EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF ASSESSMENT

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This research project has been conducted at the University College London's Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences under the Laidlaw Scholarship. This study explores the emotional dimensions of assessment processes and their impact on students. Qualitative data were collected from 22 students using the innovative Listening Rooms Methodology, with a particular focus on their experiences with assessment. The research findings offer valuable insights into students' perspectives on assessment practices. The study emphasizes students' active role in managing their education, advocating for their needs, and demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement. It suggests that students' emotions related to the assessment processes are not solely driven by a quest for high grades but are closely linked to their interest in the learning experience. These findings underscore the potential of democratic schooling as an interest-based approach to enhancing assessment practices.

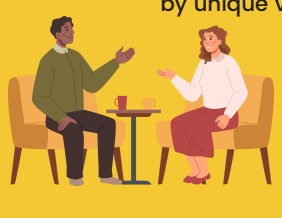
INTRODUCTION

Assessment practices have been proven across diversified settings to evoke strong emotional responses.
However, existing literature often ignores students' emotions in assessment, or treats assessment as a set practice, focusing on the emotions conducive to gaining high marks. In this project at UCL's Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences, we prioritised the emotional demands of assessment, asking what emotions students feel before, during assessment, and intriguingly, after assessment during the feedback process. Although this project recognises that assessment at UCL is an already established process, through the emphasis on emotions, particularly during feedback, we gain insight into other approaches of assessment that provoke a critical and reflexive response from students. After gaining qualitative data from 22 students in the Faculty using the Listening Rooms Methodology, we transcribed and coded the data. In this report we will discuss our findings, enriched with current literature on education, emotions and assessment.

METHODOLOGY

Our study focused on gathering qualitative data from UCL students about assessment and associated emotions. We utilised the **Listening Rooms Methodology,** which allowed us to;

- Utilize the concept of "Friendship as a method" to explore private conversations between friends as qualitative research
- Define "assessment" broadly, encompassing various activities related to measuring progress.
- Gave students prompts to guide discussions on their assessment experiences and emotions, but recognize the potential for conversations to diverge from the main topic in exploring valuable insights.
- Collect rich qualitative data, characterised by unique vulnerability and openness



FINDINGS

1. Assessment methods
The interviewees reported interest in assessment diversity. Apart from predominating essays, they enjoyed assessments that cater to different learning abilities and preferences, such as field trips and videography projects. However, they expressed confusion about the expectations of unfamiliar methods, in lack of precedents and guidelines to follow. Concerns about the misfocus of grading on skills irrelevant to content also arose.

2. Formative assessments
The interviewees reported interest in formative assessments. Despite repeated emphasis of grades, the majority enjoyed formatives as progress checkers, for experimentation of ideas and skills in preparation for summatives. Nevertheless, they expressed stress about heightened time demand, especially in the final year or periods of clashing deadlines across modules. A participating student stated:

> *"Formative is a very good useful tool as you really valued in first year and second year, and I thought there was less time pressure to which, it was perfect for me, it gave me the opportunity to practise, and I gained a lot of confidence and awareness of doing it."*

3. Group projects
The interviewees reported gratitude for group projects. They appreciated the significance of group projects in skill acquisition, such as verbal presentation and responsibility delegation, as well as meeting people from diverse backgrounds for idea building or contrast. However, they expressed stress and frustration about the unfairness of work distribution. The experience of poor contribution of group members, especially among part-time postgraduates with non-academic commitments, repeatedly emerged throughout the interviews.

4. Feedback
The interviewees reported gratitude for feedback. They recognised the usefulness of feedback in improving future assessments, in terms of content, structure and languages. However, they expressed criticism of the subjectivity of markers.

> *"They shouldn't be marked on choice of evidence, partly, but it's also accepting sort of students' individual, like in some of the original, like different approaches... giving students freedom to discuss like, different topics or thinking for a new angle."*

SECONDARY FINDINGS

- Emotions play a significant role in both individual well-being and the functioning of society, as supported by the "feeling power" theory.
- Past research suggests a strong link between assessment and heightened emotional responsiveness in students, with emotional well-being affecting attainment levels.
- Self-regulation is essential in assessment, but when induced by institutional power dynamics, it results in a cyclical pattern of hightened emotional responsiveness during asessment.

Some studies suggest that students who critically engage with the curriculum tend to feel more confident and secure during assessment.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Considering previous research in the literature review section, the findings are consistent with the presented codependent relationship between assessment practices, augmented emotional responses of variety, and self-surveillance in students. The use of Nvivo software as coding method enables clear categorization of emotions, in terms of appearing frequency and correlations with specific assessment practices, visualised by word clouds, frequency tables and highlighting code grids at page sides. The Listening Rooms Methodology, given the autonomy to explore topics the interviewees found pertinent, reveals their self-monitoring and reflecting of personal experiences and emotional responses. Their authentic descriptions and voices, natural in conversation flow, aids our analysis with sympathy of their investment and intense emotions in education.

CONCLUSION

Our research at UCL's Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences highlights the interplay between assessment practices and students' emotions. Utilizing the Listening Rooms Methodology, we've uncovered significant insights into students' emotional responses to the assessment process. Our study emphasizes the importance of clear assessment criteria, the value of formative assessments for skill development, the challenges posed by group projects, and the need for timely and constructive feedback. Importantly, it underscores students' active role in their own learning and their potential to drive interest-based improvements in assessment practices. While our findings are context-specific, they serve as a starting point for broader discussions on enhancing students' emotional well-being in higher education and the potential benefits of democratic schooling.