253 Student voice: what assessments do higher education students find most engaging?

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

In this student-led project, we sought to understand what assessments students find most engaging, to characterise the features of those assessments, and understand the relationship between those features, students' emotional engagement with those assessments, and their self-perceived learning outcomes. 574 students across an English university completed a survey describing their most engaging and interesting assessments and rating 21 Likert-scale items on five design features and two perceived learning outcomes. Open-ended responses were thematically analysed. Quantitative items were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlational analysis. In the presence of appropriate support, authentic assessments that offer realism, higher order thinking (challenge via transferable skills), and opportunities to develop evaluative judgement were associated with positive emotional engagement and perceived higher academic achievement and self-confidence. The study is significant in highlighting student voices, examining experience across each student's programme rather than within a single module, and offering practical design guidance for academics.
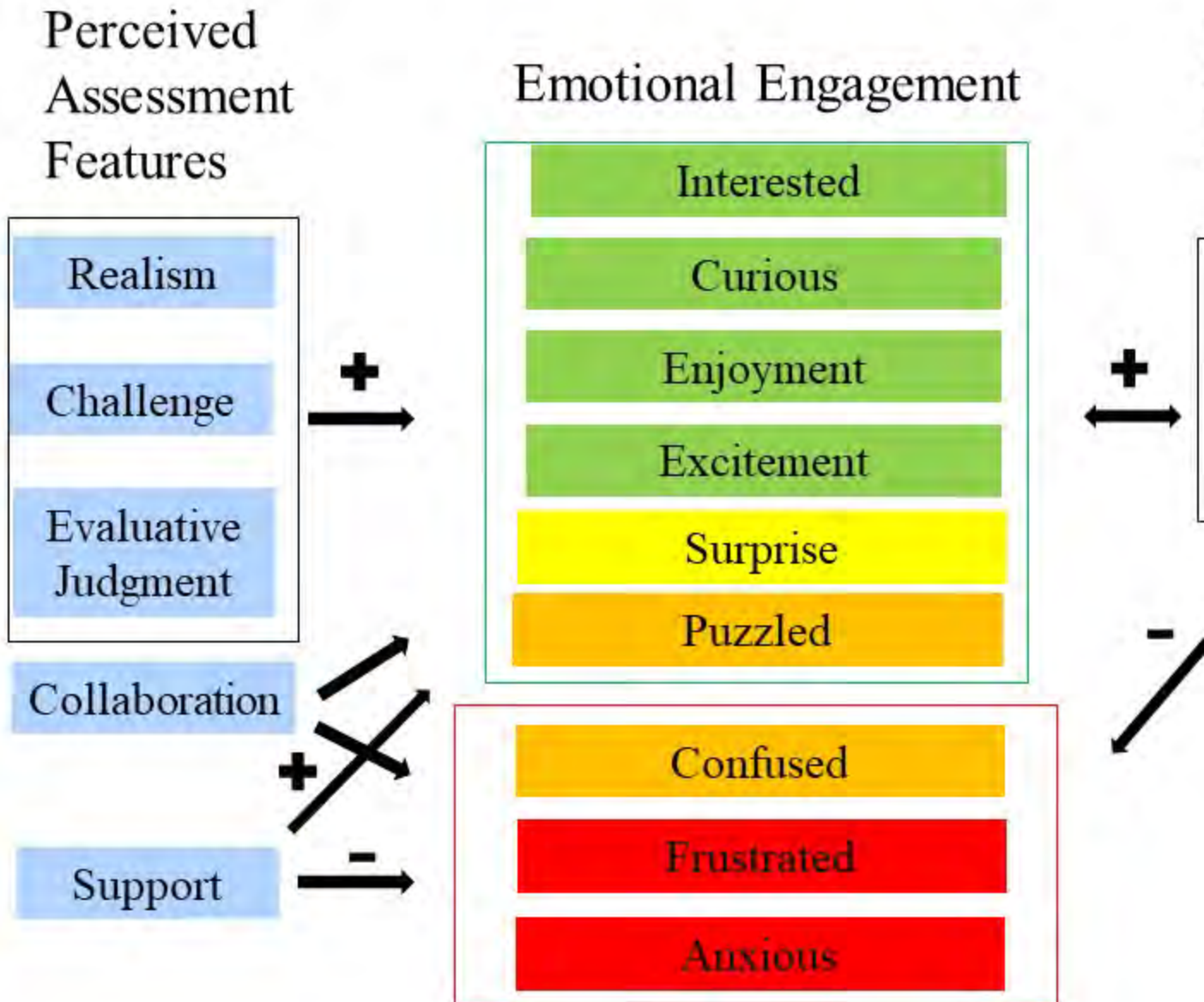
Full paper

Introduction

Assessment design offers a critical lever for enhancing classroom-based education and students' engagement because students spend much of their independent study time completing or preparing for assessments. To use that lever effectively, we need a better understanding of the assessments students find most engaging and interesting. Student interest, and positive emotional engagement in learning in general, matter because they are associated with more productive learning behaviours, better self-regulation, and better learning outcomes (Jansen, Lüdtke, & Schroeders 2016; Renninger & Hidi, 2022; Sansone et al., 2019; Pekrun et al., 2023). This study is original because it is student-led and gathers students' views of the most engaging, interesting assessments their peers have experienced across their higher education (HE) studies. It also gathers their perceptions of the assessment design characteristics and their perceived learning outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The student leaders assumed that authentic assessments would be most engaging, consistent with extant research (Sokhanvar et al, 2021; Pitt & Quinlan, 2022). To define the features of assessments that students found most engaging, we grounded our research in key dimensions of authentic assessment (Villarroel et al, 2018): realism, cognitive challenge and evaluative judgement, which we supplemented with collaboration and support. We defined engagement as activating epistemically-related emotions, measuring interested, curious, enjoyment, excited, surprised, puzzled, confused, anxious, frustrated (Pekrun et al., 2017). We defined perceived outcomes as academic achievement and self-confidence. We examined the relationships between five assessment design features, students' emotional engagement, and two self-perceived learning outcomes. Based on related literature, our assumptions are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

Perceived Assessment Features

- Realism
- Challenge
- Evaluative Judgment
- Collaboration
- Support

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Emotional Engagement

- Interested
- Curious
- Enjoyment
- Excitement
- Surprise
- Puzzled

- Confused
- Frustrated
- Anxious

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Research Questions

RQ1. How did students describe their most engaging, interesting assessment in their own words?

RQ2. What were students' emotional experiences of this engaging assessment?

RQ3. What assessment design features (realism, cognitive challenge, evaluative judgment, collaboration, support) were associated with a) emotional engagement and b) students' perceived learning outcomes (academic achievement and self-confidence)?

Methods

Led by the Student Union (first and third author), under the supervision of a higher education researcher (second author), and the Director of Education and Student Experience in Arts and Humanities (fourth author), we invited all students across a mid-ranked English university to participate in a 10 minute online survey.   In this cross-sectional, mixed methods study, we surveyed 574 students across the sciences, social sciences, and arts/humanities.

Respondents first described their most engaging and interesting assessment in their own words. To address RQ1, we thematically analysed those responses to identify the assessment types they volunteered most frequently and the most common themes that emerged in their descriptions. Students then 21 Likert scale items describing their perceptions of the assessment. An exploratory factor analysis indicated that these 21 statements assessed seven core factors which are outlined in Table 1, grouped into five assessment design features and two learning outcomes according to our conceptual framework.

Table 1.

Assessment Perceptions Scales: Items for each Factor

Object of Perception	Factor	Items
Assessment Design Features	Realism	It was relevant to the career I want to pursue
		It was useful to my future
		It reflected real life situations
	Cognitive Challenge	It gave me skills I can use in a variety of contexts
		It promoted my transferable skills
		It gave me skills I can use after university
	Evaluative Judgement	It helped me appreciate what I'm good at
		It helped me identify my skills
		It helped me see where to improve
	Collaboration	It required collaboration with others
		It involved group work
		It developed my teamwork skills
	Support	I felt supported
		I felt reassured
		I received feedback from my teaching staff throughout the assessment process
Learning Outcomes	Academic Achievement	I thought I did well on it
		I think I did better than I usually do
		It allowed me to showcase my skills and knowledge
	Self-Confidence	It improved my self esteem
		It made me feel empowered
		It increased my confidence

Rating these items surfaced underlying characteristics of emotionally engaging assessments that may matter to students, but may not appear in students' explicit, volunteered descriptions. Using a validated scale (Pekrun et al, 2017), students rated nine emotions associated with this engaging assessment. Finally, students provided demographic information. To address RQ2, we will use descriptive statistics of the emotions scales and correlation matrices to indicate relationships between different emotions to characterise emotional engagement. Pearson correlation coefficient matrices will be used to address RQ3, examining correlations between the design features, emotions, and perceived learning outcomes.

Results

Overall, the preliminary results suggest that students find authentic assessments – those with connections to the real world and that are cognitively stimulating (challenging) – to be most engaging. Students also described their engaging assessments as offering opportunities to exercise creative freedom or autonomy. Although students did not volunteer comments about evaluative judgement, they agreed that items describing it characterised their engaging assessment. Students were least likely to agree that their engaging assessment involved collaboration.

Students experienced engaging assessments as emotionally positive: feeling interested, curious, enjoyment and even excited. Emotional engagement also involved low levels of negative emotions of confusion, frustration, and anxiety. Anxiety was more prevalent than frustration and confusion. Frustration was associated with fewer opportunities to develop evaluative judgement and lower self-confidence. Engaging assessments were associated with high perceived academic achievement and self-confidence. Full analysis will be completed by the time of the conference.

Discussion

This study is significant for illustrating how to engage students' voices in the design of assessments across a university. It provides vital information about the features of assessments that students find most engaging and interesting in a form that helps guide academics in re-designing their assessments.

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