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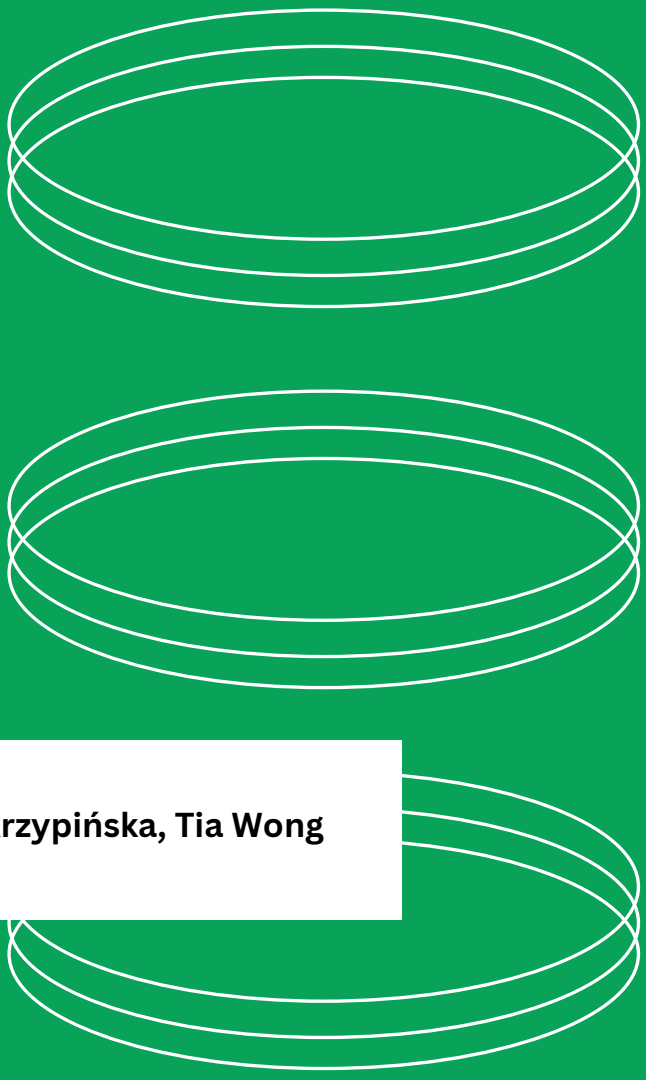
Emotional Aspects of Asessment



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Abstract

This research paper 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. While students express interest in diverse assessment methods, they also call for clearer guidance to navigate unfamiliar formats. Formative assessments are generally appreciated for their role in skill development but raise concerns regarding time constraints. Group projects receive praise for their benefits but also cause stress due to uneven workload distribution. Feedback is valued for its potential to enhance future assessments but receives criticism for being subjective, vague, and often delayed. 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.

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Introduction

Assessment practices have been proven across diversified settings to evoke strong emotional responses (Jones et al., 2019). 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, 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 to 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.

Literature overview

The process of formal assessment is a globally used teaching strategy, primarily used as a tool for tracking student's individual progress and attainment level, but also the main conditional in allowing access to further education. The functional duality of assessment causes therefore a correlation between access to education and personal achievement. This relation seems important to consider in the context of this study, as one of the core educational approaches practised at UCL values collaboration, yet the crucial part of continued access to these educational processes forces the student to turn towards disciplining the self.

Following the argument of Meghan Boler who frames "Feeling Power; Emotions and Education" (1999) on the foundation of strong empirical evidence of emotions influencing not only individual well-being, but equally the systemic functioning of individuals within the scope of their society, we aim to identify how assessment processes at the Faculty of Social and Historical Studies influence students' emotions, and the consequences of that relation. In speculation, we turn to the findings of Pekrun (2002) and the following Beaumont, et al., 2023), which prove the correlation between assessment and heightened emotional responsiveness in students, and further suggest that attainment levels are relational to students' emotional well-being. Moreover, different methods of assessment are thought to evoke a broad spectrum of emotional responses (Jones et al. 2021), leading us to speculate that assessment practices might therefore have a varied efficacy in measuring actual learning outcomes. Considering the presumed strength of the relation between emotions and assessment allows for speculation that some of the assessment practices utilised at the Faculty of Social and Historical Studies may cause a heightened emotional response in students, consequentially resulting in a new layer of necessary exam preparation; the necessity of disciplining one's emotions so that they do not influence the assessment process.

The need for self-regulation in the assessment process can be interpreted through a sociopolitical lens an example of an educational setting, where the power exuded by an institution imposes a mechanism of self-surveillance in the individual.

It has been speculated that, following a foulcatian argument, the mechanisms of self-surveillance present in an educational setting, such as assessment in higher education, imposes a meta-emotional response in the individual, for example “being angry at self, for being anxious about the assessment” (Zembylas, 2021). Therefore, the codependent relation of emotion, assessment, and self-surveillance takes on a cyclical pattern, which may lead the attention of the individual away from the assessment, and the institutions that create those assessment processes, but further towards the self. The presented pattern corresponds to the findings of Mendzheritskaya and her research team (see Mendzheritskaya et al., 2019) which suggest that individualised assessment does not prove effective in addressing emotional response to being assessed.

The emotional aspect of assessment brings therefore a significant consequence to the learning process. If the students in the assessment processes turn their attention inwards, the process becomes highly individualised and alienates them from the learning experience of other students. The depth of research on individual–group learning (Järvenoja et al., 2019, Manty et al., 2022) strongly suggests that the more focus lays on students' achievement, the less of their attention is directed at the educational process in its depth. Through the examples of schooling practices that aim at reversing these mechanisms, a promising pattern seems to arise; as Krouse (1996) suggests, students who engage in a critical understanding of the curriculum, are more likely to partake in group studying practices. Additionally, Figen (2020) highlights the importance of “opening the way to a democratic discussion” as a teaching strategy that allows the students to process the emotional aspect of learning in a social setting. These, and many other (Clack, 2019, Aquarone, 2021, recently Bertham, 2023) studies on democratic schooling prove the effectiveness of group discussion, but more significantly, consequently show heightened student engagement in their learning when the process is discussed and codesigned by them.

The discussed findings lay the path for the qualitative research we conducted at the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences at UCL. As shown above, we lean towards the argumentation of democratising assessment practices, yet these findings need to be approached with caution, as the supplementation of democratic schooling in Higher Education has yet to be thoroughly practised and studied. Nonetheless, with the breadth of findings on emotional regulation in group practices, we hope to bring attention to engaged, democratic schooling as a promising method for addressing students’ emotional needs in assessment.

Methodology

Our methodology was created to generate rich qualitative data from students at UCL, with a reflexive and critical approach taken to analyse assessment and its associated emotions. At each step of the process, even in data collection, we viewed what students said with a critical lens. On a macro-level, we drew out the main themes within the data, asked how the student subject is positioned during assessment, and the types of assessment positively viewed by students. On a micro-level, we drew out individualised student suggestions and practical steps that the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences could take.

We considered the Listening Rooms Methodology a good approach to data collection, as it encourages “Friendship as a method” (Heron 2020). We were particularly drawn to this approach as “To date, there has been no HE research undertaken that draws on private conversations between friendship pairs to understand university experience” (Heron 2020 p.397). We hope that by using this method, our research project can use student relationships to draw particular light on how the subject is placed during assessment. The Listening Rooms Methodology provides an alternative method of collecting qualitative data in response to overused surveys and questionnaires, using friendship pairs to give deeper insight into student voices. Although the topic is guided, the methodology allows for the removal of the immediate presence of the researcher, using friendship as a means to access more intimate topics or experiences that might otherwise not be elicited with a researcher present.

Consenting participants were asked to conduct a conversation of around an hour on the topic of assessment. They could conduct this anywhere, in person or online, as long as their conversation was audible. The term ‘assessment’ was defined broadly and included any activity that was used to measure progress, either by the student or the tutor. It also included work leading up to assessment, and the feedback that the students received.

Students were allowed to have a free-flowing conversation as long as the topic stayed broadly on assessment, as we recognised that although there may be points of deviation from the topic, it might illuminate or lead to other useful points (Chasin and Radtke 2013). We also gave the students prompts, such as: 'What sorts of experiences of assessment/receiving feedback have you had at UCL?' and 'What sorts of emotions have you experienced when working on assessment/when receiving feedback?'.

There were limitations in using the Listening Rooms Methodology. Although our project was published in Easter, we encountered a seeming lack of response, even though participants could record online, increasing accessibility. We sent emails to each student in the Faculty, emphasising the simplicity of taking part, the process of recording and our recompense. At the end of our project, we had amassed 11 recordings by 22 students, which our supervisor assured us was a good sample of qualitative data. Furthermore, Heron notes that this method excludes the students who have no friends, and who are unfortunately at risk of loneliness, which detriments their learning and thus the outcomes of assessment (p.404). We noticed that the participants were mostly, if not all, high-achievers at university, so it would have been especially useful to hear from lower-achieving students and their views on assessment.

We used Otter.AI, an application that uses artificial intelligence to develop speech-to-text transcription of the students' recordings. While the use of artificial intelligence greatly enhanced the speed of our project, as the software generated the complete transcription of the recordings, it had its limitations. The transcriptions' accuracy was dependent on multiple factors, such as accent, and where the recordings were conducted; audio recordings often decreased accuracy. Therefore, we still had to manually correct transcriptions, and format the speakers and their speech into comprehensible data. There were positives to this process: correcting transcripts gave us the chance to become familiar with the recordings and add notes based on our experiences and the literature we had read.

We used the NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to help us organise and code the data, and add our own reflections. We coded each student to a case ie. History Student 1 coded each speaker to a case classification: UG or PGT. After coding, these steps would help us organise our data and link specific emotions to particular departments or student groups.

The next task was to read through the transcript and code any statement where the student talked about or implied an emotion. In the subsequent meetings, we came together to discuss how we had coded our emotions, and standardised it, so that when we combined our coding, our results would be more cohesive. By the end of coding, we had come up with the following 6 codes: anxiety, satisfaction, fairness, grades, great example and student suggestion. Our supervisor encouraged us to treat each student's words empathetically and kindly whilst forming our own conclusions in relation to the literature we had read and our own experiences of assessment. If the students' experiences resonated with ours or we had further thoughts, we highlighted and annotated the data.

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 the lack of precedents and guidelines to follow. Concerns about the misfocus of grading on skills irrelevant to content also arose. Some students stated:

"Variety is good. Just make sure that all these different, and various typologies are supported by guidance on how to do it. You know, how to approach them, what is expected."

For improvement, they suggested providing samples of diverse methods. Another piece of advice was raising the transparency of assessment criteria, by provision of grading rubrics with greater emphasis on content than facilitatory skills. This would allow self-marking for a more accurate evaluation of the performance range.

2. Formative assessments

The interviewees reported interest in formative assessments. Despite the repeated emphasis on 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 demands, especially in the final year or periods of clashing deadlines across modules. A 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.*"

For improvement, they suggested increasing formative assessments of continuity, yet offering optionality. This would empower students with a sense of control to balance between additional support and stress. Moreover, shared calendars within departments would better communication across different modules to prevent concentrated deadlines.

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. A student stated:

"I think group projects, they're important things to learn, and also as a way to meet people. I think the difficulty is that as soon as it's introduced into an assess component, there's sort of the added importance and pressure onto it. And I think it's that difficulty, from my perspective, perhaps of letting go and trusting other people with something that is my grade."

For improvement, they suggested implementing ranking systems, in which students grade group members according to contributions. This would ideally monitor individual engagement.

Nevertheless, concerns about competitiveness arose, discouraging group collaboration spirit. We would suggest implementing reflection systems, with an assignment of a moderator and guidelines on effective intervention, as a safety net when needed.

“They have these like ranking systems where you have to like grade everyone in your team.”

“I don't think that's positive either because it starts becoming quite competitive, whereas the whole emphasis of a team is cooperation.”

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. A student commented on constructive feedback:

“*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.”*

They reported confusion about the vagueness of feedback. Short and generic comments, particularly in cases of satisfactory work, lacked specificity in areas to improve. Also, they expressed frustration about the non-timeliness of feedback. The long time difference between submission and feedback recieval led to a diminished impression of assignment content and limited time to internalise the feedback for application in later assessments. Additionally, they were discontented with the inconsistency of feedback length and timeliness among different markers. A student commented on feelings of disrespect:

“*It's not just a question of who's paying and who's like getting a service, it's a question of, are we mutually like? Or am I doing something to like, mutually reinforce my learning like, this is about the learning experience as much as it is about a service I'm paying for and getting.”*

For improvement, they suggested fixing the minimum length of feedback, with annotations on top of specific content and supporting examples, to ensure equal guidance on satisfactory work. They also proposed setting return deadlines for feedback, to allow sufficient self-review time before upcoming assessments. Additional advice was standardisation of minimum length and return deadlines among markers.

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 a 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 reflection of personal experiences and emotional responses. Their authentic descriptions and voices, natural in conversation flow, aid our analysis with sympathy for their investment and intense emotions in education.

The study demonstrates the active role of students in the self-management of studies, thus suggesting the potential of democratic schooling. Contrary to the widespread presupposition of minimal engagement, their value of assessments and feedback exhibits their awareness of full responsibility for learning, as well as commitment to continuous improvement. We would argue that instead of being passive recipients of knowledge and feedback, students are capable as active advocates of their needs and rights, on a mutually equal standing as educators. Additionally, the research shows their learning motivation by interest and thereby recommends the direction of improvement as interest-oriented rather than instrumental. Their intense emotions, about the holistic learning experience, suggest that tangible rewards of economic investment are not their major incentive. From criticism instead of adherence to current assessment practice for favourable results, we would argue that the repeated emphasis on grades does not imply grades as the driving force, but rather part of the experience for evaluation of interest. Interest in turn reinforces the aforementioned active role of students. By respecting their emotional evaluation, and engaging them in decision-making, democratic schooling may be an approach to interest-based improvement of assessment practices.

It is crucial to note the limited generalisability of findings, concerning a particular microsetting solely. Assessment methods not practised at the Faculty of Social and Historical Studies, such as scientific experiments and clinical practicum, were excluded from the discussion. Owing to the limitations of the Listening Room Methodology, lower achievers, at a disadvantage and potentially having the strongest feelings of alienation against assessment, did not participate in the discussion. However, the presented suggestions might serve as a starting point to prompt student-oriented improvement of assessment practices, and the possibility of democratic schooling to address their emotional responses. It would be useful for future research to involve students of different attainment levels for a more comprehensive discussion.

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.

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