



UCL

**Emotions In Education: Exploring the interplay
between student emotions, teaching and learning
methods, and their effect on the assessment
experience**

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Abstract

This self-proposed research study investigated the emotional experiences of students throughout their learning journey, focusing on the diverse teaching and learning methods they encounter, and tracing their emotional responses through to assessment and feedback. Building on the foundation laid by last year's Laidlaw project in the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences, *Emotional Aspects of Assessment*, this research broadens the scope of this exploration, conducting a year-on-year comparison of participant responses and highlighting areas of reflection that students perceive to be particularly relevant to their educational experience in 2024. Using the Listening Rooms Methodology, in-depth testimonies from 18 undergraduate and postgraduate students were collated into a body of detailed qualitative data, centering around their emotional responses throughout their learning journey at UCL.

Thematic analysis of the data revealed consistent four key themes: assessment methods, formative assessment, group projects, and feedback. Additionally, this cohort of participants placed a particular emphasis on the need for clearer marking criteria, alongside reinforced teacher-student and peer relationships. Although both of these themes are well-established in discussions on educational improvement, their recurrence in discussion highlights the critical role they could play in improving the student experience at UCL.

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Introduction

Whilst it has been established that assessment practices can trigger emotional responses, and assessment performance can be influenced by emotions (Skrzypinska, Lee and Wong, 2023), a more complete understanding of students' emotional state throughout the process of education, from teaching and learning through to assessment, has been less thoroughly investigated. In particular, with teaching and learning methods having a direct influence on how students prepare for and perceive assessment, it seems justified to prioritise a holistic reflection from students in the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences. This research aimed to address this gap by placing great emphasis on participants reflecting on their experiences of teaching and learning methods and how those emotional experiences in turn influenced their assessments. Using the Listening Rooms Methodology, extensive data was collected from 18 students before being transcribed and coded. In this research report I will discuss my findings and their implications.

Literature Review

Teaching and learning methods alongside a variety of assessment practices have long underpinned the framework through which students access university education. Yet, despite these foundational methods for learning existing in modern higher education for several decades, and their efficacy in fostering academic achievement being well understood, their impact on student well-being, particularly in the context of contemporary e-learning environments, remains less understood. Notably, insufficient attention has been paid to understanding these effects in depth from student accounts. Therefore, investigating this relationship and its consequences on the assessment experience could offer actionable insights into improving student well-being and satisfaction at UCL and beyond.

As established in *Emotional Aspects of Assessment* (Skrzypinska, Lee and Wong, 2023), emotions have the power to influence a person's well-being and there is evidence to suggest that these same emotions have been suppressed within education, with Boler critiquing education as being "impoverished in both theory and practice in accounting for the particularities of emotions" (1999). In addition to this, research published in the *Educational Psychologist* concluded that students' emotions "relate significantly" to students' learning, self-regulation as well as their achievement" (Pekrun et al., 2002). Whilst a study into the relationship between student emotions and the assessment experience has already been conducted, Pekrun's statement suggests that emotions are not only relevant in the context of assessment but that they also play a principal role throughout the broader learning journey.

Indeed, Ben-Eliyahu and Linnenbrink-Garcia further emphasise the importance of emotions and their regulation during education, remarking that students being able to alter their emotions is "especially crucial for persisting through school" (2013). They

argue that in regard to emotional management, promoting self-regulated learners is key for academic success (2013). Developing this essential emotional self-regulation may require analysing students' experiences of different teaching and learning strategies. As Boler argues, our emotions are intrinsically tied to our relations and lived experiences (1999). And so, it seems that different modes of teaching delivery, such as lectures and seminars influence students' emotional self-regulation. This sentiment is echoed in *Emotions and Learning* where Pekrun states "the cognitive and motivational quality of classroom instruction is extremely important for student's emotions" (Pekrun, 2014).

Pekrun also mentions that social structures, such as group discussions, play a role in the motivational quality of a classroom, suggesting that these structures can satisfy the innate human need for social interaction, thereby enhancing both the "interest and the perceived value of learning" (2014). Teacher emotions are also discussed as being of significance, with reference to the fact that an educator's mood can be contagious, influencing the classroom's emotional climate (2014). These findings are particularly relevant now, in the wake of COVID-19 when universities transitioned to online teaching. The remnants of this era remain, with prerecorded lectures and electronically available materials making it extremely easy to avoid university social structures. This is perhaps removing the human aspect of learning for students and denying them the satisfaction of social interaction.

Social structures and their importance to student well-being within teaching and learning methods are further supported by research into socio-emotional interactions. Studies on group dynamics and regulatory behaviours suggest that exploring the emotional processes within student groups could provide insight into the "nature of group's socio-emotional processes at large scale" (Bakhtiar et al., 2018) and therefore a better understanding of how to support student well-being and achievement.

Given that teaching and learning methods as well as assessment practices both influence student emotions and therefore their well-being, it seems that they may have a mutually reinforcing relationship. This underscores the importance of investigating student emotions not only during assessment but throughout the whole learning journey. Understanding exactly how teaching and learning methods influence student emotions and how those experiences, in turn, influence the heightened and varied emotions experienced by students during assessments may provide insight into how to improve student well-being and educational outcomes.

Methodology

The Listening Rooms Methodology utilised in this study was chosen for two primary reasons. Firstly, it enabled the extensive collection of qualitative data needed in order to explore and reflect appropriately on student experiences of both teaching and learning methods as well as assessment. Secondly, by adopting the same methodology utilised in *Emotional Aspects of Assessment*, I was able to make meaningful comparisons between the two studies on the subject of assessment and feedback in particular.

This validity of year-on-year comparison was strengthened through the use of “friendship as a method”, an aspect of the Listening Rooms Methodology that leverages the pre-existing trust within friendships to elicit authentic reflections. In this way, these reflections are not subject to the limitations of other qualitative research methods such as interviews (Heron, 2019). A notable modification in this year’s methodology was the adaptation of the question prompts and guidance criteria provided to participants. In order to shift the focus solely from assessment and feedback, the guidance documents were adapted to include general definitions of teaching and learning methods as well as assessment, allowing participants to interpret these terms in the context of their experiences. Assessment was defined as “any activity that helps students and their tutors understand how much progress the student is making”, and teaching and learning methods were referred to as “any practice used to enable learning and prepare for assessment”, whether this is teacher or student-centred. Additionally, prompt questions were adapted to include a more extensive question set exclusively focusing on teaching and learning methods, with a smaller section focusing on the assessment experience remaining unchanged from 2023. Questions such as “Can you describe a really good experience of teaching and learning methods at UCL? How about a bad one?” were used to encourage participants to relate their emotions back to lived experiences.

In providing some guidance but placing great emphasis on the role of participants in defining the scope of their conversations, I hoped to encourage honest conversation that would follow what students felt was important to them rather than presenting the “broad-brush views” (Heron, 2019) that this methodology strives to avoid, as this would continue to feed into the issue of homogenising our understanding of the student experience (Sabri, 2011).

Once these guidance documents had been prepared, recruitment of participants commenced. However, despite already being aware of, and trying to anticipate the obstacles faced in *Emotional Aspects of Assessment* under this methodology, I was not able to overcome them completely. Firstly, whilst I received 15 student emails requesting to participate in the study within the first few days of circulating recruitment

emails, the majority of these students withdrew their interest once they fully understood the commitment it would take from a friend. To overcome this, I developed a recruitment poster which was placed on the notice board of every department within the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences that had a common room. However, uptake was slow, with many students giving their reason for withdrawing that they simply couldn't find a friend willing to take part with them. This experience seems to support that this methodology excludes students who suffer from loneliness and have difficulties developing social connections (Heron, 2019).

In addition to this, I sent a large number of emails to students within the faculty, personally inviting them to take part in the study. I hoped that this would help provide students of varying abilities access to the study. However, whilst sending personal emails did result in additional participants, upon listening to the recordings it was evident that the majority of those who took part were high-achieving students.

Once participants had familiarised themselves with the guidance documents, they recorded their conversations either in-person or online through platforms such as Microsoft Teams. Although it was recommended that each conversation last around an hour, most recordings overran as students became more engrossed in their conversations. In total 18 students took part, resulting in 9 recordings from 5 different departments in the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences.

In order to analyse each recording, transcripts were developed using Otter.AI, a speech-to-text transcription application using machine learning and artificial intelligence. This application allowed me to develop transcripts very quickly, however, with this speed, accuracy suffered. The quality of each transcript varied heavily depending on the noise conditions in which the initial recording took place, as well as any accents being present.

Finally, for qualitative data analysis, NVivo was used to make sense of the data. Each student was coded to a case and each speaker was coded to a case classification, either undergraduate or postgraduate. Once this had been done, I read through each transcript looking for explicit or implicit mentions of emotions. For the purpose of accurate comparison, I used the 6 codes developed in the 2023 study: anxiety, satisfaction, fairness, grades, great example, and student suggestion.

Findings and Discussion

In this exploration, it was important to make a clear comparison to the findings in *Emotional Aspects of Assessment* with the hope of validating the results of that study. In 2023, there were four key areas of reflection: assessment methods, formative assessment, group projects, and feedback.

Fortunately, it was evident that, despite using a different set of question prompts, this year's results are largely consistent with those of the previous year, particularly when discussing assessment methods and feedback. Regarding assessment methods, despite the issues, such as a lack of clear guidance, that often accompany varying assessment methods, students still seem interested in experiencing a wide range of assessments. As one student stated very succinctly "I'd rather have different assessments than all the same". Some commentary was also made regarding the distribution of assessment, with many students echoing that they would "prefer smaller pieces of assessment rather than the big final project at the end of term".

On the topic of feedback, students continue to express gratitude for the largely useful and positive feedback that they receive. However, just as was mentioned by the 2023 cohort of participants, the subjectivity of feedback persists as an issue, with many expressing that "feedback really varies depending on what professor you get" and that they feel "every teacher has a different way that they do feedback". Some students felt very strongly about this issue stating:

"It just felt like the feedback was all over the place, and it just felt like they were very they were marking a lot with their opinions. I don't know it's... it's more subjective than it should be."

Looking beyond this year-on-year comparison, two main areas were especially highlighted by students: the importance of student-teacher relationships as well as having a greater focus on marking criteria and supporting guidance.

"This is my biggest issue, I think, with assessment guidelines, is that they're deeply unclear, and sometimes professors themselves don't know what they want, and they're like, just look at the guidelines."

"There seems to be a bit of a disconnect between some of the seminar leads and the module leads, yeah, and that kind of confuses me, but like, there definitely is in some modules"

As is clear in the above quotes, students do not have full confidence in the marking criteria and guidance around assessments, with several of them calling for greater clarity and consistency. The disconnect is also clear when students discuss feedback

with their educators leading many participants to express a desire to have their work marked by their seminar leader with whom they have had an opportunity to discuss their approach previously. This desire for students to have an academic connection with their educator was echoed throughout the recordings, confirming Pekrun's suggestion that social structures influence student well-being and achievement.

“He gave a really lovely, personalised teaching experience, where I left inspired having learnt something, as well as a little bit more confident.”

“The office hours for econ were, like, the thing that saved me, I would not have been able to understand it without having all those office hours booked.”

“I feel lucky in that my supervisor is really supportive and responsive. But I know some people's supervisors aren't as responsive, or they haven't connected, and then it's kind of like there should be more in place.”

Given the importance of social structures presented in the literature review, this study presents compelling evidence for having a greater focus on student-teacher relationships and marking criteria. It seems that students really feel most supported and in a place to succeed when they have a strong network of social connections, either with their educator or their peers. This not only matches what the literature suggests, but it also matches my personal experience at UCL. Considering that creating these social structures can entail small actions such as being responsive, it may be the case that simply taking small compounding steps will help improve the well-being and success of students in the Faculty of Social and Historical Sciences. Through various discussions, some suggestions that have come forward include students spending more time with their tutor and lecturers adapting their lectures to make them feel more personal.

Conclusion

This research study thoroughly explored student emotions and the relationship that they have with the teaching and learning methods that students are subjected to, as well as how they influence the student assessment experience. Whilst the initial findings validated work that has taken place before this; by extending the scope of the investigation this study has raised the importance of having clear assessment criteria and reinforcing student-teacher relationships in an age of education where the human component of learning is often removed through the e-learning techniques that have been adopted in recent years. Hopefully, this work will continue to encourage conversations around student well-being and how to support students in order for them to succeed at university.

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