2021

Using Institutional Ethnography To Illuminate the Contested Space of Grading

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USING INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY TO ILLUMINATE THE CONTESTED SPACE OF GRADING

A Dissertation Presented

by

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to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Education
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

August, 2021

Defense Date: May 21, 2021
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ABSTRACT

A plethora of research has documented the detrimental effects of assigning grades, A-F, to student work as well as the inherent inequities embedded in this century-old assessment practice that persists in the majority of US higher education institutions. Coupled with the ubiquitous Grade Point Average (GPA) and prevailing neoliberal audit culture in HEI, grades serve to maintain a social hierarchy veiled by the myth of meritocracy and objectivity.

The goal of this study was to investigate how grades operate as a text to mediate social relations and how faculty participate in the social organization of ruling regimes, often unknowingly. This study aim is to 1) illuminate how assessment policies, texts and discourses act on academics and 2) analyze how assessment discourses and policies subjectify academics as assessors. This project is informed by two theoretical frameworks: Institutional Ethnography (IE) and Foucault's conceptualization of disciplinary power and governmentality. Both theorists are interested in tracing the relations of ruling and governing. IE is a research approach for scholarship and activism. IE offers a method to begin to investigate the problematic of grading for faculty by tracing how the institutional relations of global capitalism organize faculty daily work through grades and professional discourses. Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and governmentality complemented this investigation by tracing the relations of governing through the technology of grades to regulate subjects.

Juxtaposing these two theoretical frameworks to "read" grades, affords an expansive understanding of how power operates in assessment practices at the microlevel within higher education's broader discursive context. This inquiry into the disjuncture of grading, reveals not only how assessment reforms undermine a faculty member's best intentions as an educator but also how assessment reforms without radical structural transformation will continue to fail.

DEDICATION

My daughter Audrey has been a constant inspiration to me. She has helped me strive to be my better self. At the heart of this project is my desire to model for her the courage to dare to compose one's life, to question assumptions, and to risk failure. Knowing that my actions become the pedagogy of my parenthood, I dedicate the completion of this milestone to her and to her future desires.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was completed during a pandemic. I want to acknowledge the loss and grief of many people during 2020-2021. I also want to acknowledge those who worked during this perilous time to keep us fed, healthy, and alive. I want to acknowledge the generosity of my friends, Nancy and Omar, who took me in when I lost my job and helped me hold a belief in the future. I also want to acknowledge the generosity of my friends, Betsy and Harro, whose island and barn retreats replenished my body and soul.

With gratitude, I want to thank my advisor, Alan Tinkler, for his guidance and unwavering belief in the value of this project. His confidence in the importance of my work helped me to see myself as an emerging scholar. I also want to acknowledge my dissertation committee, Susan Comerford, Alice Fothergill, Rille Raaper, Brenda Solomon. They asked probing questions, engaged me in stimulating intellectual conversations, and served as mentors to help this project come to fruition.

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CHAPTER 1: Mikey the Good Student [1]

Mikey, a freshman from mainland China, is at ease talking with faculty and peers. He engages with his peers. From the first day of class, I thought of Mikey as a "good student" – someone who helped create a learning community with his peers. But quickly, Mikey missed a lot of assignments resulting in a string of O's in our LMS. I still thought of him as a "good student." Not because of his grades, but because he had the disposition and attitudes I associated with a good student – intellectually curious, engaged, and questioning. I felt that Mikey was not just "working for the grade," something I had seen with his international peers in my class, but rather that he was working to expand his point of view and understanding.

At the end of the semester, my "good student" Mikey was failing my class. I added up his scores several times, adjusting where I could to give him more points within the bounds of the syllabus, but the math did not help him. Mikey's academic performance, according to the numbers, did not square with what the institution deemed a "good student" for the business school, namely, a GPA of 3.7 or higher. In the final self-reflection essay for the course, Mikey did not ask for my leniency, a better grade, nor did he try to bully me. Instead he wrote to me that he knew the consequences and accepted responsibility for the final grade he would most surely get. This impressed me; I thought that this honest self-appraisal should be valued in our business school, but his letter grade would not show this. Up until Mikey, I had not critically reflected on the

[1] Note: The story of Mikey is an account of an actual experience I had as a faculty member at the University of Vermont, where I worked as an ESOL faculty member in the Global Gateway Program.

long-term impact of the grades I gave students. I questioned myself for a long time on what it could mean if I failed Mikey – no business school, no academic placement in the U.S., and his return to China. In the end, I gave Mikey a D+ – the official university grading policy designation of "poor," not failing. Mikey, in my mind was not a failure. Using an IE lens, I can see my decision to give Mikey a D+ was my disjuncture; that is, my actual experience of teaching Mikey conflicted with the way his grade textually represented him, objectified him, and as a result I refused to fail him. Moreover, I started to ask myself questions: Why was I *in the position of being the institution's gatekeeper? How did my grading practices put me in that position? Thus started my journey to investigate the contested space of grading.*

CHAPTER 2: Introduction

Power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself.

Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.

- *Michel Foucault*

Statement of the Problem

A Faculty Member's Lived Experience: Grades in the Classroom

In the final weeks of the university semester, as undergraduate students calculate their grade for my course and overall GPA, a palpable shift exists in the classroom atmosphere: It feels tense, charged, and uneasy. This "white knuckle" feeling in the room continues until the final class period, when anxious students want to talk about their final grade. Many flood my inbox with emails. One student, who has turned in very few assignments since the beginning of the semester, is adding up her total points using Blackboard on her phone while asking me for extra credit options. Another student, whose acceptance into the business school requires a high GPA, has a distracted look on his face whenever the class begins. He has told me – more than once – he did not get the GPA *he wanted* last semester from a certain professor. At first this sounds like disappointment in his performance, but later, upon reflection, I perceived his comments as more of a veiled threat, as if he were saying, "Remember prof, I still have to complete the Student Teacher Evaluation form." There are some students, though, who have gotten A's all semester, who seem assured and confident, resolute to make it to the finish line – winners in this competition, not losers.

As this vignette illustrates, what grades signify is contested space, carrying implications within and beyond the classroom for students and for the professor. In higher education institutions (HEI), grades rank and sort a cohort, determining who will be selected to rise to the top of the academic pyramid – qualify, progress, matriculate, essentially "win" (Davidson, 2017; Labaree, 1997; Newfield, 2016). Furthermore, for professors and students, grades become a barrier to student-centered learning communities in which students feel they can take risks and work collaboratively (Tannock, 2017) while professors are often frustrated by the energy students put on grades rather than focusing on learning (Blum, 2016). But some students understand how the system works and they become experts at competing within it. As Blum suggests, "No one can be successful, can be a higher achiever, without mastering the "grammar of higher education" (p. 100).

Blum (2016), drawing on Margolis (2001), acknowledges that like other levels of schooling, higher education has been described as having a "hidden curriculum" that sustains inequality by reflecting the systemic societal values that interact with education. Such values include constant evaluation and competition with others; a distinction between powerful and powerless; and sustained inequality through racism, sexism, and class bias (Leroux, 2011; Rooks, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, 2017). Moreover, others have argued that grades do not align with the principles of critical and inclusive pedagogy, which purports to decenter power in the classroom (Davidson, 2017; Giroux, 1983; hooks, 1994).

Schools are institutions with a certain logic. Students who acquire the expertise to succeed in school often come from middle-class backgrounds with the social and cultural capital to accommodate the institution. As a result, they are often rewarded socially and economically (Blum, 2016; Holland, 2019; Newfield, 2016). High achieving students "have risen to the top in a system that rewards a certain calculated and steady focus on the measures of accomplishments" (Blum, 2016, p. 121). While others, who do not have the cultural capital acquired from economic social class, often do not "master the institution" (Blum; Hardie, 2015; Holland, 2019, 2012). What role does grading play in all of this? Grades are the 'measure of accomplishment"; they are the 'grand sorter' of schooling that sustains the social stratification. Moreover, grades buttress the pervasive neoliberal economic and social ideology in HEI, an ideology that reduces faculty and students alike to economic subjects whose purpose is to serve a capitalist economy (Patrick, 2013).

Stickiness of Traditional Grading

Since the early 1900's, grades have been promoted as an objective measure of student accomplishments, achievements, and worth (Ball, 2013; Blum, 2016; Davidson, 2017). Grading emerged with the new science of statistics that quantified human characteristics and distributed those characteristics along a scale of performance (Smith & Smith, 2019). But in recent years the confidence in the current traditional grading practices in higher education (GPA and letter grades) has garnered criticism from scholars who argue that grades are not objective, nor do they necessarily illuminate student achievement (Davidson; Jaschik, 2016, 2014; Rojstasczer & Healy, 2012;

Tannock, 2017). Furthermore, others argue that the GPA grading system fosters extrinsic motivation and credentialism – get the grade, get the diploma – which undermines the purpose of higher education: to encourage life-long learning, critical judgement, and intellectual curiosity, all in the service of preparing a democratic citizenry (Blum; Labaree, 1991; Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001; Tannock, 2017).

In addition, complaints of widespread grade inflation cast doubts on the reliability of the GPA grading system, questioning its ability to accurately reflect what students know and can do upon graduation (Rojstasczer, 2016). As the opening vignette suggests, grading is a contested space of conflicting interests between faculty, students, and administrators, reflecting not only cross purposes but also conflicting political, social and economic realities and visions(Harland et al., 2015; Kvale, 2007).

Given the centrality of traditional grades and GPA in determining student's future pathways (Holland, 2019)—including internships, majors, graduate school, and careers—I am curious why this seemingly mundane, ubiquitous, taken-for-granted faculty practice in higher education has not been researched more critically. There have been studies on grading inflation – the relationship between grades and course evaluations – and grade reliability (Smith & Smith, 2019). I have also found studies on students' perceptions of grade fairness and the efficacy of particular grading schemas. But the research is silent on the why and how of faculty grading practices in higher education. Critical studies of assessment (Raaper, 2016a, 2016b) have not as yet focused on a critical interrogation of grading practices or policies in HEI in the US.

Judging from the number of studies in the U.S. examined by Brookhart et al. (2016), empirical research on grading in higher education has not been nearly as extensive as it is in the K-12 system. U.S. compulsory education policies in K-12 might be the reason for this disparity. Although not formally compulsory, higher education is increasingly seen, for better or worse, as essential and an expectation for youth (Blum, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Newfield, 2016). There are some qualitative studies that have investigated college students' perceptions of their experience of grading, both in the classroom (Edgar et al., 2014; Gordon & Fey, 2010) and from an institutional/political perspective (Raaper, 2016a, 2016b, 2018). More often, though, U.S. higher education grading studies investigate grading at the classroom level, not the institutional level, focusing their inquiry on improvement of grading practices rather than critically analyzing institutional relations that undergird the process of assessment (Reynolds & Theran, 2000).

As some have noted, higher education grading has not been systematically studied (Boud, 2007), nor have there been many qualitative empirical studies that have explicated the grading phenomena from the faculty perspective (Brookhart et al., 2016). My study begins to address this gap in the research by critically examining the institutional relations and practices underpinning faculty grading practices at one HEI. Using Dorothy Smith's (2006) institutional ethnographic approach, I stand with Smith in the belief that if we are going to change social experience (in this case inequities in higher education), we have to first explicate it – unearth what is shaping it. This study commences to unearth

the forces shaping faculty grading practices in higher education and how faculty negotiate those forces.

Increasingly, faculty concerned with issues of social justice and equity – critical of the socially-constructed hierarchical structures and power relations circulating in the traditional higher education classroom – have adopted critical pedagogy methods in their teaching practices. Nonetheless, they, too, are often constrained by mainstream grading processes and neoliberal policies forwarded by the institution that have remained unchanged (Blum, 2016; Davidson, 2017; Giroux, 2002; hooks, 1994). Even well intentioned, humanistic or socially just pedagogical and grading reforms that attempt to empower students— such as peer and self-evaluation, or in this case, criteria-based grading— have not successfully decoupled their pedagogical practices from the institutional control inherent in mainstream grading practices (Reynolds & Theran, 2000). Thus, critical pedagogy, although it strives to disrupt social hierarchies in the classroom, does not alter the root cause underpinning grading practices: the hierarchical power relations embedded in institutional grading processes that persist, remain invisible, and have not been sufficiently analyzed (Larabee, 1997; Reynolds & Theran; Tannock, 2017). The contested space of grades is a conundrum for critical educators who want to advance social justice aims of higher education (Matusov et al., 2017; Shor, 2009).

And yet, despite the research and arguments repudiating traditional grading processes and calls for assessment reform (Boud, 2007; Brookhart et al., 2016; Link, 2019), mainstream grading practices persist in the majority of HEI. Indeed, there are only a few non-traditional "ungrading" colleges, such as Hamilton College, that have

abandoned traditional grading. Given the lasting and consequential impact grades have on learning and teaching, student psychological wellbeing, and students' future economic choices after graduation, it is surprising that most of the research on the deleterious effects of grading has focused almost exclusively on K-12 systems (Brookhart et al.; Harland et al., 2015). Extrapolating from this study I would assume there are political, economic, and social reasons for such grading "stickiness." Indeed, grades are sticky because they are in the service of something outside the classroom, namely, a neoliberal economic and social policy model, an audit culture, that serves the interests of capital accumulation, not the public good.

Future of the Academy

As researcher in this study, I am not proposing that grading practices should be improved; this would justify grades, which I hold as inherently undemocratic and problematic. Nor do I want to further strengthen GPA's stranglehold on higher education faculty practices. Rather, I stand with other scholars and public intellectuals who believe that grading in higher education needs to be transformed (Stommel, 2018, 2020), as one piece of a much larger and urgent 21st century project to transform the academy. Cathy Davidson, Founding Director of the Futures Initiative at the Graduate Center of City of New York, is one scholar who recognizes the urgent need to radically transform higher education to address the 'wicked problems' and challenges of the 21st century that our students face (Davidson, 2017b).

As Davidson (2017a, 2017b) explains, our current university structures and pedagogical practices were created in the early 20th century and are woefully inadequate

to address the problems our democratic institutions face now – such as climate change, police violence, intolerance, government surveillance. In the model of the early pioneers of the modern university, grading was one component of a project to authorize and credential a new professionalized managerial class in a corporate, urban society. But that academy of the Industrial Age of the 20th century, according to Davidson (2017a, 2017b), is not only antiquated but mismatched to what students and society need now, particularly given the likelihood that AI advancements will probably eliminate certain categories of whitecollar jobs in 10 years (Davidson, 2017b; Newfield, 2016).

As Canally and Davidson (2017b) urges, faculty need to be part of a movement that trains active learners who can challenge the status quo. I agree with and want to extend this argument to higher education faculty, who also need to challenge the taken-for-granted neoliberal policy model infiltrating higher education (Giroux, 2002, 2008; Newfield, 2016) if we do, in fact, want to eliminate inequality and foster a socially just, equitable, and democratic society. "Our mission cannot be just to train students to be 'workforce ready' for work that no longer exits. They need to be world ready" (Davidson, 2017b, p. 62). I interpret "world ready" as preparing college students to be more than economic subjects; they must become global citizens, contributing to the public good and critically engaging with "wicked problems" (Rittle & Webber, 1973, p. 155).

Research Rationale

Pilot Studies, Disquieting Questions, and Purposeful Sample

Not long after I joined the faculty at this university, I started describing my grading struggles (as depicted in the preceding introduction vignette) to other faculty in

other departments and colleges. I learned that my grading disillusionment was not uncommon. During these watercooler talks, faculty members shared their frustrations with grading, students' grade grubbing, and students' complaints and attempts to negotiate their grade. They also expressed their discomfort with being the sole "arbiter." The administrative purposes for grades – often taken for granted – have put faculty in the untenable position of passing judgment; indeed, they are arbitrating administrative decisions that have far-reaching consequences for students, beyond the faculty's classroom (Reynolds & Theran, 2000). There is a disjuncture between administrative grading purposes (purposes established and managed that are detached from the classroom) and faculty's assessment purposes, which constitute the lived experience *within* the classroom.

It was this disjuncture in grading purposes described in Chapter 1 and the collective anecdotal experiences described by my colleagues that inspired me to join forces with a faculty member in the college of nutrition sciences. Like me, this faculty member had doubts about the efficacy of grades and wanted to experiment with an "alternative" to traditional grading, what Linda Nilson calls "specifications grading" (Nilson & Stanley, 2015). I briefly describe specifications grading characteristics in Chapter 3, but I will first give the background of two pilot projects I conducted that informed the design of this dissertation study.

In 2017, the nutrition faculty member and I met to review her redesigned course syllabus, learning objectives, and assignments, aligning them with a specifications grading schema. She also reframed her talk about grades with her seventy nutrition

students, consented students for the project and clarified for students how the course requirements would be evaluated using a criteria-based grading schema, not a traditional grading schema. Subsequently, we conducted a second pilot study in 2018 with the same course (but not the same students), after fine-tuning our interview/focus group questions and collecting data from a classroom informant.

During these qualitative research pilot studies in 2017 and 2018, I facilitated focus groups, student interviews, and then analyzed and coded data. But these pilot studies surfaced something I had not expected. I had hypothesized that changing the grading schema would decenter power in the classroom, enhancing students' sense of empowerment, which our findings had suggested. However, disquieting questions arose for me about the institutional relations that were involved in the processes of assessment, something I had not considered in our pilot investigation design. My interviews with faculty surfaced new questions for me about institutional relations and the ways in which those relations influence faculty grading practices, often unconsciously. I wondered, where does the power originate that activates institutional resources to frame the meaning of grades in the classroom. This new grading schema gave the impression of greater student control, but did it actually do that? Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that this power continued to be the elephant in the room, even with criteria-based grading. The new grading schema created an illusion of student control while concealing power relations at play and institutional relations associated with assessment processes. Investigating these power relations became my focus.

Conflicts between faculty, students, and administration concerning grading, what I previously described as a "disjuncture" (Brown & Strega, 2015; Rankin, 2017a, 2017b), is the focus of my dissertation study. I reasoned that I should concentrate on faculty members who were dissatisfied with traditional grading schemas and eager to experiment with alternatives. Even though they might have been unaware of the disjuncture I perceived, they were clearly experiencing something in their current practices that contradicted their professional knowledge. I also reasoned that by limiting my focus to courses and faculty participating in a grading intervention, the process of discussing and experimenting the grading intervention would potentially disrupt faculty's previous assumptions or taken-for-granted experiences of traditional grading. This disruption offered fertile ground for exploring the disjuncture in grading practices. By comparing processes between traditional grading and the criteria-based grading intervention, faculty became research informants, "knowers" of their experience (Rankin, 2017a, 2017b).

I was confident that by presenting my faculty participants with alternate grading possibilities, I would uncover fertile ground for exploring the disjuncture in grading practices. Moreover, a purposeful sample of faculty, as noted above, assured they had knowledge and experience with the phenomena under study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Additionally, I only interviewed faculty who participated in a "specifications grading" learning community, hosted by the CTL in Fall 2018. This small group of faculty members (five) attended several meetings in Fall 2018 to discuss implementing specifications grading, which then precipitated general discussions concerning their challenges with grading. One other consideration for choosing this sample was the

faculty's willingness and ability to participate in a reflective and expressive manner, which is evidenced in their willingness to join a faculty learning community about the grading phenomena. Because I was a member of this learning community, I had easy access to faculty who would be appropriate informants for my study, as they were accessible, available, and could offer rich information with my limited resources (Patton, 2002).

In summation, by purposefully selecting faculty who are questioning conventional grading practices and experimenting with alternatives, my hope was that their rethinking of their grading schemas would foster open discussions to explore both their perceptions of what grades do, and of how such perceptions operate in faculty's daily practices. Moreover, I wanted to explore the ways faculty consciously or unconsciously identify a disjuncture similar to the one I had in Chapter 1.

In truth, this study only initiates an investigation into the constituent parts that create the "elephant in the room" when it comes to grading practices in higher education. I reasoned that focusing only on these faculty members and the classroom setting was not sufficient; I needed to analyze the grading processes in terms of institutional power. That is, I needed to turn my gaze up (Brown & Strega, 2015) and ask the question, who is served by our current grading processes? Although, not drawn upon in this study, I also interviewed an informant student who had previously only experienced traditional grading systems and was a student in a course in which the grading intervention occurred. I was curious as to how their perspective of grades and of this grading intervention (specifications grading) specifically affected their perceived relationship with students.

This could potentially be a fruitful future investigative ground to surface contrastive experiences, as well as provide insights into or contrasts with faculty's perceptions of grading.

My informants' material experience (and mine) have helped reveal a small corner of the social organization of grading. Building off of the current work, a future study could continue to map the network of social relations organizing assessment practices in higher education.

Purpose of the Study

What bolsters this stickiness of traditional grading? My study endeavors to trace the institutional, social, and power relations that undergird current hierarchical grading practices in higher education. The purpose of this institutional ethnography was 1) to analyze higher education assessment processes in terms of institutional power and social relations, starting from the faculty/student level up through the departmental level, as seen in one department at a public university; 2) to describe how faculty experience and perceive grading practices, specifically after an alternative grading practice (specifications grading) is introduced in a course within this department; and 3) to surface concealed power relations that operate in and through higher education grading practices. I hope this study stimulates future conversations in higher education on the efficacy of current grading practices, specifically how grading practices intersect with a democratic purpose of higher education and how to redress the social inequities of grading.

I also hoped this study expands faculty's understanding of the words, texts, ideas, directives, and policies related to the problematic of grading, and that it suggests ways to

work for change using the Institutional Ethnographic, which is outlined in Chapter 3. In fact, Smith (2006) asserts that the Institutional Ethnographer's approach to research can be transformative. The potential for transformation comes from knowing (mapping) these relations embedded in abstract concepts – such as grading, GPA, standards—and by illuminating how institutional relations manifest themselves in our daily experience, texts, and language.

I am interested in how grading in higher education is a faculty practice that is affected by a network of institutional text-mediated relations *outside* the classroom, relations not transparent to faculty or students, nor for that matter, to the researcher. Smith (2006) refers to these translocal relations as "ruling relations." It is these ruling relations that I map in my study. I have investigated whose interests are served by our current grading practices and how our consciousness with respect to grading is organized. According to Campbell and Gregor (2004), "Ruling takes place when the interests of those who rule dominate the actions of those in local settings" (p. 36). I have investigated how this ruling organized faculty assessment work, decisions, and practices.

As the opening account in Chapter 1 illustrates, grades in higher education are often a contested space between faculty and students. Critical theorists contest grading in higher education (Ball, 2013; Giroux, 2009; Tannock, 2017) in large part because the preoccupation with measuring, standards, classification, and utilitarianism fosters a social hierarchy that undermines higher education's role as a public good. Given the systemic and lasting impact of grades, as well as the time and space grading practices occupy in faculty's daily work, I strove to explicate the grading practices of faculty and how those

institutional (ruling) interests – unannounced manifestations – influence relations between faculty and students and faculty and administration.

My research goal has been to agitate resistance (Brown & Strega, 2015), to make visible dominant discourses that we encounter every day, dominant discourses that have an unconscious influence on our lives (Foucault, 1975, 1995). I have chosen institutional ethnography because IE researchers put the pieces of a much larger puzzle together, always maintaining a view toward tracing the institution relations of power and global capitalism, and how everyday experiences come into being as a result of those social relations (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2006).

Institutional Ethnography - Researching Beyond the Local

In Chapter 4, I explain the ontology of IE in greater detail. I define important terms to support the rationale for this method of inquiry and why it is an appropriate method to answer my research questions. In this study, "social organization," as conceived by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (2006), is the interplay between social relations; that is, people's daily activities, and their actions as social beings that organize our lives (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). We participate in these social relations that not only organize our daily lives but also bring phenomena into being, often without much conscious thought (Smith). This study will investigate how grading in higher education is socially organized and how social relations at play in our grading practices influence faculty actions.

From an IE approach, identifying a disjuncture is the first step in discovering a "research problematic" from the data, as noted by Rankin (2017a). "The formulation of a

research ‘problematic’ expresses the researcher’s discoveries and descriptions of when knowledge ‘shifts’” (p. 3). I gave an account of my disjuncture in Chapter 1. It encapsulates the junctures (or disjuncture) the researcher notes when knowledge generated from “’being there’ is abstracted into something else” (Rankin, p. 3). After the aforementioned pilot projects, I identified a disjuncture in the cross purposes of grading from the faculty point of view. The pilot study transcripts also helped me notice and name what IEs term “a problematic” (Rankin) in higher education, that is, an ordinarily taken-for-granted happening in faculty’s experience that is perceived as troubling or uneasy – which is indeed how I felt about my own grading experiences.

Smith (2006) suggests that IE inquiry should grow out of what the researcher identifies as a problematic ‘the topic for exploration, the thing that puzzles you (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Grading is a significant part of faculty’s daily work; as such, it proved a concrete starting point for me, a way to examine and describe these everyday relations between faculty and students from a bottom-up institutional ethnographer’s approach. Consistent with the IE framework, grading happens in relation to other translocal texts and decisions, and that suggests power relations or what Smith terms “ruling relations.” Ruling relations are not just imposed rules; they are practices faculty take up to act in a certain way to put ruling relations into action (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). “Rather than treating the knower’s location as a problem of bias, we [institutional ethnographers] believe that it reveals something about whose interests are served. And that is an issue of power” (Campbell & Gregor, p. 15). Thus, institutional ethnographers study how one’s knowing is organized by power relations.

In this study, I uncover one corner of the social organization of grading in the higher education setting. As an IE researcher, my aim was to investigate the "features of social organization that must be traced and understood to make sense of the setting" (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 49). I did not know these features at the outset. The goal of this study was initially to investigate how things *actually* happen with grading, regardless of what faculty understand them to be. The research problematic, however, became an account of how faculty participate in this social organization of ruling relations, often unknowingly.

Research Questions

1. Given the map of social relations as illuminated by institutional ethnography, how do faculty experience grading? (IE)
2. How do assessment policies, texts, and discourses act on academics? (IE)
3. How do assessment discourses and policies subjectify academics as assessors? (Foucault)
4. How are these discourses used, responded to, and reacted against? (Foucault)

Research Aims

I studied the grading practices of three faculty members who participated in a faculty learning community on "specifications grading." My aim was to understand how institutional processes are linked to faculty's assessment work in the classroom. IE has a broad definition of *work*: Work is a purposeful activity a person undertakes (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2006). I wanted to describe the social relations influencing grading and how faculty mediations respond to or resist these social relations.

In this research, I located myself from the standpoint of faculty. From this position, I followed the daily practices of grading beyond just what happens at the end of term when grades are issued. Instead, I investigated what is known about a seemingly taken-for-granted, commonplace practice to see how social relations impact and shape educational practices of grading. This research offers an alternative to the authorized notions of evaluation and assessment, shifting away from those abstract concepts back to the embodied knower, that is, to faculty so that we can understand how things happen the way they do. As an IE researcher, I am not asking why things happen the way they do as much as *how* things happen the way they do. I analyze and then explicate the problematic associated with the social organization of grading, exploring how grading is hooked onto other social relations. Understanding how something works is a requisite for changing it (Smith, 2006).

Significance of Study

This study is needed because the purpose of grading is a contested site (Tannock, 2017). Little has been written about faculty's empirical experience of what has been assumed to be a normal mundane occurrence in higher education combined with growing doubts about the efficacy of grading, even as it remains a persistent assessment practice in HEI. As far as I can discern, no investigative work has been done on the role ruling relations (power relations) have played in shaping faculty grading practices. I contend that neoliberal practices, priorities, and accountability technologies are not inevitable and can be resisted when faculty critique and reflect upon their own classroom/assessment

practices (Giroux, 2002, 2009). IE is a research approach that catalyzes this reflective praxis.

This study contributes to the ongoing conversations about the purpose of assessment in academia, given our long-standing democratic ideals of the purpose of higher education as a public good. I surface the way in which social relations organize our grading practices and what that means in a larger political context. Mapping the social organization of grading shifts our understanding of what meaningful feedback should look like, and, I hope, raises questions pertinent to our vision of the future of higher education. This study illuminates why faculty are experiencing grading as they do, and raises questions that challenge status quo practices. Boud (2007) and Brookhart et al. (2016) note that adverse impacts of assessment have been noted but that little has been done to address them systematically or to investigate their impact on higher education. Others have noted that there is insufficient analysis of the institutional relations of power concerning assessment processes (Reynolds & Theran, 2000) or of how those processes are perceived by faculty and students. IE's ethnographic approach provides a deeper dive into how grading policies, texts, and discourses impact faculty practices, perceptions. and experiences. Furthermore, concerns about higher education as a public good warrant this ethnography approach to map the institutional practices that undergird the status quo, in hopes of disrupting said practices.

CHAPTER 3: Literature Review

Grading Practices in Higher Education: A Culture of Rewards, Punishments, and Accountability

A Personal Account

Before 2013, I had taught primarily in community-based adult-education settings, not in HEI. These contrasting teaching experiences have informed this study, because they brought the practice of traditional grading (A-F) into stark relief. I start this review with a brief account of this contrast and how it initiated this study.

My background and training before teaching at HEI was influenced by theorists with a more emancipatory or transformative vision of education, theorists such as Paulo Friere, Malcolm Knowles, and Stephen Brookfield. The adult learners I taught, often older than traditional college-age students, came to our classes generally because they wanted to acquire professional certificates, language skills, or a high school equivalency diploma, for example. Often my course assessments were formative and competency-based (Girardi & Crew, 2016): How well had students mastered the skills they needed to progress in their particular educational program or to attain personal goals; grades did not figure into the learning progress. As an adult educator, I had little experience or training in how to assign traditional grades (A-F), nor were grades generally discussed among my colleagues or students. I saw my position in the classroom not as the "assessor" (Foucault, 1975) but as facilitator, coach, and peer mentor, helping students achieve their learning goals while encouraging their agency (Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019). In this community-based adult-learning context, I understood students' motivation for learning

as oriented to what learning theorists describe as “mastery learning” (LeJeune, 2010) or “mastery goals,” not oriented toward achieving good grades or extrinsic rewards per se (Benita et al., 2014).

Mastery orientation means students are motivated intrinsically to improve their competence (Docan, 2006), relying on their self-referenced progress toward their mastery goal (Benita et al., 2014; Mukhalati & Taylore, 2019). This intrinsic motivation to learn is the “inherent satisfaction derived from effective, freely chosen action (Deci et al., 1999a as cited in Pulfrey, 2013, p. 39). Freely chosen action, not extrinsic rewards or the threat of punishment, fosters a learner’s mastery orientation. I do not want to over generalize my adult-community teaching experience, but it seems to me, in accord with adult-learning theorists, that these students did not *need* grades to learn (Mukhalalati & Taylore). The discourse of grades did not command center stage in our student-teacher interactions. Of course, I would sometimes get questions such as, “In your opinion, is this an A paper or C paper?” I would often hedge, preferring to frame my answer with responses such as, “Here is why I think this paper is better than your last one.” I really did not know if it was an A or a C paper; I had no training in how to grade. Such questions, I realize now, seem to have been students’ way to gauge their proximity to a threshold, and not necessarily a desire to achieve grades or a particular GPA (Chuklov, 2006). I surmise that their questions (as I discuss in subsequent sections) reflected the way in which grades, even from our earliest school experiences, continue to signify value in comparison to normative standards: Is it good enough and for that matter, am I good enough?

In 2013 I took a position as a faculty member in a public research university (I taught there for six years). I lacked experience and understanding of high stakes grading policies and practices but was thrust into an environment which required me to grade (A-F) all my students and most of their assignments. Students wanted to know their grades. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* describes culture shock as "a sense of confusion and uncertainty, sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation." The expression "culture shock" describes my reaction to higher education's high stakes assessment practices; I was unprepared for, anxious about, and confused by the "grading arms race" (Harland et al.) between faculty and students. I had transitioned from a culture of "mastery learning orientation" (Pulfrey et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000) to the "audit culture" of a public research university.

Shore (2013) defines audit culture as a set of behaviors that transform organizations to make them auditable by operating on measurable financial principles of costs and benefits (p. 106). The ubiquity of quantitative performance-measures transforms organizations and the way people see themselves: … "[A]udits reshape organizations in their own image, turn targets into measures, and transform people into self-managing subjects" (Shore, 2013, p. 106). In higher education, the prevailing audit culture focalizes performativity for faculty and students (Ball, 2003). In the case of students, performativity is signified by grades/GPA and the concomitant rewards or punishments – scholarships, program acceptance, internships, financial aid (Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). Many students I have encountered, domestic and international,

exhibited more of a "performance orientation" (Docan, 2006), or an extrinsic motivation (Pulfrey et al., 2013). In other words, an audit culture fosters students' fetishizing grades, not the learning that the grade represents (Labaree, 1997), resulting in ... "a new kind of individual: the 'auditee,' a political subject who embodies an 'auditee mentality'" (Shore, 2013, p. 106). These are the students I saw in higher education.

I Can Change This: Promises of Assessment Reform Amended

In contrast to mastery orientation, studies in motivation define performance orientation as students motivated by external achievement rewards or performance goals that focus on out-performing others or performance-contingent rewards, e.g., grades, GPA (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988; Pulfrey et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These motivational studies often suggest the potential for instructional interventions to reorient students' motivation and enhance student learning, particularly interventions that reform teacher assessment practices (Yeager et al., 2019). I took these studies to heart. There is an implicit promise that humanistic, student-centered assessment reforms cannot solely reorient students to learning for learning's sake (Croussard, 2010); it must also facilitate a shift to the "use value" of education as a public good (Labaree, 1997). "When education is conceived of as a use value, then citizens, employers, students place value on education because they consider the content of what is learned there to be *intrinsically* useful" (Labaree, p. 54 [added emphasis]). Labaree's observation parallels my own experience teaching without grades in an adult learning context: Education was "providing students with a useful array of competencies that are required either for

constructive citizenship in a democratic society or for productive work in a market society" (Labaree, p. 54).

When I initiated my assessment-reform exploratory study in 2017 (see Pope et al., 2019), I had concluded that *how* I graded students was the linchpin. I therefore hypothesized that by remodeling my grading practice, I would not only diverge from the grading arms race but also promote a socially just grading practice. A remodeled, criteria-based grading practice promised to decenter power relations in the classroom through greater transparency (Sadler, 2005). I did not question, however, the taken-for-grantedness of grading students in HEI; instead I, like my colleagues who participated in this study, presumed grading needed only be reformed, not eradicated (Pope et al.). But as this study progressed, it became increasingly clear to me that a focus on assessment reform belies a critical analysis of the deeper structural, socio-political implications of grading. Thus, my inquiry shifted from an analysis of an assessment intervention, specifications grading as described by Nilson and Stanny (2015) to an inquiry of institutional power concealed in grading practices, which then lead me to institutional ethnography.

Motivation studies contend that how students' activities are rewarded can influence their motivation to perform them, thus increasing or decreasing extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ambrose et al., 2010; Blum, 2016; Yeager et al., 2019). More salient to this inquiry is the *continued existence of grades* in HEI, reformed or otherwise. Grades establish a disparity between faculty and students: a disciplinary power differential between assessed and assessor (Foucault, 1975). Moreover, grades reify the

disjuncture described in this paper's opening account of angry, anxious students waiting for their final course grade because their grade does in fact *reward or punish* them for their performance (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Ambrose et al.; Foucault; Tannock, 2017). In this inquiry, I accepted Reynolds and Trehan (2000) challenge to analyze institutional power in assessment practices by interrogating *how* this disjuncture comes about: what constitutes the "work" of grading, how faculty "take up" that work, and what faculty grading reveals or conceals regarding the ruling relations and the exercise of power in HEI. I argue that grading is a signifier for the underlying socio-political conditions generating the disjuncture I experienced when grading students, and therefore that assessment posits faculty as political actors (Canally, 2012; Crossouard, 2010; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Kvale, 2007).

Larabee (1997) characterizes the shift in higher education from a public good with a use value to a private good with an exchange value. In other words, he contends that there is a commodification of higher education (Giroux 2002; Newfield, 2016) in which grades convert to a currency of exchange (Crossaurd, 2010). As Labaree argues, when the value of education becomes an exchange value for social mobility, then,

> The value of education from this point of view is not intrinsic but extrinsic, because the primary aim is to exchange one's education for something more substantial – namely, a job, which will provide the holder with a comfortable standard of living, financial security, social power, and cultural prestige. (p. 55)

Critiques of the neoliberalization of HEI resonate with this shift (Connell, 2013; Giroux, 2009). Credentials can be exchanged, like a commodity, and are valued for the status they

can secure, not the knowledge they symbolize (Labaree). Grades as currency mediate this exchange and perpetuate the fetishizing I had observed, as "students at all levels quickly come to the conclusion that what matters most is not the knowledge they learn in school but the credentials they acquire there. Grades, credits, and degrees – these become the objects to be pursued" (Labaree, p. 56). Labaree's conceptualization of this value shift of grades as a kind of currency echoes the cultural shift I experienced when first entering the academe.

Inquiry into Grading Work: Faculty as Political Actors for Ruling Relations

Harland et al. (2015) offers three purposes for grades in higher education: judging what a piece of work is worth; giving formative assessment for improvement; and collecting data for administrative decisions. But these purposes, repeated in many grading studies (Gurskey & Brookhart, 2019), presume grade neutrality. Grades, however, are *not* neutral (Ball, 2013; Kvale, 2007). What is more, Kvale and others (Boud, 2007; Davidson, 2017a) identify inherent conflictive purposes embedded in higher-education grading practices, highlighting the latent socio-political function of grading practices and policies. To deploy grades, faculty become the gatekeeper of the institution, wielding disciplinary power in a high-stakes accounting regime (Shore & Wright, 2015b). Harland and colleagues' study is an example of how assessment-reform efforts fail to sufficiently acknowledge how assessment practices, and specifically grades, are taken up by faculty, often unwittingly, as a proxy for institutional power and ruling relations within HEI.

Faculty power in assessing students means grades have consequences beyond the classroom, including program progression, scholarships, internships, financial aid, and

graduate school acceptance, which endows faculty with significant power. As the vignette in Chapter 1 illustrated, my exercising that power revealed what Smith (2006) describes as "a disjuncture" or "problematic" (Rankin, 2017a): a conflict between my professional knowledge as an educator and what the institution expected me to do when grading: sort and rank students. As an IE researcher, this problematic became my methodological tool for noticing and for asking implicit questions about faculty's grading work and the institutional processes socially organizing grading.

I describe IE and the research method in more detail in the subsequent section, but my personal account of grading presented in this paper, as with other faculty informant accounts, helped to organize this IE study by empirically tracking and explicating the complex, taken-for-granted social organization of grading. Tracing these institutional processes in faculty discourses and practices is my central analysis interest.

Many studies have long maintained that grades negatively impact student learning (Yeager et al., 2019). My study takes a different trajectory. Rather, I argue that *all* grading, even well-intentioned humane efforts to remodel grading practices, as was the case in this study, perform a gatekeeping function. This function is the "elephant in the room," often unacknowledged by faculty, that grading students is a political act and faculty are political actors. The disjuncture I experienced as a faculty member "taking up the work" of grading in HEI revealed how ruling relations are tied to prevailing neoliberal economic and to social forces operate within and beyond the classroom. Grades, buoyed by an audit culture aligned with neoliberal interests, are a contested space in higher-education assessment-reform initiatives. Audit culture discourses—such as

accountability, quality, efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency—veil their interests in an ethic that presents itself as benevolent (Shore, 2017). To put it another way, what I was implicitly *required to do with grades* (gatekeep, rank and sort students, etc.) conflicted with my professional knowledge of what I *should do* (provide feedback for mastery learning, as an example). Inquiry into this disjuncture revealed not only how assessment reform undermined my best intentions as an educator, but also how assessment reform, without radical structural transformation, would continue to fail.

Introduction

> Professors can change attitudes, but only by thinking about educational values, and not just grading policies.
>
> --Cathy Davidson. *The New Education, How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux.*

Critical theorists, pedagogues, and scholars have called for a critical examination of higher-education practices that impede social justice and perpetuate an oppressive class structure and a patriarchal system, particularly in our current neoliberal context (Ball, 2013; Cannella et al., 2012; Connell, 2013; Giroux, 1983, 2002, 2009; McArthur, 2010; Loughead, 2015; Newfield, 2016; Tannock, 2017). One practice starting to garner greater critical attention is the university's traditional grading system of A-F and GPA and how it contributes to inequality in higher education by differentiating and classifying students (Blum, 2016; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; Reynolds & Trehan, 2000; Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Empirical research studies on grading in higher

education, as cited in Guskey and Brookhart (2019), focus on quantitative studies related to issues of reliability, which suggest human inconsistencies are to blame for grading problems, not inherent institutional structures. Other studies have researched students' perceptions of grading fairness and the importance of effort in grading policy (Gordon & Fay, 2010; Pepper & Pathak, 2008; Tippin, 2012), highlighting discrepancies between faculty and student expectations. Still others have examined the adverse impact on student motivation (Edgar, 2014; Docan, 2006) and critical judgment (Boud, 2007). While these empirical studies have illuminated the contradictions and challenges of our current assessment practices, they have not sufficiently critiqued the underlying socio-political function of grading, its continued structural importance in most HEI, nor the institutional power latent in grading practices.

In the subsequent section, I draw on the arguments of scholars who have linked the history of grading to societal forces in the late 19th and early 20th century to the rise of the eugenics movement, which racially categorized people (Ball, 2013; Davidson, 2017). My review of the literature suggests that the practice of grading, while it might appear to be a benign, everyday occurrence in higher education (some would say a necessary evil!), is not so benign. Such a practice is, in-fact, a socio-political act (Kvale, 2007; Wall et al., 2014). The politics of grading, some critical theorists argue, is evident in an ideological and policy shift in the purpose of higher education, from a public good to a private good (Giroux, 2002, 2009; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Labaree, 1997; Newfield, 2016; Wall et al., 2014). Such a shift means education has become another commodity for sale, another consumer good. The corporatization of higher education in our neoliberal social and

economic context, ideologically shifts the purpose of education from a public good to a private good. This commodifies higher education at the expense of developing a democratic citizenry who continue to critically examine the society (Giroux, 2009; Molesworth et al., 2009; Newfield; Tannock, 2017).

The purposes of higher education are interwoven with assessment policy. I argue that what grades "mean" is contested space. For students, grades mean rank, who will be selected to rise to the top of the pyramid. Furthermore, grades become the end goal, assuring a student's standing in the social hierarchy, conferring a credential in exchange for social position (Labaree, 1997; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). But this meaning undermines higher education's mission as a public good (Giroux, 2004, 2009; Labaree; Newfield, 2016; Ravitch, 2001). In the following sections I outline a brief history of traditional grading. I then summarize the literature on the current neoliberal context of higher education as it intersects with an audit culture manifested in grading.

Grading and the Tyranny of Numbers

For faculty, grading carries a myriad of problems. For example, some studies cited by Guskey and Brookhart (2019) have found that the grade students anticipate getting in a course correlates to how they evaluate a teacher – the higher the grade the better the evaluation – which in turn portends significant consequences for faculty reappointment, promotion, and tenure. Others have noted that the rising tide of grade inflation in the last 40 years has cast doubt on the efficacy of grades to accurately measure student achievement (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). Several studies have demonstrated that there is no corollary between grades and college graduates'

achievement (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001; Lindemann & Harbke, 2011; Nilson & Stanny, 2015). Some have argued that when students are viewed as consumers paying tuition, faculty feel pressure to raise students' grades—as a kind of fee for service (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). When grades become an exchange currency between faculty and students, not only do they fail to illuminate what a student has achieved but also diminish higher education's core mission of civic engagement (Nie & Sunshine Hillygus, 2001) and as a public good (Labaree,1997; Newfield, 2016; Tannock, 2017). Given these pernicious effects of grades, inconsistencies, and conflicts, one has to wonder how grades started in the U.S. HEI.

While this paper does not purport to be a history of grading in the higher education of the early 20th centuries, its legacy is relevant to the issues at hand—audit culture and the accountability regime. As Davidson (2017) describes, everything within the university system is ranked and graded: students, professors, and departments. This sorting and systematic ranking across HEI reflects the professionalization of higher education, a process that started after the turn of the 20th century and that has grown steadily as college enrollments have continued to balloon. Davidson and others (Blum, 2016; Ravitch & Viterelli, 2001; Rothstein & Jacobson, 2006) explain this scientific management of education as an arcane system of grading and assessment designed at a time in the 1900s when U.S. universities, influenced by industrialization practices such as Taylorism, were establishing industry norms (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Beliefs in data-driven scientific methods, quantification, and professionalization started trends in higher-education grading that continue today (Rothstein & Jacobsen). Davidson describes the

far-reaching institutional consequences that grow out of student grades and test scores, most notably as these metrics influence the ranking of universities in *US News and World Report*, the primary publication universities use to establish their brand to recruit students, attract research and grants, etc. (Deresiewicz, 2014).

But what is driving this tyranny of numbers? Ball (2015) characterizes this effect as the mechanism that modern schools employ to divide, differentiate, and categorize – in essence, a technology of exclusion. "Numbers define our worth, measure our effectiveness and, in a myriad of other ways, work to inform or construct what we are today. We are subject to numbers and numbered subjects" (Ball, p. 299). I would argue, as Foucault does (1975), that grades, their equivalent numbers, and GPA percentages, function as a mechanism of power embedded in schools to evaluate and compare students. The grade, like Foucault's conceptualization of the examination, is designed to make students countable, visible, and manageable. Grades and GPA in higher education make the learner "...visible and calculable, but power is rendered invisible, and the learner sees only the tasks and the texts which they must undertake and their 'result,' position, ranking, category" (Ball, p. 300).

Mediated through a neoliberal audit culture, this invisible power within modern educational institutions is used, as Ball (2015) asserts, to manage and govern the population. In the subsequent section I elaborate on the history of measurement in education, a precursor to the current accountability regime of higher education. I then review the intersection of audit culture and assessment practices in higher education and

how grades manifest the continuation of disciplinary power as conceptualized by Foucault.

The Measurement of a Student Body

The foundation of assessment in modern education has a darker history that is linked to the ranking, division, and exclusion of students as legitimized by eugenics (Ball, 2013; Davidson, 2017a). Ball argues that "we can begin to see in this history some particular ways in which education in the nineteenth century becomes one of intersection between discipline and regulation, between the individual and the social body, between individualizing and totalizing which in most respects remains in place today" (p. 65). Statistics and eugenics catalyzed the measurement of individuals and introduced the "normal curve" (Brookhart et al., 2016), also known as the bell curve (Davidson, 2017). Francis Galton, a professed eugenicist and scientist of psychometrics, went so far as to rank human characteristics on a scale of A-D, asserting such ranking could predict the extent that one could likely have high-quality offspring (Brookhart et al.). In the early 1900s, the science of statistics, coupled with European higher-education models, to produce a ranking and categorizing students that greatly influenced American universities (Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Harvard president, Charles Eliot, credited with turning Harvard into a modern research university, embraced Galton's thinking and sought to apply normal curve theory and science to education (Davidson). Eliot advocated for A-F grading (Blum, 2016). "[Eliot's approach] reduces grading to determining the number of grading divisions and the number of students who should fall into each category. Thus, there is a shift from a decentralized and fundamentally haphazard approach to assigning

grades to one that is based on ‘scientific’ principle” (Brookhart et al., p. 701). By 1917, following Eliot's lead, 36 out of 64 colleges used A-F grading practices (Brookhart et al.).

The normal curve theory as scientific principle reinforces the myth that humans are born with certain unalterable “innate capacities” which can be, indeed should be, categorized in relation to what is deemed normal (Ball, 2013; Brookhart et al., 2016). A traditional grading system (A-F), therefore, was intended to rank students on a standard norm, not to measure student achievement (Brookhart et al.; Davidson, 2017). We continue to see in grading discourses and policies an affirmation of scientifically provable, socially constructed, differences in which “class, race, disability and blood intertwine within education policy and practice, constantly re-emerging in different forms and contexts and guises, always in relation to power” (Ball, p. 96). Assessment reform efforts that purport to measure achievement yet retain a hierarchical grading system, elide the power relations exercised in discourses intended to rank students on a normal curve. The elephant in the room when it comes to grading, regardless how it is reconfigured, is that “learners are organized for teaching purposes and encouraged to view themselves in terms of the paradigm of ability and its normal ‘distribution’” (Ball, p. 101). More than 100 years have passed since Galton, eugenics, and Taylorism, yet HEI continue to operate from this “normal curve” mindset.

Given the history of traditional grading outlined above, it is apparent that grading is not innocent; it is enmeshed with values of inequality, competition, and privilege (Kvale, 2007). Grades mask a societal hierarchical structure, as Ball (2013) contends, while purporting to be “class blind” and giving the illusion of equality (Kvale).

University exams in the Middle Ages, for example, were severe and competitive; students were either publicly honored or shamed based on exam scores (Kvale). In the modern university, Tannock (2017) claims that grades execute punishment and shame particularly when grading on a curve relegates one-third of the class to the category of losers. A false meritocracy seals this shame by upholding that students deserve it (Marc, 2020).

What is more, grades operate to "socially select" certain students for additional educational opportunities, better social position, and privileges (Deresiewicz, 2014; Kvale, 2007; Labaree, 1997). Disturbingly, and something that should alarm any faculty member seeking social justice in higher education, the grading literature links eugenic modes of thought to our current educational system and grading practices (Davidson, 2017). Ball (2013) claims that grades implicitly support a view of hereditarianism that ranks, sorts, categorizes as if it is natural and in the blood. Foucault referred to this practice as a "new racism," that is, mundane techniques (such as grading) are used to divide the classroom into types; these types are then ranked, ordered, and distributed into hierarchical tables that are scaled and catalogued (Foucault, 1970b, as cited in Ball, p. 100). We can expand Foucault's new racism to include socially constructed divisions into types: gender, class, age, and ability. With this background in mind, this study investigates how faculty and our grading practices are implicated in these exclusionary assessment practices and policies.

Assessment and Audit Culture

This history of grading previously described illuminates the way in which grades/assessment established a social hierarchy in HEI (Blum, 2016) that continues today but has been reconfigured, using quantitative performance technologies of an audit culture. "Audit culture" is a term coined

> [b]y sociologists and anthropologists to describe not so much a type of society, place or people so much as a condition, one shaped by the use of modern techniques and principles of financial audit, but in contexts far removed from the world of financial accountancy. In other words, audit culture refers to contexts in which the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct – and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating. (Shore, 2008, p. 279)

Quantitative-performance measures of an audit culture not only reflect a preoccupation with measurement, evaluation and competition, but also galvanize high stakes testing, credentialism, hyper-accountability, and the ideology of meritocracy.

A benchmark of the neoliberal accountability regime (Apple, 2005; Newheiser, 2016), quantitative performance measures started with Taylorism and the scientific management practices in the 1920s and 1930s. HEI adopted this audit culture, which values an accounting of *everything* in life, including learning. Grades forward an audit logic of efficiency, a target-driven normative order driven by numbers as applied to the scientific management of education (Shore & Wright, 2015a, 2015b). "What is distinctive

about audits today is the scale of their diffusion and the extraordinary extent to which auditing principles and practices have proliferated" (Shore, 2017, p. 105). The language of accountancy, no longer confined to the business sphere, has become a way of life in our neoliberal worldview that is supported by our institutions, including higher education, in which governing by numbers is connected to rationalities of commerce and markets (Shore).

In the logic of an audit culture, grades are a regulatory apparatus of the university, and by extension, a discipline technology of the markets in a regulatory state (Raaper, 2016b). Grades regulate students' activity and behavior. Indeed, in the Foucauldian view, they regulate bodies who have been schooled and coerced, often unwittingly, for the agenda of the dominant culture (Devine, 1999). "Foucault saw the whole pedagogical process not as a liberating movement of upward mobility (as the conventional wisdom would have it) but as the normalization of disciplinary power subtly insinuating its intricate pattern of control throughout society" (Devine, p. 251). The continuity of grading in higher education masks (I would go so far as to say *denies*) the structural inequalities advanced by the neoliberal economic and social policy project. Grades oversimplify the complex reality of the learning process (Blum, 2016). Furthermore, they regulate and narrowly define success and values to align with market-based performance measures (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Hursh, 2009; Wall et al., 2014).

In a neoliberal audit culture, performance measures shape "subjectivity" by defining an individual's degree of worth (Blum, 2016; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Knight et al., 2012; Kvale, 2007; Shore, 2017). "We become the sum of our evaluative measures"

(Blum, p. 137). This line of reasoning on subjectivity and accountability, guided by Foucault's theoretical framework, will be discussed in subsequent sections of this paper. General findings from the literature review suggest that current grading practices reinforce a market-driven ideology that undermines the purpose of higher education as a public good, intended to develop a student's identity as a democratic agent (Tannock, 2017). Neoliberalism ideology characterizes students as consumers, education as a brand, and students' intellectual endeavors as mere training (Giroux, 2002). Connell (2013) argues that in the neoliberal view, education is human capital formation that exists to produce a productive workforce who will produce profits for a market economy.

Connell (2013), in accord with Goldrick-Rab (2017), contends that the audit culture discourses of rationing, scarcity, and sorting reproduce privileges for the dominant social group and regenerate privilege and poverty; that is, some have access to educational resources because they can pay, while others do not (Goldrick-Rab). The elaborate sorting system in higher education—including grades, high stake testing, GPA, and ranking—all legitimize winners and losers. In the neoliberal paradigm, "[t]he education system as a whole comes to stand, not for common interest and self-knowledge of the society, but for ways to extract private advantage at the expense of others" (Connell, p. 106). This neoliberal paradigm shift to commodify and commercialize higher education is spreading around the globe (Andreotti, 2011) and is manifested in higher-education assessment practices (Raaper, 2016b).

Neoliberalism is an ideology, not just a neutral economic market logic (Giroux, 2008). In this paper I critically investigate neoliberal forces operating through higher-

education assessment discourses and practices. Giroux acknowledges that our educational institutions operate within a neoliberal ideology that forms individual subjectivities. My central inquiry concerns how this formation occurs by interrogating taken-for-granted social relations. I investigate how neoliberalism's prevailing audit culture manifests in higher-education grading practices. In subsequent sections, I describe the IE inquiry framework used to conduct this investigation. I then discuss Foucault's theorization as it complements and intersects with IE methodology to further illuminate ruling relations operating in higher-education assessment.

CHAPTER 4: Institutional Ethnography – A Method to Analyze Social Organization of Work

> From an anti-oppressive perspective, most research is organized with a gaze facing the wrong way, toward those who suffer from inequities rather than those who benefit from them or those who are indifferent.
>
> -- Brown & Strega, *Research as Resistance*, 2015, p. 24

The purpose of this study is both exploratory and analytical, in keeping with the principles and framework of institutional ethnography (IE). Within the framework of IE, grading is a happening, which means there are other social relations that are not readily apparent but are nevertheless manifested in the everyday happening of faculty assigning a grade to students' work (Rankin, 2017b; Smith, 2006). In this study, I expand faculty understanding of the words, texts, ideas, directives, and policies related to the problematic of grading and suggest ways to work for change.

I chose an IE inquiry framework for this research study in order to 1) explore the everyday problematic of grading for faculty, 2) explicate this problematic, and 3) illuminate these often unexamined social relations to make sense of the social organization of grading in higher education. IE allowed me to discover and analyze the institution relations of the power in higher education within which I work, and trace how things happen the way they do. Given that IE is a mode of inquiry that diverges from the ways I have been trained in the academy to do research and write research, I will explain its ontology and methodology, and how the IE framework influenced the research design of this study.

IE is an approach for scholarship and activism (Rankin, 2017). It is built on an epistemology that all knowledge is constructed and particular interests are either activated or subsumed in its construction. IE ontology insists on investigating the empirical, which in this study, focalizes the daily work of faculty grading their students' learning products. The researcher must, according to IE ontology, investigate lived experience without imposing abstract concepts or theories onto that lived experience. In the IE ontology, as described by Smith (1990), a "sociology of the people" means that the social (e.g., faculty's daily life) is an arrangement of social relations that coordinates faculty's activities on a much larger scale – an institutional complex (Devault, 2012). Understanding how these social relations are coordinated within an institutional complex is the primary aim of IE.

From an IE perspective, exploring those institutional social relations helped me unpack those abstractions circulating in our everyday practices, which have become a shorthand framed by the institutional complex (Ball, 2013; Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Devault, 2012). In other words, these abstract concepts are what Smith (2006) refers to as "ruling relations" (defined below) operating in and through our work. IE conceptual framework shares the concerns of phenomenologists and Marxists: It directly investigates and describes *phenomena* as lived experiences by people and brings meaning to that experience. I wholeheartedly agree with Smith's premise that to change social experience, we have first to explicate it.

IE ontology asks, *How are we putting our social life together?* However, IE, does not solely focus on subjective experience as its core concern. Smith (2010, 2018)

describes IE methodology as a bottom-up approach that is concerned with individual experience *(the bottom*) in as much as it reveals about how our daily experiences (our responses, actions, etc.) are being coordinated by others beyond our local setting (*up and out*), and the problems these social relations create. IE is also concerned with the way sin which institutions frame taken-for-granted abstract constructs (e.g., GPA, excellence, normative curve, accountability) that are then readily taken up by research informants. Finally, they are brought into being in our daily experiences via texts and discourses. Smith asserts that potential transformation of social experience comes from knowing (mapping, tracing) how institutional relations manifest themselves in our daily experience, texts, and language.

Influenced by Marxist theorists, IE rejects the conventional view that institutions are standalone entities (Devault, 2012; Smith, 2006); thus, IE acknowledges that global capitalism manages and maintains power in our local daily lives through social relations *outside* the local institution. Moreover, institutions become the coordinated activities that connect people (Devault; Smith) and that serve capitalism and power relations beyond the institution. Simply looking at the institution as a problem to be fixed is not looking far enough for the IE researcher. The aim of this study is to explore one corner of an institution to make visible how one activity, grading, is coordinated with other people, texts, and institutional practices—and the consequences of those coordinated activities (Devault). Within the IE framework, "[t]he research goal is to empirically link, describe, and explicate tensions embedded in people's practices, not to theorize them" (Rankin, 2017, p. 2).

This study has provided a description and analysis that points to the social organization of grading. I did not know in advance what I would uncover in the informants' interviews. Informants' interviews revealed other people or other processes to investigate; it was an iterative process. Unlike other qualitative methodologies, IE does not seek to reveal the subjective state of informants, but to trace how informants' activities connected to other people and operations within the institutional complex. I examined the disjuncture between practices, policies, and outcomes in social relations within an institution to reveal contradictions and incongruities (Rankin, 2017).

Finally, the IE inquiry framework challenged the conventional role of researcher. I became a collaborator with the informants in the inquiry process. I was not trying to find out what was similar, but rather how ruling relations operated across many local sites. "The researcher's purpose in an institutional ethnography is not to generalize about the group of people interviewed but to find and describe *social processes that have generalized effects*" (Devault, 2012, p. 383 [emphasis added]). In this way, as the IE researcher, I had to put the pieces of a much larger puzzle together, always maintaining a view toward tracing the institutional relations of power and global capitalism, and how everyday experiences came into being as a result of these social relations (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Rankin, 2017).

The challenge for me as an IE researcher was to be self-reflexive in identifying the ways in which institutional concepts such as student, teacher, evaluation, assessment, judgement, ranking, etc. (i.e., the ruling discourse) had been discursively inscribed in my own worldview of what constituted authorized institutional practices and discourse. One

of the potential pitfalls a researcher has to avoid is what Smith (1999) refers to as "institutional capture" (Rankin, 2017). My own thinking had been captured because it was socially constructed from training, experience, and ideology within the institution I was researching. Indeed, I had tools at my disposal, established frameworks in my professional discourse (Rankin) that I could have readily applied to explain problems. But the IE framework required me to consider my own talk when engaging informants. I employed personal vignettes and accounts to help me critically examine my own thinking and prevent institutional capture in order to reveal tensions and latent contradictions in the institutional relations I was investigating (Rankin).

As researcher, I eschewed abstractions imposed on empirical experience to reveal what was intended to be concealed; I committed to empirically describing what is happening and then to analyze the data to see what was there. "The research goal [was] to amass evidence that is used to describe and to empirically explicate how disparate interests are activated or subordinated" (Rankin, 2017, p. 2). IE aims to understand and describe the underlying structures that affect individuals and groups (Smith, 2006).

Institutional Ethnography Terminology

The following paragraphs define three key technical terms used in IE research as applied to this study.

Standpoint

In IE ontology the researcher is asked to adopt a standpoint, a stance that has an empirical location for a group of people who have a certain position within an institutional complex. In this study I adopt the standpoint of faculty who are research

informants positioned within the institution. My focus is on describing what is happening for faculty as standpoint informants with expert knowledge when it comes to grading. "Standpoint informants are positioned as 'expert knowers' about what happens in their daily work; however, their knowledge is examined for its social construction and its embedded contradictions. What is regarded as 'true' is the material description of things that happen – that loosely agreed upon 'world in common'" (Rankin, 2017, p. 2). Standpoint is not a perspective; it is a description of how a standpoint informant's knowledge is constructed and organized.

Ruling Relations

"Ruling relations" refers to the ways in which people enact their social life with regard to daily activities that are enmeshed in social relations within the economy and ruling institutions, in this case, higher education. Often, those ruling relations remain invisible, operate at a distance, and organize a faculty's work as a way to govern them. Until subjected to inquiry, ruling relations operate hidden in plain sight. "Ruling relations coordinate what people know about what is happening – even if that knowledge does not quite match what is known from being there" (Rankin, 2017, p. 3). The goal of this study was to find traces of ruling relations in the work faculty do every day around grading. I asked, *How do ruling relations shape the work faculty do, but do not necessarily support the interests of faculty?* The emphasis in IE is on the real, the material, the experiential, not on the theoretical. IE asks the researcher to examine the ruling relations and to analyze the power practices at play within institutions (Rankin).

Research Problematic

The problematic within the IE framework is discovered within the data as the researcher empirically examines the ruling relations. IE researchers have to spend time with the data to make the problematic apparent. IE departs from traditional qualitative research practices by NOT imposing or developing a theory about the issue under investigation (Rankin, 2017); rather, it tracks and maps ruling relations as they are discovered during the inquiry. In this study, as I describe above, I discovered a disjuncture around grading practices during my own experience with grading. "The problematic is a methodological device that directs attention to a domain of possible questions, questions which have not yet been formulated, but which are implicit in the way the everyday world is organized" (Grahame, 1998 as cited by Rankin, 2017b, p. 350). The following two figures visually represent how I am conceptually thinking of grading practices within the IE ontology.

Figure 1

Hierarchy and Social Organization of Grading

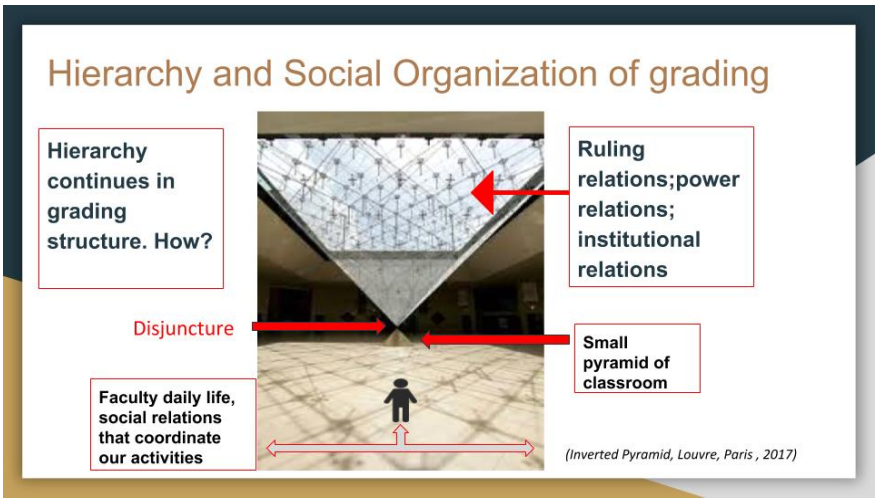
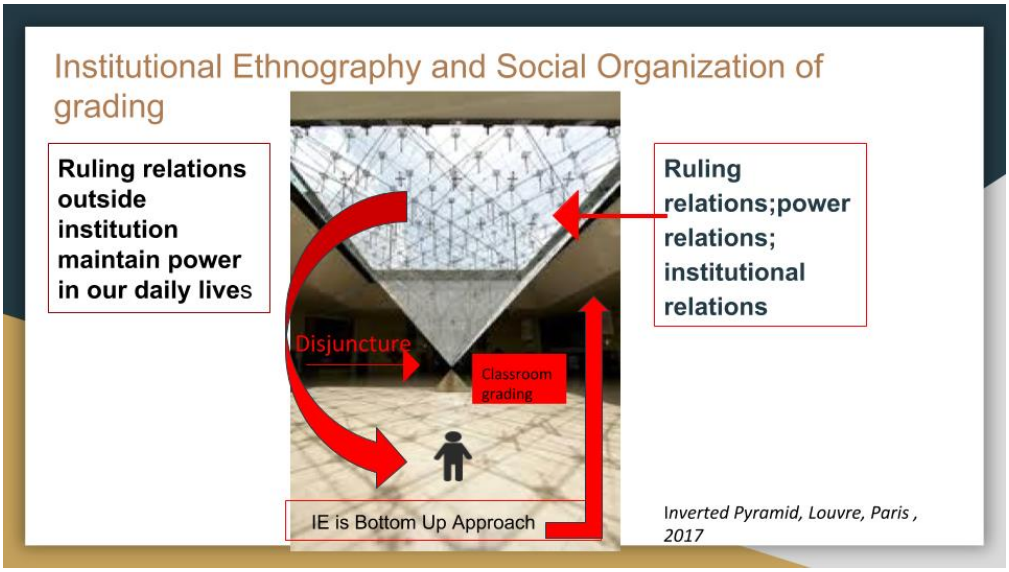


Figure 2

Institutional Ethnography and Social Organization of Grading



In this overview of IE, I explain key terminology and the theoretical framework as it relates to the role of an IE researcher and IE methodology: The focus is on tracing the power and institutional relations of global capitalism; therefore, it is appropriate to complement the IE inquiry framework with Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and governmentality since Smith and Foucault are interested in tracing relations of ruling/governing.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This study is grounded in a theoretical location dually informed by Dorothy Smith's ontology of IE and Michel Foucault's theoretical framework as outlined in

Discipline and Punish and his later (post 1980) lectures and writings. To anyone familiar with Smith's critique of post-modernism and post-structuralism (Doran, 2000), one might think, as Satka and Skehill (2011) suggest, that pairing Foucault's and Smith's theoretical concepts in the same study is akin to pairing odd bedfellows. Indeed, Smith herself might not appreciate my association, given her ardent stance against overlaying a priori theoretical interpretations or imposing theoretical orthodoxies onto lived experience (Smith, 2006). However, both theorists are concerned with how power functions. Smith's project is concerned with mapping how power operates at the level of professional practices (Satka & Skehill, 2000). Foucault's theorizations, on the other hand, offer a historical lens to analyze, describe, and recognize power operating in the present – to problematize the present (Menniken et al., 2014; Satka & Skehill, 2000) by creating a "history of the present." Smith and Foucault "make visible the micro point of view of how the mechanisms of power and governing are working in time and place or in particular spaces" (Satka & Skehill, 2011, p. 193).

Thus, I contend that juxtaposing the two theorists' viewpoints and tools for analysis offers an innovative method to investigate the pieces of the puzzle of grading by revealing the micro-level manifestations of power (Gore, 1998) embedded in grading spaces in higher education, as illuminated through texts, discourses, and practices. Smith and Foucault offer different lenses for viewing the same scene. They provide a bidirectional analysis that generates two maps: one of ruling relations mediated through texts and professional practices, and the other of systems where knowledge, discourse, and power intersect to illuminate discontinuities and resistance. In the following section, I

discuss Foucault's theoretical framework as a mode of analysis to better understand how academic subjectivities as assessors are constituted (and resisted) in higher education grading spaces.

What Is the Problem?

Both Smith and Foucault begin with a problem, but they apply the concept of problem for different purposes, which corresponds to their respective ontological and epistemological approaches as described above. Smith's concept of problem or problematic (discussed in Chapter 2) is a methodological device for further inquiry**.** "The problematic is a methodological device that directs attention to a domain of possible questions, questions which have not yet been formulated, but which are implicit in the way the everyday world is organized" (Grahame, 1998 as cited in Rankin, 2017b, p. 350). Smith's concept of problematic focuses on where one experiences a disjuncture, that is, where there are conflicts or tensions arising between authorized knowledge and experiential knowledge (Rankin, 2017a). In Smith's framework the problematic serves as an entry point for investigating the ruling relations that are often unspoken but are implicated in the informant's disjunctive experience of the problematic.

Foucault investigates the history of a problem – how something *becomes* a problem that then has to be managed, specifically how certain behaviors or phenomena are constituted as a problem (Ball, 2013; Menniken & Miller, 2014). In this paper, from a Foucauldian perspective, the problem is how to distribute/manage the population of students in our society – who should be educated and how to educate them. Ball contends that a Foucauldian interpretation of the problem in education forces us to rethink how

education policy works. Education policy, he argues, is a history of classification and exclusion—a history of normalizing that is intended to manage the well-being of the population, which in turn means the well-being of the nation/state (Ball). In this historic light, schools became the intermediaries between families and work, playing a socializing and civilizing role for the benefit of the state. "The school became in many respects an expression of humanity and a demarcation of the limits to humanity – who is educable, of value, worth investing in" (Ball, p. 48).

Foucault's conceptualization of the problem of education, when applied to grading policy, converts grades into a technology to deal with the problem of how to manage the population (of students), because the population is a resource for the institution and state. For Foucault, technologies refer to mechanisms in which societies pacify, dominate, or regulate subjects (Schirato et al., 2012). Teachers, through technologies such as assessment/grading in higher education, play the role of both caretaker and disciplinarian; they are assessors who classify, differentiate, improve, and exclude certain populations of students not normalized (Ball, 2013). Thus, the function of a problem for Smith and Foucault diverges in accord with their theoretical frameworks; however, juxtaposing the two frameworks builds an expansive understanding of how power operates in assessment practices at the microlevel within a broader discursive context.

Same Scene Using Two Different Maps of Ruling/Governing

Although Smith and Foucault each have their own intellectual distinction, juxtaposing their conceptual frameworks, for the purposes of this study, has the

advantage of highlighting how power circulates in higher education assessment as it is linked to everyday practices, and how those practices are influenced by ruling/governing strategies. Both Smith and Foucault focalize the effects of discourse/discursive practices to illuminate the linkages between practices and ruling/governing. These theorists afford the chance to bi-directionally map power relations in grading practices. I compare several of their intersecting ideas below. Smith (2006) investigates how institutional discourse, mediated through texts and other technologies, governs our daily practices (Satka & Skehill, 2011), as well as how power is exercised through those practices. Smith's interest in discourse aligns with Foucault's concept of governmentality in which the state regulates its citizens through institutions and discourses, and educates them to regulate their own behavior in accord with state interests (Teghtoosian, 2016).

Smith is a structuralist (Marxist) who sees power as top down or owned by certain groups (defined as ruling relations). These external forces discursively and socially organize knowledge within institutions. For Smith, investigating the incongruities between lived experience and institutional texts, discourses, and practices "open[s] up and make(s) visible the hegemonic monopoly of public processes in people's lives" (Satka & Skehill, 2011, p. 109); the key aim of IE inquiry. Smith's method elucidates how the whole setting works with a more durable, less vulnerable concept of power (Teghtoosian, 2016).

Foucault, on the other hand, is looking at social relations from a post-structuralist paradigm – a label applied to him, not one he used to describe himself (English & Mayo, 2012). Foucault thinks of power as being fluid, where *everyone* has some power but an

individual also operates as part of their own oppression. A Foucauldian analysis interrogates how discourses emerge and come to dominate a particular scene, which I am applying to the scene of assessing students. The aim of Foucauldian analysis is to elucidate where knowledge, discourse, and power intersect to highlight discontinuities and resistance. Foucauldian analysis is concerned with challenging assumptions, truths, and over generalized ideas that have become practices constructed via strategies of governance (Danaher et al., 2000). Foucault asks questions of how actors and texts set out who governs, to what extent, and through what devices (Menniken & Miller, 2014).

I stand with Satka and Skehill (2011): We need a diversified understanding of power to discern the relations of practice to the broader discursive context. In this regard, then, I see Smith's and Foucault's frameworks as complementary, not contradictory. Smith views theory and method as combined into inquiry that makes explicable everyday happenings which otherwise remain mysterious or misrepresented (Rankin, 2017a). IE analyzes experience via an agent's knowledge of practice. In the IE ontology, the social world is not given, but actively and continuously constituted through what people do (Teghtoosian, 2016). The ethnographic approach to research investigates the practical dynamics of power, in a sense, creates a map of how things are put together.

Foucauldian analysis, on the other hand, complements IE by investigating through conceptual analysis what makes that discourse possible: the actual workings of power to shape subjectivities and behavior in a particular way. Smith and Foucault share a bottom-up approach; they are interested in the micro-level of power relations. Smith, however, is less interested in subjectivities than Foucault. She sees power as more durable and less

vulnerable, whereas Foucault sees power as more fluid. Blacker (1998) describes this as Foucault's interest in a "worm-eye view" to look where power is being applied.

By putting these two theoretical frameworks in dialogue within the space of grading and assessment in higher education, I acknowledge that there are tensions and challenges that the two theorists present. I contend, however, that a complementary, bidirectional analysis affords a broader view of power as it is mediated in everyday practices and through the relations of ruling and governing. My approach applies what Manias and Street (1999) describe as a "tool box approach," one that deconstructs existing practices while also providing an avenue for faculty to critique and reflect upon such practices. Furthermore, combining governmentality and ethnographic focuses opens up spaces for future empirical analyses of such practices and how compliant and resistive subjectivities are constituted.

Foucault's Theory in Search of a Method

Foucault has been criticized for not offering a prescription for how to implement his theory, nor does he offer a cure for the powers of domination that objectify or subjugate us (Blacker, 1998). He is not prescriptive, because he is not going to speak for others; to do so would be to establish a new universalized power that dominates (Blacker). Foucault is often unsettling to his readers because he problematizes the humanist discourse and established consensus. "An important part of Foucault's genius is his ability to pull this off, to astonish us and unsettle us by interrogating, deconstructing ... our dreams of liberation, utopias" (Blacker, p. 351). Some have described his work as pessimistic, but Foucault is not deterministic, as I discuss in later sections. Rather, he

makes it hard to look at what is considered normal in the same way ever again. In this study, “unsettling the status quo” is a viable method. I contend, in the Foucauldian spirit, we need to consider that as faculty (or researchers), we are in positions of power and have a certain responsibility or ethic: to understand what we do and how what we do affects others (Blacker).

I use a Foucauldian conceptual analysis as a research approach to problematize assessment: that is, to investigate how the technology of assessment is used to align individual choice with the desired outcome of a neoliberal, political rationality. I have sought to better understand the subject formation of faculty as assessors by attending to how higher-education assessment is constituted by discursive practices that draw on expert knowledge, techniques, and technologies that are linked to this neoliberal, political rationality. A Foucauldian analysis, unlike IE, is not an activist approach with a social justice commitment. Instead it offers insights into how and why faculty understand themselves in relation to dominant and resistive discourses, and how those discourses manifest themselves in practices (Teghtoosian, 2016). Governing is contingent and mutable, and this opens space for interventions, both dominant and resistive. “A Foucaudian analysis uses criticism to ‘unsettle the taken-for-grantedness of how things are’” (Teghoosian, p. 341).

I have analyzed the interview data by giving primacy to the relations that link actors, techniques, and ideas, as well as to how what is considered real is programmed and performed (Ball, 2003; Mennicken & Miller, 2014). Menniken and Miller describe these assemblages of relations as heterogeneous, social, technical, and co-functional. This

study investigates the grading assemblage within a specific rationality: neoliberalism's audit culture. The Foucauldian conceptual analysis used in this study investigates how the micro is connected to the macro, that is, how the regime of audit culture dominates HEI at this given time and in this given context.

Power is Everywhere

I started this chapter comparing Smith's and Foucault's respective theoretical paradigms. I now turn to how they each conceptualize power, a focal point for both theorists that underpins their respective theoretical frameworks. Smith conceptualizes power as structural domination. Power is organized around rulings relations not visible or apparent at the local scene of study. Her concern is with the dominating effects of power and how it constrains agents. She is looking at power and how it is applied from a distance (Satka & Skehill, 2011), by documenting the practical dynamics of power through a range of voices. Unlike Foucault, Smith does not contend that knowledge and power have to co-occur (Satka & Skehill).

Foucault is also concerned with how power is applied, but in direct relationship to its target (Blacker, 1998). Gore (1998) and Ball (2013) suggest that Foucault's analysis of power in penal institutions can also be applied to educational institutions as disciplinary institutions. Grading, for example, could be considered a type of discipline, a direct application of power as judgment. Furthermore, Ball et al. (2012) contend that grading is a mundane technology of government that can be applied to a lot of public services, because it supports the idea that social problems are governable (Ball et al.). I will discuss technologies in more detail in subsequent paragraphs.

In Foucault's theorization of power, knowledge and power co-occur; they are in a knowledge-power spiral (Satka & Skehill, 2011). Knowledge in this sense is deployed to support power (Gore, 1998). Knowledge is the discourse embedded in institutions that legitimize power and co-occur with power (Gore). Power, for Foucault, is not structural, but rather the social forces of a dominant rationality (neoliberalism) that is separate from individuals who exercise power. However, everyone has some power and power relations can easily change in different contexts; certain ideas become truths and hold power at certain times and everyone has some power to act. Power, therefore, is not static but is codified (Gore) through technologies that support a dominant rationality. Methodologically speaking, then, power can be traced by identifying the ways in which it is codified through practices and the assemblage of ideas, actors and instruments that are interdependent and co-function (Mennicken & Miller, 2014). That is the research approach used in this paper.

There are distinct types of power in Foucauldian theory that I will briefly outline and connect back to Gore's (1998) claim that Foucault's analysis of penal institutions relates to power in educational institutions. Disciplinary power is concerned with individuals and how they function within an institution. Disciplinary power has techniques to punish and reward as "individuals are singled out as behaviors are regulated and compared" (Gore, p. 236). Grades serve to both regulate and compare students. Disciplinary power maintains the norm by comparing individual actions to a standard and invoking a normalizing standard (Gore). We differentiate individuals from each other by classifying and categorizing them, essentially using sorting and ranking as a means to

distribute and assign groups. Thus, this study investigates how grading operates as a discipline technology in the Foucauldian sense.

Regulatory power is concerned with the population at large "controlling by rule, subject to restrictions[;] invoking a rule, including a sanction, reward, punishment" (Gore, 1998, p. 243). Regulatory power uses social relations to control the population. Although not covered in depth in this paper, this regulatory power is conceived as "biopower" in Foucault's work. To achieve a normalizing society, there is an interplay between disciplinary and regulatory power. In the educational context, from a Foucauldian conceptualization of power, grading is technology that both disciplines and regulates. Teachers are the agents of power who judge the norm and bring subjects back to the norm or who classify students in relation to the norm. Where Foucault's penal analysis connects to education is contained in the hierarchy and normalizing judgment that is embodied in the examination (Blacker, 1998; Foucault, 1975). "When conformity becomes the reigning norm (perhaps at first a hardly noticeable shift from the equality ideal), a process is initiated that leads to an ever more finely tuned streamlining and ranking in accord with the norm" (Blacker, p. 352). If you deviate from the norm, then the examination (e.g., assessments, IQ tests, grades) brings you into line with the norm.

In addition to distinguishing different types of power and corresponding functions, Foucault's general theory of power diverges from Smith's and other traditional concepts of power. For Foucault, power is not just structural or phenomenological, it is also relational (Gore, 1998; Mennicken & Miller, 2014; Satka & Skehill, 2011). It is the interplay between structure, agency, and national/ institutional policy. Power at the

micro-level is conceptualized as social relations that do not act directly on others but upon their actions, or what he calls the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1982; Mennicken & Miller). Power is governing, which means to govern someone's actions is to structure what possible actions someone might take (Ball, 2013; Foucault, 2002; Mennicken & Miller). Foucault would argue that power is not just coercion; it is negative and productive, enabling yet constraining. Foucault contends that power forms the subject – we cannot escape power relations; there is no independent, sovereign subject that exists outside power relations. That does not, however, foreclose agency, as I will show in subsequent sections.

Subjectivity and Subjectification

Foucault's concern (and mine, with respect to academic subjectivities of an assessor) is how individuals are made subjects by authorities that are socially legitimized and act on our actions (Ball, 2013; Mennicken & Miller, 2014). Foucault's historical stance characterizes subjectivity and subjectification, and their attendant practices, as historically specific modes of how these people see themselves and how they behave (Danaher et al., 2000). "Power, manifested particularly through discourses of truth and knowledge, makes us what we are. Human beings-as-subjects are therefore contingent, rather than innate or natural" (Schirato et al., 2012, p. 140). As Davies and Bansel (2010) claim, we are currently in a historical mode of *neoliberal* subjectification that has emerged within universities and impacted faculty subjectivity. Davies and Bansel explain how the neoliberal mode of subjectification uses the discourses of efficiency and quality to regulate practice, to measure performance, which constructs teaching subjects in the

neoliberal university that generically look the same. “In short to reproduce the same practices in order to re/organize themselves to fit the template of best practice as defined by management” (Davies & Bansel, p. 7). Ball (2003) defines the neoliberal subject as responding to a new mode of state regulation: someone focused on their performativity who organizes themselves in response to targets and evaluations as an enterprising self concerned with excellence.

I extend my analysis of power from IE’s research approach of investigating work and ruling relations to an analysis of the ways individuals are made subjects by authorities who are socially legitimized to act indirectly on one’s actions (Menniken & Miller, 2014). The normative rules of actions influence how we see ourselves and how we behave (Danaher et al., 2000). The subject is produced by these discourses (discussed below); we are not free agents, but rather subjects whose thoughts are scripted by social forces and institutions and power relations (Danaher et al.). Often these normative rules are hidden or taken as a given. Ball (2013) illustrates how the faculty as assessor is constituted from a Foucauldian perspective:

> Foucault says the school became in the nineteenth century an apparatus of uninterrupted examinations’ (1979, p. 186), the examination is a mechanism of simultaneous evaluation and comparisons ‘woven into [the school] through a constantly repeated ritual of power’ (p.186). The learner is made visible, but power is rendered invisible, and the learner[s] see . . . only the tasks and the tests which they must undertake. (Foucault cited in Ball, p. 48)

As previously discussed, within an audit culture assessment becomes a technology of government that helps assure student and faculty accountability, thereby reinforcing the culture of performativity within a neoliberal rationality. In other words, assessment re-forms, such as we deployed in this study, actually re-form faculty as the performing subject (Davies & Bansel, 2010). Grading, as mentioned before, is not only a discrete form of disciplinary power that operates based on norms that are embedded in HEI assessment practices, but also a legitimized discourse of accountability and power relations operating to create a certain type of faculty subject.

Regardless of what type of assessment a faculty member uses (peer, self, etc.), a Foucauldian perspective would interpret any normative judgement as an authoritative gaze that embodies disciplinary power because it reinforces norms, rewards, or punishes while dominating and controlling (Danaher et al., 2000; Raaper, 2016b). Grades are a form of disciplinary power intended to monitor bodies. Thus assessment is a technology, in the Foucauldian perspective, that directs conduct, not just for the students but for faculty too. Grading becomes a normalizing gaze (Foucault, 1975) that makes it easier to govern students and faculty. HEI monitor faculty grading practices through learning management systems (Blackboard), department reviews, school ranking reports, etc. All of these social relations, discourses, and practices influence faculty subjectivity as assessor because they constrain our individual choice and actions, while shaping our behavior for the institution's desired outcomes.

Foucault is not deterministic, though. Instead one might describe Foucault's theorization of subjectivity as agency within constraints. Ball and Olmedo (2013) define

Foucault's concept of subjectivity as twofold: 1) we are subjected by power and succumb to this power, and 2) self-knowledge can also configure our identity. Ball and Olmedo posit that we should look at subjectivity as a process of becoming; we are governed by others but we are also governed by ourselves. They argue that as faculty, we are teaching subjects constituted by certain practices that are socially and culturally determined by neoliberalism as a new truth that works on faculty's subjectivity. For example, neoliberalism, which acts outside us and within us, has transformed universities into a type of governance that has increased competition and an entrepreneurial self (Ball, 2003); through our practices we are obligated to do certain things. These social practices force human beings to work on themselves to comply with models of what is deemed normal to be accepted (Danaher et al., 2000). But as I will discuss later, self-care and practices of freedom are proactive ways we can act on ourselves as ethical subjects, rather than just react to our subjugation (Ball & Olmedo).

Governmentality – The Neoliberal Way to Govern Without Governing

To return for a moment to the concept of regulatory power and normalizing society previously discussed, Foucault understood power as governing. In other words, governing constitutes the social relations, rules, and sanctions that structure someone's actions and possibilities for how they might act. In Foucault's later work and lectures, he introduces the concept of governmentality as a mode of governing that supports the dominant neoliberal rationality (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Foucault, 1983, 2010). When the population of the state is understood as a resource, then the state intervenes in the lives of its citizens to regulate behavior. But in the neoliberal rationality of modern western

society, the responsibility for regulating the population has moved to institutions, not to a centralized state (Danaher et al., 2000). Governmentality in the neoliberal context is a modern form of disciplinary-power that uses strategies and techniques to exercise power over an entire population to get the most out of human resources (Mennicken & Miller, 2014). It deploys a range of monitoring techniques through government apparatuses that not only regulate individual conduct through institutions (Danaher et al.), but also limit individual choices. It governs well by governing less (Newheiser, 2016).

Governmentality is not direct repression; instead, it uses normalizing judges and discourses (Ball, 2013; Danaher et al., 2000) that are increasingly invisible, which makes power diffuse and hard to centralize. Making what is invisible visible is difficult because we have to look for governmentality techniques in our daily practices (Gore, 1998). I concur with Gore that as educators we have a responsibility for how we exercise power; therefore, as Gore contends, if we document techniques of power at play in our pedagogy, determine what is essential to our pedagogical enterprise and what can be altered, then we can consider how we might exercise our power differently.

To undertake Gore's (1998) charge for educators to more responsibly exercise their power, we have to understand how we *perform* our work as faculty. In the current neoliberal regime of truths, technologies of accountability assert measures of performativity (Ball, 2013) for faculty that limit our agency by governing with a light touch (Newheiser, 2016) and constrain possible actions available to us (Davies & Bansel, 2007). These technologies of accountability or audit technologies (Ball et al., 2012) are embedded in the systems of schools and in other institutions, as mechanisms to improve a

subject's performance – ability to deliver specified outcomes – harkening back to the notion of the population as a resource for the state. Grading, as previously discussed, is one example of a mundane audit technology in a chain of activities in schools that pressures students and faculty to deliver performance outcomes according to certain standards (Ball et al.; Davies & Bansel). Assessment technologies not only drive student performance but they also drive faculty performance in higher education's managerial audit culture (Davies & Bansel; Knight et al., 2012). The focus on one's performance produces anxiety and influences a sense of self-worth for both students and teachers (Ball et al.; Knight et al.), because a student's or faculty's worth to the school is audited (measured) by the extent to which each acts as responsible subjects who emulate the institutional model of standardization (Davies & Bansel).

Davies and Bansel (2010) explain audit technologies, such as quality assurance or best practices, as mechanisms to generate a level of performance from subjects without their resistance. Moreover, they argue that enhanced performance procedures (e.g., student evaluations) create greater vulnerability and self-doubt about one's work or security (Davies & Bansel). Embedded audit technologies within schools compel teachers and students alike to focus their performance on what has been rhetorically framed as an essential measure that must be taken into account. According to Ball et al. (2012), these audit technologies normalize and colonize student-teacher interactions, as well as school activities, which they describe as a delivery chain intended to deliver desired performance outcomes:

> The delivery chain, as intended, is enacted through an accretion of minutiae. All of this becomes part of the normal life of schools, it becomes ingrained in routines, patterns of work, assumptions and perspectives. Indeed, it is impossible to overestimate the significance of this in the life of the school, as a complex of surveillance, monitoring, tracking, coordinating, reporting, recording, targeting, motivating. (p. 525)

Although Ball et al. (2012) characterize a Foucauldian neoliberal K-12 system in the U.K., I would argue that the neoliberal university also has a delivery chain of activities that colonize student-faculty interactions through the mundane day-to-day practices (such as the audit technology of grading) that not only objectify faculty and students, but also transform university education into a function of the economy – by duplicating class domination, redistributing opportunities, and categorizing individual worth (Ball et al.). Audit technologies manage and dominate the academic population, not by punishment but by duplication (Ball et al.) through interactions. These interactions re-form students and faculty into desirable economic subjects for the state because they have particular attributes, skills, and abilities attached to economic activities (Dilts, 2011). The survival of the university is tied to the performance of the academic population, as Davies and Bansel (2010) argue, because the "viability of the academic subject is intimately tied to the viability of the university as defined by audit technologies that simultaneously individualize academics and efface difference, making difference, in fact, dangerous" (p. 17). In the Foucauldian sense, audit technologies in the university are another form of domination, a disciplinary technique intended to manage/govern the

population by measuring and comparing performativity across institutions and entities in order to control a social hierarchy and stratification in society.

Grades are a technology of government that produce the ideal student subject, but in our neoliberal context, grades also govern faculty as they are measured against student outcomes and satisfaction (Raaper, 2016a). Ball (2013) explains that performance orientation and ranking is a discipline technique of a neoliberal mode of government that disciplines subjects by comparison, self-judgement, and self-surveillance. Performativity, in a Foucauldian perspective, is also a dominating technique; as we grade, we are getting students to re-form themselves to standards and criteria that frame what is normal or what is desirable to achieve. Technologies such as grading are used to measure and audit a subject's performance according to standards, which is one way to govern (Ball). Moreover, grading as a technology or discipline not only selects who will be ranked in a hierarchy (disciplines), but also controls the reproduction and stratification of that hierarchy (governmentality).

Grading is a discipline technology that measures and compares; it is essential in our education system since any assessment entails the judgment of performance, even when used to enhance student agency, as Ball (2013) and Raaper (2018b) suggest. There is an inherent conflict in performativity as measured by grades, even when faculty use empowering grading practices (Trehan & Reynolds, 2000). Raaper (2016a) notes, "While being situated in competing pedagogical discourses of empowering and supporting students, as it is evident in recent scholarly work on assessment, assessment can function as a technology of government in neoliberal university contexts" (p. 178). Thus, grading,

she argues and I also maintain, governs an academic population, reproducing a social hierarchy and stratification through technologies that support the functions of a neoliberal economic paradigm that sees the population as a state resource.

Ball (2013) further elaborates on "performativity" as a technology that "makes us responsible for our performance and the performance of others" (p. 138). The danger with grading as a performance-oriented audit technology, though, is that it fosters the idea of students (and faculty) improving their own performance as a corollary to self-worth. Discourses about the "good A student" are an example. Schools train students to self-regulate their worth by using grades. Performativity, according to Ball, is not just about domination and oppression, it rewards students and faculty who are "better" than others; "indeed performativity works best when we come to want for ourselves what is wanted from us, when our moral sense of our desires and ourselves are aligned with its pleasures" (p. 140). What is desired by the institution – GPA and grades singling out high- and low-performing students – transforms the teaching and learning exchange into a measure of performance aligned with a neoliberal audit culture: Subjects are valued for their productivity, and performance indicators determine all social relations (Ball & Olmedo, 2013).

Foucault's Later Turn to Technologies of the Self

If Foucault's theorization of subjectification ended here, we could claim he is deterministic for denying the subject's agency, for seeing the subject as dead (Danaher et al., 2000) "because rather than the source of meaning, it (subject) is produced by discourses, institutions and relations of power" (p. 116). Some have argued (and

complained) that the early Foucault defines subjectivity in a more deterministic framework, i.e. as docile bodies. However, others have noted that the later Foucault evolves in his understanding of subjectivity by expanding the ethical dimension of a subject to one who can challenge the forces that govern oneself through critique (Schirato et al., 2012). Dilts (2011) argues that this turn to ethics in Foucault's later work was a critical response to neoliberal governmentality and subjectivity. On the one hand, Foucault would argue that we are constituted subjects by practices of power relations; on the other hand, he would also assert that we can choose to respond and resist those practices (Danaher, 2000). In the following section, I explore Foucault's later theorization of care of the self, namely the crafting of our subjectivities through critique and resistance.

From a Foucauldian perspective, neoliberalism is not inevitable; rather, it has been normalized through power relations as the dominant rationality of our time, which makes it *seem* inevitable (Giroux, 2002). As discussed previously, Foucault sees power relations as both constraining and enabling, as negative and productive; thus power can be resisted, reversed, or changed, because to exercise power does not mean that one has *total* control… as power relations are unstable (Foucault, 1982). Power can only be acted on when there are free subjects: As power is always present, then freedom is always present (Foucault). Furthermore, the aforementioned regulating power (governmentality), which governs us by subjecting us to technologies that regulate and orient our thinking and behavior (Schirato et al., 2012), works to legitimize itself through discourses, knowledge, and claims to truth. Discourse is a social practice influenced by power

relations; it is a group of statements that belong to a single formation (Foucault, 1977); that is, discourse asserts what is knowable, speakable, and shapes what we think and what we consider valuable or not, right or wrong. Our thoughts are not just driven by instincts, but by discourses that circulate and regulate our behavior (Danaher et al., 2000). These discourses operate within people and within disciplines, norms, and rituals. As such, they organize space, time, and new procedures that create new ways of being, and indeed, create pressures to perform in certain ways (Ball et al., 2012). However, when we question how we are governed or why we do what we are told, then we are exercising a political critique that becomes a form of resistance (Gutting & Oskala, 2019). Critique is the contrary response to being governed; it is a technique to limit or avoid being governed (Schirato et al.).

Concomitant with political critique is the technique of critiquing one's own practices, which means to exercise power on oneself, to govern oneself, as a technology of self or care of the self. As Gallo (2017) explains, Foucault's concept of governmentality in his later works extended to a theorization of governmentality of the self in which the focus of government "is changed from governing others to the government of the self" (Gallo, p. 692). Governing of the self is not done in isolation but rather in relation to others in practices such as counseling, spiritual direction, prescriptions for life – and in pedagogy (Gallo). By analyzing and questioning the power that circulates within and through our pedagogical practices, we care for ourselves as we reflect upon what we do or do not want to become (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). From a Foucauldian perspective, technologies of the self is a practice of freedom because we are

critiquing the practices that have created our subjectivities; we are resisting the forces that have shaped our subjectivity.

Implications for Faculty Praxis

In this literature review, I have brought together two theoretical frameworks for critically examining faculty assessment praxis. What I have offered is a partial and provisional account that is intended to stimulate reflection and dialogue, reconsideration and further development, rather than one claiming to be either comprehensive or definitive. Smith's and Foucault's theoretical conceptualizations of the interplay between power and social relations underscores the often hidden discourses at work in student/faculty relationships and practices around grading. Weaving these two thinkers together clarifies the affordances of grades in a neoliberal audit culture, and in doing so it opens up space for faculty to critically interrogate both the structures and discursive practices that position faculty as assessors. I conclude this literature review by considering the implications of these two theorists with respect to resistance and activism. I first turn to Foucault's conception of resistance—how it intersects with his theorization of subjectivity—and the implications for faculty praxis. I then briefly compare Foucault's and Smith's view of activism as it, too, relates to faculty praxis.

Some have argued that Foucault did not develop an adequate notion of resistance, nor did he support a total liberation from power (Clemitshaw, 2013). But others argue that Foucault's later works, in fact, have a clear notion of resistance (Armstrong, n.d.). Resistance for Foucault is not progressive or emancipatory, but rather that there exists sites or occasions for resistance that are unpredictable (Clemitshaw).

> Foucauldian resistance neither predates the power it opposes nor issues from a site external to power. Rather it relies upon and grows out of the situation against which it struggles. Foucault's understanding of resistance as internal to power refuses the utopian dream of achieving total emancipation from power. (Armstrong, para. 8)

For Foucault, resistance is not derived from an external source (Thomas, 2008); rather, it asks the question. "How am I and my work being constituted and to what effect?" (Davies & Bansel, 2010).

From a Foucauldian perspective, resistance is not necessarily practiced at the macro level, e.g., revolution (although he does not foreclose revolution); instead, resistance is practiced at the micro level, or what Blacker (1998) describes as Foucault's "microphysics," i.e., the site where power is applied. Power is embedded in our daily practices, in how we perform our job as faculty. Thus, by examining our performativity practices, we are using practices of resistance because we can bring power relations into focus to better understand where power is positioned and how it is applied (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Foucault does not endorse particular forms of resistance or activism (Teghthoosian, 2016), rather "he provides tools by which others may make tactical interventions in particular situations" (Newheiser, 2016, p. 17). He is opening spaces for strategic interventions on the local level, but not revolutions that might reinforce dominating power. "As Foucault understands it, critique does not consist in condemnation, nor does its power derive from hyperbole. Instead, it aims to uncover the

contingency of systems of power that we are tempted to take for granted" (Newheiser, p. 16).

To engage in a critique of power relations and the ways we faculty participate in applying these power relations in our own practices, thus becomes the means to self-defining our teaching subjectivities, according to a Foucauldian theory of subjectivity (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). We apply this process of critique to our teaching subjects in order to deconstruct how our teaching subjectivities are constituted to take certain actions (Ball & Olmedo) and to loosen the constraints on the possibilities for actions. Therefore, one may argue that resistance to neoliberal technologies that create certain types of teaching subjects involves a process of self-critique in which faculty deconstruct their teaching practices and recreate them. That is, we "refuse what we are and fracture the limitations imposed on us by normalizing identity categories" (Armstrong, n.d., para. 8). Engaging in this process of self-critique encourages us to rethink our relationship to power (Ball & Olmedo). Indeed, as Foucault contends, "there are no relations of power without resistance" because it is when power is exercised that resistance is formed (Foucault, 1980, as cited in Gordon, 1980).

Foucault's notion of resistance is a shift from governing others to governing ourselves:

> It is not to form the political will of the others; it is, through the analyses he does in his own domains, to bring assumptions and things taken for granted again into question, to shake habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel the familiarity of

> the accepted, to take the measure of rules and institutions. (Foucault, as cited in Gordon, 2000, p. xxxiv)

If we cannot escape power or escape our neo-liberal subjectification, then we must think seriously about the technologies of self and the kinds of subjects we want to turn ourselves into (Dilts, 2011). Critique is an internal response to subjectification (Dilts). Davies and Bansel's (2010) discourse analysis study found that while faculty shape themselves to a generic model sanctioned by the neoliberal rationalities of the new university, improving themselves to be more what the university wants, they also *resist* becoming the type of faculty that the institution wants by encouraging individual projects and responses. Davies and Bansel recall Foucault's concept and challenge to "de-individualize" – in other words, engage in ethical reflexivity and critique as a way to practice "radical openness to difference and multiplication of ideas" (p. 13). Although we cannot escape power or power relations and practices, Foucault challenges us to engage in thought, critical thought to become ethical subjects (Davies & Bansel). Resistance is engaging in ethical reflexivity and self-critique.

Foucault's theorization of the care of self, as outlined above, is a technology of governmentality on the self – to govern oneself – which is *life affirming* because it allows for an active (not reactive) standpoint. It has the potential to be a practice of resistance to power, and as such, a practice of freedom (Gallo, 2017) in our everyday lives as faculty. "The practices of freedom are the productions of ways out, inventions of lines of flight, a micro-political investment in everyday relationships, an active establishment of new games of power" (Gallo, p. 699). Foucault's conceptualization of

the care of the self operates on the micro level as potentially an act of active resistance to a governmentalized society. I contend then – if guided by Foucault's theorization of governing oneself – faculty can negotiate, respond, and resist neoliberal technologies in their praxis.

Smith's and Foucault's theoretical conceptualizations of the interplay of power and social relations underscores the often hidden discourses at work in student/faculty relationships and practices around grading. Foucault's conceptualization of resistance diverges from Smith's, precisely because Foucault does not support a liberator conception of resistance (Clemitshaw, 2013; Teghtsoonian, 2016). For Smith, discursive practices might subordinate activist's goals, but making change means analyzing those ruling relations that displace resistant discourses. The aim is to get ruling relations to work for those of us working from below; disrupting ruling relations is political activism. Smith's ontological framework of IE helps explicate "how" traditional grading remains sticky, by outlining a method to trace the ruling relations mediated through texts and social practices. IE helps us to see how ruling is put into practice as we competently perform, with regard to assessment practices, in our daily work as faculty in higher education. Not until we can identify these processes will we be able to critically reflect and intervene (Teghtsoonian).

Foucault's theoretical framework, on the other hand, helps explicate why traditional grading remains sticky in higher education by offering a method of discourse analysis that traces the ways grading and assessments act as disciplinary technologies operating *on* faculty in higher education. Combining governmentality with ethnographic

research methods offers insights into how and why we conduct ourselves the way we do in relationship to our work lives and public policies. Foucault's framework allows us to explore how power operates in and through the policies and practices of the neoliberal university, illuminating how resistive and compliant subjectivities are constituted.

> According to Foucault's ideas of governmentality, we are governed by this power and we perform self-surveillance on ourselves and our actions as if being observed. These technologies of power seep into our bodies, performing a kind of bio-power, affecting how we feel and act. (English & Mayo, 2012, p. 61)

English and Mayo note that Foucault thought disciplinary power exercised through disciplining technologies most effective, because of the effects this power has on the day-to-day interactions between people. If grading is a form of disciplinary technology, as I have argued, then Foucauldian analysis helps us understand how the processes and discourses circulating around grading form the subjectivities of academics as assessors.

Combining governmentality with ethnographic research methods offers insights into how and why we conduct ourselves the way we do in relationship to our work lives and public policies. According to Foucault, the practice of freedom, that is, the governing of the self in order to change, comes from very small things (Davies & Bansel, 2010). In this study I hope to illuminate how governmentality research using ethnographic methods can explicitly focus on counter conducts by opening up space for interrogating practices and complex subjectivities (Teghtsoonian, 2016).

CHAPTER 5: Journal Article 1

Title: Institutional Ethnography Illuminates Ruling Relations in Higher Education: Revealing Grades as Texts

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Abstract

This article identifies the role grades play as regulatory text mediating ruling relations within U.S. higher education institutions. This article demonstrates how institutional ethnography (IE) provides a way forward for those interested in "re-visioning" higher education to understand how neoliberal social policies shape and infiltrate faculty's daily work. IE is a method of inquiry that starts with an individual's experience, then traces how their experience is coordinated to organizational processes and social relations. Taking an IE approach, this article aims to illustrate how grades are "activated" as an institutional regulatory text that constitutes the context for faculty actions, decisions, and thinking. This study begins to explicate how grades discursively organize faculty experience consistent with a neoliberal regime of accountability. The author argues that traditional "grades" (A-F) and by extension GPA in U.S. universities, not only erases aspects of the actual labor of faculty involved in preparing and teaching courses but also creates a conflict of values for faculty navigating institutional

surveillance through grading policy. IE methodology illuminates the taken-for-granted, text-mediated faculty actions activated by an institutional discourse embedded in grading policy that both reproduces and buttresses neoliberal ideology in higher education.

Introduction

It is the nature of ideologies to see some things clearly and place other things out of view—to serve up a combination of useful concepts and to conceal self-interest.

(Iber, 2018, p. 8)

In post-industrial societies, organizational knowledge and social interactions in institutions such as higher education have increasingly become text-mediated. Within the ontology of institutional ethnography (IE), as conceived by sociologist Dorothy Smith, texts are not neutral or inactive. This article takes the "standpoint" of faculty, "an empirical location… within the complex regime" (Rankin, 2017b, p. 2) of higher education. IE is a complex methodological approach with many component parts, thus for the purpose of this article I will focus primarily on two IE concepts: texts and how they mediate ruling relations. The methodological approach of institutional ethnography problematizes our understanding of texts. Texts become *active*, mediating social interactions by coordinating actions, decision-making, consciousness, and social organization in our lived experience and work process. This interaction occurs not only in the local setting (as in this study of a particular course from the "standpoint" of a faculty member), but also beyond the local setting to the extra-local settings, such as accreditation bodies, registrars, for example.

In turn, a text puts a sequence of actions in place that are linked back to the management practices of "ruling relations" (Smith, 1999). The author defines "ruling relations" as the complex web of social relations in which people enact their social life; those daily activities are enmeshed within the economy and ruling institutions – in this case, higher education institutions (HIEs). Rankin (2017b) expands this definition of ruling relations:

> Ruling relations are social relations that organize work from afar. Although ruling relations are generated at a distance from the "standpoint" they are often "activated" by people in a local setting. Ruling relations shape how work being carried out at the standpoint must proceed and how that work will be represented. (p. 3) [emphasis added]

I argue that ruling-relations practices within the higher education regime, of which grading students is one such practice, remain invisible and taken for granted in faculty's daily work because ruling relations operate *through* texts. That is, by activating texts (grades), faculty accomplish the desired actions of ruling relations – for example, to rank students. Thus grades, when conceptualized as a text, become a means to not only organize a faculty member's work, but also to govern faculty by activating practices of knowledge that subsume how a problem is known or experienced (Rankin, 2017b) – in this case, the problem is one of ranking and sorting students in higher education.

This article's aim is to illustrate how IE methodology enables us to trace these ruling relations in our everyday work as faculty, In other words, its aim is to show how things work, to trace "institutional relations of power, coordination, and control beyond

the everyday knowledge of the people at work in the starting place" (Devault, 2012, p. 384). Until subjected to inquiry through the analysis of taken-for-granted texts and discourses, ruling relations not only organize faculty's daily work from afar using texts, "but also coordinate what people *know* about what is happening – even if that knowledge does not quite match what is known from *being there*" *(*Rankin, 2017b, p. 3). This study aims to show how IE methodology makes what is invisible in HEIs visible.

As previously mentioned, the focus of this article is on traditional grades (A-F) conceptualized as a regulatory text in the IE ontology and how grades mediate ruling relations in HEI. I use "grade" and "text" interchangeably throughout the paper. But what is important to understand here is the role of texts, namely, to uphold the interests of ruling relations and also to coordinate what people *know* about what is happening – even if their knowledge does not quite match what is known from *being there*. Texts activate authority relations at and beyond the local setting (Smith, 2005). In other words, texts (grades) organize our daily activities to coordinate with extra-local ruling practices beyond our classrooms (Smith, 1999). This text-mediated management subordinates local experience to the discursive and constitutes what I referred to earlier as "ruling" (Campbell, 2006; Devault, 2012; Rankin, 2017b). In the following sections, this article demonstrates how IE methodology can explicate1) how ruling relations coordinate our activities through text-mediated interactions, and 2) how institutional discourse infiltrates our consciousness and practices as we take up the economic priorities of the institution that has discursively organized our activities.

Employing an IE approach, this article examines grades conceptualized as a text that shapes faculty experience in higher education. While there is much debate about "reforming" higher education, I stand with Smith (2006a) in the belief that if we are going to change social experience, we have to first explicate experience – and reveal what is shaping that experience. This paper will show how IE methodology helps illuminate how grades, when conceptualized as a text, coordinate faculty activities, decisions, and sequential events – and subsequently, accomplish the coordination and control that supports the interests of a neoliberal higher education institution. As Devault (2012) notes:

> In contemporary global capitalist society, our everyday worlds are organized in powerful ways by translocal social relations that pass through local settings and shape them according to a logic of transformation that begins and gathers speed somewhere else. (p. 382)

Research for this article was conducted with faculty and staff at a New England public university. The data for this ongoing project are a combination of unstructured interviews and document analyses that occurred during the academic years 2018-2020. The data presented here, however, are restricted to a single account of a faculty member's grading practices, a typical analysis strategy employed by IE researchers. My aim is to write an account (Rankin, 2017a) of a faculty member's local experience and then to demonstrate the use of IE methodology as a means of illuminating how local experiences are increasingly text-mediated; to "write(s) back into the account of experiences the social organization that is immanent, but invisible, in them" (Campbell, 2006, p. 96). IE

methodology is concerned with discovering dimensions of institutional relations that are, essentially, text-mediated and not transparent (Smith, 1999).

In IE ontology, the text speaks for the institution; texts exert control and texts "are key to institutional coordinating, regulating the concerting of people's work in institutional settings in the ways they impose accountability to the terms they establish" (Smith, 2005, p. 118). IE is an "ethnographic strategy that recognizes texts as actual presences in people's activities [that determine] how activities are coordinated both as local sequences of action and institutionally" (Smith, p. 104). I argue that faculty in HEIs, as Smith contends happens in other institutions, become agents of the text, in this case grades, and by extension the institutional ruling relations that the text embodies. IE methodology is concerned with discovering the dimensions of institutional relations that are, essentially, text-mediated and not transparent, as this study demonstrates.

Reading Grades through the Lens of Institutional Ethnography: How Texts Mediate Institutional Relations

The Stickiness of Traditional Grading in Higher Education

Grading in HEIs in the US emerged in the early 1900s with the new science of statistics which quantified human characteristics and distributed those characteristics along a scale of performance (Brookhart et al., 2016; Schneider & Hutt, 2014; Smith & Smith, 2019). Brookhart and colleagues define grades in the U.S. western context as "symbols assigned to individual pieces of student work or to composite measures of student performance on report cards" (p. 2). In the US, most university faculty who assign an A-F grade (symbol) to students' performance in a course determine a student's

Grade Point Average (GPA). The GPA – a composite measure on a student's transcript (report card) – has increasingly become a paramount concern for students obtaining scholarships, gaining admittance to graduate school, continuance in their programs of studies, obtaining internships, and securing financial aid (Holland, 2019).

In recent years, confidence in the aforementioned traditional grading practices in higher education has garnered criticism from scholars and public thinkers who argue that grades are not objective, nor do they necessarily illuminate student achievement (Davidson, 2017a, 2017b; Jaschik, 2016; Rojstasczer & Healy, 2012; Tannock, 2017). Still others contend that the predominant GPA grading system fosters extrinsic motivation and credentialism, which undermines the purpose of higher education: to encourage life-long learning and critical judgement to prepare a democratic citizenry (Blum, 2016; Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001; Tannock). And yet, despite the research and arguments repudiating traditional grading processes and calls for assessment reform (Boud, 2007; Brookhart et al., 2016; Docan, 2006; Link, 2019; Supiano, 2019; Wall et al., 2014), mainstream grading practices persist in the majority of U.S. HEIs.

The stickiness of grades, as Blum (2016) professes, drawing on Margolis (2001), is due to higher education's "hidden curriculum" that sustains inequality by fostering societal values of evaluation and competition under the umbrella of education. These values include constant evaluation and competition with others and a distinction between powerful and powerless, as well as sustained inequality through racism, sexism, and class bias (Blum; Shore & Wright, 2015a, 2015b). In this hidden curriculum, grades act as the "grand sorter of students," sustaining the inequality of social stratification in higher

education by establishing a hierarchy of students based on grades and GPA (Apple, 2005; Blum, 2016; Davidson, 2017a; Tannock, 2017).

Schools are institutions with a certain logic, and students who acquire the expertise to succeed in school—often from middle-class backgrounds with the social and cultural capital (Blum, 2016; Holland, 2019)—derive social and economic rewards (Labaree, 1997; Newfield, 2016; Waller et al, 2015). Grades buttress a pervasive neoliberal economic ideology in HEIs that reduces faculty and students alike to economic subjects that serve a capitalist economy (Lynch &Hennessy, 2017; Raaper, 2018). In light of current critical examination of grading, grades have increasingly become a contested space of conflicting interests between faculty, students, administrators, and institutions which reflect the conflicting political, social, and economic realities and visions contained within the space of grading (Harland et al., 2015; Lynch & Hennessy).

Empirical research of letter grading in higher education in the US has largely focused on concerns about improving the reliability and accountability of grading practices (Brookhart et al., 2016) rather than, as Reynolds & Theran (2000) recommend, a critical analysis of the institutional relations that undergird this process of assessment. Studies exist of grade inflation (Jaschik, 2016; Lynch & Hennessey, 2017; Rojstaczer, 2016), the relationship grades and course evaluations (Langbein, 2008), student perceptions of grading (Edgar et al., 2014; Gordon & Fey, 2010), and the efficacy of certain grading schema (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Davidson, 2015; LeJeune, 2010; Lindemann & Harbke, 2011). But research is silent on the *why* and *how* of faculty grading practices taken up in higher education, namely, the institutional forces shaping

faculty grading practices in higher education, and how faculty experiences and practices are shaped by these forces. Given the importance of a students' GPAs in determining their future (Holland, 2019), this gap in the research is a glaring omission that speaks to the power of ruling that this study aims to interrogate.

Grades as Regulatory Texts in an Audit Culture

IE research methodology regards an individual informant's experience as *data* (Campbell, 2006); that is to say, the IE researcher describes how an individual's lived experience is *discursively* organized "from somewhere else." Tracing that "somewhere else" by tracking institutional relations that coordinate individual experience and work processes through texts, is the primary concern for IE researchers (Devault, 2012; Rankin, 2017b; Smith, 1999). The IE approach examines how what is written (texts) organizes and authorizes what is known; that is, texts legitimize certain kinds of thinking. Texts generate other texts as well, but a regulatory text plays a key role in Smith's (2001) ontology of texts; they become the reference point for how one interprets one's action: We check our interpretations against the text, which is fixed and unchanging. Smith (2001) further explains how texts regulate temporarily the terms of engagement between and among readers of the text by the categories and concepts the text carries. Categories and concepts carried in a grade, for example, might include abstractions such as excellent or failure, good student or bad student.

A text is regulatory inasmuch as it controls at least one side of the conversation with the reader of the text – it does not budge in the usual give and take of a two-way conversation. It is this constancy of texts that provides the standardizing effect (Devault,

2012; Smith, 2001). This standardizing effect, in which "one side of a text" can be replicated across a multifaceted institution, Smith argues, is essential for organizational management and the interests of ruling relations, because texts are a technology that transcends individual perspectives. Its pre-determined standards regulate people's actions/activities. Texts coordinate in two directions (Smith): the local setting (in this case, a faculty's course) while also hooking up to other settings and people who read the text/grade (in this case, the university department, accreditation board). As such, the regulating text

> … establishes a shared and enforceable common ground, a virtual reality standardized across multiple settings. The diverging and conflicting concerns can be negotiated in the production of a text in which divergent views no longer appear; the resulting regulatory text, precipitated into textual time (Smith 1990b), has been authorized and can be activated to regulate and appropriate actions as organizational and institutional. (Smith, p. 176)

In this article, grades are conceived as a regulating text that embodies the features Smith describes above. Grades are activated by faculty, but they also, as my analysis demonstrates, elide divergences and differences between and among various local settings within the institution. In the IE ontology of texts, the life and work practices of research informants are influenced by those ruling relations through regulatory texts (Smith, 1999, 2001, 2005), often without their awareness and, as in the account of a faculty member in this study, in contrast to and without regard for actual lived experience. Furthermore, since texts are a technology of institutional ruling relations, I

further argue that faculty grading practices in higher education serve a neoliberal accountability regime—i.e., an audit culture, which I describe below.

Audit Culture, Regulation and Neoliberalism

> "Audit culture" is a term coined
>
> … by sociologists and anthropologists to describe not so much a type of society, place or people so much as a condition, one shaped by the use of modern techniques and principles of financial audit, but in contexts far removed from the world of financial accountancy. In other words, audit culture refers to contexts in which the techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct – and the new kinds of relationships, habits and practices that this is creating. (Shore, 2008, p. 279)

Building on Shore's definition, I argue that the spread of audit culture and its technologies to govern is a process of neoliberalization (Hursh & Wall, 2011), reproduced through regulatory texts (such as grades) that function as audit technologies because they reorganize patterns of work in advanced industrial societies, and in this case, the work of faculty in HEI.

Certainly, audit culture is more than texts (Shore, 2008; Shore & Wright, 2015a, 2015b), but texts play a role in regulation, a key feature of audit culture and a key feature of ruling relations, according to Smith (2001). Taylorism, a belief in efficiency and effectiveness, permeates the history of grading (Davidson, 2017) presented earlier in this article, and undergirds the logic of an audit culture in all areas of work in HEI (Shore &

Wright, 2015b), including learning and teaching. In short, audit culture is a target-driven, normative order governed by numbers (Shore, 2008). Thus GPA – as audit culture succinctly describes – has a regulatory role in HEI. Grades are a regulatory apparatus of the university and by extension the discipline of the markets in a regulatory state (Raaper, 2016b). In fact, within the structures and logic of audit culture, we can see how the neoliberal idea of the regulatory state governing at a distance resonates with Smith's concept of ruling relations that regulate from somewhere else (Smith, 1999). In both instances texts mediate social relations, govern, and discipline. Moreover, audit technologies claim to make professionals more accountable to the public, but this managerial accountability can be coercive and authoritarian (Shore). In addition, audit technologies, such as grades (Hursh & Wall, 2011), can mask ideological content (Jankowsiki & Provezis, 2014; Raaper, 2016a, 2016b). This masking effect is important, because there is a claim of faculty independence and self- governance. But grades as a regulating text within an audit culture of HEI contravene claims of independence by maintaining an external control on faculty work process, decisions, and thinking (Raaper; Wall et al., 2014).

How Texts Abstract Experience for the Institution

In a text-mediated setting such as higher education, management of faculty works as a ruling practice carrying the values of the organization through texts to coordinate faculty work, specifically with an eye toward maintaining the value of the social hierarchy (Smith, 1999, 2005). This study examines how texts (grades) are embedded within institutional economic values and are organized around social hierarchies that

intimately penetrate faculty's work and thinking, and are brought into a faculty member's practice of evaluating students. In this sense, then, ruling relations operate in controlling how faculty interact with students through grades. Grades as a regulating text of the institution embody values important to the economic interests of the institution (Smith, 2001) and shape how faculty's experience is ruled discursively, and how it is constructed ideologically across the institution, thus making faculty accountable to the institution (Devault & McCoy, 2006).

Eastwood (2006) describes IE as making ruling relations accessible by opening up spaces to investigate the everyday lived experiences of practitioners and how these experiences are coordinated by social relations. Smith's reasoning on accessibility, as Eastwood describes it, is to "unpack the generalizing and abstracting mechanisms of the institution" (p. 182). In this article, grading is conceptualized as one such abstracting and generalizing mechanism. "As Smith emphasizes, this generalizing process – the abstraction of experience into standardized language that is recognizable to the institution – happens through texts" (Eastwood, p. 182).

An Institutional Ethnography of Grades

The Research Problematic or Disjuncture: A Researcher's Experience

IE researchers are motivated by what Smith (2006) refers to as the "problematic": a disjuncture we experience in our day-to-day lives and our work processes (Rankin, 2017b). Experience is data in the IE approach (Campbell, 2006) because within an experience, the researcher is looking for incongruities in how people live and work– conflicts that arise between authorized knowledge, categories the institution imposes, and

experiential knowledge actualities (Campbell). Through stories and accounts, IE brings into sharper focus the disjuncture between these ideas and the ways in which people's actualities are fitted into these institutional categories and how they are made actionable (Rankin, 2017a).

Therefore, identifying this problematic is a methodological strategy for discovering how an informant's knowledge is built by texts and abstractions that support ruling relations (Rankin, 2017b). "The problematic is a methodological device that directs attention to a domain of possible questions, questions which have not yet been formulated, but which are implicit in the way the everyday world is organized" (Grahame, 1998, as cited by Rankin, 2017a, p. 3). Descriptions and analysis of an individual's experience does not validate a preconceived theory, but rather strives to make visible what is invisible, namely, the ways institutional discourses produce our practices which are increasingly mediated through texts (Rankin, 2017a, 2017b). As Smith (2005) describes it, when the "disjuncture between the artificial realities of institutions and the actualities that people live are not avoidable; they are of the transformation, the process of going from the actual to words or images that represent it" (p. 187).

As an informant for this project, I will give an account (Rankin, 2017a) of an experience I had that I now define as my "disjuncture" (Rankin, 2017b), in which the incongruities between my professional knowledge as a teacher conflicted with the institutional and authorized grading practices of my institution. I hope to show in my account how the IE methodology surfaces the problematic – the transformation from

actual reality to artificial textual reality – as Smith (2005) describes it above, by bringing ruling relations mediated through texts into clearer focus, and how using IE methodology to identify this problematic led to the subsequent IE ethnography (Rankin, 2017a) of grades.

Grading Experience: An account of a Disjuncture - Mikey the "Good" Student

For six years I taught English to international undergraduate students, who hoped to pass an introductory sequence of courses (including my course), with the requisite GPA that would enable them to matriculate at a U.S. public university. Our courses are considered "gateway" courses: Get through the gate and go on to matriculate. I quickly realized that grades were the uppermost concern for these international students, despite my imploring them not to worry about grades, and instead to focus on learning. What follows is an account of the disjuncture I experienced while grading a student named Mikey, who illuminated for me the incongruities of the textual transformation of a student to a "grade" from the actual, lived reality of teaching that student.

Mikey, a freshman from mainland China, is at ease talking with faculty and peers. He engages with his peers. From the first day of class, I thought of Mikey as a "good student" – someone who helped create a learning community with his peers. But quickly, Mikey missed a lot of assignments resulting in a string of O's in our LMS. I still thought of him as a "good student." Not because of his grades, but because he had the disposition and attitudes I associated with a good student – intellectually curious, engaged, and questioning. I felt that Mikey was not just "working for the grade,"

something I had seen with his international peers in my class, but rather that he was working to expand his point of view and understanding.

At the end of the semester, my "good student" Mikey was failing my class. I added up his scores several times, adjusting where I could to give him more points within the bounds of the syllabus, but the math did not help him. Mikey's academic performance, according to the numbers, did not square with what the institution deemed a "good student" for the business school, namely, a GPA of 3.7 or higher. In the final self-reflection essay for the course, Mikey did not ask for my leniency, a better grade, nor did he try to bully me. Instead he wrote to me that he knew the consequences and accepted responsibility for the final grade he would most surely get. This impressed me; I thought that this honest self-appraisal should be valued in our business school, but his letter grade would not show this. Up until Mikey, I had not critically reflected on the long-term impact of the grades I gave students. I questioned myself for a long time on what it could mean if I failed Mikey – no business school, no academic placement in the U.S., and his return to China. In the end, I gave Mikey a D+ – the official university grading policy designation of "poor," not failing. Mikey, in my mind was not a failure. Using an IE lens, I can see my decision to give Mikey a D+ was my disjuncture; that is, my actual experience of teaching Mikey conflicted with the way his grade textually represented him, objectified him, and as a result I refused to fail him. Moreover, I started to ask myself questions: Why was I in the position of being the institution's gatekeeper? How did my grading practices put me in that position?

How IE Examines Experience to Critique the Social

As the above account reveals, I became cognizant of the problematic (Smith, 2005, 2006) of grading students: the textual transformation of my lived reality into an artificial institutional reality (Smith, 1999). I was being told one thing but I knew something else, based on my personal experience (Rankin, 2017a). The disjuncture I experienced the moment I gave Mikey a D+ (and not an F, using official grading policy) my concern shifted from worrying about "what" grade I should give Mikey to wondering "who or what" is served by grading students (Hursh & Wall, 2014). I could see how "[t]he necessary disjuncture[s] at the point of transition from actual to institutional reality dump or distort the experience of those who are caught up in and subject to institutional forms of action" (Smith, 2005, p. 187). By grading Mikey as I did, not as the institution would have me do, I was aware that I had been "caught up in" an institutional reality that did not correspond to my actual experience of teaching and being in a classroom with the embodied Mikey. Indeed, grades distorted that experience, because as a regulatory text, grades transposed the reality of my lived work experience into an incompatible institutional reality (Smith, 1999, 2001, 2005).

The disjuncture, that is, the tensions and contradictions (Rankin, 2017b; Smith, 2006) I describe above, set in motion my IE investigation of grading. My account of grading Mikey is not intended to be an object of interest, but rather an "entry "into the ruling relations of higher education from the standpoint of a faculty member (Rankin, 2017a, 2017b). My account of my disjuncture above illustrates how the abstract principle of "good student" conflicts with my lived experience of what constitutes a good student.

Yet, my thinking is hooked into institutional actions and knowledge outside my immediate experience, what Smith (1999) refers to as "relations of ruling."

Smith is also concerned with how actions are coordinated *with* knowledge *through* texts (Campbell, 2001, [added emphasis]). According to Campbell (2006), Smith (2005) describes this as a "bifurcated consciousness," that is, moving between two worlds that are often contradictory (p. 94). In the case of faculty, there is the world of the classroom, working with individual student bodies and students' lives in real time, and then there is the task of translating faculty work into an organizational text, a grade, which transforms students into objects identifiable and categorizable by the institution such as, for example, the "good B student," the "F student." In my account, I had to reconstruct my ways of knowing Mikey into the discursive mode of a grade for the institution; my experiential knowledge of him was subordinate to the text-based or discursive ways of knowing Mikey in modern managerial techniques (Smith).

As previously discussed, this subordination of the experiential is a key function of texts. "The power of subordinating the local experiential knowing to the discursive is the basis of textually mediate management" (Campbell, 2006, p. 95). IE methodology, as illustrated in this article, attends to how what is written organizes what is known, and how what is known, abstracted through texts, carries authority and is reproducible (Devault & McCoy, 2006; Smith, 2005). In my account, for example, Mikey is known only to the institution by the grade I give him, thus grading is a text-mediated management procedure. Texts are standardizing; they mediate ruling relations by constraining what can be said (Devault & McCoy) – in this case about my student Mikey.

Furthermore, as an IE researcher who operates from the standpoint of faculty, I began to see how grades become a ruling practice, how they work, and what they accomplish: They organize faculty experience and activities into "[c]omplex sequences that coordinate individual's diverse consciousness and activities into institutional action" (Turner, 2006, p. 140).

In the subsequent sections of this paper, while maintaining a faculty standpoint (Rankin, 2017b), I analyze an account of a new faculty member in the STEM field, Esther, who describes designing the grading scheme for their inaugural undergraduate courses at a public research university. By attending to this informant's description of their everyday work life, this analysis begins to investigate socially organized challenges (Rankin, 2017a) in Esther's work, as well as how ruling relations are organized through the materiality of the text/grades (Smith, 2006). Institutional ethnography opens up how the regulatory function (Smith, 2001) of grades textually organizes a faculty member's actions and knowledge within a higher education culture, which is increasingly "characterized by a call to be objective and an unbridled emphasis on empiricism" (Giroux, 2017, p. 5).

My analysis also begins to show how faculty, by activating grades, are connected textually to the interests of the neoliberal economic and social worldview of an audit culture, an accountancy regime responsive to market rationales and competitiveness (Hursh & Wall, 2011). Grades implicate faculty in HEI's audit culture, in which a management accountability regime articulates the standards used to regulate and narrowly define success and values so they can be measured and compared by

quantifiable data (Davies & Bansel, 2010; Hursh &Wall; Hursh et al., 2015). We saw this in my aforementioned disjuncture. Furthermore, Giroux (2017) contends that:

> … [a]udit cultures support conservative educational policies driven by market values and an unreflective immersion in the crude rationality of a data-obsessed market-driven society; as such, they are at odds with any viable notion of a democratically inspired education and critical pedagogy. (p. 5)

Organizations exploit the capacity for texts to mediate and coordinate knowledge with action (Campbell, 2001), and this is particularly true in the current neoliberal context of management efficiency and accountability in the audit culture of higher education (Giroux; Hursh & Wall; Shore, 2008).

When faculty actions/work processes are textually-mediated and organized by grades, as illustrated in this analysis, faculty's interests shift (often unknowingly) to the interests generated from afar by the ruling relations, which govern locally through texts (Smith, 2005, 1999). In other words, faculty's work tasks, in this case grading students' achievements, are shaped by the institution's audit regime and yet come to seem "natural," as the only way tasks could be done (Devault, 2012). Grading becomes an activity of ruling relations that governs faculty by "objectifying aspects of the social world in order to develop facts and knowledge upon which to base decisions" (Rankin, 2017b, p. 3).

Moving from the account of my disjuncture in the previous section, I will now describe the method of inquiry and then analyze an account of a faculty member describing their grading practices, to illustrate how ruling affects their everyday work life

and how ruling relations, as mediated through grades, influence their practice. The research interest in my paper is to make explicit the connections between grading and the text-mediated discourses faculty must employ, which institutional ethnography methodology makes researchable.

Method of Inquiry

For this study, I analyze research informant interviews conducted with a junior faculty member in the STEM field, who I refer to as Esther, at a New England public research university. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, although false starts and repetitions were edited out. This paper traces Esther's text-mediated work, specifically their attempt to design a grading schema for undergraduate STEM courses. Esther is the lead teacher for the courses discussed, having previously been a TA at another institution; therefore, Esther is experiencing a new level of management and responsibility in this transition to junior faculty. The context for this study is grading practices within a higher education environment that is increasingly managed by regimes of accountability (Jankowski & Provezis, 2014; Kvale, 2007; Raaper, 2016a, 2016b; Shore & Wright, 2015). Additionally, IE interviews unfold based on the particular standpoint the researcher takes (Devault, 2012; Rankin, 2017b) to describe how things are happening, organized and coordinated from a specific position (Rankin). In this study, the researcher takes a faculty standpoint since, as a faculty member at the same university, I know intimately the work processes of grading practices.

Open-ended interviewing has been used to allow Esther to describe her work processes as they relate to grading, as fully as possible, and to explore a particular strand

within the institutional complex (Devault, 2012). IE researchers maintain that interviewees' activities are subject to discursive processes, and those processes shape the interviewee's work (Devault). Thus, "[t]he researcher's purpose in an institutional ethnography is not to generalize about the group of people interviewed but to find and describe social processes that have generalized effects" (Devault, p. 383). Interviews in IE methodology are not used to reveal subjective states, but rather to trace the connection between these activities and how they are connected to other people or operations within the institutional complex – in other words, how they are socially organized (Rankin, 2017a). The interview in IE methodology goes beyond just giving voice to people's experience, although it does that too. Instead, an IE methodological approach assumes that institutions are not stand-alone entities; they comprise coordinated activities – the forms we know as bureaucracy, administration, media – as well as complex discourses that coordinate the activities that connect people (Devault; Devault & McCoy, 2006).

IE researcher works with the informant to research the empirical linkages among everyday life, organizations and process, and governance (Devault, 2012). Institutional ethnographers use interviews to uncover the "organizational features of a given set of text-mediated interactions" (Walby, 2005, p. 198) by investigating the informant's experience, always with an eye to the institution and ruling relations that coordinate that experience (Eastwood, 2006). The linkages unearthed in the informant interview constitute a complex field of coordination and control, which Smith (1999) identifies as ". . . the ruling relations; these increasingly textual forms of coordination are the forms in which power is generated and held in contemporary societies" (p. 70) (as cited in

Devault, p. 381). IE interviews build on people's accounts to unveil power relations and how those relations organize everyday lives (Devault; Rankin, 2017b).

My aim in conducting interviews with the faculty research informant was to listen for and ask about the actions, activities, and standardizing and mediating role (Devault & McCoy, 2006) grades as a text play in the context of this faculty member's work. More specifically, this article explicates how grades operate as an "active" regulatory text as conceptualized by IE, a text that has a standardizing effect, to better understand the textually-mediated discursive processes embedded in grading. Finally, I seek to reveal the text-mediated discourses that faculty draw upon in their everyday work processes when navigating grading practices. Using the following account of a faculty member's interpretation of grades and her grading practices, I come to show *how grades come to mean what they mean* by describing a faculty member's interpretive and sense-making practices in a concrete setting. When faculty are regulated by grades, grades become a form of neoliberal accounting technology, a ruling structure in an accountability regime that commodifies higher education.

Research Findings and Analysis

The Role: Esther, as Entrepreneurial Worker

In this study, I employ the analytic strategy of writing and framing an account of a faculty member's work processes, specifically those text-mediated processes associated with activating and interpreting grades. This analysis holds to the "IE mission of linking instances of things happening into the ruling relations that organize and coordinate those instances" (Rankin, 2017a, p. 8). Institutional ethnographers believe that people and

events are actually tied together in ways that make sense of such abstractions as power, knowledge, capitalism, patriarchy, race, the economy, the state, policy, culture, and so on (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). The contribution of this approach will be demonstrated in this paper by opening up the topic of how grades as a regulating text in HEI create problems for faculty in the context of designing and teaching high impact, learner-centered courses (Davidson, 2015, 2017a; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017) within a STEM program. These problems originate from the ways in which grades as a regulating text organize what faculty do, authorize certain knowledge, and frame what faculty can speak about; in other words, grades hold faculty accountable to the institutional priorities of an accountability regime, a neoliberal principle that encourages standardization. The data analyzed here allow us to look in on a faculty member's actions and activities undertaken as she designs and justifies a grading schema for a course. In the analysis below, I begin to show how faculty's interests and values shift when their actions are textually organized and their thinking is discursively influenced by the institutional discourses associated with grades.

The exchanges analyzed below occurred between the researcher and Esther, a junior faculty member in a STEM department at a public research university during two in-depth interviews in 2018-2019. Before presenting an analysis of the data, some context is needed to situate the research informant. Esther is a full-time, non-tenure track lecturer carrying a full course load, in which teaching is her primary responsibility. Esther had been teaching full-time for less than one year when interviewed. I met Esther at a faculty training session for an alternative grading schema, "specifications grading" (Nilson &

Stanny, 2015; Pope et al., 2019), at our Center for Teaching and Learning. Prior to being hired as a full-time lecturer, Esther had been a TA graduate student at another university with some teaching responsibilities, however, as Esther describes it, a TA does not "own" the course as Esther does now as a lecturer:

> *E: Well, because as a Teaching Assistant, every time you have a question, you have someone you can ask. Sure, I could as the "Course Owner" go ask and bug people about my itty-bitty problems, but eventually it's my responsibility and my decision because then it reflects on me how things are going.*

The discourse of ownership Esther uses reflects the ideal "entrepreneurial" worker in an accountability regime of the neoliberal university (Knights et al., 2012). For example, when Esther started teaching the first semester, it was her responsibility to meet faculty who teach sequential courses as well as identify the prerequisite skills and disciplinary knowledge students needed to progress in their particular course. In neoliberal universities, this isolation and individualization of faculty means that faculty carry the responsibility for their course's success, erasing other factors, actors, or collective decisions within the institution that might impact the course. As Esther makes clear, there are individual consequences if one does not live up to that responsibility of the entrepreneurial worker: "It reflects on me how things are going." When I asked Esther about the lack of specific feedback or direction in planning courses and the Chair's "rubber-stamp" of the course syllabi, Esther replied, "I just wanted to survive, make a decent job, and have nobody hate me forever." As the entrepreneurial worker, "[w]e are

burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not, we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 88).

The Grade: Faculty Member Esther and the Text-Mediation of Faculty Priorities

As mentioned previously, the analysis here explicates how the competent design of a faculty member's grading schema in a syllabus expresses a grading policy in HEIs that establishes standards and methods of accountability for what constitutes a quality education in a STEM program. However, I argue that the textual practices within an accountability regime are at odds with the department's public commitment to a student-centered learning experience and to a faculty's beliefs about how to deliver learner-centered instruction. The data analyzed here allow us to look in on a faculty member's actions and activities, undertaken as they develop a grading schema for a course that they then have to justify to their peers, department Chair, students, and to themselves. The subsequent analysis excavates the conflicting values between faculty professional knowledge and text-mediated institutional priorities.

The values of a quality education in Esther's department are publicly consistent with the current literature on reforming STEM education by incorporating active learning and meaningful application (Freeman et al., 2014). And while it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss this literature here, I note it because these quality values are expressed in Esther's department's public documents and yet, as the data show, the reality of Esther's experience as a faculty member contradicts these values. Such public facing values include the small size of the department, which is described as valuing a high-level of student interaction with faculty who "get to know you well." In addition, the

website stresses that small size does not impede national recognition. Finally, the college website explains that "students view each other as collaborators, not competitors" and faculty teach meaningful applications for humankind, "not just solving for *x*." These public-facing documents articulate a student-centered, active learning approach as a value within Esther's department and presumably shared by faculty members designing and teaching courses.

In addition, the department voluntarily holds *Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology* (ABET) accreditation. The accreditation commission in ABET sets standards for specific program areas and degree areas that constitute accreditation certification. The accrediting body's website states the following: "ABET accreditation provides assurance that a college or university program meets the standards of the profession for which the program prepares graduates." The ABET website claims to promote best practices in education that focus on learning outcomes, and "directly involves faculty and staff in self-assessment and continuous quality improvement." As we can see, the public documents of Esther's program and the department's subscription to accreditation claim to value student-centered learning, high-impact practices, and teaching and learning experiences that are applicable to "real world" problems. These quality values are also supported by Esther as a competent teacher and course designer. However, these public facing values, I argue, are in conflict with the values prioritized within an accountability regime mediated by grades, as I will illustrate in the subsequent analysis.

Grades, when conceived as a text-mediated process, produce faculty accountability to the department, college, and institution by establishing standards of measurement. As a regulatory text that standardizes, generalizes, and is reproducible, grades are at odds with the department's and program's public commitment to student-centered learning and instruction because these text-mediated practices undermine faculties' sense of responsibility and ability to serve students by maintaining hierarchical relationships and structures (Reynolds & Trehan, 2000). Value statements of the department make a public commitment to the relationship between faculty and student, but grading practices, as illustrated in the excerpt below, draw Esther away from these values, even though she expresses the centrality of a faculty's relationship with students to enhance student learning. Below, Esther describes needing a certain concentration when she is grading, which is differentiated from teaching or meeting with students. Moreover, the excerpt below shows how the grading process regulates how Esther prioritizes time, tasks, activities, and what students will learn in her course.

E: Yeah. First of all, let's get this out of the way. I'm mostly behind with grading, like notoriously behind grading.

S: Me too.

E: And I don't like it. The students don't like it. It's just I don't have the bandwidth to do all of it.

S: Yeah. What eats up the bandwidth? ...

E: I have a lot of office hours, and I have an open-door policy, so students can pop in whenever they want, unless I'm, like, busy with another meeting or something,

which is a valuable resource to them. And given that we are a small department, it's a point for us. So I often get interrupted. I don't really like that, especially with grading, because I want to be as fair as possible, meaning that the faster I can go through them, the more likely I remember, "Hey, I've seen this mistake before. I deducted this much. I should do the same for this case."

S: So you need to have clear space to do this, you say, or a certain mindset to do this.

E. And know that there's nothing else coming up that I would need to focus on.

S: What happens when you get interrupted?

E: Think they would lower the quality of the overall grading or the consistency of it.

S: Interesting. So, say some more about that. …

E: Because I just lose my train of thought, because, sure, usually, my first step is to take the assignment and break it down into how I want to grade it points-wise. And then, depending on how granular I'm going, it will be very easy to do it. But the thing is, I can't anticipate what type of mistakes students might make. If 50% do the same mistake, okay, there might be an issue on my teaching part, but then I'd know how much to deduct for that. I can work that into the rubric. But for some problems, you can't really do that, because there are different ways of solving a problem in our case. And then, "Well, did they set the equation right? Yes, they did. Did they do this? Did they do that?" So I'm starting to learn that it is a lot easier if you think about how you want to grade something before you set up the

assignment. And what I mean by that - and [specs] helps with that - is being clear of what the outcomes are, where you put most emphasis, and then break it down based on that.

In the excerpt above, we see that Esther recognizes that student learning is complex and hard to quantify. Grading students' work is a reductive process. Esther also has to standardize the grade given to students, even though problem-solving is not standard: "There are so many ways to solve the problem." Esther also acknowledges that grading influences the course's assignment design, because the text-mediated process of adding and subtracting points and quantifying across a diversity of possible answers drives Esther toward finding a way to "make grading easier" by thinking of grading practices first before designing an assignment. "Being consistent" does not necessarily allow for student diversity, rather it erases differences, which is contrary to what Esther understands about the learning process. The department's public commitment to value high faculty-student interaction is in conflict with Esther's need to focus on grades and mitigate student interruptions to be able to grade consistently, even as she acknowledges, an "open-door policy" is good for students and a priority of the department to encourage high student-faculty interactions. In the above excerpt we can see how grades shift focus and priorities, drawing Esther away from the values expressed by the department in order to prioritize text-mediated accountability.

As previously mentioned, texts in an accountability regime regulate faculty work. Grades regulate Esther's labor, specifically, the additional labor required to grade

students outside what Esther views as an instructional priority – determining if students have understood the course material as illustrated in the excerpt below.

S: Where does that pressure you feel to get something done come from?

E: So, one, for personal reasons. I want to be at the pulse of student's abilities. I want to know how they're doing right now. If I grade something they submitted this week in a week, do I still go back and talk about something that happened a week and a half ago to reiterate some points and reinforce? Or will that be completely lost on them because they already moved on?

S: And you wouldn't know that if you didn't grade?

E: So what I started doing is flipping through things right after I get them to get a general idea of was there a common mistake? Was there a problem people had problems with? Or just to get a general idea of reoccurring things and then I did that at the beginning of the semester with the first quiz. It was so terrible that the next week – no, not the next week. I didn't grade them but I could clearly see from their answers that something wasn't clicking, so then we did the quiz redo two days later.

S: So it's connected. Okay. So you connect it back to, "What should I be teaching?" is what you're saying.

E: Yes.

Students' actual answers on the quiz give Esther information about what they have learned, but *grading* that quiz, deciding what points to give a student, is counterproductive to what Esther values – finding out "the pulse of students' ability."

The tension Esther experiences with grades is apparent when Esther decides *not* to grade student quizzes, since doing so when Esther knows they would get a low grade goes against Esther's professional knowledge. This excerpt begins to show how the grading process actually interferes with what the department publicly claims to value in a quality learning experience. Instead, grading takes faculty time *away* from students and course planning, and it affects Esther's decisions and choices ("Do I go back?"). The center of Esther's concern is teaching and learning – she wants to know if something "isn't clicking"; however, the pressure to grade shifts Esther's priority to institutional accountability. In the excerpt above we can see how grades are a technology of audit culture that not only shape the learning experience but also the teaching experience; they contradict the department's public statements that value student-centered interaction with faculty.

Another aspect of the data makes this contradiction clear. Esther has spent a significant amount of time designing a grading system that is criteria-based, in which students have to meet all the criteria in the assignment to achieve a passing grade. When we discuss negative or ambivalent student evaluations of this grading system, Esther's response makes clear the tension grades create in the relationship between faculty and students, as well as the incongruities embedded in HEI accounting regimes.

> *E: They know at the end they will learn things well. But they don't really want to go through the work to get there. And the system is forcing them. If they want the grade, great, if not, I mean, I had students who did not show up to any lab at all,*

submitted no laboratory works, because they were able to get out a C by doing well on the other two parts.

S: And is a C okay? In your field, can you get a C and stay in the discipline? I thought it was a GPA requirement.

E: Yes. But if they did their calculations, and that's fine for them, I'm okay giving them a C if they have not proven two out of the six learning outcomes.

Esther's grading system becomes a coercion that is contrary to her expressed intentions. Grades are "forcing them" to complete the assignment in a specific way to get the higher grade, but not all students can be forced. Esther wants students to achieve the learning outcomes for the course, but grades become the central exchange in faculty and student interactions, not the value of the learning experience, despite Esther's expressed desire. Students in HEI text-mediated accounting regime are also calculating what work they have to do to pass the course with a C grade – everyone in an accountability regime has to account for their effort. Thus, Esther's priority for achieving the learning outcomes is in fact undermined by the grading schema, once again highlighting the incongruities of a competent faculty member's expressed pedagogical interests with the interests of ruling relations of an accounting regime.

What is increasingly apparent is how much labor Esther expends in developing a grading schema for the course with a sincere interest in ensuring the course has meaningful learning outcomes. In the excerpt below, Esther explains how students had the option to complete various final projects depending on the grade they wanted to achieve; however, to Esther's disappointment, not all students wanted to achieve an A.

E:. . . because I have the specs laid out for the final project. Do this, you get this, you do all of these steps. You get an A. [The student said], "Well, project seems too hard. I'm not going to go for an A. I'll just go for a B."

S: That's okay.

E: It is okay.. I just don't like their tone.

S: Say some more. What do you mean, you didn't like their tone?

E: It just sounded like, I don't know, it's just sad when they don't want to strive for better.

S: I think that's what you're talking about when you hear that outside the door. Maybe, I don't want to – it is that it's more like it's the grade that's driving this decision, not the material and wanting to learn the material?

E: Exactly. And personally, I didn't think that the jump from A to B was that difficult. Plus, they would have learned an awesome skill which is important. But they just decided they weren't to prioritize other things, that is. Fine.

This is an instance in which Esther is attempting to prioritize learning, to provide what the department website describes as hands-on learning; however, Esther's priorities run up against the priorities within an accountability regime, in which the students are also embedded. The grade is paramount because as a regulatory text it "accounts student's performance" and thus influences the students' as well as faculty's decisions. The above excerpt also offers a glimpse of the debunked myth of meritocracy built into the accountancy regime. That is, if students do not go for the higher grade, put in more effort (labor) and strive for better, then, in a neoliberal accounting regime context, students are

not being the productive workers who are rewarded for their productivity and performance. This is effortful competition that contradicts Esther's intention of student learning for the sake of learning, as well as the public values stated on the program web page of collaboration over competition. The implicit ranking of students by grades becomes a reward system reinforcing neo-liberal accountancy by creating incentives to get desired behaviors, namely, more productivity.

Employing an IE methodological lens, I have begun to illustrate how grades act as a regulatory text creating conflict with faculty's professional knowledge, priorities, and interests, thereby shifting faculty attention and priorities to the institutional priorities of accountancy, even when the institution publicly expresses the value of student-centered instruction. Esther, through the activation of grades, is hooking the student into the institutional agenda to incentivize students for certain behaviors that merit social reward. Grades categorize students who deserve or do not deserve these social rewards. This is not Esther's personal choice, rather the text/grade makes an authoritative determination which students are worthy, or deserving. Faculty thus uphold, often unknowingly, the institutional value of student ranking when they activate the text/grade. What the data also illustrate are how expressed professional values of what constitutes a learning experience conflict with the regulatory aspect of grades. In the next section, I turn to how Esther's course gets "written up" in the Course Assessment Report (CAR), a report that summarizes students' grades and assessment averages, which further illustrates the discourses mediated through grades.

Authorized Knowing: Textually-Mediated Discourses and Ruling Relations

Discourses, concepts, and categories build institutional realities and subordinate subjective realities of an individual's lived experience. "The shaping of facts, news, information, cases, and other forms of knowledge is circular in this sense: [F]rames govern the selection of what will be recorded, observed, described and so on" (Smith, 2005, p. 191). Institutional discourses replicate processes and fit them into actions and hold actors to these authorized actions. From an IE approach, then, discourse is as much an outcome of faculty grading practices, as it is an input that frames grading practices – how we come to know what grades mean and say what we know. I have been arguing that grades as a text are active and can be activated, that they contribute to a regime of accountability in an audit culture. Several discourses inform the "activation" of grades within an accounting regime. I will now turn to examine what audit-culture discourses bring into focus and what they render invisible or unsayable.

What Counts - The Discourse of Measurement

> Discourse is produced wherever work is regulated through series of texts. By means of the reading, writing, and viewing of books, magazines and videos we can locate the intersection between our everyday discursive activity and the hierarchal structures of business, state, Authority, and capital. (Walby, 2005, p. 197)

The discourse of measurement is mediated and produced by grades, as the neo-liberal ideology and management practices attempt to install rigorous forms of accountability in HEI (Apple, 2005). The discourse of measurement is both an input and an output that

informs the consciousness of faculty, particularly because it is taken for granted as a routine practice in HEI. The taken-for-grantedness of measurement is how faculty like Esther can hold on to their idea that their teaching is learner-centered, when in fact other interests of the institution and ruling relations dominate their work. The evaluative and measurement pressures on faculty are apparent in the excerpt below and evince how other conceptions of effectiveness, outside grades and numbers, are not considered viable in audit culture.

In the following data, Esther explains how the student's "passing score" of the CAR was determined. A brief description of the CAR report will help contextualize the subsequent data. CAR reports are collected for the department's external accreditation review process. A faculty member reports and provides evidence of the number of students who "have passed," that is, who have achieved particular learning outcomes in their course, as well as grade averages. The faculty's course data are compared to the required standards of the accrediting body and listed on the CAR; then faculty have to justify their numbers to their peers. CAR reports, according to Esther, are generated as evidence to the accrediting body that particular learning outcomes are not only included in the program's curriculum but are also measured. In addition, CARs also include remediation plans for faculty whose student pass rate is below the department's predetermined thresholds. Below, Esther discusses how the passing score for CAR was determined in her department:

E: … because we're engineers and we like to have a solid reason for anything we're doing. Okay?

S: Okay. Good. I'm registering that. Go ahead.

E: And second thing, we want to accurately measure things. Now, it is very clear that we have outcomes and we want to measure that they were achieved, but this 60 number, we kind of made that up, nobody told us that that's how we're supposed to do it.

S: It must have come from somewhere.

E: Intuitively it makes sense because a 60 is like a D and you want everyone over that, but is a D really okay?

S: Have students achieved the learning outcomes if they get a D?

E: That is the question.

S: Okay.

E: And then number two, my D might be different from your D. Right? Or someone's 80 might be different from someone's 80. The standards are different throughout faculty. . . .

E: And this came up several times, and we of course did not come to a conclusion because here's the thing: Everyone is different and has a different perception of how much a student's work is worth. We have faculty that intentionally design exams to be difficult. . . .

E: So for example, if you want to measure a yard fabric, you want to use a one-and-a-half yardstick to measure that one yard, cause if you measure with an equally long stick, you might be inaccurate. So then, do you design everything for

students to – if they want to be an A, they have to be exceptional? Is B your general guideline? Also, what do those letters even mean?

Notice in this passage above how Esther claims faculty need a "solid reason" to "count" a student as passing: An agreed upon number or letter grade is considered a solid, tangible, reason. From an IE epistemology, the discourse of measurement creates an artificial reality, that intelligence and learning *can* be measured. And yet, as Esther intimates, this solid reasoning evaporates when it is clear that what counts and how it is counted is in fact an arbitrary number/letter; "We kind of made it up." For an accountancy regime, grades make it easier to compare students, even, as Esther notes, when the subjective "worth" of a "D" might differ for each faculty member. But notice, too, how from an IE ontology of texts (Smith, 2001), those individual faculty differences of what constitutes "pass" are erased by the text/grade. A "*D*", no matter how it is written or read, is still a "*D*" a pass—even with those subjective differences. This is the standardizing effect of regulating texts discussed previously.

Notice, too, Esther says that this designation of *D* is "intuitive," which suggests that the discourse of measurement creates a reality in faculty consciousness that learning *can* and *should* be measured, even if individual faculty measurements differ and even when this conflicts with their professional knowledge. A complex social process such as learning is turned into a reductive number, but this reduction clearly conflicts with Esther's professional knowledge when she questions if the grade shows what students have actually learned or achieved: "What do those letters mean anyway?" Grades are efficient and comparable; they enable comparison across faculty, courses, student. Thus

in an audit culture, texts make students easily comparable, generalizable, and, most importantly for the institution, they do not cloud the accountability process with too much specificity.

This discourse of measurement produced by grades serves a regime of accountancy, because it is rooted in the science of statistics that exists at the "intersection between individualizing and totalizing" (Ball, 2013, p. 83). Counting and measuring makes structures visible to external scrutiny and for comparison. But this measurement discourse, embedded in "scientific principle," also reifies the myth that humans are born with certain capabilities which can be and should be categorized (Ball). What we see in the data excerpt above is the intention to rank students on a standard "norm," which Esther clearly views as problematic. The discourse of measurement provides a framework for scientifically provable differences that, according to Ball (who echoes Smith's concern with the objectification of knowledge that rules our lives) constitute an educational policy in which "class, race, disability[,] and blood intertwined within education policy and practice, is constantly re-emerging in different forms and contexts and guises, always in relation to power (Ball, p. 96).

Who Matters - The Discourse of Rigor

Texts and the discourses embedded in them look natural and benign, as problems of performance; they appear apolitical when they are not. Grades in HEIs are an accounting technology that masks an ideological project. Regulating texts, in this case grades, govern us from a distance. This extra-local governing is evident in the following excerpt, in which faculty in Esther's department use the "discourse of rigor" when

reviewing the uncustomarily high averages in Esther's course. Esther has to defend the rigor of the course because, for some faculty, it seemed that too many students got A's.

> *E: It was a first-year course, "Introduction to . . . " And grades were exceptionally high. So averages were 90 on most of the assignments, and that raised some eyebrows. So we talked about it. Because some faculty said, "Yeah but should the average be that high?" And then, well, my reply to that was, "It's a first-year, two-credit course," I said. You don't want to make it too difficult because the main purpose of this course is, not necessarily to meet those outcomes, it is to get everyone on the same level; those who had no hands-on experience whatsoever with circuits and what not, to build some confidence, learn more about the program, things like that. It's not necessarily a course you want to weed out people.*
>
> *S: So why is it a problem if everybody's at 90, from that faculty's point of view? And do you think that's true?*
>
> *E: So, another thing is why I don't think it's a problem, that that probably means they met the learning outcomes. Isn't that what we want?*

Previously I acknowledged that learner-centered teaching matters to Esther, and at least on paper, it is a priority for the department. Esther wants to get students to the same level; that is, to level the playing field for all students. Esther is not, in the instance above, placing students on a normal curve in which there will always be some students at the top and bottom of the curve. Yet this excerpt highlights how the discourse of rigor is

intertwined with the assumption that, for some faculty, not all students *should* meet the learning outcomes in Esther's course; in fact, learner-centered teaching, focused as it is on achievable outcomes for all students, contradicts the ideology of a normal curve. As Ball (2013) notes, "Learners are organized for teaching purposes and encouraged to view themselves in terms of the paradigm of ability and its normal 'distribution'" (p. 101). Therefore, the high averages Esther has to account for in her CAR raise suspicions that the course is not rigorous enough if some students *do not* fail. I contend that the discourse of rigor masks an ideology of the normal curve, in which students should fall into pre-determined grading divisions as a reproduction of social hierarchy and a form of social selection.

But notice, too, in the above excerpt, how Esther evinces a contradictory consciousness, the bifurcated consciousness discussed previously in which contradictory world views are simultaneously in play. We can see how the grade as regulatory text coordinates Esther's actions with the knowledge concealed in the discourse of rigor, even though this knowledge is incongruous to Esther's world view of student learning. The discourse of rigor masks an ideology of scarcity: Not everyone is *supposed to succeed* in HEI, nor in Esther's course.

Activating the grade (text) forces Esther to adhere to this ideology of ruling relations. What is more, Esther, too, employs the discourse of rigor when intimating that some courses should weed out students. Esther moves between two worlds that are contradictory: the accountancy regime of HEI and the lived experience of teaching a body of students in real time. Furthermore, Esther is tasked with translating that lived

experience into an organizational text, a grade, which transforms students into objects identifiable on the CAR. The discourse of rigor – that justifies weeding out students – contradicts Esther's expressed value of building student success and confidence. This masking of an ideology of scarcity is further illuminated in the following excerpt, in which Esther describes the faculty reactions to the high averages in the course.

E: So then, that one faculty member was like, "Well, if they already meet that [learning objective in the course]*, shouldn't we challenge them more?"*

S: But why?

E: I don't know. Because in their philosophy, the average should be an 85 which is random, arbitrary. Let's put it like that.

S: And when they argued that, did they give you an argument for that?

E: Well, from what I remember, that's just how they do it. Sometimes, if the class average is too high, they even assign more stuff to challenge students.

S: Okay, you had these 90s, which to your mind might mean they met, they did the things they had to do in the class?

E: Yeah. Well then I explained that I think that[90] *is appropriate for a class of this level. Also the outcomes were met. So I don't see that there's a problem with the grades being so high.*

S: How did you feel having to defend that? What goes on in your mind when you think about being in that experience?

E: Well for one, I don't want to do things wrong, but the more I am in this teaching business, I realize nobody really knows what they're doing [laughter]*. Or at least,*

everyone tries to do their best. It looks different for each person, based on their experiences and all of that.

S: But what's wrong *mean for you?*

E: Wrong . . . against what is customary in that particular department.

One would think that high grades for all students in a course would be an indication of success for a teacher – students successfully met the learning outcomes for the course. But as Esther explains, some faculty viewed the course's high averages as indicative of a lack of "rigor": "give them more work" or "challenge them more" if the grades are too high. Rigor reifies an accountancy regime that is a zero-sum game: There *have to be* winners and losers.

In a capitalist system in which an ideology of scarcity drives competition, the discourse of rigor embedded in grading practices creates latent competition among students, because in a rigorous program, some students *should* succeed and some *should not* (Tannock, 2017). This implicit competition contradicts the department's expressed values of collaboration, discussed previously. Moreover, the rigorous discourse intentionally positions faculty as gatekeepers for the institution; faculty work is not only audited by texts such as the CAR, for example, but faculty also become auditors when they activate grades, auditing students, and supporting the audit culture of HEI by determining who wins or loses. What I have not explored in this analysis but raise as a question for future investigation, is Esther's positionality as female and junior faculty, and how discourses are also gendered and might influence Esther's actions.

IE informed analyses above in this section illustrates how faculty actions are ruled through text-mediated discourses framed in a neoliberal management rationality. Their talk illuminates how grades are a discursive practice that supports the organizational complex which frames their work in an accountancy regime. The discourses of measurement and rigor inform the accountancy work of faculty while subordinating any other professional interests faculty may have in creating learner-centered classrooms, for example. Examining this text-mediated interaction above between Esther and her colleagues helps us understand how power is exercised through discourses and text-mediated knowledge practices in HEI, such as grading. Esther wants grades to mean something, to show student achievement, to not be a barrier to all students learning, yet according to Smith, "When an account is constructed (in this case the average grade of students in a particular course), inserting a ruling conceptual frame and suppressing the experience of the "subject" of the lived actuality that the account claims to be about, the account is said to be ideological (Campbell, 2001, p. 243). The ideological idea of "a normal curve" and "scarcity" is masked by the routine practice of grading and by the discourses that subdue other competing actions that Esther might take, as a teacher who cares about student-centered learning.

Discussion and Implications

My argument is that an accountancy regime is established through, but not limited to, grading practices in higher education. This audit culture dominates faculty actions in their classroom and subordinates their lived experiences as professional educators, constraining their choices. Grades as text are replicable and reveal the organizational

arrangement of the institution. In this analysis I have not attempted to evaluate the grading practices of this faculty member against some professional standards of competency. Rather, I am arguing that faculty work is routinely being organized outside their control by this text-mediated practice. I have provided a brief glimpse into how faculty views and actions come to be coordinated with the system they operate within. The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates how, through faculty's reading and rewriting of grades, Esther actively participates in the discourses of the accounting regime of HEI.

My analysis of how faculty knowledge is text-mediated through grades begins to identify how specific ruling interests come to dominate faculty's decision making. I isolate text-mediate ruling relations in grading in order to examine a routine feature of higher education and of faculty practice; the very routineness of grading makes the agenda of ruling relations invisible. Grades mediate activities within faculty classrooms and departments, as well as at the institutional level. The institutional ethnographer is interested in mapping out textually-mediated processes that explicate how ruling relations operate through texts. Utilizing institutional ethnography and the talk of faculty, Esther explicates how grades, when conceptualized as a text, coordinates the lived realities of faculty work, shaped by discourses within the organizational complex. The grade as a regulatory text instigates processes and actions, as well as circulates discourses that inform and shape faculty consciousness.

Given the history of traditional grading, the reality I have had to face in my own assessment practices is that grading is not innocent; it is enmeshed with values of

inequality, competition, and privilege (Kvale, 2007). Grades mask a societal, hierarchical structure, as Ball (2013) contends, while purporting to be "class blind," and give the illusion of equality (Kvale, 2007). As faculty, IE forces us to ask what the social function of grading is. In the past, for example, university exams in the Middle Ages were severe and competitive; students were either honored or shamed (Kvale). I concur with Tannock (2017) that grading in the modern university is a form of punishment and shaming, especially when we grade on a curve in which one third of the class are automatic losers.

Furthermore, grades continue to be a form of social selection for more education, better social position, and privilege (Deresiewicz, 2014; Kvale, 2007; Labaree, 1997). What I found disturbing in the grading literature, and which IE has helped me illuminate in this paper – something that should alarm any faculty member who believes higher education should be a site for social justice – is that Eugenic modes of thought that categorize people are embedded in our current educational system, and grading is one persistent trace of this history. Ball (2013) forwards that grades implicitly support a view of hereditarianism that ranks, sorts, categorizes, as if it is natural and in the "blood." Foucault referred to this ranking as a "new racism;" that is, mundane techniques (such as grading) are used to "divide the classroom into 'types' and these are ranked and ordered and distributed into hierarchical tables, scaled and catalogues" (Foucault, as cited in Ball, p. 100). It is a form of social stratification of intersectional oppressions. Little has been done to investigate how faculty and our grading practices are implicated in these inequitable, socially unjust practices or policies. Demands for transparency and accountability are characteristically one-directional and top-down, as those in positions of

power seek to make legible the performance of those below them without being accountable to those they govern. Institutional ethnography illuminates these ruling relations and reverses the gaze.

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CHAPTER 6: Journal Article 2

Transformation Deferred: The Continuity of Disciplinary Power in a Higher Education Assessment Reform Effort

Abstract

Evaluating student achievement in U.S. higher education is generally based on a broad "grading scale" lexicon that takes the form of symbolic representation, usually letters *A, B, C, D, F* with a table of numerical equivalents calculated into a student's Grade Point Average (GPA). This article stems from my experience and empirical observations of this "A-F grading technology" that is central to U.S. faculty work and shored up by a neoliberal accountability regime. Guided by Foucault's (1982; 1995) theoretical framework of disciplinary power and governmentality, this article examines the potentially problematic role and promises of assessment reforms that purport to enhance student empowerment and autonomy within a disciplinary institution. From a Foucauldian perspective, this assessment practice conceals the continuity of disciplinary power, coercively demanded by faculty, in which an accountability regime is the contemporary mode of power relations within U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs).

Introduction

> *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. – Audre Lorde*

Higher education institutions (HEIs) usually have official examinations, assessments or grading policies that obligate faculty to 1) tell students how they will be

assessed in a course and the weight of those assessments, and 2) provide students feedback on their performance within an assessment activity. In the U.S. context, grading policies often lack specific guidance or explicit justification on how faculty should judge the quality of student performance or assign grades (Sadler, 2005). Grading decisions are viewed as the faculty responsibility ". . . on the grounds that any external prescription or guidance would cut across the teacher's role as an academic professional" (Sadler, p. 176). Resistance to guiding faculty's assessment practices has been touted as protecting academic freedom: "Academic freedom protects a faculty member's authority to assign grades to students, so long as the grades are not capricious or unjustly punitive. More broadly, academic freedom encompasses both the individual and institutional right to maintain academic standards" (Nelson, 2013).

Assessment terminology is used differently in different countries and contexts. Thus, for the purposes of this article, I clarify terms used in the U.S. context, and specifically, at the U.S. university where this study originated.

- *Assessment* in this article refers to the process of making a judgment about student achievement and performance. This process includes appraising the quality of all types of student-learning tasks: tests, papers, labs, assignments, and examinations.
- *Grading* in this article refers to the process of representing students' achievement by a *symbol* or *number*. This includes scores and marks that represent student achievement on individual tasks, such as an exam or paper; grading also refers to the evaluation of student achievement on a larger scale,

for a major piece of work, subject, course, or module. Grading symbols may be letters (A, B, C, D, F), descriptive terms (Honors, Pass, Fail) or numerals (7, 6, . . . 1). Symbols are converted into a table of numerical equivalents which allows grades to be used as a calculable measurement.

- *Grade Point Average* (GPA). Faculty appraise student work, and then encode it with a grade, but the connections among the symbol, student product, and course objectives are essentially erased once encoded. Moreover, grades do not have a universal interpretation in this system; rather, they are made based on faculty's professional judgment as interpreted within a norm-referenced framework (Sadler, 2005).

This article interrogates what grades mean within a latent norm-referenced framework that persists in U.S. HEI grading practices. Guided by Foucauldian theorization of disciplinary power and governmentality, this paper engages with the following research questions: a) Why are assessment reform efforts always falling short? and b) How do failed education reform efforts make visible institutional power structures?

Grading as the Master's Tool

From a Foucauldian perspective, the "master's tools" are the disciplinary technologies operating through disciplinary institutions, ensuring the continuity of disciplinary power to manage the population. Higher education is a disciplinary institution, and assessment techniques such as "grading" are disciplinary technologies that coercively demand obedience from a managed student population. Critiques of

assessment in higher education, and specifically grading, have acknowledged the powerful position assessment affords faculty not only in the classroom between assessor (faculty) and assessed (student), but in less visible ways, in students' lives beyond the university (Raaper, 2018). Because grading and its calculated average, GPA, operate at every level of the university – registration, matriculation, enrollment, financial aid, scholarships, accreditation, graduation – the high-stake nature of grades and GPA has caused students to "fetishize the grade" (Canally, 2012, p. 3) at the expense of learning and of intrinsic motivation (Pulfrey et al., 2013). Proponents of assessment reform have responded to faculty's sovereign power by calling for a shift to more humanistic, student-centered assessment practices that purport to benefit students, mitigate an emphasis on grades, and foster student empowerment (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; LeJeune, 2010; Nieminen, 2020; Pereira et al., 2016; Reichart, 2003; Sadler, 2005).

Critics of higher education assessment practices have also noted how grades reinforce a reductionist view of learning as a measurable accumulation of knowledge (Blum, 2016; Tannock, 2017) – the banking model of education (Crossouard, 2010; Freire, 2017; Giroux, 2001). What is more, grading opens teaching up to the neoliberal rhetoric of accountability, measurement, standardization, and currency: Only what is measurable is valuable (Lynch & Hennessy, 2017). This predominantly economic rationale for public higher education that is existing in a free-market ethos of the neoliberal university (Ball, 2015, 2016; Giroux, 2002, 2009; Lynch & Hennessey) has focalized grades as the tool of an audit culture. Grades hold faculty accountable to the administration to ensure institutions are producing standardized knowledge workers for

the benefit of the capitalist class (Andreotti, 2011; Canally, 2012; Giroux, 2004; McLaren, 2005).

Like Canally (2012), I question whether those critics have gone far enough to acknowledge the role that academic labor (*my* academic labor), and specifically the labor of assigning grades to represent students' performance, has continued to cultivate a neoliberal managerial model centered on ranking and sorting. Canally claims, and I concur, that we have a "blind spot" when it comes to critiquing the role of academic labor and staff (faculty, administrations, counselors) in perpetuating a hierarchy in higher education – a practice inherent in the practice of grading and a benchmark of neoliberal managerial practices (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Ingleby, 2015). What I have come to realize, upon reflection of my own grading reform efforts, is that establishing this hierarchy makes academic staff complicit in the neoliberalization of public higher education: In grading students we are, in fact, sustaining the "master's house."

In this paper, I begin to excavate the dominant discourses, guided by Foucault's theorization, that retain this blind spot and thwart faculty resistance to detrimental neoliberal practices, including establishing a hierarchy between teacher-student; fostering competition among students; coercing to exact obedience; netting rewards and punishments for meeting pre-determined criteria; and discouraging creative and critical thought (Canally, 2012; Davidson, 2016; Giroux, 2014; Tannock, 2017). The discourses of assessment reform would seem to temporarily beat the master at his own game, but reform efforts that do not *eliminate grades* impede any real transformation of higher education. The blind spot, I argue, is our failure to self-critique how the professional

discourses of assessment operate, in HEI grading practices, to reify faculty's disciplinary power in service to the ruling relations of a disciplinary institution.

Assessment literature documents a growing "learner-centered turn" in assessment practices (Periera et al., 2016). This shift calls for greater student autonomy and empowerment as a means to make assessment, and grading specifically, more democratic (Tannock, 2017) and reliable (Brookhart et al., 2016; Feldman, 2018; Guskey & Brookhart, 2019; Link, 2019; Smith & Smith, 2019). Student-centered assessment reforms do not appear to overtly exercise disciplinary power, but they nonetheless do not *disrupt* disciplinary power, as some reformers would hope (Nieminen, 2020; Reynolds & Trehan, 2000; Siebert & Walsh, 2012). Assessment reform, "(b)y demanding rigid adherence to a set of predefined criteria and punishing those that do not meet these narrow parameters with low or failing grades, faculty are perpetuating the same obedience to hierarchy that is the benchmark of neoliberalism" (Canally, 2012, p. 2). Although not discussed at length in this paper, the learner-centered turn in assessment has also been interpreted as a neoliberal approach to ensuring greater student satisfaction as paying consumers (Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010).

Reynolds and Trehan (2000) assert that "where assessment does depart from mainstream practice, alternatives are typically based on humanistic, student-centered aspirations for social equality, rather than on an analysis of the assessment process in terms of institutional power" (p. 268). Informed by Foucault's theoretical framework of disciplinary power and governmentality, this paper takes up Reynolds and Trehan's

charge to analyze institutional power by problematizing assessment reform within the accountability regime of the neoliberal university and continuing the collective effort to politicize assessment in higher education (Ball, 2016; Davidson, 2017a, 2017b; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Giroux, 2008, 2014; Hursh & Wall, 2011; Jankowski & Provezis, 2014; Kvale, 2007; Raaper, 2016, 2018; Wall et al., 2014).

There is an inherent contradiction embedded in any assessment reform effort in the absence of transformed institutional structures (Kvale, 2007; Schneider, 2020; Tannock, 2017). Here is how Tannock, seeming to echo Lorde's recognition of the difficulty in dismantling the master's house, characterizes the inherent contradiction and problem of transformation within the existing structures and power relations in higher education:

> . . . the structure of the contemporary neoliberal university continues to be able to accommodate any number of radical claims and ideas – provided that no attempt is made to put these into practice within the university itself. We remain free to espouse our belief in democratic education, even as we labor and learn within profoundly undemocratic educational institutions. (p. 1347)

Unearthing and illuminating these contradictions in HEI's assessment practices and discourses, problematizes well-intentioned assessment reforms in the neoliberal university.

A Remodeling of Grading: Mastery Learning, Transparency, and the Promise of Student Control

The politics of grading in U.S. higher education is complex and subject to criticism. As previously mentioned, "grading" in this paper means the symbolic representation of student work using letters A-F or their numerical equivalents. This grading scale system is often referred to as "traditional grading," using a norm-referenced framework, or a "normal curve" that assesses students' achievement in comparison with other students or a "norm." This article draws on interviews from a recent Institutional Ethnography (IE) study (described below) in which a group of faculty wanted to disrupt traditional norm-referenced grading practices in two ways. First, they used a criteria-based or standards-based framework (Beatty, 2013; Buckmiller et al., 2017; Sadler & Royce, 2005) within which students were assessed, and by the rationale for grades based on explicit criteria alone. Second, students had a *choice* in the grade they could pursue: each grade, A-F, had particular criteria thresholds including a required number of assignments, complex tasks, etc. Generally all student work was marked "pass or no pass, or resubmit." Students contracted with the instructor for the grade they wished to pursue by completing all required work with a "pass" to achieve said grade.

This remodeling promised to counter students' fetishizing of grades, a faculty frustration cited as the negative consequence of performance orientation (Ames, 1992; Benita et al., 2014; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; McClure & Spector, 2005). We hoped our assessment remodeling effort would shift students' focus to mastery learning (Ambrose et al., 2010) in a course. More importantly, grade remodeling promised to shift our

positionality from enforcers of institutional needs to advocates of student-centered, humanistic, and compassionate assessment practices (Nilson & Stanny, 2015; Pope et al., 2019). Our remodeled grading schema shared pedagogical intentions and values of "contract grading (CG)" (Hiller & Hieltapelto, 2001). Lindemann and Harbke (2001) found that students perceive more control and autonomy over their learning with contract grading. Transparent criteria, for both the final grade and cumulative assignments, mean students can monitor their own progress. Like criteria-based grading, CG emphasizes mastery learning – thus it is both student-centered and empowering (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009), and potentially less biased (Feldman, 2019; Nilson & Stanny, 2015), ensuring more certifiable student achievement.

Framework for Inquiry

This article's theoretical argument is based on reflections from a small-scale exploratory research project, using an institutional ethnography (IE) methodology to analyze the text-mediated ruling relations operating through faculty's assessment work and grading practices. The four faculty interviewed for this study came from diverse disciplines and tenure tracks at a U.S. public research university and had participated in a semester-long "faculty learning community" centered on grading practices. Faculty in this IE study, including the author, had experimented with a remodeling of their grading practices moving from a norm-referenced framework to a criteria-based and contract-based framework (Nilson & Stanny, 2015; Pope et al., 2019). Drawing on empirical and conceptual strategies of analysis and informed by Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and governmentality, I build on this earlier exploratory work by focusing on the

forms of power with which assessment, and more specifically grading, is implicated in assessment reform discourses. I use Foucault's theoretical lens to interrogate the empirical data collected from these faculty research informant interviews, what IE refers to as "expert knowers," as well as the author's own work experience as a faculty member within the institution. Interviews had been recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded. The study was approved by the University's Human Subject Research Protections Office.

This article builds on the institutional ethnography tools used in an exploratory research project to provide a view of how higher education faculty negotiate their student assessment work within a neoliberal accounting regime. Specifically, I used an ethnographic approach directed toward actual descriptions and thinking – of faculty assessing and grading students – while engaging in assessment work. Dorothy Smith's (2005) institutional ethnography provided a conceptual framework in which "standpoint informants," in this case the faculty and the researcher, are the expert knowers of their own work processes. As an IE researcher, I explicated the knowledge embedded in that standpoint. "The goal of IE is to study problems arising in the standpoint location and to describe how these are coordinated within a purposive 'institutional order'" (Boonan et al., 2018, p. 4). The premise of IE is to trace how the institutional work (outside the local setting) is being carried out and organized through textual representations at the standpoint informant's local setting. This previous IE study described the problem for faculty assigning students a grade, because grades abstracted and erased what faculty know about learning and pedagogy. I examined the textual work of grading, how it

directed and represented the problem of assessing students in a way that organized (often unwittingly) what happens between students and faculty in the interest of ruling relations (those who rule or govern) beyond the classroom.

Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and governmentality aligns with IE and offers a way to think about the empirical data, in terms of the complexity of power relations that further illuminate the "linkages between everyday experiences and practices in local sites and wider processes of ruling/governing" (Teghtsoonian, 2016, p. 331). Both IE and Foucault's orientation focus on the particular mechanisms used to govern/rule and the effects of discourse and discursive practices on individuals who take up the goals of those who rule/govern (Teghtsoonian). In this paper, Foucault's theorization affords a research strategy that builds on the aforementioned IE framework of inquiry to generate new insights into educational policy and its effects, as well as to illuminate the linkages to broader public policy and practices of neoliberalism. This article explores the interplay of forms of power both limiting and productive within the discursive context of faculty "assessing" students in higher education.

By juxtaposing Foucault theorization with IE methodology, this article aims to extend the discussion of disciplinary power exercised in higher education assessment regimes by unearthing complexities and contradictions. In subsequent sections, I problematize the promises of assessment reform by analyzing the discourses that reify the master's tools, particularly discipline technologies such as grading that continue to exercise disciplinary power within these institutions, albeit less overtly but no less consequentially.

Findings

Higher Education and Disciplinary Power: The Problem of Managing the Good Student

In Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* he describes four disciplinary institutions, one of which is schools. Foucault defined disciplinary institutions as intended to "manage" the population (Foucault, 1975, 1995). Schirato et al. (2012) explain that Foucault universities played a central role in managing the population through normalization, hierarchicalization, and centralization, as well as marginalizing certain forms of knowledge and "molding the learning of students" (p. 65). This is a disciplinary function of the disciplinary institutions, that is, to manage the population through and across people and institutions to support a dominant function of the state (Foucault). In the current neoliberal economic and social context, a dominant function of the state (now reconfigured as free market) is to produce productive subjects who contribute to its markets, are measured and accountable, and competitive (Jankowski & Provezis, 2014).

From a Foucauldian perspective, then, the problem is how to distribute/manage/divide this population of students in our society – not only how to educate students, but who should be educated (Ball, 2013). In fact the problem, Ball would argue, is more specifically to determine who is the good student and worthy of resources. In this historic light schools, as disciplinary institutions, became the intermediaries between families and work, playing a socializing and civilizing role for the benefit of the state (Foucault, 1975, 1995). Ball contends that a Foucauldian interpretation of the problem in education is a history of classification and exclusion, a

history of normalizing in an effort to manage the well-being of the population, which in turn means the well-being of the nation/state. “The school became in many respects an expression of humanity and a demarcation of the limits to humanity – who is educable, of value, worth investing in” (Ball, p. 48). Foucault’s conceptualization of the problem of education, when analyzed through the lens of grading policy, converts assessment in HEI into a “discipline technology,” (Ball et al., 2012) a way for educational institutions to deal with the problem of how to manage students who are a resource for the institution and the state.

Faculty in higher education, then, play the role of both caretaker and disciplinarian of the student population. Assessment/grading is what Foucault regards as the micro-level function of disciplinary power (Jessop, 2007; Schirato et al., 2012); faculty become the assessor who classifies, differentiates, improves, and excludes certain populations of students not “normalized” (Ball, 2013) as good students. The sovereign power of the grade, no matter how it is re-formed, establishes expectations of behavior as a “normalizing gaze” (Raaper, 2018).

One example of this normalizing gaze is apparent in the faculty use of the discourses of the “good student,” and how, when discussing the good student (and conversely, the bad student), faculty often objectify the good or bad student by labeling them with a grade: The good student is a “B” student, for example. Regardless of which assessment practice faculty deployed or remodeled, the value-laden, normalizing language of *good* and *bad* is attached to particular grades and thus becomes a shorthand

for categories of students and their work. One faculty member acknowledged that this value-laden language was hard to shake, even after remodeling her grading practices.

> N: *But one of the things that was brought to mind in one of the early classes I took at CTL was the value-laden – my inclination is to be like, "Good job," or it's not good or bad – right? – and I want so hard not to use it, because it's not about my value on them. Right? But it's a challenge. I don't know how to write those comments.*

In the quote above we see how faculty experience the tension of grades, of their role as assessor. They do not want to be the assessor assigning value to a student and yet feel constrained as the assessor to do so. In fact, that is exactly what grades do as a disciplinary technology in a disciplinary institution: Grades serve to demarcate which students conform to faculty expectations of behavior, demonstrate appropriate attitudes, and exhibit pre-determined criteria – and which students do not (Ball et al., 2012). As assessors, faculty feel the tension of constantly being in the position of dividing students with grades, as this faculty explains:

> L: *I really wanted to not haggle over points for grading anymore. I decided that for most of my course objectives the most important thing to me was that students demonstrate that they're meeting those objectives, and if they demonstrate that they're meeting them, then I was sick of being like, "well you get an 85 but you get a 95"…*

We were drawn to remodeling our grading practice to stop haggling with students over grades, but this new model did not resolve our positionality as disciplinarian, it just diffused it.

In our grading-reform efforts, the criteria for passing an assignment was set at a "B" level. "B" is considered good work within our institution's grading policy, and a "B" student is by default a good student. One faculty, when asked to describe "a not particularly good student" who does not get a "B," did so this way:

> E: *Well, if out of their work, it's obvious that they're not understanding the underlying concept, but just putting stuff on paper and going through certain motions they learned.*

This faculty member justifies the grade by equating it with behaviors that are not appropriate in their mind as a good student – "just putting stuff on paper." But how that behavior is obvious or why that might be the case is not examined, nor does it need to be – the grade says it all. Disciplinary power is organized around standards and norms intended to classify and qualify who meets the norm and who does not. As Raaper (2018) points out, faculty as assessors have the role of "guarding the norm" and have the authority, due to academic freedom of faculty practices, to make judgments about students.

But to what extent are faculty free to act? This freedom is a false freedom, because we are still operating by using the master's tool – the grade – which categorizes and ranks students while guarding the status quo. Below is one example of how

accreditation hinges on faculty upholding certain standards in their class and being the gatekeeper of those standards.

> N: *It was more about alignment of the type of assessments we give and what is passing – because passing criteria [are] important, because students can be kicked out of the program. . . . For example, if they fail their practical exams, they can be kicked out of the program. So in that respect, we've had a lot discussion around what's equitable, what's fair, but what is also appropriate, that if they can't do basic material...*

Grades are not neutral (Crossouard, 2010; Kvale, 2007) even when they are remodeled in student-centered, humanistic ways, as we deployed them; the grade carries the value of the student for the institution and the state. Students are classified, objectified by a grade and by how far or close they are to what constitutes *good*, or in other words, normal and meeting pre-determined standards. We have not "dismantled the master's house," because we are still using the master's tools and have not critiqued institutional power in our grading practices as Reynolds and Trehan (2000) urge; rather, we continue to reify disciplinary power by using the discourses of accountability inherent in audit culture.

The politics of grading are intertwined with the history of grading in higher education; the conditions and structures put in place in the 19th and early 20th century are what make the current neoliberalization of higher education possible (Davidson, 2017a; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; Schneider & Hutt, 2014). Moreover, evaluating and assessing student work and giving grades positions faculty as socio-political actors (Kvale, 2007; Wall et al., 2014). This positionality is often overlooked in assessment

reform efforts (as in this study). Indeed, grades and GPA are not only a constant but also considered a given, a taken-for-granted norm. In political terms, grades become the end goal that assures a student's standing in the social hierarchy by conferring a credential in exchange for social position (Labaree, 1997; Lynch & Hennessy, 2017; Newfield, 2016), which can undermine higher education's mission as a public good (Giroux, 2004, 2009; Labaree; Newfield; Ravitch, 2001).

The foundation of our modern education has a darker history linked to the practices of ranking, division, and exclusion legitimized by eugenics (Ball, 2013; Davidson, 2017a). Ball argues that "we can begin to see in this history some particular ways in which education in the nineteenth century becomes one of intersection between discipline and regulation, between the individual and the social body, between individualizing and totalizing which in most respects remains in place today" (p. 65). This history of grading illuminates how grades sustain a social hierarchy (Blum, 2016), and how the audit culture, a benchmark of the neoliberal accountability regime, facilitates this hierarchicalization (Apple, 2005; Newheiser, 2016). Taylorism, the foundation of scientific management and precursor to our current audit culture, is rooted in HEI grading practices started in the early 1900's. Grades forward an audit logic of efficiency, target-driven normative order driven by numbers (Shore & White, 2015a, 2015b). The language of accountancy, no longer confined to the business sphere, has become a way of life in our neoliberal worldview which is supported by our institutions, including higher education.

HEIs have adopted this audit culture that values an accounting of *everything* in life, including learning. Disciplinary power operates over our minds and bodies within our disciplinary institutions.

> Foucault saw the whole pedagogical process not as a liberating movement of upward mobility (as the conventional wisdom would have it) but as the normalization of disciplinary power subtly insinuating its intricate pattern of control throughout society. (Devine, 1999, p. 251)

In the logic of an audit culture, grades then are a regulatory apparatus of the university and by extension are a discipline technology of the markets in a regulatory state (Raaper, 2016b). Grades regulate students' activity and behavior. Indeed, in the Foucauldian view, they regulate bodies who have been schooled and coerced, often unwittingly, for the agenda of the dominant culture (Devine).

Audit Culture Discourses in the Master's Tool Box: Objectivity, Transparency, and Self-Regulation

Grades exercise disciplinary power at the micro-level, that is, in the social relationship between faculty and students – and between students, HEI, and the marketplace. For Foucault, disciplinary power in the modern state expands into institutions that mold the subjectivity within which individuals are judged, against a standard, to be normal or abnormal, and . . . "that leaves the need for a type of power and governance that is concerned at administering and securing life at a wider social level, a dimension of the modern reason of state that treated people in relation to their collective identity as a population" (Schirato et al., 2012, p. 90). A Foucauldian read of our grading

remodeling effort would suggest then that grades as a disciplinary technology continue to subjugate students, because the normalizing gaze, discussed previously, is internalized by students who learn to self-discipline or self-govern. Thus, the symbolic Panopticon gaze in our current HEI context is informed by audit culture discourses. These audit culture discourses emerged from the research project interview data. Audit culture discourse circulating in HEIs articulate the values and worldview that become the standard against which faculty and students self-discipline. These discourses establish the assessment parameters and logic, often taken for granted and unexamined within the faculty assessment practices signified by grades and GPA.

I turn now to examples of the audit culture discourses of 1) objectivity, 2) transparency, and 3) self-regulation that make visible the subtle patterns of control creating and constraining our assessment practices as faculty.

Discourse of Objectivity

Faculty in our group had strong negative reactions to traditional grading, which motivated them to remodel grading practices, specifically to a criteria-based, pass/no pass model. Traditional grading was a conundrum for our group, because it positioned them as the assessor who rewards or punishes, a sovereign position of power that dominates. These faculty disliked these roles and wanted to diffuse their positionality by being what they believed to be more objective in their grading, by using criteria-based grading. As one faculty noted:

R: *Because I find it very difficult to tell the difference between a C+ and a B-. I mean, you can do it in points, but so much of it's subjective, that I just hated the whole subjectiveness of the grading system. . . .*

With our remodeled grading schema, however, the subjectivity of grading was less prominent:

R: *I didn't have to say, "Well, you kind of met that, so I guess you can have a C." Whereas in specifications grading, "You did not make that, therefore you get an* F." *It was so much clearer. So much easier.*

By specifying criteria for how assignments are to be graded, faculty distance themselves from what they believe is the inherent subjectivity of traditional grading and can claim they have an objective measure of student performance – pass or no pass criteria.

I would argue, though, that while this criteria-based system uses the discourse of objectivity, it does not disrupt faculty control or disciplinary power; rather, it diffuses faculty power in the language of "meet or does not meet criteria." Here is one faculty member's example of how faculty describe the all or nothing of the criteria-based system:

R: *You must meet all requirements of a grade in order to earn that grade, and while this may seem harsh, that's how it goes to make it work. And so they would miss a couple of things. So they wouldn't get all the requirements for an A, and I'd give them a B. And so they would consider it harsh. And I said, "Well, you have free passes, go back and fix it." And they would. . . .*

Criteria-based grading promises objectivity, but as we see in the example above, it more readily functions to justify the grade, to make the grade reasonable to faculty and students by portraying the assessor's judgment as neutral. Faculty feeling pressure to justify the grade is also consistent with the evidenced-based neoliberal approach in educational practice – there is a right or wrong for everything. An evidenced-based approach establishes knowledge as less complex forms of thought, a reductionist model of learning that can be measured and quantified – reducing knowledge to skills acquisition for the knowledge worker in a knowledge economy (Patrick, 2013).

The need to justify the grade surfaced frequently in our discussions. Our remodeling schema did not sufficiently abate faculty's concern.

> N: *I think I just feel the need to justify what I'm saying that I can't have – even though I have this gut sense of what's going on, I have to be able to express – so writing that out. So even with specs grading, I still give comments. So those are still there.*

This faculty seems aware of the disciplinary power they exercise, which criteria-based grading does not mitigate, since as she describes, faculty are still defining and directing possible decisions and options for students and assigning a grade based on those pre-defined choices. These standards are not value-neutral; they fabricate the kind of people we want (Ajjawi et al., 2019). What is more, a critical look at criteria-based grading suggests that 1) criteria put constraints on student work, and 2) they valorize some knowledge and silence others, which does not allow the student to bring in an alternate viewpoint that might change the standard (Ajjawi et al.). Ajjawi and colleagues remind us

that as faculty we choose some standards and silence others. When we create our standards – our rubrics that articulate our standards are beliefs of what quality practice is – students have to come to these same beliefs to get a grade in the course. Ajjawi et al. also warn that we could replicate undesirable practices as a result of criteria-based assessment. One of those undesirable practices that we continue to replicate, I argue, is grading. The grade is the text that reproduces the practice of sorting, dividing, and demarcating students in terms of who met the standards and who did not. It retains the hierarchicalization masked as objective.

The discourse of objectivity becomes the "master's tool" inasmuch as it also succeeds in subjugating faculty's professional knowledge of the complexity of learning. In problem-solving activities, one faculty noted that the process is hard to reduce to measurement:

> E: *Because solving problems, I don't want to say that you have to get the answer right in the end for you to get all the points. I don't want to say that because you can bungle some—forget a plus sign or a minus sign, or some minor mistake—but get the concepts.*

And yet, despite faculty's professional knowledge, they feel compelled to reduce learning to a single number or percent. The example above notes that what really mattered to the faculty was that the student could get the concepts, even without getting the right answer. Ajjawi et al. (2019) argue that criteria-based grading reinforces what actions should occur based on students' grade and GPA – essentially who makes the cut and who does not. This is where we see what Foucault referred to as the productivity of power, not to

repress or control people, but to reinforce certain behaviors and punish others (Ball, 2013). One faculty reported students' frustration with being monitored even in our remodeled grading schema.

> E: *[Students] felt it's unfair that they work so long on these reports. And then even if they get 12 out of 14 specs right, it's a fail.*

Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power as also productive, not just overtly dominating, helps illuminate how our criteria-based remodeling did not assertively repress or control students but reinforced certain behaviors and punished others, as noted previously. Our professional knowledge has been subjugated; we know learning is too complex to measure, and yet we re-form our grading schema to measure it anyway, only this time using criteria to erase this complexity.

What is more, in reifying the discourse of objectivity in grading, faculty subjectify students, in the Foucauldian epistemology, by categorizing them and therefore confirming the value of students, making their value visible to the institution as a coherent set (e.g., the A students, the B students, the good students). The conundrum for faculty, as noted below, is that on the one hand, our grading schema depersonalizes assessment, which for some faculty makes it easier to evaluate students' work, but conversely, grades make it harder to evaluate the individual student, specifically when it comes to letters of reference – in which the high-stakes of grades intersect with a student's future goals beyond the classroom. A grade does not assure one actually knows a student, for example:

> E: *Because the thing is if, for example, I need to recommend someone for an internship because a company and was like, "Hey, do you know anyone?" Who am I going to recommend, the person that I never talked to and don't know anything about them or the ones who come to my office hours and I know that they're hardworking and I can talk about their skills.*

In the above example, it is evident that the grade alone fails to reveal the particularities of the student to be recommend for an internship; interactions with faculty enable faculty to talk about a student's skills to potential employers. But we can also see in this high-stakes scenario of reference writing, how the discourse of objectivity inequitably serves students. For example, a student who knows how to "do school" will know the grade alone is insufficient for garnering social advantages without developing a relationship with the faculty member. Thus, faculty unwittingly reproduce the social hierarchy by rewarding students who know how to do school over those who do not (Blum, 2016).

The discourse of objectivity in an audit culture valorizes the early 20th century political project outlined previously in this article – the hierarchicalization of humanity in which groups of the population are more highly valued than others (Ball et al., 2012, 2013, 2016). Furthermore, the discourse of objectivity in which learning is framed as a value-free measurable criteria shapes these standards as mere cognitive representations, rather than acknowledging how the standards constitute productive power relations between students and faculty in complex social arrangements (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Crossouard, 2010; Gore, 1995). Faculty and students participate as assessor and assessed, whereby faculty, as guardians of standards in our remodeled grading schema, reify a

symbolic Panopticon (Crossouard). Thus, education, as other aspects of governing in modernity, fabricates the kind of people society needs in order to take some actions in the interest of the state (Popkewitz, 2004). As one faculty notes:

> N: *When you read a good one – I read something good, when it's well-done, they follow the assignment, it's beautifully written, it's far better than anything I ever produced as a student, I'm in awe and it's – that's easy. It's very easy to grade. When it's not well-done, it's – is it how I taught the material? Is it how they're engaged with the material? Is it their own abilities? What am I gonna do with that? And how am I going to respond to that?*

In both instances, reducing learning to a list of criteria erases the tacit knowledge and the complex processes of learning that cannot be measured. Instead of measuring learning, Ajjawi et al. (2019) argue that criteria-based grading reinforces what actions should occur based on students' grade and GPA – who makes the cut and who does not. In essence, the objective criteria we use for grading produces the students we want; criteria influence how students see themselves and the world, which is why grading becomes an ethical consideration (Ajjawi et al.; Crossaurd, 2019). The discourse of objectivity standardizes the student body while it erases the complexity of learning and the diversity of individual learners.

Discourse of Transparency

I now excavate the discourse of transparency that surfaced in my interviews with faculty, which was often framed as faculty's concern with "being fair." In an audit culture, the language of transparency connotes visibility, an assumption of equality by

making knowledge and information visible for public scrutiny (Shore & White, 2015a, 2015b). But as Strathern (2000) points out, this proffered equality can also be a form of control or surveillance. There is a "tyranny in transparency," an implicit surveillance veiled as a democratic process that claims to be fair to all students (Strathern). I want to consider transparency in two aspects. First, what does it communicate about the relationship between faculty and students? Second, how does it communicate a false meritocracy? In our remodeled grading, we spent a lot of time publicly specifying criteria in rubrics for each assignment, to register that our grades portend text-mediated transparency. But this insistence on transparency within an audit culture, the compulsion to provide more information rather than communicating "fairness" to students, we more than likely signaled an erosion of trust in the student/faculty relationship (Strahern). Any vagueness could be a source of student contention.

> N: *The specs make me define for the student what I'm looking at. There's always vagueness in there. But if I say "include the section on such and such," and a person writes a sentence on such and such, is that a section? Right? It's not foolproof, but I have something to work with. Now I know I can explain somewhere [to students] a sentence is not a section.*

Faculty feel compelled to clarify any vagueness in grading by giving more information to students to garner their trust in the grade they receive, which paradoxically acknowledges the absence of trust between faculty and student (Strathern) that harkens back to Harland's et al. (2015) description of grading as an "arms race" between faculty and students.

In truth, the discourse of transparency conceals all the *invisible indicators* that support learning which in fact cannot be made visible. The "tyranny of transparency," in a Foucauldian conception of disciplinary power, suggests ". . . a complex play of visibility and invisibility" (Schirato et al., 2012, p. 59). Our rubrics transparently make explicit how students will succeed or fail, exercising a "gentle disciplinary power." While the discourse of objectivity totalizes a population of students (essentially makes the individual invisible), the discourse of transparency singles out students by making individuals subject to an "examination" (Foucault, 1975) that assesses an individual student's performance and then justifies that performance with a grade. Transparency surveilles students by supervising closely, by forcing students to represent themselves to faculty in pre-determined ways (Strathern, 2000), and then singling out and comparing students, which makes individual students more legible to outside experts (Gore, 1995). This coercion is concealed in the language of transparency.

In addition to lack of trust, which justifies surveillance, transparency also registers that faculty are treating all students equally (Tierney et al., 2011), but equality is not equity, as many have argued (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2020). Rather, equality signifies fairness, everyone treated the same, while reinforcing a false meritocracy (Cooper, 2015; Mark, 2020; Menand, 2019). It is a false meritocracy, because the discourse of transparency, as we discovered in our case, fosters a sense of moral justification in grading without faculty feeling compelled to critically examine grading practices more broadly. One faculty noted,

R: *I didn't have to say, "Well, you kind of met that, so I guess you can have a C. Whereas in specifications grading is, "You did not make that, therefore you get an F." It was so much clearer. So much easier.*

In our case, faculty can claim to be fair, because we are transparent in our student evaluations and their subsequent ranking within the system. But this fairness can reproduce an ideology of meritocracy: why people should be where they are or get what they deserve. The "paradox of meritocracy' is that it justifies the status quo (Mark, 2020). For example, when faculty claim their grading is transparent and therefore fair to all students, because we treated all students the same, we risk being satisfied that we have been morally just in our grades and therefore do not need to critically examine our assumptions, prejudices, or biases (Mark). This faculty member also commented,

R: *To me, it's [grading] just part of the system. When they go get a job, nobody asks to look at their transcripts.*

They accept that grading is a given, "just part of the system," and in doing so accept the status quo without examining their assumptions or critically reflecting on systemic injustices.

The discourse of transparency forwards the concept of fairness as another tool that supports the master's house; but it is just part of the system, elides an oppressive, inherently unequal system (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). The tyranny of transparency (show more, tell more, reveal more, so your performance can be measured against standards) supports disciplinary power within a disciplinary institution that audits students—for their performance and productivity of knowledge in a particular field—while concealing

its taken-for-granted assumptions. Those assumptions are that 1) student's performance can be observed and measured and those procedures, because they are transparent, are open to see, critique, and suggest improvement; and 2) transparency is equivalent to equality. Audit technologies, such as the one we deployed, presume transparency is fair judgment, but they also set the stage for students' learning how to audit themselves and regulate themselves, which is presented below.

Discourse of Self-Regulation

Foucault's conception of governmentality – government + rationality (Schirato et al., 2012) – refers to the historic shift in choice-making from the state to the individual, a move toward self-governance. Efficiently governing in the modern neoliberal state requires individuals to learn to govern themselves in alignment with what is valued by the market (Dilts, 2011; O'Brien, 2015). Moreover, this constructed social reality has to seem natural and given, which is reified in the discourses circulated through an audit culture (Apple, 2005; Ocean & Skourdoumbis, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015a), and the audit technologies such as assessment, which fabricate subjects who support market interests (Davies & Bansel, 2010). When referring to our criteria-based, contract assessment that allows students to resubmit work for a "pass," a faculty explained student self-regulation this way:

> E: *They [students] know at the end, they will learn things well. But they don't really want to go through the work to get there. And the [grading] system is forcing them to resubmit if they want the grade. If not, I mean, I had students who*

did not show up to any lab at all, submitted no laboratory works, because they were able to get out a "C" by doing well on the other two parts.

Thus, we can see how the prevailing assessment discourses of self-assessment and self-regulation reproduce a similar shift to individual responsibility for self-regulating one's behavior in HEI. Foucauldian analysis illuminates this shift in our remodeling assessment practices.

As previously discussed, disciplinary power regulates the population when the population is seen as a resource for the state. Foucault's theorization of governmentality helps expand our understanding of disciplinary power within a paradigm of accountability in HEI: All actions of citizens are accountable, that accountability is public (transparent), and the population self-regulates its behavior to the normalizing gaze. In our remodeling of grading, explicit criteria detailed on rubrics given in advance, not only enabled students to monitor their own work, to self-assess and therefore self-regulate, but also enabled them to fix and resubmit as noted below.

L: *But now they have to go back and fix it. And if, I would tell them, you know, "These are the resources. If you can't figure this out, come and talk to me." So then they would figure it out, lo and behold, you know? But previously they would never have had to. . . .*

The faculty's emphasis in the quotation above addresses students using the rubric to figure out how to correct their own work and then to resubmit it to be graded again, presumably for a better grade. In the literature, "students figuring it out for themselves," that is, practicing how to self-regulate their learning, is framed as promoting positive

student behaviors, such as extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000); fostering autonomy to make judgements about what is good (Boud, 2007); and encouraging life-long metacognition skills (Shim & Ryan, 2005).

In retrospect, we wanted our remodeled grading schema to disrupt what Boud (2007) describes as the "unilateral agenda of authority." We understood our criteria-based rubrics as decentering faculty power and fostering student autonomy from the assessor, as they learn to become their own assessors. Additionally, we developed a system of contracts in which students could choose the grade they wanted and how they would achieve that grade within predetermined parameters. In this way we saw our grading reform as shifting from constructing passive learners to nurturing active learners who develop the ability and confidence to form judgments about their work, which empowers them to see themselves not as directed by others, but as directing their own learning (Boud). Absent critical examination, this remodeling seemed valiant, even noble: We understood our reconfigured assessment practice as foreground learning, as well as student engagement. One faculty member described our reform effort this way:

> L: *[Our remodeled grading] removes the pressure of A, B, C grading but still provides standards of achievement that students need to meet. I think the stress of having to get a certain grade often precludes one from experiencing mastery learning. I remember almost nothing of all the basic science courses I took, because I was just memorizing throughout and certainly wasn't concerned with reaching a level of mastery learning if it meant I wouldn't get an A.*

Students not only practice making judgments about their own learning but have choices as to how much time they spend to reach their desired grade. But here, too, Foucault's theorization of governmentality helps us critically examine our assumption in this re-formation, namely that promoting student's self-regulation through assessment practices within a disciplinary institution could be a benevolent, apolitical act (Nieminen, 2020). I argue instead that the discourse of self-regulation embedded in audit culture, which is increasingly taken up by faculty, is used to *valorize* grades to maintain the status quo.

Within the classroom, self-assessment techniques – such as rubrics, check lists, reflections – enable faculty to govern with a "light touch" (Newheiser, 2016). As Davies and Bansel explain (2010), audit technologies, such as tools promoting quality assurance or best practices, are mechanisms to generate a level of performance from subjects without their resistance. Our students did not resist because the reward of a grade remains intact. Our rubrics and checklists become a way for students to self-regulate their performance without resistance, as this faculty suggests:

> R: *Because all the assignments are pass-fail. And as long as they follow the criteria... I have very little student pushback. I don't have to say , "You missed a point here" or students say "Why didn't you give me a point for that?" Because there are no points. It's the criteria. Did you meet the criteria? And the criteria are clearly in the syllabus. And that's one of the things most students really like, is that there are clear criteria. And if they meet the criteria, they get the pass.*

The lens of governmentality critically exposes our assumption that our grading scheme promoted student autonomy and choice. In truth, self-assessment becomes a compulsion

for students to perform what is considered essential to measure and taken into account – did they meet the criteria or not. Governmentality diffuses power by creating a willingness of the individual to participate in their own governing – students really like having clear criteria. A Foucauldian analysis illuminates how self-assessment is an audit technology of surveillance in which individual students take responsibility to monitor their performance as they strive to deliver expected performance outcomes.

Governmentality is not just directing the conduct of others, but it is the force of self-governing, of conducting one's own conduct: the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1982). In our case, students conducted their own governing by contracting for a grade, monitoring their own performance, and then self-assessing; in other words, confessing to us how well they met criteria for their contracted grade. Ball (1990) notes how these confessional techniques (self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-improvement) are mechanisms of monitoring and control without being overtly coercive. The assessment reform efforts that embrace self-assessment techniques, as we did, become in Foucauldian terms, a technique designed to "direct the conduct of men" (Foucault, p. 37) by shifting the focus to how students can improve themselves through self-governance and regulation. Audit culture in HEI, buttressed by these self-assessment practices, not only determine student value/ranking within a hierarchy, but also drive a student's self-improvement. Our remodeled grading scheme deployed self-assessment techniques that invited students to self-govern to the extent that a responsible subject emulates the institutional model of standardization (Davies & Bansel, 2010).

As a tool for analysis, Foucault's concept of governmentality evinces how disciplinary power is not simply imposed from above; rather, students can "punish themselves" by disciplining themselves to follow an accountability regime – a shift mentioned previously. Faculty see this as the student's responsibility:

> L: *I think [students have] the most control over the grade they receive in a course. This is not meant to say that a faculty member has nothing to do with it, but I think in the end, the responsibility is the student's. The faculty member needs to set clear expectations and make sure that students have the knowledge needed to complete assignments. But if the faculty member has set up the assignments correctly and scaffolded the course content around them, then it's really up to [students] to decide how much effort they want to put into an assignment and what grade they would like to earn.*

Others have written about the politics of the shift from state to individual responsibility in the last decades, which I will not repeat here. Rather, I am interested in the symbolic panopticon – the continuity of disciplinary power that, although less overt, is still present in these self-regulation discourses. In a sense, our remodeled grading, which centered on student self-assessment via rubrics and learning contracts, mirrors a form of self-regulation akin to the quality assurance schemes described in higher education by Jankowski and Provezis (2014), that is, improving quality becomes a means of "self-development through perpetually enhanced performance" (p. 480). As this faculty explains:

L: *With [our remodeled grading] I think a lot of control for grades is back in the students' hands. It is clear what assignments need to be completed to get each grade, and it's clear what needs to be done to pass the assignment. Therefore, I feel the student has much more agency surrounding how they want to go about meeting those [criteria]*.

From this perspective, self-regulated student performance ". . . is viewed as a form of coercive accountability through the constant monitoring of practice in order to improve" (p. 480). In other words, self-assessment is still the "assessment of a product," only the product is the student, and assessment becomes a technique of production improvement (Jankowski & Provezis).

As previously mentioned, the growing trend in assessment has shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered. This trend has been framed by some as a promise of more autonomy and choice for students (Pulfrey et al., 2013), a way to disrupt disciplinary power (Nieminen, 2020), reform that valorizes student empowerment (Siebert & Walsh, 2013). Within our disciplinary institution, this self-regulation and self-governing appear on the surface to empower students, but when students were asked in Nieminen's study of summative self-assessment, for example, if they felt more autonomy when self-assessing, they instead noted feelings of disempowerment, because of constant monitoring and the sovereign power of the grade. Foucault's concept of governmentality helps illuminate this contradiction not only in Nieminen's study, but also in our own remodeling. The conundrum with grading and self-regulation is not that it overtly

confines students; rather, it diffuses power by instant communication and continuous control (Foucault, 1975, 1995).

Implications

Our motivations for remodeling grading practices stemmed from a deep ambivalence about the efficacy of grades. Research on the harmful effects of grades (Lynch & Hennessey, 2017; Schneider & Hutt, 2014) affirms our conundrum with grading:

> L*: I feel that for me as a teacher, the most important thing is whether or not a student is learning the material I'd like them to learn. I don't want to spend time haggling over one point here or one point there, which is why I decided to implement specs grading in the first place.*

It was our intention to be more humane, student-centered, and less authoritarian in assessment practices, but on closer examination, we realized that our remodeled grading scheme cannot succeed, because we are operating within a disciplinary institution that still exercises disciplinary power through grades as an "audit technology" (Davies & Bansel, 2010). Audit technologies are mechanisms to generate a level of performance from subjects without their resistance. Audit technologies manage and dominate the academic population not by punishment but by duplication (Ball et al., 2012) through interactions that reform both students *and* faculty to desirable economic subjects for the state – with particular attributes, skills, and abilities attached to economic activities (Dilts, 2011). Foucault's theorization of disciplinary power and governmentality exposes how structures hold together the interests of the status quo. Those interests (economic,

social, and political) seek to manage the population as a resource for the state in which assessment functions as a technology of government (Raaper, 2018).

This article evinces how assessment reform gets enacted in the neoliberal university and how disciplinary power is then transformed within assessment. I have been arguing that grading governs an academic population, reproducing a social hierarchy and stratification through technologies that support the functions of the neoliberal economic paradigm which sees the population as a state resource (Raaper, 2016a). Our remodeling effort was a re-formation of this governance, not a disruption of it. Assessment reform efforts fail to disrupt disciplinary power in the neoliberal university that is driven by an audit culture, because audit technologies such as grading have colonized higher education. Grading students has always been about managing the student population and producing "ideal' citizen-subjects (Schneider & Hutt, 2014); grades govern students who learn to govern themselves. The grading system contributes to a "delivery chain" of activities that are ingrained in the life of a school, with the intention of delivering the desired performance outcomes (Ball et al., 2012).

Because grading persists in HEI, disciplinary power continues to circulate between faculty and students, operating through assessment policies and practices, erasing any potential benefits of well-intentioned reform efforts that leave the master's house intact. The purpose of this article is to agitate for resistance to this audit culture colonization in higher education. I stand with Canally (2012) in a call for more faculty agency and a critique of our complacency in fostering this process. Foucauldian analysis is the educator's tool to illuminate the blind spots that prevent a coherent strategy for

resisting the neoliberalization of higher education sustained by an accountability regime. By grading students, faculty are enforcing a hierarchy in their classrooms, whether they intend to or not. They are also reifying neoliberal rhetoric that emphasizes competition, individual responsibility, meritocracy, obedience to standards, and validity of measurable outputs by perpetuating this rhetoric in their assessment practices. Grades are the currency in higher education (Labaree, 1997) and it is time we agitate and refuse to engage in that exchange.

This article illuminates how the tyranny of the grade in higher education, as constituted by the discourses of audit culture, is an example of a master's tool that continues to subjectify faculty as assessors, despite well-intentioned reform efforts. Unseating faculty as the gatekeepers and assessors in a disciplinary institution would be a radical move in the prevailing audit regime of the current neoliberal university context. As Davies and Bansel (2010) affirm: "The practices of accountancy cannot recognize or countenance anyone who sees their job as responsibly working against the grain of dominant discourses, of asking dangerous questions of government, of opening spaces of difference where new possibilities might emerge from the previously unthought-of or unknown" (p. 12). Thus, the constancy of grading, even as we attempt to reform assessment practices, stymies real transformation within the U.S. HEI. For that transformation to occur, we need other tools to dismantle the house.

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CHAPTER 7: Implications and Significance

In this study I begin to empirically trace the phenomena of grading, not from the meaning faculty ascribe to the activity of grading – that would be a different type of ethnographic study – but rather from a critical inquiry approach to make visible the institutional and social organization that is embedded in faculty's work of grading. The implications and significance of this dissertation stem from the purpose of my investigation: How do grades come to mean what they do for faculty?

I took the standpoint of faculty in this study. Standpoint from an Institutional Ethnographic theoretical perspective means the "embodied experience" of the knower (Smith, 2005). As a faculty member, I am also an expert knower when it comes to the work of grading students. This research used an ethnographic approach, such as interviewing and textual analysis, as a means to begin to trace the *complex social relationships* embedded in faculty descriptions and reports of "their doing grades." I say *begin*, because the aim of this research was to start a map of grading with a focus on linkages, not on results. Like a cartographer, I seek to trace the landscape of ruling relations that organize faculty assessment practices, often invisible and yet present in text-mediated discourses. This research has scholarly, instructional, and organizational implications which I review in the following sections.

Scholarly and Methodological Implications

While IE has flourished in nursing and social work, IE has garnered less attention as an area of qualitative research of higher education. My research argues that IE is well suited to research in higher education. This study offers the opportunity to delve into IE's

conceptual underpinnings and show how this innovative approach to inquiry lays the foundation for further uses of IE in the field of higher education research. Specifically, the mapping and tracing of assessment practices in this study is partial at best, but provides the basis for a much larger study that would further investigate the linkages, social organization, and text-mediated discourses associated with grading and grade point average (GPA). Audit culture, business management practices, market-based solutions, and the imposition of evidenced-based practices are increasingly present in higher education discourses. Efficiency and accountability have shifted from what is valued in higher education to what can be measured.

IE affords scholars an opportunity to explore and explicate how the complex work of faculty is being organized and reorganized by these technologies of management and governance. Further mapping would illuminate how these technologies have unforeseen consequences that impact faculty and students, as well as how these discursive practices are a source of inequality. One implication of this study also resonates with Khun's claim (2020). . . "that ranking students or grading them on a curve – in both cases setting them against one another for artificially scarce distinctions, this rigging the game so that not everyone can succeed – is not only counterproductive for learning but also, frankly, immoral" (p. xiii). It is the moral implication gleaned from this study that should make grading and assessment practices be the central concern of any diversity, equity, and inclusion dialogues in higher education.

IE also asks scholars to think of theory differently, not simply to subsume what people do in practice, but to apply an analytic lens that explains how what they do is

organized by text-mediated and regulated social organization. Exploring lived experience is not the ultimate goal of IE. Instead, the goal is to show how this experience is text-mediated (Ross & Sanders). IE is an approach to inquiry that requires an ontological and epistemological shift for the researcher. It rejects abstract theoretical explanations as its starting point and instead seeks to trace and map how people's activities are organized and coordinated by text-mediated modes of governing (Kearney et al., 2019). This study illuminates how a corner of the social world in higher education, grading, is put together and how faculty's work interfaces with institutional ruling relations. The implication is that there is more mapping to be done to make explicit what the situation is for faculty and their interaction with outside organizing forces regulating higher education.

Future studies, then, could easily take diverse standpoints (e.g., students, advisors, registrars, administrators, etc.) to trace and expand our understanding of the extra-local text-mediated ruling relations linked to grades. In one example, this study explicated how discourses used when evaluating faculty grading practices are mediated through the Course Assessment Report (CAR), and what impact it has on faculty work and subjectivity. Further investigation and tracing would also reveal other sub-texts and text-mediated discourses that are not questioned but taken for granted. Higher education is replete with hierarchies and regulations that provide fertile ground for other IE studies that look at what is visible, and what is invisible dimensions of academic work. In doing so, IE affords opportunities for meaningful change.

Implications Instructional Practice, Critical Pedagogy, and Organizational Leadership

There are implications from this study for transformative instructional assessment practices going forward, valorizing current subversive movements such as "ungrading" (Blum, 2020). Moreover, this study signals the latent opportunities for faculty to resist continuing neoliberal trends in higher-education assessment practice (e.g., discourses focused on accountability, efficiency, and the tyranny of metrics), by pulling back the curtain on invisible (or at least not obvious) ruling relations coordinating our work and by exposing how our subjectivities as assessors are shaped by these professional discourses. Starting from questions or tensions that arise from people's actualities, my aim as an IE researcher was to go beyond what faculty know, to find out how what they are doing is connected with others' doings in ways they cannot see (Smith 2005).

IE's activism roots are clear in this process of revealing what is present but not always observable: The process of uncovering the relations that organize our activities is a form of activism, because change cannot happen if we do not know *how* things happen the way they do. I discovered, too, as a researcher, that I had changed in the dialogic process of research, as Smith (2005) predicted: Research is activism when we make a commitment to change growing from our research. The choices we make as researchers can either support social justice or hinder social justice (Strega & Brown, 2015). Thus the process of revealing the social relations of assessing students makes it hard for me to see faculty's position as neutral or benign.

This study also read grading practices through the Foucauldian conceptualization of disciplinary power, which suggests affordances for faculty to resist or transgress from the ever-encroaching audit culture in higher education. I argue that faculty assessment practices supported by the disciplinary power embedded in grades and GPA, reify student compliance and performativity. Upon critical reflection, one implication from this study is the role/need for critical pedagogy, indeed radical pedagogy. Speaking from my experience as researcher and faculty, when I started to critically reflect on how my work was text-mediated – grades as a regulatory text – I questioned my role as assessor. Further research might look at how IE, Foucault, and critical pedagogy converge in faculty instructional practices as a means to exercise freedom within limitations. Future study could illuminate the "counter conduct" and practices faculty exercise to resist and transgress their subjectification as assessors within a neoliberal logic (Stommel, 2018, 2020).

Applying this critical approach in the classroom gives faculty and students language to question power and control. This is not always easy (Catterall et al., 2014; Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Mott et al., 2015), and there is resistance from faculty and students (Hooks, 1994). But we can challenge the regimes of truth, that is, the current neoliberal regime in higher education, by tracing the lines of power and problematizing behavior, processes, and phenomena (Thomas, 2008). Confronting problems, in this case the problem of grading, requires restructuring of power relations. There is a tension between critical pedagogy and Foucault, as Thomas (2008) suggests, but I think it is a productive tension; indeed, reading critical pedagogy through Foucault creates a toolbox for us as

researchers, faculty, and learners. Problematizing unsettles us and we cannot go back to old ways of thinking. Critique, then, is the capacity to change our interpretations.

Another implication of this study is the need to explore whether or not faculty can be change agents. It remains an open question because of the strength of normative practices in HEIs, in which transformation encompasses a broader context outside the classroom. IE is well suited to empirically examine a host of issues in higher education, ranging from how assessment looks in practice from a diversity of standpoints (e.g., registrar, admissions, student advisors, etc.) to an empirical examination of how the student experience is socially organized in higher education to produce competent workers in the neoliberal paradigm. IE offers a way to critically look at what faculty do in their everyday life within the academy. The IE research methodology looks for the gaps in what is intended to happen in assessment policy, as in this study, and what actually happens in practice. The significance of investigating this gap, as I experienced it, is that once faculty see how their work is organized and put together by extra local and text-mediated ruling relations, they no longer see their work in the same way. They, as I was, become unsettled.

The unsettling of what we had taken for granted affords opportunities for transformation, not because we have a prescription for what and how to change, but because we have a deeper understanding of how power works on and through us. This opens up space to discuss what is *possible* – not necessarily what is *knowable*. The aim, then, is to be consistently "unsettled" and not let our assumptions, beliefs, and – in the

case of faculty – our instructional practices be reified. By embracing the moments we see as uncomfortable – what we want to elide – we garner courage to speak the unspeakable.

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