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DEMYSTIFYING CRITICAL REFLECTION

Improving Pedagogy and Practice
with Legitimation Code Theory

Legitimation Code Theory



3

'I COMPLY BUT DEEPLY RESENT BEING ASKED TO DO SO'

Ethical considerations of assessing students' reflective writing

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Introduction

Ethical reasoning, ethical decision-making, and professional integrity are often cited among the most important graduate qualities in university strategic plans. A voluminous literature also highlights the importance of preparing tertiary students for ethical professional practice. In higher education students' capacity for ethical reasoning and ethical practice are often assessed through reflective types of assignments such as critical reflection essays, learning journals, and reflective journals that are becoming increasingly popular in applied disciplines such as education, social work, business or health sciences. These assignments are often framed as 'empowering' and 'emancipatory' as they are designed to enable students to challenge existing power structures and the status quo in institutional settings (see e.g. Fook 2004; Fook & Morley 2005). They are described as forms of 'creative' expression that do not conform to any structures and therefore allow students 'freedom' to engage with their experiences without limits (Crème 2008). However, among the issues that emerge with regard to reflective writing are ethical concerns associated with assessing an assignment that is culturally or contextually insensitive and asks students to divulge often deeply personal and ethically sensitive information (see e.g. Boud & Walker 1998; Ghaye 2007; Morley 2007; Marsh 2014). While ethical decision-making and integrity are undoubtedly crucial components of professional practice and a necessary student attribute, this chapter will critically examine the appropriateness and ethicality of the widespread academic practice of assessing students' reflective writing in higher education.

We begin by reviewing the literature on critical reflection which defines reflective writing as a form of 'emancipatory education' that involves challenging presuppositions, exploring alternative perspectives and transforming old

ways of understanding (Mezirow 2003: 12). This ‘transformation’ deviates from the ‘objective’ and epistemologically oriented meanings that are valorized in higher education (Fook et al. 2016). We draw on the concepts of axiological *clusters* and *constellations* (Maton 2014) from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) to analyze reflective assignments from business and evaluate whether they can be claimed to be ‘empowering’ and ‘emancipatory’ and enabling critical reflection as a process. The findings of this research suggest that reflective assignments could be seen as contributing to deficit discourses rather than challenging the status quo and allowing ‘freedom of expression’ as well as limiting rather than empowering students’ agency. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the need to critically reflect about the practice of assessing critical reflection in tertiary settings. We suggest that decolonizing critical reflection is necessary in order to design reflective tasks that enable rather than constrain students’ learning to become self-reflective practitioners.

Literature review: The construction of critical reflection assignments

Critical reflection refers to how people make “judgements about whether professional activity is equitable, just and respectful of persons or not by drawing on personal action” examined within wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts (Hatton & Smith 1995: 35). As a ‘soft’ (Biglan 1973) or ‘transferable’ (Brown 1990; Halpern 1998; Kek & Huijser 2011) skill, it is often taught and assessed through the use of a wide variety of assignments, such as learning and reflective journals and reports, reflection essays, case studies, or narratives (Carson & Fisher 2006; Fook et al. 2016; Fook & Gardner 2013; Ryan & Ryan 2013). We distinguish between the process of critical reflection and written reflective assignments by using the term ‘critical reflection’ to name the process and ‘critical reflection assignments’ to refer to “written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning” (Thorpe 2004: 328 as cited in O’Connell & Dymont 2011: 47). Typically, reflective assessment tasks are often designed to induce ‘a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt’ (Dewey 1933), create ‘inner discomforts’ (Brookfield 2000), and require students to identify a personal and ‘disorienting dilemma’ (Mezirow 2000) or a ‘critical incident’ (Fook 2002) during the practical application of their disciplinary knowledge in field work, field placements and other ‘real-life’ scenarios students engage in during their undergraduate degrees. Critical incidents or learning events are often narrated in the form of an autobiography or life narrative (Crème 2008) that then forms the object of analysis in critical reflection assignments. Students are expected to analyze these problematic situations through applying the theoretical concepts of their discipline and/or deconstruct dominant assumptions and challenge existing power structures

and the status quo in institutional settings (see e.g. Brookfield 2000; Fook 2004; Crème 2008; Fook & Morley 2005).

Despite a rich literature that discusses critical reflection, there has been little consensus or understanding of what counts as *evidence* of effective practices of critical reflection, particularly in the context of higher education. Recent research has identified what constitutes the knowledge practices of critical reflection across a range of disciplines such as nursing (Brooke 2019), engineering and English for Academic Purposes (Brooke, Monbec & Tilakaratna 2019; Monbec et al. 2020), social work education (Boryczko 2020), teacher education (Macnaught 2020) and social work and business (Szenes et al. 2015; Tilakaratna & Szenes 2017, 2020; Szenes & Tilakaratna 2021). Drawing on linguistic and sociological approaches, these studies highlight key features of highly graded reflective writing, for example, their genre structure, i.e. staging, recurring patterns of evaluative resources and the importance of semantic waging, i.e. moving between theoretical knowledge and everyday experiences (see also Maton 2014; Kirk 2017; Macnaught 2020; Meidell Sigsgaard 2020; Meidell Sigsgaard & Jacobsen 2021).

With regards to the ethical considerations of assessing reflective assignments, previous research has pointed out a Western bias towards cultural assumptions and norms, for example, through its excessive focus on individuality (Fook & Askeland 2007; Tilakaratna et al. 2019). This focus on individuality and the ‘self’ is evident in claims such as providing students with the opportunity for ‘*self-expression*’, and in concepts such as ‘*self-regulation*’, ‘*critical self-reflection*’ (Facione 1990; Hettich 1990; Hiemstra 2001, emphases added), and ‘*self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking*’ (Paul & Elder 2014, emphases added). Other ethical concerns include ‘ *censorship*’ (Cheng & Chan 2019), coercion and intrusion into students’ privacy (Ghaye 2007; Ross 2011; Smith & Trede 2013), overburdening students with ‘*busy work*’ and ‘*more workload*’ (Mills 2008; Mortari 2012), and setting assignments that are seen as ‘*tedious*’ and a ‘*nuisance*’ (Mills 2008; O’Reilly & Milner 2015) or a ‘*pain*’ (Jindal-Snape & Holmes 2009).

Previous research has claimed that critical reflection tasks are a form of ‘*creative*’ play or activity that have no specific genre or text structure and allow students “to play around with ideas in an open, unworried and exploratory way” (Crème 2008: 52) and are thus unteachable and unassessable. In contrast, Szenes, Tilakaratna & Maton (2015) show that high-scoring reflective assignments in social work and business conform to a uniform genre structure: while highlighting discipline-specific differences, high-scoring reflective assignments in both disciplines include several common genre stages. These include descriptions of personal and professional experience, critically examining previous assumptions, beliefs and behaviours, and a resolution to learn from mistakes and a pledge to apply new knowledge to inform better behaviour in the future. Further, Tilakaratna & Szenes (2020) and Szenes & Tilakaratna (2021) challenge current pedagogical practices which claim that critical reflection tasks

allow for ‘creative’ expression by demonstrating that students from different disciplines align themselves with privileged disciplinary values by creating value-laden constellations in their assignments.

Theoretical foundations: Axiological clusters and constellations

LCT is a sociological framework that enables the organizing principles underlying knowledge practices to be explored, across a wide range of academic disciplines as well as everyday and professional contexts (see e.g. Maton 2014; Maton et al. 2016, 2021). This chapter draws on the LCT concepts of *clusters* and *constellations* (Maton 2014; Maton & Doran 2021). Specifically, it focuses on an *axiological* form of clusters and constellations, in which practices signal the “aesthetic, ethical, moral or political affiliations” of actors (Maton 2014: 152). The aim is to examine the extent to which the reflective assignments analyzed for this study can be claimed to be ‘empowering’ and ‘emancipatory’ and enabling critical reflection as a process.

Axiological clusters can be formed by recognisable and recurring configurations or patterns of these kinds of meanings that have positive or negative *charging* (Tilakaratna & Szenes 2020; Szenes 2021; Szenes & Tilakaratna 2021). Linked to other clusters, they can form a larger unit termed an *axiological constellation* (Maton 2014; Maton et al. 2016; Tilakaratna & Szenes 2020; Szenes 2021). In Maton’s words, tight association among the stances constituting a constellation (Maton 2014: 163) can enable *clusterboosting*, whereby actors can benefit from the meanings associated with other positively viewed stances that are closely connected with the stances they express, whether they engage with those stances or not. Conversely, actors can experience *clusterfucking* of their stances by association with other stances that are negatively charged, regardless of whether they enact those stances or not. This chapter aims to demonstrate the usefulness of these concepts for revealing what the academic discipline of business seems to value as successful written demonstrations of critical reflection as well as what it seems to devalue and evaluate as failures of demonstrating critical reflection.

To identify clusters of axiological meanings in reflective assignments, we draw on the APPRAISAL¹ framework, also called ‘the language of evaluation’ (Martin, J. R. & White 2005), from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyze instances of evaluative meanings, i.e. attitudes, values and judgements. Attitudinal meanings are realized by interpersonal linguistic resources² selected from the ATTITUDE system of APPRAISAL that is further divided into the sub-systems of AFFECT, classified as types of emotion, and JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION, classified as forms of opinion (Martin, J. R. 1992, 2000; Bednarek 2008). Selections of attitudinal meanings from the subsystem of AFFECT involve linguistic resources which construe attitudinal meanings as evaluations of emotions and feelings; selections from JUDGEMENT signal evaluations of behaviour; selections from APPRECIATION signal evaluations of phenomena and things respectively

(Martin, J. R. & White 2005). These resources of ATTITUDE can also be graded by amplification (e.g. good: great: *outstanding*; *entirely* incorrect) or blurring (e.g. *somewhat* important; *may* have offended) in order to intensify, quantify, sharpen or soften attitudinal meanings (Hood 2010; Martin, J. R. & White 2005).

Since all evaluations are aimed at something, we will also identify *what* is being evaluated (Martin, J. R. & White 2005: 59), i.e. the *Targets*³ of attitudes⁴. As illustrated by Example 1 below, an instance of inscribed negative [judgement: normality] (*foreign*) evaluates the Target ‘*my teammates’ behaviour*’.

[1] my teammates’ behaviour [Target] seemed **foreign** [-judgement: normality] to me

Following the conventions of coding attitudinal meanings established in Martin, J. R. (2000) and Martin, J. R. & White (2005), in the analyses below we will term instances that evaluate ‘attitudinal choices’ and the evaluated entities ‘Targets’ in order to illustrate their role in the construction of clusters in the reflective assignments analyzed in this study. Attitudinal choices will be coded in **bold** font and their Targets will be underlined. Their charging will be indicated by the signs ‘+’ for positive and ‘-’ for negative evaluation. Resources of grading will be coded in *black bold italics*. This coding scheme is summarized in Table 3.1 below:

TABLE 3.1 Coding scheme for text analysis

Coding scheme

Targets (i.e. the evaluated entities)	<u>underlined</u>
attitudinal choices	black bold font
type of attitude	square brackets ⁵ (e.g. [+judgement: propriety])
charging	‘+’ sign for positive evaluation ‘-’ sign for negative evaluation
grading (amplification/blurring)	<i>black bold italics</i>

When the same Target is repeatedly evaluated by instances of positive or negative attitude, such recurring patterns can be generalized as positively or negatively charged clusters (Tilakaratna & Szenes 2020), as shown in Figure 3.1.



FIGURE 3.1 An example of a negatively charged cluster

This visual representation will be used in this chapter to capture the nature of axiological meanings clustered together in the reflective assignments analyzed for this study.

The dataset and the reflective assignment tasks

The reflective assignments analyzed in this chapter are part of a dataset collected for an ongoing international multidisciplinary research project on the knowledge practices of critical thinking in higher education, whose aim is to understand the disciplinary requirements of undergraduate reflective writing. After gaining ethics approval for the project, 64 senior undergraduate reflective journals from business studies (1,000 words) and their grades were collected from a core interdisciplinary business studies unit at a large metropolitan Australian university. All grades were ordered from highest to lowest, all identifying details of the students were removed, and the texts were then numbered as Text 1, 2, 3, and so on. Out of the 64 students who consented to having their assignments analyzed for research purposes, only six received a High Distinction grade and 11 students failed this task. To analyze the same number of texts from each of these groups, the six highest- and the six lowest-scoring assignments were then chosen for the analysis presented in this chapter.

The reflective journal task set within a core, senior and challenging interdisciplinary unit in business studies was designed to develop students' reflective practice and specifically their intercultural competence. Reflective practice is defined in the Unit of Study Outline as "a dynamic ongoing interactive self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective communication and interaction across cultures and contexts" (Freeman 2009). The reflective journal task required students to critically reflect on their experience of multinational teamwork by examining their visible and invisible values, beliefs, assumptions and behaviours drawing on Solomon & Schell's model of intercultural competency (Solomon & Schell 2009: 49–50). In particular, the students were provided with the following guiding questions:

Question 1: Choose one behaviour that you thought was a strength or weakness and identify the 'below the surface' value that underpins that behaviour.

Question 2: Having identified the cultural value that you believe underpins your particular strength or weakness, now explain how and from where that cultural value developed using the 'core elements of culture' provided on p. 50 of Solomon and Schell (2009).

Question 3: What does this teach you about the way you behave, and your expectations of others, when working in multinational teams?

Question 4: How might you integrate this awareness into future team work, either at university or in the workplace?

This chapter seeks answers to the following research questions: 1) how ‘*emancipatory*’ and ‘*empowering*’ are these assignments and 2) how do successful students demonstrate critical self-reflection in high- and low-scoring reflective assignments? For reasons of space, in the following sections we will only highlight textual examples from the business reflective journals to illustrate the ethical concerns we identified throughout the course of our research.

Deficit discourses in reflective writing: Stereotyping the ‘Other’, negative self-talk, and a focus on failure

As shown in the literature review section above, reflective assignments are often framed as ‘empowering’ and ‘emancipatory’ designed to enable students to ‘challenge’ existing power structures and the ‘status quo’ in institutional settings (e.g. Fook 2004; Fook & Morley 2005). When analysing reflective assignments in detail, we noticed that some students seemed to interpret the instructions ‘critically analyze’ and ‘critically reflect on’ as an invitation to criticize others and themselves. Specifically, this section will illustrate how student writers of high-scoring reflective journals from the field of business engage in deficit discourses by stereotyping and othering their peers while student writers of low-scoring assignments engage in negative self-talk and focus on failure.

Deficit discourses: Clusterboosting Australian values and clusterfucking ‘foreign’ values

For reasons of space, we first explore Text 1 to provide more detailed analyses before presenting illustrative results from other high-scoring assignments. Our first example demonstrates that in the high-scoring business reflective journals the student writer initially negatively evaluates the other participants they interact with during their multinational teamwork. They describe their personal experiences concerning their multinational team assignment and analyze the ‘below the surface’ values that underpin their negative experiences of teamwork and negative attitudes towards their peers.

[Text 1] My group had three members from China where communitarianism is *generally valued* [+appreciation: valuation] and other cultural differences [-judgement: normality] such as communication styles made

their behaviour seem **foreign** [-judgement: normality] to me (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2000: 71)

To uncover patterns of evaluation that cluster into a set of axiological values, we coded the attitudinal choices of similar targets and their charging, specifically, subsequent mentions of the student's team mates (e.g. *three members from China, their behaviour*) as well as references to communitarianism and related expressions (e.g. *Chinese style, cultural differences*). The detailed attitudinal analysis presented in Table 3.2 reveals that both the student's team mates and their country of origin, values and characteristics are repeatedly evaluated as incapable and 'abnormal'. These resources, clustered together, function to amplify the student writer's negative judgement of the 'capacity' and 'normality' of his peers from

TABLE 3.2 A repeated pattern of coupling negative evaluation of student's peers and communitarian values [Text 1]

<u>Target: peers</u>	attitudinal item	type & charging
<u>other group members</u>	<i>less academically gifted</i> than myself	[-judgement: capacity]
<u>three members from China</u>	foreign	[-judgement: normality]
<u>their behaviour</u>	foreign	[-judgement: normality]
<u>to use direct communication</u>	their resistance	[-judgement: normality]
<u>my team mates</u>	fail to understand language or grammar	[-judgement: capacity]
<u>they</u>	do not understand the concept	[-judgement: capacity]
<u>my Chinese workmates</u>	looked at me blankly	[-judgement: capacity]
<u>the group's</u>	lack of direct communication	[-judgement: capacity]
<u>Target: communitarianism</u>	attitudinal item	type & charging
<u>commonly indirect Chinese style</u>	foreign	[-judgement: normality]
<u>China where communitarianism is generally valued</u>	foreign	[-judgement: normality]
<u>Chinese style</u>	commonly indirect	[-judgement: normality]
<u>other cultural differences such as communication styles</u>	made their behaviour seem foreign to me	[-judgement: normality]
<u>communitarianism</u>	foreign	[-judgement: normality]

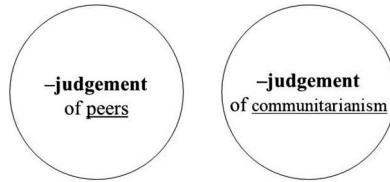


FIGURE 3.2 Negatively charged clusters of the student's peers' behaviour as incapable and communitarianism as 'abnormal'

mainland China from their cultural differences to their communication style.

We can generalize these salient linguistic resources of negative judgement, which target the student's Chinese team mates and their behaviour and values that stem from communitarianism as negatively charged clusters. Illustrated by Figure 3.2, these clusters condense the patterns of repeated evaluations, which function to dismiss the student's peers' behaviour as incapable and communitarianism as 'abnormal'.

As mentioned above, business students were required to draw on Solomon & Schell's intercultural competency framework to analyze their visible behaviours as well as hidden values, beliefs and assumptions (Solomon & Schell 2009: 49–50). This framework includes concepts such as *myth*, *folklore*, *heroes* and *history* within 'core elements of culture', which influence both 'on the surface' personal behaviour as well as 'below the surface' cultural values (e.g. egalitarianism, honesty, loyalty, etc.). Further analysis of Text 1 revealed that the business student contrasts the 'foreign' value of communitarianism to his Australian value of 'individualism', one of the core elements of culture in the theoretical framework students were required to apply in their reflective journals. The extract below demonstrates that the value of individualism is evaluated exclusively positively by piling up resources of positive capacity, which functions to construct the student's academic abilities as superior to his Chinese peers.

[Text 1] The hidden **value** [+appreciation: valuation] that underpins my behaviour of discounting is individualism. Individualism involves a **preference to act independently** [+judgement: capacity] and **to put an individual's own interests before any group interests** [+judgement: capacity] (Parker: 194–196). The main reason I have used discounting in the past is to ensure that I **get the best marks** [+appreciation: valuation] **possible** [+judgement: capacity] at university which can be classified as my individual [+judgement: capacity] objective. The broader objective this links to is **success** [+judgement: capacity] in life. Doing well at university has been shown statically to **positively impact** [+judgement: capacity] upon a person's career, health and material wealth in a generalized case

(Todaro & Smith 2009: 373). I therefore used discounting behaviour in the aim of **achieving my own individual objective** [+judgement: capacity] which I justified to myself by claiming **it** was **similarly helping the group achieve** [+judgement: capacity] its objective.

This recurring salient pattern of positive capacity targeting the value of individualism is constructed in direct opposition to the pattern of negative normality targeting the value of communitarianism we showed in Table 3.2. By packaging them up into abstractions that condense attitudinal meanings, the business student constructs these as oppositional clusters illustrated by Figure 3.3.

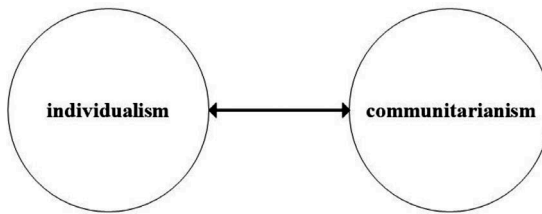


FIGURE 3.3 Oppositionally charged clusters in business: Individualism versus communitarianism

The next step in our analysis was to identify what other ideas the clusters of individualism and communitarianism were related to in the student's assignment. In other words, it is important to understand what constellation an idea is part of (cf. Maton 2014). Other Australian values are also discussed by the student writer, such as *equality*, *courage*, *excellence*, and *cooperation*. Similar to individualism, each of these values condense a range of meanings: for example, the value of excellence is exemplified through positive judgements of capacity such as efficiency, productivity and behaving competitively, and the value of courage condenses behaviours such as offering ideas during teamwork, divulging stories and experiences and the student's expectation that peers should not feel intimidated when participating in groupwork. Each cluster that actualizes an Australian value condenses a repeated pattern of *positively* charged attitudinal meanings. Together these clusters form a positively charged constellation of Australian values. On the other hand, similar to communitarianism, each cluster that actualizes a Chinese value condenses a repeated pattern of *negatively* charged attitudinal meanings. This construction of oppositional constellations enables *clusterboosting* Australian values and *clusterfucking* 'foreign' values in the business reflective journal. The clusters forming these opposing constellations are visualized by Figure 3.4.

By citing his positively charged Australian value system as the reason for his inappropriate behaviour, the student essentially redeems himself by excusing his stereotyping and othering of his Chinese peers. While space precludes the

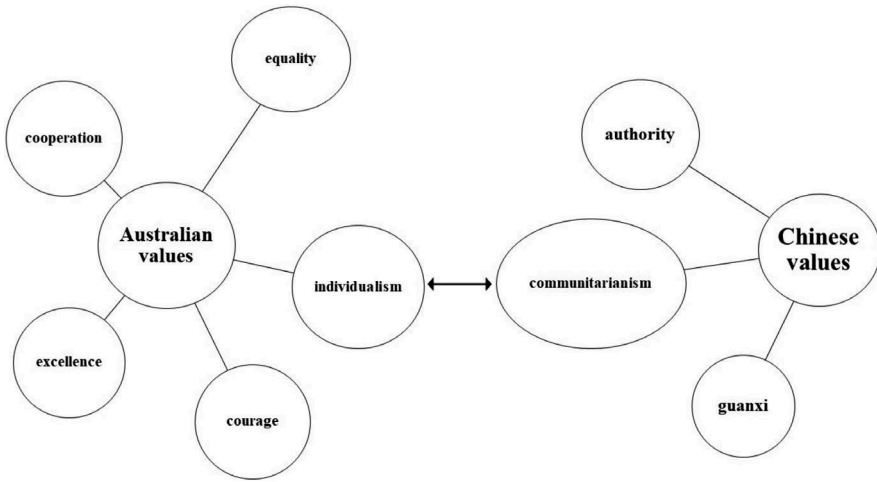


FIGURE 3.4 *Clusterboosting* Australian values and *clusterfucking* ‘foreign’ values in a high-scoring business reflective journal

detailed presentation of other high-scoring students’ reflective assignments, it is important to mention that such oppositional constellations appear in each text. We provide examples of these oppositional constellations in Table 3.3, where students contrast their positively charged Australian values and behaviours to the negatively charged non-western values and behaviours of their peers.

TABLE 3.3 Oppositional constellations of Australian and foreign values and behaviours [Texts 2–6]

Text	Australian values and behaviours: +charging	Foreign values and behaviours: –charging
Text 2	history, heroes, mythology, folklore, mateship	face saving, silence, indirect communication
Text 3	integrity, honesty, equality, courage, cooperation, excellence	collectivism, fear of rejection
Text 4	excellence, individualism, freedom, history, landscape, low power distance	collectivism, authority, high power distance, Confucianism
Text 5	heroes, mythology, folklore, family, contempt for authority, individualism	authority, fear of losing face, indirect style
Text 6	excellence, courage, cooperation, optimism, religion, history, mateship, individualism	collectivism, indirect communication style, face, hierarchy

The clusterboosting of Australian values and the clusterfucking of ‘foreign’ values in the highest-scoring business reflective journals play an important role in demonstrating ‘intercultural competence’, where the students use the constellation of Australian values as the basis for and the justification of othering

their international team mates by engaging in deficit discourses. In the following section, we will share examples where such deficit discourses are not aimed at others but the students themselves.

Deficit discourses: Negative self-talk and a focus on failure

We will now look at the low-scoring assignments analyzed in study. The following extracts from Texts 8 and 9 illustrate how the student writers evaluate Chinese and Australian values and behaviours as weaknesses and strengths. As both these extracts show, certain linguistic choices of evaluation can dominate longer stretches of text by occupying a dominant position at the beginnings or endings of texts (Hood 2010; Martin, J. R. & White 2005). In the extract from Text 8, examples of such dominating evaluations appear at the beginning of the paragraph, where ‘weakness’, an instance of [–judgement: capacity], repeated twice, spreads negative axiological charging over meanings associated with the student’s Chinese values and behaviour, e.g. talking less and indirect and implicit Chinese team communication. On the other hand, Australian values and behaviours are evaluated as a ‘strength’ by the student, which is an instance of [+judgement: capacity] and is associated with working hard, performing well, being more direct and explicit, and talking more. The extract from Text 9 draws on similar oppositions where ‘strength’ is associated with western students through examples such as talking more, contributing more, and doing more for the team. In contrast, ‘weakness’ condenses examples such as talking less and humility. The quotes “[t]he cultural difference between China and Australia made a ‘virtue’ became a ‘weakness’” [Text 8] and “our traditional attitude [humility] becomes a weakness” [Text 9] from these two extracts are particularly telling of how these students feel about the cultural expectations placed on them at an Australian university.

[Text 8] The cultural difference between China and Australia made a ‘**virtue**’ [+judgement: propriety] became a ‘**weakness**’ [–judgement: capacity]. However, to perform **well** [+judgement: capacity] in a team, I have to try to convert **this weakness** [–judgement: capacity] into **strength** [+judgement: capacity]. ... I can **work very hard** [+judgement: capacity] in a team although I **do not talk a lot** [–judgement: capacity]. **This** [+judgement: capacity] is a kind of integration of Chinese culture into Western culture. Team communications in Western cultures are usually **very direct** [+judgement: capacity] and **explicit** [+judgement: capacity] (Brett et al. 2006), and [team communications] in Chinese culture, they are indirect [–judgement: capacity] and **implicit** [–judgement: capacity]. To integrate this [+judgement: capacity], I would have to try to express myself **as direct as** I can.

[Text 9] Sometimes, western countries students consider talking more as **contributing more** [+judgement: capacity] (which I **really cannot agree**

[-judgement: capacity], with). They usually like to show how **better** [+judgement: capacity] their ideas are and **explain what they have done for the team** [+judgement: capacity]. As a result of less talking in the team, my contribution **will be devaluated** [-judgement: capacity] by others. Therefore, our traditional attitude [humility] [+judgement: propriety] **becomes a weakness** [-judgement: capacity] when working with a team. ... Therefore, we need to adjust our behavior to match with the whole team [+judgement: capacity].

As illustrated by Table 3.4, identifying what the students construct as positive and negative attitudes in their reflective journals enables us to retrieve the negative axiological charging within the idea that Chinese values are weaknesses

TABLE 3.4 Reinforcing the negative evaluation of the students' Chinese values and the positive evaluation of Australian values [Texts 8 and 9]

Text 8	
recasting item	evaluated Target
weakness [-judgement: capacity]	<u>Chinese value</u> + virtue <u>I</u> + do not talk a lot <u>Team communications in Chinese culture</u> + indirect <u>Team communications in Chinese culture</u> + implicit <u>this virtue</u> + weakness
strength [+judgement: capacity]	<u>I perform</u> + well work very hard <u>integration of Chinese culture into Western culture</u> + this = work very hard <u>Team communications in Western cultures</u> + very direct <u>Team communications in Western cultures</u> + explicit <u>to integrate</u> + this = direct and explicit team communications in Western cultures
Text 9	
recasting item	evaluated Target
weakness [-judgement: capacity]	<u>less talking in the team</u> + will be devaluated <u>my contribution</u> + will be devaluated <u>our traditional attitude</u> [<u>humility</u>] + becomes a weakness
strength [+judgement: capacity]	<u>talking more</u> + contributing more <u>their = western students' ideas</u> + better <u>they = western students</u> + explain what they have done <u>we + need to adjust our behaviour to match with the whole team</u>

in the students' Australian educational contexts. On the other hand, Australian values and behaviours are axiologically positively charged as they are constructed as the ideal values Chinese students feel they are expected to conform to in order to be successful students.

Similar to the positively charged constellation of Australian and negatively charged constellation of Asian values constructed in high-scoring reflective journals, we identified similar ideas in the low-scoring assignments. Low-scoring student writers also draw on Solomon & Schell's (2009: 49–50) intercultural competency framework to analyze their visible behaviours as well as their invisible values and beliefs. For example, the writer of Text 9, whose extract we show above, explains that the value of *humility*, one of their 'below-the-surface' values, influenced their behaviour during the team work discussed in their assignment. In their reflective journal, the student links the value of humility to other values such as *silence*, *Confucianism*, *conflict avoidance*, *harmony*, and *trust*. The extracts from Texts 8 and 9 above are particularly telling as they illustrate how cultural values that differ from Western values are evaluated as weaknesses not only by the local Australian students but also by the Asian students themselves. We illustrate the negatively charged axiological constellation of Chinese values constructed in Text 9 in Figure 3.5. By concluding that they need to adapt their behaviours and abandon their own cultural values, low-scoring student writers are clusterfucking Asian values similar to their high-scoring peers.

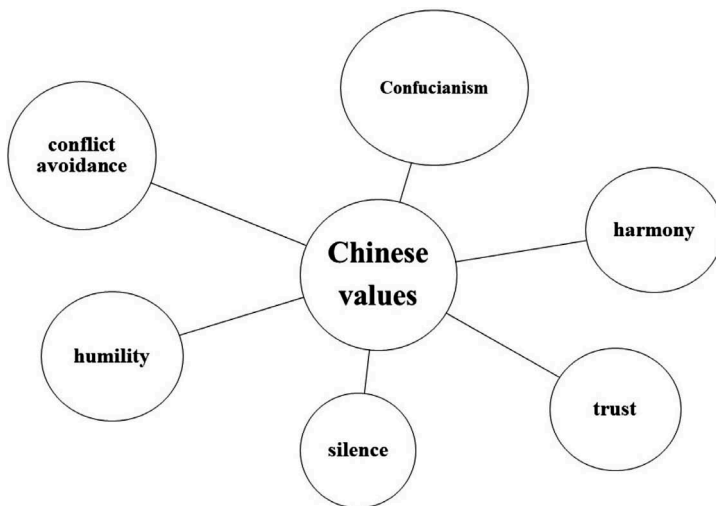


FIGURE 3.5 *Clusterfucking* Chinese values in a business reflective journal

Similar clusters of meaning were found in the other low-scoring assignments analyzed for this study. Looking at the instances of Asian values and behaviours listed in Table 3.5, we can see that most of these qualities would

TABLE 3.5 Constellations of Chinese values and behaviours in low-scoring assignments [Texts 7–13]

Text	Chinese values and behaviours: –charging
Text 7	face saving, politeness, Confucianism, Taoism, conflict avoidance, respect, dignity
Text 8	introversion, silence, compromise, listening, history, Confucianism, benevolence, wisdom, propriety, diligence
Text 9	silence, humility, Confucianism, conflict avoidance, harmony, trust
Text 10	listening, respect, face, dignity, history, Confucianism, propriety
Text 11	respect, patience, harmony, conflict avoidance, modesty, Taoism, Confucianism, trust
Text 12	respect, listening, cooperation, peace, heroes, folklore, history, guanxi

be typically considered positive characteristics irrespective of culture. Some of these can be unpacked, for example, *respect* can be unpacked as *someone is respectful* to make explicit the positive judgement it encodes. This reveals the positive evaluation encoded in these kinds of nominalized abstractions. By identifying these axiologically charged values, we can thus retrieve what the students construct as Chinese values in the business reflective journal. However, these students also find themselves and their cultural backgrounds and the values they grew up with devalued in Australian higher business education. As a result, by negatively evaluating these values and their behaviours in their reflective assignments, they construct negatively charged constellations of Chinese values and culture.

While the student writers of the high-scoring reflective journals were found to engage in deficit discourses by stereotyping and othering their peers, the writers of the low-scoring assignments engage in deficit discourses related to the ‘self’: they were found to engage in negative self-talk and focused on their failure in not being able to behave in a way that is expected in an Australian context of educational culture. From both the high-scoring assignments as well as the low-scoring and failed assignments it seems that when expecting students to acquire ‘intercultural competence’, the expectation is for the Asian students to conform to western culture. Perhaps then this begs the question whether it was really these students who failed their critical reflection assignments or did the University fail them? We discuss the implications of our findings and problematize the practice of assessing critical reflection in the following section.

It’s critical: Problematizing the assessment of critical reflection

When we first commenced this research into reflective writing in 2012, we were concerned about the small number of students being awarded a high grade and we became interested in uncovering the expectations of ‘success’, in

other words, the ‘basis of achievement’ (Maton 2014). We collected and analyzed high-scoring assignments from the fields of social work and business and conducted interdisciplinary LCT-SFL analyses in order to understand what knowledge practices and linguistic resources are at stake in successful demonstrations of critical thinking. From a theoretical perspective, we advanced research on the knowledge practices of critical thinking: high-scoring assignments demonstrate the capacity to create *semantic waves* (Maton 2013) that weave together context-dependent and context-independent forms of knowledge, such as empirical cases and abstract concepts, transforming them into generalizable practices for future contexts (Szenes et al. 2015). Our detailed linguistic analyses (see e.g. Tilakaratna & Szenes 2017; Szenes & Tilakaratna 2021) have shown that, instead of engaging in ‘creative play’ (Crème 2008), successful students across disciplines deploy structured and formulaic use of linguistics resources: high-scoring texts conform to a uniform genre structure and draw on similar recurring linguistic resources for demonstrating critical reflection. We also found that high-scoring reflective assignments demonstrate mastery of constructing axiologically charged clusters of meaning that align with rather than ‘challenge’ or ‘question’ the disciplinary values of their academic disciplines (Tilakaratna & Szenes 2020).

From a pedagogical perspective, our research could contribute to the explicit teaching of the highly complex resources that empower students to produce successful critical reflection assignments. This means deconstructing the genre structure of successful exemplar texts, modelling how to skilfully use the ‘right’ kind of linguistic resources for linking subjective experiences to theoretical frameworks, and exposing students to the ‘cultivated gaze’ of their academic disciplines, i.e. the ‘prolonged exposure’ (Maton, 2014: 95) to professional practice. Previously we (Tilakaratna & Szenes 2020: 587) argued that tertiary “students need to learn, through the use of clusters of axiological meanings, the axiological cosmologies underlying their disciplines to be able to demonstrate their capacity for critical self-reflection”. However, after identifying some ethical concerns of the practice of assessing critical reflection assignments, we need to ask some critical questions ourselves. Did we simply identify the parameters of ‘success’ or did we also contribute to reinforcing the status quo, the dominant approach, the dominant hegemony?

After focusing on the generic structure and linguistic resources of high-achieving reflective texts, we started paying attention to language and meaning we considered problematic in both high- and low-scoring assignments. In line with previous research discussing ethical concerns, in this chapter we highlighted some examples we consider problematic examples of demonstrating ‘successful’ critical reflection. By drawing on the concepts of clusters and constellations from LCT, we unpacked the axiological clusters that form positively charged constellations of Australian values and negatively charged constellations of Chinese values in both high- and low-achieving students’ reflective writing assignments in Business Studies. Specifically, the high-scoring students explore

the elements of Australian core culture that influenced their upbringing in general, and conclude that their negative attitude and behaviour towards their Asian peers in a multinational teamwork exercise stem from those values. By producing such axiological constellations in their reflective writing, the high-achieving business students demonstrated their alignment with western values and a rejection of Asian values.

Our analyses of the low-scoring business reflective journals show some similarities. The low-scoring students also aligned themselves with the theoretical framework of 'intercultural competency', which is considered a skill highly valued in the context of business higher education, and crucial for becoming a business practitioner capable of working in a multinational environment. By comparing themselves to their Australian peers, the Chinese students focus almost exclusively on negative self-judgement and their 'failure' of being capable partners in a multinational team exercise. They also feel devalued in the Australian business higher education system because of their cultural heritage, which they construct as a hindrance to their success. Rather than 'challenging the status quo' as claimed in the literature, these students aim to conform to the Australian educational system and the values of their peers and align themselves with the framework of 'intercultural competence' as taught in their course. This could also be seen as contributing to deficit discourses, an ethical concern associated with assessing reflective assignments (see e.g. Boud & Walker 1998; Ghaye 2007; Morley 2007; Marsh 2014), and limiting students' agency rather than enabling transformative learning. In sum, our analyses of both the high- and the low-scoring business reflective journals show that demonstrations of success of critical reflection involve *clusterboosting* Australian values as opposed to *clusterfucking* Chinese values, which results in the construction of deficit discourses of stereotyping and othering as well as negative self-talk and a focus on 'failure' in the student assignments. This is consistent with the results of previous research that identified a high level of negativity in western reflective writing (see e.g. Ghaye 2007; O'Connell & Dymont 2011).

Based on these results, an important question needs to be raised. If these students justify their prejudices and negative attitudes by citing their internalized Australian values as the reason, does this count as 'evidence' of acquiring the skills of intercultural competence and is there 'criticality' evident in such 'reflection'? Research on critical reflection assignments states that these tasks allow students to 'transform' their understandings of disciplinarity and practice, 'challenge' the status quo and 'emancipate' themselves from institutionalized power. How should we as academics critically reflect on the requirements of reflective assignments so that these tasks enable rather than constrain students' learning to become self-reflective practitioners? How should we construct these assignments so that they achieve more than stereotyping, negative self-judgement and a focus on failure? How can we match our pedagogy to our best intentions to improve our students' capacity for ethical reasoning? What if we have uncovered that

the ‘rules of the game’ – instead of deconstructing existing hierarchies of power – only serve to reinforce taken for granted ‘regimes of truth’ (e.g. Foucault 1980), i.e. in the context of this Australian business unit, historic assimilationist expectations? What if – instead of being empowered – students from non-mainstream backgrounds feel disempowered by the reflection process?

It is also worth pointing out that the lower-scoring assignments received mostly Fails and Passes, with a small number of Credits. It is concerning that each of these texts were framed around Chinese values, with Confucianism cited in five out of the six lowest-scoring texts we analyzed. The disconnect between intentions and university mission statements and the experience recounted in the business reflective journals is apparent. Ghaye (2007: 159) points out that “an important ‘intention’ of reflective practice is to improve what we do”. How does devaluing students’ cultural background and their feeling disempowered improve student learning and post-graduation professional behaviour?

Previous research also asked whether journal writing should even be assessed and suggests that such writing should not be forced upon students (Brooman & Darwent 2012). Indeed, several studies have highlighted students’ negative attitude towards reflective assignments in general. These were often evaluated as ‘tedious and unnecessary’, ‘busy work’ and ‘just a nuisance’, ‘superficial’ and not suited to an education setting (see e.g. Cisero 2006; Mills 2008; McGarr & Moody 2010). Among other reasons students cited unclear assessment criteria and instructions, the lack of explicit pedagogy, and their perception that reflective tasks have little to no relevance to the kind of ‘traditional’ learning they expected to take place at university (O’Connell and Dymont 2011). In their evaluation of critical reflection assignments, students also shared their resentment about the requirement to disclose personal and private matters, which some interpreted as being forced to write reflective tasks. The extract by Sinclair Penwarden (2006: 12) is particularly telling of such perceived coercion:

I remember becoming nauseated when entering the room of a dying patient and being transported back to the age of 11 when I had experienced the same smell in my father’s room at the hospice.... My husband and best friend are the only two people I wish to confide in. My feelings are private – yet I am expected to frame them in prose and submit them to my university. I don’t know my lecturers or personal tutor intimately. What right has anyone to ask for such personal information, let alone ask that it be graded by a faceless lecturer? As nurses we respect patient’s rights not to disclose their personal feelings. Yet no such right is afforded to students. I have had reflections returned with requests for more details about my feelings. I comply but deeply resent being asked to do so.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter we set out to critically examine the appropriateness of assessing critical reflection assignments which often ask students to divulge deeply personal and ethically sensitive information. Drawing on the LCT concepts of clusters and constellations, which explore how certain kinds of meanings are grouped together and reveal belief systems and ideologies, we identified positively charged constellations of Australian values and negatively charged constellations of Chinese values in both high- and low-scoring business reflective journals. Limitations of our study include the small size of our dataset from a single unit of study in a single academic discipline. Although our findings cannot be generalized, our findings resonate with previous research on the ethical dimension of assessing critical reflection. This includes a western bias, i.e. the application of taken-for-granted western understandings of teaching and learning to Asian students, which results in deficit models of assessing Asian students' critical thinking skills (e.g. Fook & Askeland 2007; Tilakaratna et al. 2019). To date, however, very little research exists on decolonizing critical reflection from western assumptions and biases.

Existing research focuses on, for example, decolonizing critical social work from neoliberalism (Morley & Macfarlane 2014), decolonizing Eurocentric critical reflection research methodology by including Indigenous perspectives (Baikie 2020), and empowering students to produce reflective writing that 'does not fit typical patterns' by intentionally enacting an inclusive pedagogy (Martin, J. L. & Walsh-Marr, this volume). Our research has shown that deficit discourses around stereotypes and othering as well as negative self-talk and individualistic ideologies were constructed in the reflective journals. The framework of LCT was valuable for revealing that both Australian and Asian students engage in critical reflection through individualistic rather than cooperative ways, which has enabled us to shed light on the ethical concerns associated with assessing reflective writing in the context of Australian business higher education. We conclude with the recommendation that tertiary institutions need to move beyond simply uncovering the rules of the game, making expectations visible, and soliciting confessions through critical reflection (cf. Atkinson 2012; Fejes & Nicoll 2015), and work towards intentionally decolonizing the practices of critical reflection and its assessment in order to ensure that it becomes an ethical, equitable and empowering activity for all students.

Notes

- 1 Following the labelling conventions presented in Martin, J. R. (2013), the names of language systems are written as small caps.
- 2 Attitudinal meanings can be realized through a wide range of grammatical structures, vocabulary choices and lexical metaphors.
- 3 The capitalized label 'Target' indicates its use as a function label. This should not be confused with the LCT concept of *target* from the Autonomy dimension (Maton 2018).

- 4 Since in the high-scoring reflective assignments analyzed for this study the Appraiser is always the student writer, a separate column demonstrating the *source* of attitudinal meanings will not be added to the tables illustrating the attitudinal analyses.
- 5 In SFL the linguistic choices available in a language system that users make selections from are indicated by square brackets (see Martin, J. R. 2013 for a full description).

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