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# Situational analysis and mapping for use in education research: a reflexive methodology?

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## Introduction

Higher educational research has been subjected to critique and criticism (e.g. Oancea 2005[2]; Tight 2004; Haggis 2009; Trowler 2010). It has been suggested that processes of reflexive practice that could potentially address those critiques are inadequately undertaken; researchers insufficiently explicate the social realities of their research projects and the disciplinary discourses and knowledge paradigms in which they construct their theories and employ their methods (e.g. Hammersley 2010). In one particular critique, it is suggested that:

> We need to find ways of standing outside of our histories, circumstances, and fields, and of examining our epistemological and ontological assumptions. I have argued that we need to know not only more but *differently,* and to keep on extending the range of our different ways of knowing.
>
> (Haggis 2009, p. 389)

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[2] Rather than referring to the individual debates that have taken place in the last three decades or so, we cite this paper which presents an overview of the criticisms addressed at educational research, notably during the 1990s.

Although it is questionable to what extent it is possible to stand 'outside our histories, circumstances and fields', we argue that a way of knowing differently is achieved by revisiting our research methods and analytical approaches. What would improve the tool kit of the educational researcher to enhance reflexive practice, and thus address those epistemological and ontological assumptions as a matter of course?

We investigate the use of situational analysis as a response to Haggis' (2009) challenge and appraise it as method to enhance reflexive practice. Developed by Clarke (2005), situational analysis is rooted in grounded theory, but importantly, in Clarke's evocative phrase, aims 'to push grounded theory more fully around the post-modern turn' (e.g. p. xxi). As a *method assemblage*[3] (Law 2004), it includes in its research inquiry a wide variety of human and non-human elements and is based on the principle that '[s]ituations become the fundamental units of analysis' (Clarke, 2005, p. 22). One of the main literatures on which Clarke's concept of situation draws is symbolic interactionism, where Mead asserted that 'situations are organisations of perspectives that stratify nature' (1927/1964, p. 315).

Situational analysis's main reflexive tool is the use of three types of maps that address different levels of analysis: a *situational map,* this is analysis at what Clarke (2005) calls the the macro level enabling researchers to articulate – from their own ontological perspective - the major elements in the situation; a *social worlds/arenas map*, this is a meso level analysis where the researcher maps the categories that make up the social world of the actors (as perceived by them and articulated to the interpreting researcher) at the heart of the inquiry and determines their commitments, relations, and sites of action; and finally, a *positional map*, this lays out at micro level

[3] This refers to a process of creating distinctions between what is there, manifestly absent, and hidden, portrayed through a range of 'lenses'.

the major positions (e.g. subject positions) taken and *not* taken in the data with regard to articulating a particular issue or controversy around the situation of inquiry.

We draw on data collected during a research project investigating how new joiners to an academic community come to understand – or try to understand – the local assessment processes and the meaning of associated criteria and standards. The problematic nature of assessment standards are being widely debated in the UK within academic teaching and research communities, as well as at institutional and at government policy levels. Taking the application of assessment standards as a 'socially-situated, interpretive act' (Shay 2005), standards are considered much more broadly than in educational practice at universities. Standards thus also relate to perspectives on wider issues such as social purpose, ideology, power relations (Broadfoot 1996), the nation's knowledge pool, visions of future intellectual and economic capability, and teacher or student identities (e.g. Samuelowicz and Bain 2002; Brown, Bull and Pendlebury 1997).

For our understanding of a reflexive research practice we use Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) definition of 'casting a self-critical eye onto one's own authority as interpreter and author' ( p. vii) within arenas of research procedures, primacy of interpretation, the political-ideological character of research, and representation and authority (2009, p.11). Every research project involves a string of decisions a researcher needs to make that are unique to the inquiry, for instance on the boundaries of the research domain, the phenomenon under investigation, the ontological assumption of the research question, the nature of the data to be collected, whose voice is represented and to whom, and so on. 'Casting a self-critical eye' implies that for each of those decisions some kind of rationale is given, that is ultimately shared with an audience and for which a researcher or a collective of researchers at the

discipline level can be held to account. Elsewhere, this is referred to as epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Henwood 2008).

First, we summarise situational analysis by outlining the historical context of its creation and highlighting its salient characteristics. We then present the main features of our research project, followed by an application of situational analysis to our data. We finish with a discussion of our interpretation of Clarke's (2005) method, where it helped us gain greater reflexivity and where it proved to be more challenging.

**Situational Analysis – Grounded Theory after post-modernity**

At the start of this section, we should clarify that this paper is *not* a contribution to a critique of grounded theory, nor an attempt to place situational analysis in the wider debates on competing versions of grounded theory (for these types of discussion we refer the reader to e.g. Charmaz 2000; Mills et al. 2006; Suddaby 2006; Seaman 2008, Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). Equally, it is important to point out that we are researchers in a social-constructivist tradition, and that our research design and objectives are framed predominantly within social-constructivist theories, drawing on Vygotsky (1978) and situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) [4]. Therefore, the assumptions and the theoretical lens we bring to the research inquiry come from these perspectives and from our substantive area of interest, which is *learning*. We additionally refer to Lave and Wenger's (1991) articulation of the 'situated' nature of learning, where they emphasise the relational nature of knowledge and learning, and the negotiated character of meaning within a community (e.g. see their discussion, p.

[4] Although social-constructivism and situational analysis have different origins, they could both be grouped under similar theoretical frames, referred to by Clarke (2005) as 'situated knowledges' (see the discussion section).

32-33). With these caveats in place, we will now outline the main features of situational analysis.

Adele Clarke was a student of Anselm Strauss, co-author of the seminal text Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although not in opposition to Strauss' version of grounded theory and its aim of presenting a more systematic research method for analysis of qualitative data in order to create theory, Clarke (2005) argues that it insufficiently deals with what she calls its 'recalcitrancies', leftover tastes and flavours of 1950s/60s positivism. In presentation of data, she contends that grounded theory seeks formal theory (as opposed to a more situation-specific substantive theory), rejects contradiction and ambiguity, and aims to be conclusive.

Situational analysis, launched in Clarke's (2005) book with the same title, strives to be more relativist in the sense of explicitly recognising the socially constructive nature of reality. It is multi-perspectival through allowance and presentation of ambiguity and difference, complexity and contradiction, without necessarily aiming to 'explain' these differences through a substantive theory (closer to the 'real world' than formal theory). The researcher is encouraged to adopt a stance of 'non-innocent' subjectivity, i.e. to lay his or her cards on the table. Situational analysis has as its purpose to address the lack of reflexivity in grounded theory, which in Clarke's (2005) view, has continued to deny that 'we are, through the very act of research itself, directly in the situation we are studying' (p. 12). Clarke's (2005) commitment to a reflexive research practice is to address the basic question: 'Whose knowledge about what counts to whom and under what conditions?'

Clarke (2005) exaggerates to make the point. She would probably agree that grounded theory has traditionally been sensitive to differences and nuances, and also to what the researcher brings to the subject of inquiry (cf. the concept of theoretical

sensitivity, Glaser 1978, Corbin and Strauss 2008, Orland-Barak 2002), challenging researchers to be more insightful in the development of theories which explain the 'deviant cases' and not just 'most' of the data. However, where Clarke goes further is in her approach to data; here she challenges traditional grounded theory's contention that important features of the data have to emerge 'out of it', and thus assigning data an autonomous nature. Clarke's assertion is that researchers need to 'take responsibility' and be accountable for the construction of the data, accept that we are a part of that construction process and articulate the absence of data that is not included in the inquiry: "…we often "know" that it is quite likely that such dynamics are present in the situations we are studying even if the data are silent" (p. 75).

Clarke (2005) invites those who engage with grounded theory and situational analysis as analytic tools to do so alongside 'and complementing other theoretic and analytic approaches' (p. 146). Although Alvesson and Sköldberg suggest (2009) that Clarke's (2005) approach could be a whole new way of doing grounded theory, we would argue, as elaborated further, that situational analysis can only be part of a synthesis of theoretical and methodological approaches.

***Why maps***

In its endeavour to 'postmodernise' grounded theory, situational analysis employs a cartographic presentation of the research inquiry: three maps that depict the research analysis at different levels. Clarke's (2005) justification for their use, the history of which she locates within the Chicago school, is that maps break with normal researchers' ways of working and might therefore generate new and different insights. Firstly, they create a visual representation of complexity. They open up the 'knowledge space' in the way that they can hold multiplicity, heterogeneity, and 'messiness', which could be transported to other situations to depict different

compositions. Furthermore, they can function as discursive devices to create collections or assemblages. Finally, the claim is that they visualise research questions and express concisely the field of the inquiry, the ideology of the researcher and the direction of the appropriation of the data, i.e. getting clarity into who 'owns the data'. Practically, as it is easier than in a text to be moving elements around, they can be a very good analytical tool (see p. 30). In the discipline of (human) geography, more traditionally associated with the use of maps, we come across the following description that fits in well with situational analysis: "Maps have no ontological security, they are of-the-moment; transitory, fleeting, contingent, relational and context-dependent" (Kitchin and Dodge 2007, p. 340). The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000), looking at a visual representation of what exists, distinguishes between map-making, or cartography, and mapping. Representations of the former become the end product of projects of spatial representation, whereas the latter can be seen as a by product of storytelling, the retelling of journeys made, or possibly the rehearsal for journeys to be made (2000, pp 230-234). It is possible situational analysis attempts to do both: it is both a spatial representation as well as a product of storytelling, the story of the inquiry, where the practice of mapping is "enacted to solve relational problems" (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007, p. 331).

The three maps at macro, meso and micro level address different levels of analysis. Clarke (2005) calls the outcomes of the maps 'thick analyses', paralleling the anthropologist Clifford Geertz' *thick descriptions*. The maps can be seen as laying bare the internal world of the researcher; they reveal what we, as researchers, do with our research material and the processes we employ or decisions we make when we depict the elements at the heart of the inquiry.

Clarke (2005) proposes that the maps are not the final analytic *outcomes* of analysis; rather, they allow the researchers to *come into* the material more deeply by offering specific tools in the analytic toolbox of the qualitative researcher. Situational analysis is meant as a reiterative process, i.e. where researchers go back and forth between maps and construct various versions. Clarke's maps therefore share Kitchin and Dodge's vision of them as "ontogenetic in nature" (2007, p. 340), i.e. in a continuous state of becoming.

Paradoxically, Clarke (2005) uses a grounded theory term of *saturation* to know when a map is the *finished product*: no new data has come to the surface, for a while maps have remained the same and the researcher has not felt the need to change any of the elements on it that mattered.

***Sites of silence and the non-human***

In taking post-modern tenets seriously, an important notion in situational analysis is that it allows the representation of multiplicity, the simultaneous existence of several perspectives where one voice does not dominate over another (cf. Alveson and Skölberg's, 2009, term of *polyphony-driven)*. Related to this is the attempt to articulate that which is not expressed in the data, or in her terminology, the 'sites of silence' (p. 85). By this Clarke (2005) means that what we, researchers, believe or assume is there but what, for whatever reason, has not shown up in the data, i.e. what has hitherto not been articulated by any of the research participants.

Another interesting and conspicuous feature included in situational analysis is the presence of non-human elements, which are *explicitly* taken into account. The argument here is that through their particular material properties, these elements structurally stipulate the shape of interactions and our engagement with them. Clarke

defines the inclusion of non-human elements as co-constructing and co-constituting the situation as a 'post-modern challenge' to the notion that only humans matter or matter most. This stance echoes Vygotsky's emphasis on mediating tools (1978), Salomon's exposition of the *distributed* nature of cognition and knowing (1993), and Latour's (2005) actor-network-theory (the latter explicitly mentioned by Clarke, 2005).

Clarke (2005) elaborates on this vision in the second half of her book where she 'turns to discourse', citing Foucault and social constructionism as the main influences on her version of discourse analysis, and presents ideas on how to map narrative, visual, and historical discourses.

**Our research**

The small-scale, qualitative project focused on nine newcomers to an assessment community and captured their experiences of coming to understand assessment criteria through audio diaries recorded over the period of a semester, as well as semi-structured interviews, and a follow-up workshop. Participants were encouraged to record both formal and informal experiences. Experiences therefore included teaching, studying module handbooks or reading official documents on standards and assessments, comparing assessment standards at the Business School to those used abroad or at other institutions, conversations or arguments with colleagues, conversations with students, module team meetings, and so on.

All participants were new or relatively new to the Business School, although some where established academics. Participants included associate lecturers, PhD students (studentships and self-financed), and salaried members of staff. Associates and PhD students taught on an occasional basis on hourly-paid contracts.

Apart from situational analysis, we used Atlas.ti, a computerised qualitative data analysis package, to accomplish a thorough coding of the texts obtained from the audio and written diaries, the interviews and the workshop discussions. We read and reread the texts, revisiting our sets of codes in the process. We used our wider research team to discuss the data, the maps of which various versions were produced, and use of situational analysis for our type of research. We presented at two conferences and comments found their way back to later versions of our maps. Finally, we wrote another article, where we approached our research topic through the conceptual lens of situated learning theory (authors, in submission), the theory that underpins most of the outputs of the research centre.

***Doing the maps***

We demonstrate the use of the maps as analytical tools for our particular research topic in figures 1. to 5.

*Situational map*: producing our situational map occurred as a type of collective brainstorming exercise to identify which human (individuals, communities, organisations) and non-human elements (discourses, debates, objects, structures) informed our research inquiry, as defined by us: "Who and what are in the situation? Who and what matters in this situation? What elements 'make a difference?" (Clarke 2005, p. 87). The map in fig.1 shows our messy 'saturated' situational map; many different versions have preceded this one and its production was therefore a re-iterative process.

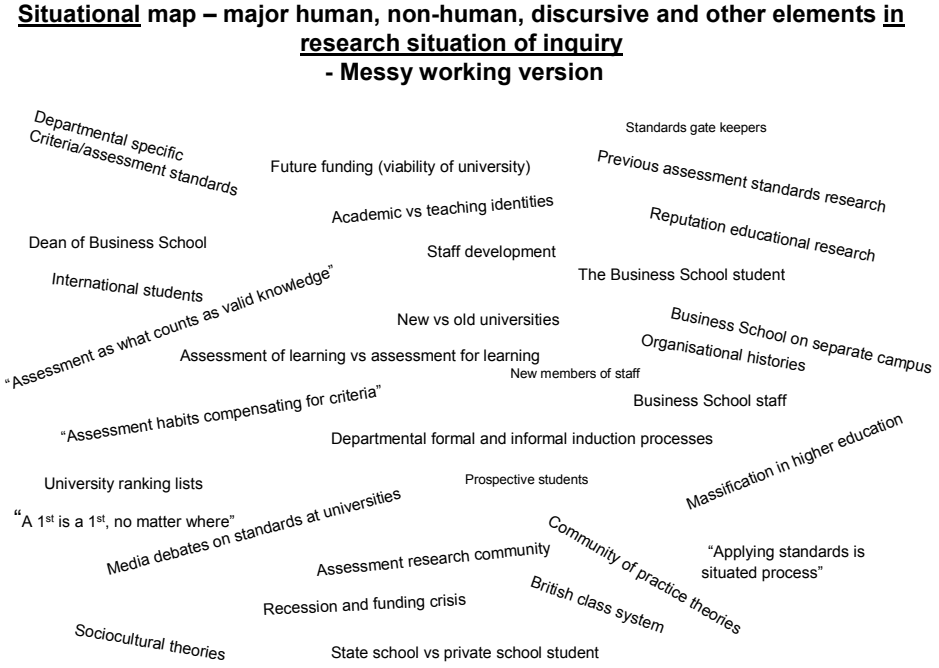


Fig. 1

Although not essential, Clarke (2005) suggests an abstract, ordered version of this map as a step in the analysis process, using organising categories from her own work and that of Strauss (1993 in Clarke 2005). Research project specific, these categories signify *general orders*, i.e. orders that can be used in other research projects, that may generate new elements and are another way of thoroughly examining the situation of inquiry. Taking the elements in our messy map, an ordered version of it is presented in Table 1.

| **Individual human elements/actors***(e.g. key individuals and significant (unorganised) people in situation)*<br><br>Dean of the Business School<br>New members of staff<br>Key standard setters in academic communities | **Nonhuman Elements/Actants**<br>*(e.g. technologies; material infrastructures; specialised information and/or knowledges; material things)*<br><br>New and old methods of assessments<br>Assessment of learning vs assessment for learning |
|---|---|
| **Collective human elements/actors** *(e.g. particular groups; specific organizations)* | **Implicated/silent actors/actants** *(as found in the situation)* |

| Assessment research community<br>Business School staff | Prospective students<br>Future funding/viability of university |
|---|---|
| **Discursive constructions of individual and/or collective human actors** *(as found in the situation)*<br>• Academic vs teaching identities<br>• Business School staff<br>• International students<br>• State school vs private school students | **Discursive constructions of non-human actants** *(as found in the situation)*<br>• Department-specific criteria/assessment standards |
| **Political/economic elements** *(e.g. the state; particular industry/ies; local/regional/global orders; political parties; NGOs; politicized issues)*<br>• Massification in higher education<br>• New vs old universities<br>• University ranking lists | **Sociocultural/symbolic elements** *(e.g. religion; race; sexuality; gender; ethnicity; nationality; logos; icons; other visual and /or aural symbols)*<br>• University standards (collectively as opposed to schools or further education) |
| **Temporal elements** *(e.g. historical, seasonal, crisis, and/or trajectory aspects)*<br>• Recession and funding crisis<br>• Scholarships for PhD students | **Spatial elements** *(e.g. spaces in the situation, geographical aspects, local, regional, national, global spatial issues)*<br>• Departmental formal and informal induction processes<br>• Business School on separate campus<br>• Associates in one office<br>• Self-financed PhD students in one office<br>• PhD students and permanent members of staff in own offices |
| **Major issues/debates (usually contested)** *(as found in the situation and see the positional map)*<br>• 'Applying standards is situated process'<br>• 'There are absolute norms for excellence'<br>• The Business School student<br>• Reputation educational research | **Related discourses (historical, narrative, and/or visual)** *(e.g. normative expectations of actors, actants, and/or other specified elements; mass media and other popular cultural discourses; situation-specific discourses)*<br>• (Media) debates on standards in universities<br>• Previous assessment standards research<br>• Social-constructivist perspective<br>• Community of Practice theories<br>• Sociocultural theories<br>• 'What counts as valid knowledge' |
| **Other kinds of elements** *(as found in the* | |

| | |
|---|---|
| *situation)*<br>• Staff development<br>• Socio-economic class system<br>• Assessment habits compensating for the criteria<br>• Organisational histories | |

Table 1

The next step is to perform relational analysis by drawing lines between each of the elements, and describe the significance of that line, i.e. the nature of the relationship. However, this map as such is not the analysis itself. It points to the *possibilities* of analysis, suggests directions in which analysis could go. Using it with other analysis tools that also in some way contain a visualisation of the data, such as social network analysis (Scott 2000), could be a next step.

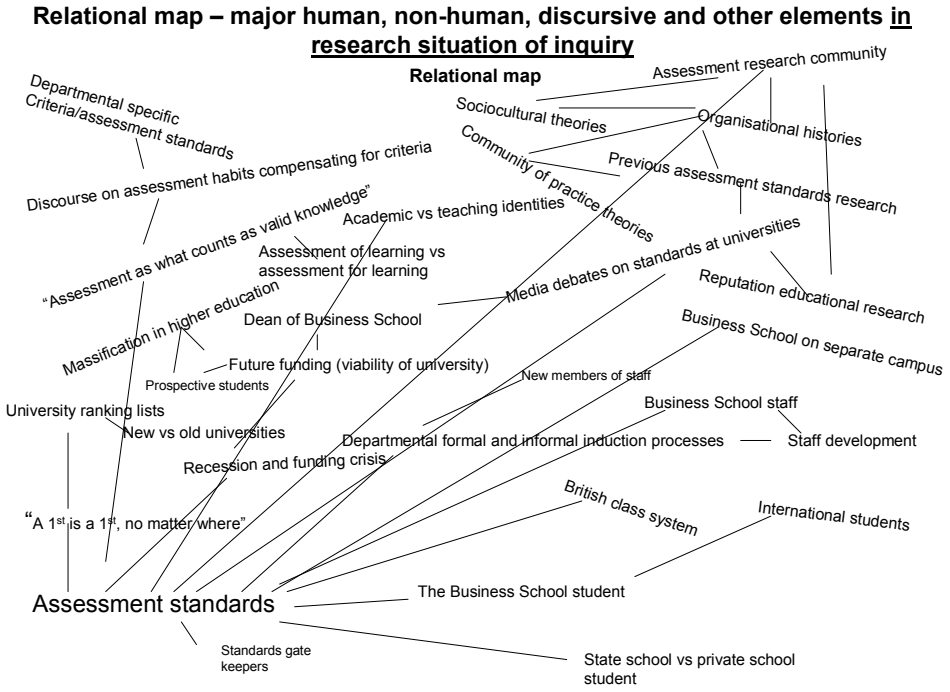


Fig. 2

Narratives around this map could be about in which way each of the elements make an interpretation of the assessment standards a 'socially-situated interpretive act' (Shay 2005). An example of this is the debate on the relationship between assessment *of* learning versus assessment *for* learning and their influence on the construction of assessment standards. Assessment of students' work is seen to be critical for the summative purpose (assessment *of* learning) of accreditation and performance measurement, as well as the formative purpose (assessment *for* learning) of engaging students and supporting their learning. Summative assessment for selection purposes (often through public examinations) has long been recognised as a societal function of assessment; but more recently the developmental value of formative assessment has been acknowledged, both in the schools sector (e.g. see Black and Wiliam, 2003) and in higher education (e.g. QAA guidelines 2007; Carless, 2005).

*Social world map*: the concept of social worlds is rooted in symbolic interactionism (Clarke 2005). A social world map concerns itself with collective social action, a particular work or activity focus, such as, in our case, the assessment of students' assignments. Clarke suggests that social worlds are '*…actor-defined*, permitting identification and analysis of collectivities construed as meaningful by the actors themselves' (2005, p. 110, our emphasis). Fig. 3 presents a social world map. Clarke (2005) provides a social world 'conceptual tool box' (p. 112) to help further construct the data narratives that lead to its production. This again points to Clarke's conception of the maps, not as formulas for analysis but directions through which to start the analysis process, as 'sites of engagement' (p. 141). The social world tool box includes sensitizing concepts such as primary activities, going concerns, mavericks, shared ideologies, and discourses. For instance, the going concerns for the marking

community may be achieving fairness in marking, creating standards that are transferable, or the need to participate as academics in a marking practice.

A following step, then, is to describe each social world in this inquiry and address questions such as ‘what are the commitments of a given world?’, ‘How do participants believe they should go about fulfilling them?’, ‘How does the world describe itself (presents itself) in its discourse?’ ‘Are their particular sites where the action is organised?’ (p. 115).

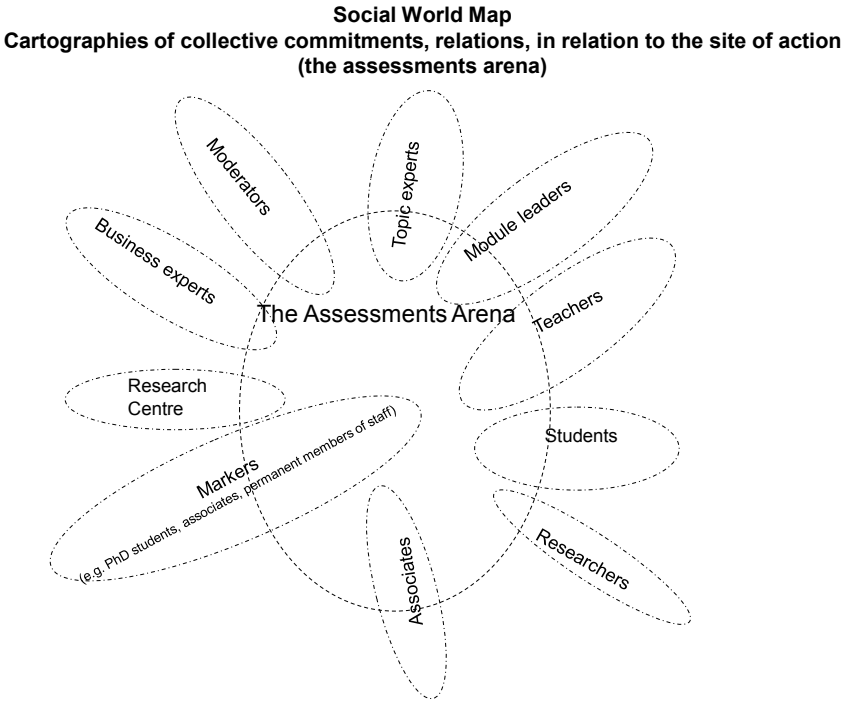


Fig. 3

An important part of the analysis could be to observe how the worlds try and maintain their world as separate from others and how social legitimation is obtained. For instance in the case of the newcomers, in carrying out this part of the process, we are able to articulate that the collective membership of the different worlds perceives the task of assessment and coming to an understanding of the standards in different socialisation processes, with particular implications for their developmental and

psychological needs. At the same time, an individual can be part of different social worlds that sometimes overlap, but sometimes clash. Six out the nine research participants in our project were classified as *contract lecturers* or *associates*, yet some came from a research world, some from a business expert world. As part of a business expert social world, a few of our associate research participants came with strong views on the type of knowledge that needed assessing in a strategy course, which conflicted directly with the course leader, whose dominant social world was that of the teacher. If we look at the ideologies of our research centre, the social world of us as researchers, an ultimate commitment is perhaps to improve the student experience, broadly approached by shifting an assessment paradigm from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning. And although members of other social worlds are unlikely to oppose this commitment on ideological grounds, their own commitments, for instance, to uphold academic standards in their academic disciplines for the social world of the topic experts, may 'override' their commitments to a pedagogic agenda.

Clarke (2005) locates the significance of producing a social world map in the notion that all social worlds have equal status, is therefore a democratising process that is inherently post-modern and challenges positivist or functionalist notions of normal/deviant, centre/periphery, and so on. For instance, drawing the social world map made us analyse the arena of assessment standards linked to socialisation processes that contribute to an understanding of them, from the perspectives of participants in the different social worlds. As we concluded elsewhere (see authors, 2011) perceived routes to participation in an academic community seemed to be linked to employment status (salaried, contract, scholarship versus self-funded PhD) and associated levels of confidence, for instance having the confidence and security to ask questions and challenge ruling perspectives on academic standards. A

recommendation for action coming out of this finding could then be, for instance, the design and facilitation of dialogue targeted at members of the different social worlds, to assist their different ways of coming to understand assessment standards.

Defining social worlds during different research periods could have as an additional function to demonstrate the more salient changes in the arena of inquiry; for instance the presence of a big group of contract lecturers, as opposed to ten years ago when the contribution of associates to teaching the curriculum was significantly less.

*Positional map*: at micro level, a positional map lays out the major subject positions taken and not taken in a particular area of concern with regards to two key discursive elements, chosen by the researcher, in the inquiry situation (see also Friese, 2010). It is important to point out that, unlike in analyses of the more human agency-focussed approaches, e.g. phenomenological, constructivist, the positional map does not represent individual research participants (or social worlds or organisations), rather, a map represents the 'heterogeneity of positions' (Clarke 2005, p.126) that are available for individuals to take up. Clarke's argument is that positional maps are a deliberate move away from the 'politics of representation' (i.e. representing each individual, p. 127) to allow complexities back into the analysis process and avoid oversimplification, inevitably the result of adoption of binary positions. It is argued that this move will ultimately make researchers see situated positions more clearly. Equally, there are no 'negative cases', where the research makes value judgments about being 'good' or 'bad', as this would convey a commitment from the researcher to a particular subject position in a situation-specific discourse.

As with a phenomenological study, individual perspectives are solicited through interviews but take less of a central role. Instead, they are included in the

analysis process to gain insights into the topic that is central to the research project, such as what the positions are. The positions on a positional map, therefore, represent what was found in the data but also include those that were expected (given the researchers' perspectives articulated in the situational map) but *not* found. Clarke (2005) envisages a positional map to look something like this:

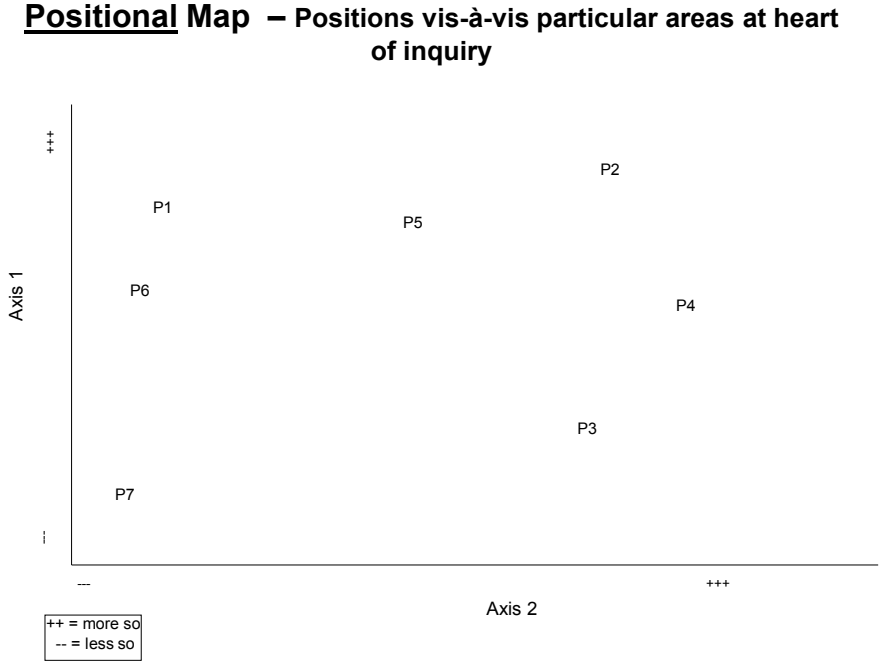


Fig. 4

In practice, we found that producing a positional map was problematic. In our reading of the data, we identified a number of important themes and controversies which could potentially be represented as axes. We discuss some of these next.

One potential axis is one we call *disciplinary content vs. generic skills*. One end represents a situation where the generic skills of academic literacy are highly valued – e.g. the skill of constructing an argument, and using appropriate referencing conventions. In our data, this was reflected in assessment documentation, such as

marking grids, where markers are guided to look out for clear structure, proper referencing, building blocks for a good argument, etc., *without specifying expectations of content*. The other end of the axis represents high value placed on the disciplinary content brought into play in assignments.

Another area in which a number of positions are adopted could be named *expectations about how to come to understand the assessment culture.* If portrayed as an axis, one end represents a situation where new markers are seen (and see themselves) as quasi-apprentices, learning from others in their community about the local assessment standards and processes. At this end of the axis, there is recognition that coming to understand the assessment culture is a process of osmosis that happens over time. To understand them one has to follow and engage with a number of formal and informal processes that facilitate learning the standards, i.e. departmental workshops, marking bees (collective marking in a shared geographical space), sitting in colleagues' classes, reading criteria sheets. The other end of the axis represents a position where it is believed that assessment standards exist independently of the local community, and are generalisable across disciplines and higher education institutions. Individuals who occupy a position towards this end of the axis may resist applying the *dominant* local standards, or at least, may challenge others before complying with them.

Another axis is that of *academic belonging*. In the case of our newcomers, the way in which our study participants felt that they belonged in the communities of which they had become members (or at least, contractors), was linked to envisaged academic trajectories. One extreme of this axis represents an unspecified academic career path (leaving individuals feeling that they might be on the margins of the community), where individuals are physically separate from 'mainstream' colleagues

and feel excluded from routine departmental activities. The other end of this axis represents a situation where individuals perceive a clear academic trajectory with a positive status and physical location within the new department.

Mapping combinations of these three axes together to see where in the data they intersect could possibly generate some interesting insights about the subject positions they generate – i.e. which *could* exist in the data. After all, is it possible that there might be a relationship between feelings of belonging and engagement with colleagues to learn about the local assessment culture. What we found harder to do was defining the direction of this relationship, which is what a *more so* or *less so* along the axes requires the researcher to do, and translating the intersection of the axes into meaningful subject positions that we felt represented our data, including that which was absent. More importantly, we felt unable to represent positions in what we perceived to be the *constraints* of the axes that in our view a positional map would mean. Contrary to what Clarke (2005) intended, in an effort to construct positions based on our data, we perceived the mapping of positions as closing down the space of possibility, rather than opening it up.

Finally, it was not clear to us which perspective the researcher maps on a positional map and hence the organising principle that underpins it (see the next section for a discussion). We can see how thinking about what the axes would be could be a useful exercise, in the sense of a positional map as depiction of a *hunch,* a certain way of knowing of what is going on, or what hidden tensions might explain participants' spoken concerns.

**Interpretation and discussion of situational analysis**

At the beginning of this article we suggested that engagement in reflexive practice and 'knowing differently' (Haggis 2009) could be achieved by revisiting our research methods and expose our ways of working. We explored situational analysis (Clarke 2005), which we tested on data generated by our research project on assessment standards. In what follows, we discuss what we gained from doing situational analysis, how we applied it and where we ran into difficulty, and how it performed as a method of reflexive inquiry.

First of all, situational analysis must be commended for attempting to create a post-modern *method* in a tradition that is better at critiquing and saying how *not* to conduct research, and is in a way 'anti-methodological', than at putting forward an alternative (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009). For us, the purpose of situational analysis is to add another layer, an 'ontological methodology' (Law 2004), to our everyday way of working to enhance research reflexivity. A situational map, the first map, allowed us to portray the various collective actors (human and non-human) that in some way shape our inquiry into assessment standards. We took this to mean the identification of as many elements as possible, disorganised and inconsistent, that we could point to as *being there*. From it we were able to raise fresh awareness of our topic as being situated in a number of debates, institutions, practices, theories. Compare this for instance with Alvesson and Sköldberg's *primary interpretations* (2009), which are made before and during interaction with a research subject: "…the researcher 'interprets' what and who can be asked...what is interesting and what it is possible to get an answer to' (p. 287). Each of these elements 'pull' assessment standards in many different directions with regards to what they signify and how a research into them could be conducted. A strong reflexive element is for instance the notion that the research funding body, or powers at the research institute are explicitly

present in the research inquiry, i.e. they are negotiated and resolved inside it, rather than outside (cf. Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006). What is ultimately brought to the fore? Which research narratives make the researcher's cut and which are lost, perhaps through hidden pressures such as journal deadlines, end of research funding, or imminent published research by the competition (Weick 2002)? A relational map of the situation contains useful *prompts* to enhance understanding, complemented by other analytical approaches, how the various elements on the map relate to each other and could make visible connections that are hitherto unexplored.

The social worlds map is made up of actors that negotiate their way within these directions, that demonstrated the ambiguities, inconsistencies, and conflicting messages with regards to what assessment standards come to mean and the routes taken by members of staff to interpret, negotiate but also shape them. Individuals may populate a number of social worlds at any one time. Unpicking the data in this way gave us an awareness of these worlds that exist around the subject of assessment standards and provided insights into conflicting commitments of members of these worlds, as well as structures of power with regards to access to information and 'coming to know' academic standards (cf. authors 2011, our other article on this subject).

In terms of reflexive research, we interpreted the first two maps as a *presentation* of what we see to be there (and by implication, what our blind spots are) for the situational map, and a *representatio*n, an ordering of sub-sets into worlds for the social world map that make up our data set. The situational and social world maps increased our awareness of the constructs in the setting, sharing, and applying of assessment standards and placed us as researchers in a social world of our own research centre with its own particular commitments. At the same time, they map

how we as researchers 'enact our reality' (Law 2004) and how we see our research participants enact theirs.

However, the production of a positional map became an impossible task, the hardest part being to determine what comes first, the axes or the positions, and thereby addressing the question of ownership and representation of the data. Are the positions created by defining what the key issues are, or does one unpick the positions to define the axes? Clarke (2005) gives sparse advice with regards to how to produce a positional map with the argument that only the researcher knows the main issues in the situation of inquiry, as well as the notion that the maps are not formulas for analysis but directions through which to start an analysis process, as 'sites of engagement' (p. 141). Her comments suggest that axes might reflect conceptual tensions that are seen by the researchers but not necessarily by the participants themselves, and so do not – at least knowingly – reflect the concerns of the participants. Therefore, the researcher is required to step back from representing research participants' voices and instead, present positions around a given concern that are 'out there' , that the researcher can 'point towards', and so "move with Foucault beyond the 'knowing subject'" (1973 in Clarke 2005, p. 126). [5] The aim of a positional map, i.e. to locate a net of temporary subject positions generated by the identified discourses, therefore clashes with our approach to representation that includes the notion of agency (to represent research participants). We share this with

[5] What this meant became clear to us further in a workshop with Kathy Charmaz on coding in grounded theory (a joint event by the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods and the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, 7 June 2011 at Cardiff University). Charmaz attributes the development of a constructivist approach to grounded theory to Antony Bryant, Adele Clarke and herself. Although situational analysis is different still to a constructivist version - Charmaz characterises situational analysis as more "advanced" - Charmaz and Clarke's take on data presentation is very similar: individuals' perspectives are sought but overall are only interesting in as far as that they are able to illustrate and illuminate the wider issues in the research inquiry.

Mills et al. (2006), who, although finding the situational and social worlds maps useful, were unable to produce a positional map, arguing that their constructivist approach to grounded theory, which they contrast with Clarke's postmodern version, meant that they could not reject the notion of the individual as able to shape their world in some way (p. 75). Furthermore, mapping as a social process in the context of a reflexive practice tool representing thought processes of the researchers, in our view does not go far enough. We will discuss this next.

### *A reflexive methodology?*

As we used Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000/2009) interpretation of a reflexive practice as our starting point, we will now use it as a yardstick by which to consider situational analysis as a reflexive methodology. In the process of data interpretation, the reflexive methodology of Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000/2009) suggests a quadri-hermeneutic process, each stage with its own focus of interpretation: the handling of empirical data (accounts in interviews, observations of situations and other empirical materials), interpretation (underlying meanings), critical interpretation (ideology, power, social reproduction) and self-critical and linguistic reflection (own text, claims to authority, selectivity or sampling of the voices represented in the text). Furthermore, they also put forth corresponding themes for reflection (2000, pp. 248-255) that occur in between the levels. A situational and social map could be seen as a to-ing and fro-ing between the empirical material level and interpretation level, prompting the researcher to reflect on favouring of certain interpretations, existing multiplicity of interpretations of accounts, why certain worlds dominate over others, etc. A *critical* interpretation is sought in the creation of a positional map, pondering the different types of reality that are present in the situation of the research, openness

to other representations and selectivity of the voices that are represented. Alvesson and Sköldberg's critical interpretation stage has overlap with Clarke's (2005) challenge to identify 'sites of silence' and encourage researchers to explore further the underlying power dynamics. The logical challenge to be addressed for the reflexive researcher is how does one identify and then depict or describe a site from within the world that is known? Which domain is outside the field of vision of research participant but also of researcher?

A self-critical and linguistic reflection that could address these questions, the fourth level of interpretation as identified in Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2009) reflexive methodology, is more problematic to locate in situational analysis. The maps themselves leave as unprompted questions such as 'who is the researcher and how is who they are consequential?' (Clarke 2005, p.12). What do we bring to the topic of assessment standards? What are our missing perspectives because of our backgrounds? What are *our* sites of silence? To categorise the various qualitative research methodologies and their approach to reflexivity, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) distinguish between two types of reflexive practice that can overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive (pp. 312-313). One is reflexivity that aims to uncover or highlight political, intellectual or ethical elements in the manner of research, referred to as D-Reflexivity where the D stands for deconstruction, defensive, and destabilising. It includes recognition that reflexivity is not confined to the personal (cf. Henwood's, 2008, interpretation of 'epistemic reflexivity') but that it also refers to the identity of the research (cf. 'Bourdieu and Wacquant's, 1992, 'epistemic reflexivity'). The second type of reflexivity, R-reflexivity, tries to gain new insights, where the R refers to reconstruction and representation. Building on a post-modernist tradition, it seems to us that ambitions of situational analysis are mainly

within D-reflexivity, but to some extent also within R-reflexivity, trying as it does to portray the influences on the research inquiry itself *and* point towards domains of representation in the data analysis. It is likely that Clarke (2005) would argue that all of the maps are inherently self-critical and offer linguistic reflections because they lay bare the choices and processes of the researcher[6]. We, however, suggest that it is at the fourth level of reflection where Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2000, 2009) reflexivity of casting a critical eye on authorship and representation and Clarke's post-modern situational analysis part ways. After all, if situational analysis is a post-modern challenge where "…the subject [including the researcher, author] is [instead] decentred, enmeshed in the 'text' of the world, constituted in 'intersubjectivity', discourse and language" (Usher 1996, p. 28), a post-modern approach to a reflexive methodology can only achieve so much. Therefore, what remains ultimately unresolved for us is the question of how reconstruction and representation of the elements on the maps, in particular the positional map, come about and what or who drives them, i.e. the question of agency.

As Clarke (2005) points out, exchanging methods and theories across different disciplines is now common practice. The benefit of doing this is, if not discovering something new or gaining novel insights, to revisit one's own methods and theoretical positions (also see Williams 2011). Indeed we would argue that the very act of engaging with an unfamiliar methodology is a good exercise in reflexive practice: trying to get to grips with situational analysis has led to many discussions in our research team about how to do research, how to analyse data and fundamentally, what we consider to be our data. To the reader it must, by now, be obvious that exploring the use of situational analysis and its visual representation of data was rather out of

[6] Or as per the rationale Charmaz offered in the workshop mentioned in footnote 4 for there not being a differentiation between the different epistemologies for the positions: *it is all interpretation anyway!*

our comfort zone. However, attempting to gain new understandings does not come without real efforts and we enjoyed engaging with something that felt at times new and exciting, at times daunting and challenging, and at times simplistic and unproductive, sometimes all of these simultaneously. When our frustrations and anxiety of getting to grips with situational analysis overwhelmed us, we took solace from Clarke's (2005) statement that feeling anxious is 'an appropriate postmodern state' (p. 296)!

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