar networks.

Of course, students’ attitudes to such processes are affected by habitus and horizons for action developed from early years education onwards (see Burhans & Dweck, 1995; Reay & Wiliam, 1999; Filer & Pollard, 1999). In addition, opportunities for students to use social capital for coursework assessments inside educational institutions, in the family and through other networks, are not equally distributed. Instead, they are affected by the habitus and horizons for action created by class, race and gender. These factors play out differently between high status academic
qualifications and lower status vocational ones (see Bates et al., 2001; Bates & Wilson, 2002) and within vocational training regimes (Bates, 1991). Students may also find that new forms of social capital are risky because they involve a different habitus from that developed with peers, family or other networks. As part of evolving a new learning identity, habitus might require concerted engagement with study, rejection of peer norms of low levels of work, new social capital, and new ways of thinking (see, for example, Brookfield, 2000).

Iterative links between cultural and social capital raise questions about what types of cultural and social capital are being offered and avoided in a qualification and whether these have genuine social and economic value. There are further questions about what opportunities a learning programme offers for developing different forms of capital and what role students themselves play in this development.

3. Getting through: cultural and social capital for GNVQ students

The published study discussed earlier related teachers’ and students’ experiences of the GNVQ assessment regime to an ideological climate associated with a ‘risk society’ and to the chaos of policy processes that produced four versions of the Advanced GNVQ assessment system in eight years (Ecclestone, 2002). The study aimed to connect macro levels of social context, policy making and the epistemology of assessment, meso levels of institutional conditions, teaching teams and subject cultures, and micro levels of summative and formative assessment activities. It employed the theoretical framework of a ‘policy trajectory’ (Ball, 1994) which combines analysis of ‘policy texts’ and ‘policy discourses’ in order to trace the complex, contradictory progress and effects of a policy initiative through different levels of the education system.

Some conclusions from the earlier study about students’ experience of GNVQ assessment relate to concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus, field and horizons for action. A summary of these conclusions precedes case studies of two of the six high-achieving students, drawing on new analysis of transcripts from interviews and observation data. Over two years, fieldwork in two colleges followed the work of nine teachers from two courses (business, and health and social care) and 25 young people aged between 16 and 19, characterized by their teachers as independent and well-motivated. It encompassed a series of in-depth group and individual interviews, observations of lessons and tutorials, marking a large number of assignments and exploring criteria with students and teachers, and discussing emerging findings.

All 25 students saw themselves as ‘second-chance’ students who were ‘not good enough’ for A levels: this image was confirmed by a questionnaire to the whole cohort of 80 students. The teachers in the study made strenuous attempts to present GNVQ as having parity of esteem with A levels and this was crucial to a positive image of GNVQs as a ‘good qualification’. Nevertheless, students also knew that A levels were ‘better’.

Nineteen of the 25 developed social capital solely with ‘people like them’. Few students had external contacts for help with projects while assignments that required
them to work outside the college were heavily predicated on what Inge Bates has called ‘hunting and gathering information’ (Bates, 1998a). Opportunities to ‘do the work yourself’ but also to be able to work with friends, were crucial factors in students’ image of autonomy and a positive identity as newly successful, second-chance learners. Institutional pressures, such as limits to formal teaching of 15 hours a week and fragmented teaching teams, also reinforced students’ desire to work within comfortable friendship cliques.

Although limited, social capital gave students motivating opportunities to work in the colleges’ attractive libraries, at home and in refectories, away from ‘boring’ teachers and the confines of dreary classrooms. In spite of knowing that A levels offered better opportunities for progression than GNVQs, students liked the different assessment regime and its opportunities for informal, secure networks. These features enabled students to see themselves as independent from teachers and this perception was reinforced by an emphasis amongst teachers and students on gaining procedural autonomy through command of the assessment specifications. Positive images of a second chance and independence contributed to a comfort zone of acceptable engagement and norms of working.

More pragmatic factors led students to welcome the assessment regime and consolidated the comfort zone. These included the need to fit GNVQ assignments around part-time employment, social and personal interests and lack of experience in students’ families about what was required in GNVQ. The comfort zone both opened up and constrained horizons for action, producing strong images of ‘acceptable’ work in terms of volume and difficulty. Ultimately, students’ and teachers’ expectations of desirable cultural and social capital were reduced by the end of Year 1 to command of the official requirements and the strong boundaries exerted by the detailed grade criteria. This made ‘playing the game’ of gaining a qualification easier but meant that students came to equate their personal autonomy with procedural autonomy. Although they were positive about this autonomy, it reduced their willingness to take risks in aiming for the high grades that might develop critical autonomy. Instead, using the specifications of grade criteria made them ‘play safe’ and resist work that was ‘too difficult’.

The comfort zone affected horizons for action that arose from teachers and students’ beliefs about whether students were motivated and capable of developing the higher level skills and knowledge embedded in the Distinction grade criteria. Distinctions were crucial for progression to higher education and the criteria offered the chance to develop genuinely useful cognitive skills. Instead, the dynamics of the comfort zone meant that 19 students used the specifications to judge in advance how ‘hard’ the Distinction criteria were in each assignment and then to avoid the challenge. In a questionnaire to 80 students across the eight groups in the study, 60% ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ aimed for a distinction. ‘Playing safe’ enabled them to avoid failure and this was essential to a new image of second-chance, successful students.

Some of the Distinction criteria in units such as sociology, social policy and European business revealed knowledge, skills and attributes associated, albeit superficially, with the beginning of critical autonomy. Yet opportunities to develop them were attenuated by teachers’ concern that students in the precarious job and
education market of urban north-east England must pass the qualification. Expectations about students’ chances of passing were also affected by teachers’ belief that most GNVQ students would not be able and motivated enough to gain the critical depth needed for Distinctions. These concerns produced a low-risk approach to getting students through the criteria, reinforced by regulation from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and awarding bodies to ensure close compliance with the grading criteria. Teachers worked within their own comfort zone of acceptable engagement, breaking complex assignments into separate tasks and coaching the students through the requirements. They also adopted a laissez-faire approach to the friendship and informal working patterns that might enable students to develop new social capital.

Although two of the nine teachers in the sample wanted initially to be more creative and ambitious, departing from official requirements came to have strong images of risk for all teachers. At the same time, conditions of service in colleges, together with continuous upheaval and restructuring, made teachers’ own work increasingly risky. The inexorable pressures of ‘performativity’ (Ball, 2001) emerged through inspection, awarding body grading of the consistency of GNVQ teachers’ assessment decisions against ‘national standards’ and other quality assurance processes in colleges. Pressures on horizons for action coalesced around ‘playing safe’, ‘getting through’, ‘tracking and checking’ students’ work. These were pragmatically rational responses to demands and expectations.

In subtle ways, the comfort zone confined social and cultural capital to achievable targets for grades. This meant that teachers or students who wanted to take risks, such as developing an ability to engage critically with the content of modules, became ‘outsiders’ to the GNVQ community of practice. Such pressures led one of the nine teachers to give up his long-held aspirations as a sociology teacher to encourage students to think critically and to develop new cultural capital. After two years’ teaching on GNVQ, he conceded his attempts to work at the level demanded by Merit and Distinction criteria to students’ open resistance to the ‘difficult’ work that this involved. He decided to cover only the content relevant to the ‘Pass’ criteria and to allow students to opt out of sessions they did not see as ‘relevant’ for their chosen topic for assignments: students who wanted to go further could do so by negotiation. Across the eight courses in the study, trust between peers, and between teachers and students, coalesced around conforming to the criteria. Over two years of the GNVQ course, norms of engagement and notions of ‘good’ GNVQ teachers and ‘good’ students changed to those who ‘got the students through’ the requirements while autonomous students were those who could get themselves through.

So far, discussion here has emphasized GNVQ-related factors, particularly in relation to horizons for action created by various pressures and expectations. It is important to reiterate that young people’s habitus, developed and enacted through formal education and external aspects of their lives, also has profound effects on cultural and social capital within a particular programme. Six of the 25 students sought and gained Distinctions, developed and enhanced a positive habitus and showed potential for more sophisticated forms of social and cultural capital than the
other students. However, a number of factors, including the effects of the comfort zone, hindered this potential.

Analysis now focuses on two of the six high-achieving students and examines how external dimensions, habitus and horizons for action in the assessment regime interacted to shape social and cultural capital. Attempts to capture these interactions raise ethical dilemmas about the extent to which researchers probe into the lives of young people and how they then write public accounts (Ball et al., 2000). These dilemmas are partly addressed by using pseudonyms, discussing earlier accounts of the two students with them before publication of the earlier study, and not including new personal details here.

**Michael**

In September 2001, Michael began the third year of a business degree at a post-1992 university, the typical higher education destination for most Advanced GNVQ students. My study encompassed his experiences in the Advanced GNVQ through both years of the course, followed by an in-depth interview about learning and motivation mid-way through each of two years at university and at the beginning of Year 3, focusing on specific assignments he was working on. Unlike the other five high-achieving students, he chose GNVQ, not as a second chance but as a positive alternative to A levels. He is a cheerful, quietly confident young man who enjoys equally the company of adults and peers.

During GNVQ, he respected and liked teachers and the atmosphere of his ‘totally cosy’ business course. His habitus from school led him to set great store by working with ‘people like him’, namely peers who were willing to work hard and not to see educational achievement as something to pretend to avoid. Reinforcing this aspect of habitus enabled him to aim for high grades. Unlike the high achievers in Osborn and Triggs’ (2001) secondary school study, he did not try to project an image of underachievement as a conscious strategy to gain social acceptance. Instead, like all six high-achieving students in the study, his emerging adult identity was rooted in his peers rating him as doing well: it was cool to be successful. At the end of Year 1 of his GNVQ, he was elected as chairman of the ‘Young Enterprise’ company in one of the modules, a major transformation in his confidence. Over two years, he navigated easily between different social groups within the GNVQ and asked people through family and work contacts for help with assignments.

In his first year of GNVQ, gaining procedural autonomy through a command of the assessment specifications enabled him to avoid asking teachers for help. This was essential for his self-image of confident self-reliance. The comfort zone consolidated existing habitus but also developed new aspects of it. Like the other high-achieving students, ‘not asking for help’ resonated with idiosyncratic, ipsative assessments of moves towards independence in his part-time job, personal and college life. These moves were important and he could articulate them in detail. Within the GNVQ and later in the degree programme at university, he worked out how to use assessment criteria in order to gain Distinctions and used teachers’ feedback to improve his work. This was a conscious strategy, revealed through the way he could recite actual
phrases from their previous written comments as he embarked on new work. Such strategies were crucial for his identity as a successful student, paralleling the other high-achieving students in the study.

Safety and comfort enabled Michael to work out new horizons for action that had great intrinsic value for him and he was proud of these. Confidence with an established habitus and the comfort zone of the GNVQ course enabled him to shape new horizons for action in subtle ways. They evolved through small steps in independence in his part-time job and popularity with peers. By Year 2, he was happy to ask teachers for help during lessons and also to help less confident students with their work. Trust and reciprocity were therefore part of the capital he drew upon and developed. Importantly, he talked a great deal about the support of his parents who subsidized his lifestyle and ‘are happy as long as I’m happy’. He was especially proud that his achievements made him the first in his family to go to university.

Enthusiasm for new opportunities for cultural and social capital within a business studies degree manifested itself in his pride in the university’s ‘beautiful’ new campus, a new, very diverse range of peers, including overseas students, and what he saw as the mature outlook of the teachers. This opened up a whole new world in the city he had always lived in, and the combination of familiar and new was a strong motivator for Michael. Initially, the absence of prescriptive assessment criteria and formative feedback from university tutors was liberating. But by the second year, he was frustrated with teachers and students who did not want to engage critically with the political content of modules. He also became critical of poor feedback on his work and the way that his mother still navigated him through the university’s administrative and labyrinthine modular grading systems with telephone calls and letters to tutors. Frustration contrasted with new-found confidence in his part-time job as assistant manager in a video shop. Stifled opportunities to develop critical autonomy, together with lack of procedural and personal autonomy, contrasted with his former success in GNVQ.

These new negative feelings did not sit easily with established habitus. He felt it was ‘wrong’ to be critical and was embarrassed that he was no longer ‘the nice Michael you [the author] knew in GNVQ’. In the face of this tension, he retreated to a personal comfort zone of working with ‘people like him’ and to a more instrumental approach to getting through the course. Unlike the GNVQ course, this comfort zone did not characterize the culture of the whole year group and was, instead, a small sub-field. By the middle of Year 3, he was determined to gain the qualification but was also trying to regain some intrinsic motivation in his final-year dissertation. He could not face just ‘getting through the degree’: instead, he wanted an upper second and some of the deep involvement in assignment work that he had experienced before. He eventually gained a lower second and in 2003 completed a one-year full-time MA in International Business at the same university.

Annette

From a background that Annette described as ‘middle-class’ and troubled experience at school where she was bullied ‘for being different’, she combined a charis-
matic feisty enthusiasm and a creative engagement with the content of her health and social care course. She saw GNVQ and the move to an FE college as creating a crucial second chance to show the potential to achieve well in formal education: she knew she had this potential, despite mediocre grades in GCSEs. She was popular with teachers and with high- and low-achieving students, moving easily between the norms and activities of different groups. She latched onto teachers she rated, namely those who combined depth in their subject with a willingness to be authentically human, to ‘be themselves’ with students. For these teachers, she put in special effort and sought their advice and extra feedback on her work. In contrast, teachers’ ability to get her through the restrictive assessment specifications by using an instrumental coverage and checking approach to feedback was a decidedly inferior characteristic. In this respect, she rebelled against the comfort zone, seeking challenge and intrinsic interest from the assignments.

Unlike Michael, she seemed to be creating a different habitus. Moving to the unfamiliar field of a vocational course in a large urban FE college, rather than the school where her peers had remained, was extremely valuable to her. In idiosyncratic ways, she used the GNVQ to define opportunities for developing new cultural and social capital that she saw as relevant. The scope for doing this was extremely important, and initially she hated the confines of the assessment specifications. Instead, she aimed for Distinctions by throwing herself wholeheartedly and imaginatively into the unfamiliar subjects offered in GNVQ. Assignments, particularly those in sociology, social policy and psychology, enabled her to explore her own life, circumstances within her family and the lives of disadvantaged young people she worked with in a youth club. Yet her creative ‘stream-of-consciousness’ approach to this analysis did not fit the assessment criteria. She spent a year resisting the structure they imposed. In Year 2, she conformed (albeit creatively) and gained Distinctions.

During the course, Annette lived with her partner and worked part-time in a youth club. Although her mother was supportive of her studies, pressures of caring for Annette’s ill father made it difficult to take a close interest in her studies and progress. Despite Annette’s positive attitudes to the course, social and personal preoccupations led to very erratic engagement. In the first year, this led to conflict and periods of uncertainty and disengagement. The ‘nagging’ that her partner gave her if she started to slide into demotivation during the course was a crucial support. By Year 2, her desire to escape the north-east city where she had always lived was in stark contrast to Michael’s desire to remain at home. Excitement at the prospect of university ‘as far away as possible’ sustained her motivation to do well through the second year. After GNVQ, she went to a pre-1992 university to study psychology.

Like the other high-achieving students in the study, Annette’s habitus within learning and social fields interacted and developed. In this characteristic, students showed the traits and attributes of the middle-class ‘embedded learners’ of another study, where personal identity (‘becoming somebody’), the activities of a formal learning programme, the lifestyle of being a student and ‘imagined futures’ are all inextricably linked (Ball et al., 2000). Annette’s enhanced social status with low- and high-achieving peers alike created social capital that she had not experienced at
school. Like other high-achieving students in the study, she was good at navigating peer and teacher norms and generated social capital with both groups. It was also important for her to appreciate the idiosyncrasies of the GNVQ teaching team, particularly in relation to their feedback on her assignments.

Importantly, and again like the other six high achievers, Annette and Michael were not seen as ‘swots’ or ‘sad’ by less successful or hardworking peers. Instead, they were popular whilst maintaining an assertiveness that enabled them to work hard when less-motivated students wanted to distract them: this commitment appeared to be integral to their status with other students. Annette talked enthusiastically of the tolerant coexistence in the GNVQ group of low and high achievers, and it seemed that this climate enhanced the status that was important to her achievement. However, this might also suggest that high achievement for young people who are developing a new sense of themselves as high achievers and successful learners is, in part at least, created by their need to do better than less motivated students. If so, this sets up specific forms of social capital that maintain inequality within the group.

Conclusions

It seems that high-achieving students in the study invested old habitus in new strategies for achieving good grades in GNVQ. This habitus combined with new opportunities for social and cultural capital offered by the field and horizons for action of GNVQ assessment regime in further education colleges. The article has aimed to show how subtle and iterative such processes and outcomes are. The comfort zone that arose from these interactions shaped the types of cultural and social capital that students could develop, or were prepared to develop. This distinction is important for acknowledging that students are far from passive recipients of any curriculum or assessment regime.

In some ways, the goals of GNVQ designers in demystifying cultural capital through public specifications of assessment enabled students to ‘play the system’ in terms of ‘getting through’ and this enabled them to see themselves as newly successful, autonomous students. In Michael’s case, this was with minimum disruption to habitus. In contrast, Annette could evolve a new habitus. For both students, instrumental strategies for getting through were integral to habitus, as were times of deep engagement with the content of assignments and assessment processes. The high-achieving students undoubtedly saw GNVQ as a worthwhile field in which to invest their practice.

However, cultural capital also depends on knowing more about structural conditions and opportunities for advancement. It also demands time, effort and emotional as well as material investment. Despite an ability to play the GNVQ assessment system, there were few opportunities, even for these two well-motivated students, to locate their experience within the sort of wider awareness of material conditions that contributes to critical autonomy and thereby to more empowering cultural capital. Analysis in the study shows that GNVQ was not solely responsible for this: indeed, Annette used assignments to explore her life in ways that were both meaningful and
valuable to her. Yet while GNVQ opened up limited possibilities for cultural capital, the comfort zone ended up stifling it.

Analysis here suggests that outcome-based assessment regimes inhibit cultural and social capital. However, it is perhaps important not to overplay the potential for any qualification at Advanced level to develop sophisticated forms of cultural and social capital. The GNVQ assessment regime and external conditions undoubtedly had negative effects on students’ potential to develop social and cultural capital. Yet it is also important to recognize that students’ habitus, together with external factors, were powerful influences on their ideas about what counted as ‘desirable’ social and cultural capital. This is likely to be the case whatever the type of assessment regime students work with, even when teachers try to develop more ambitious forms of social and cultural capital.

Students’ experiences and teachers’ responses explored in this article suggest that qualification designers, researchers and teachers should evaluate more precisely how assessment regimes in different qualifications shape cultural and social capital. However, current research in this area tends to be located within a specific educational sector, such as primary or post-16 education and little cross-sector analysis of concepts and issues explored in this article has been done. In addition, sociological and policy-based studies of assessment tend to be carried out separately.

Combining sociological and policy-based research could evaluate cultural and social capital within different qualifications and explore the effects of assessment policy and practice on the socialization of children, young people and adults as learners (see Ecclestone & Pryor, 2003, for further discussion). An important methodological basis for this is the longitudinal ethnographic approach developed by Pollard and Filer in the Identity and Learning Programme cited above. As more people participate repeatedly in formal learning and assessment throughout their lives, we need a better understanding of how cultural and social capital are developed or hindered in pre- and post-16 assessment regimes: cross-sector and cross-cultural work would contribute to this understanding.

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Notes

1. This was the Northern Council for Further Education and is now the NCFE, a major awarding body for adult and community education.
2. The typology in the study characterizes different forms of autonomy and motivation in post-16 learning programmes. ‘Procedural autonomy’ enables students to navigate through formal support structures (such as assessment specifications) and might provide a basis for personal and critical autonomy (Ecclestone, 2002).

References


**Appendix 1**

The research study cited in the paper comprised an in-depth analysis based on interviews with 25 policy makers and GNVQ designers in different parts of policy design and implementation.
processes about their aims for the assessment model and their perceptions of problems with assessment policy for GNVQs (see Ecclestone, 2000, 2002). A two-year case study of both year groups in two Advanced GNVQ courses in two urban FE colleges in precarious regional economies comprised a sample of 9 teachers and 25 students. The sample of 25 comprised students deemed by their teachers at the outset of the study to be ‘autonomous and motivated’. This rationale aimed to give official claims for goals of increased motivation and autonomy in GNVQs a favourable head start before other, non-qualification-related factors intervened to affect their realization. Analysis of data in the colleges, summarized and discussed in this paper, derives from: a series of post-observation interviews after lessons; observation of lessons and tutorials; participant observation in joint ‘blind’ marking of students’ assignments with each teacher (50 assignments in total); discussion of interpretations of grade criteria and the purposes of formative feedback with teachers; discussion of the same themes with students, focusing on specific assignments. A questionnaire followed up themes from data and was returned by 34 of 60 (55%) GNVQ teachers in regional sixth form colleges and FE colleges and 62 of 70 students in the eight groups covered by the college fieldwork.