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‘Entering a Forbidden Territory’: Co-Creation of Assessment Marking Criteria

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Abstract

Advancements in active learning methods necessitate transparent and continuous dialogue between learners and educators to align and reconcile differing expectations. This study investigates the co-creation of assessment marking criteria in higher education, emphasising the pedagogical value of involving learners in collaboratively designing rubrics with teachers. The research explores how co-creation fosters student engagement, critical thinking, and shared ownership of valuable active learning opportunities. Conducted following a postgraduate module, the study analysed learners’ experiences of co-creating a marking rubric and employed a qualitative methodology involving module evaluations, focus groups, and interviews with participating learners. Four key themes emerged from the data on student perceptions of co-creating a marking rubric in that they: provided novel learning experiences, enhanced agency and creativity, strengthened the sense of community, and improved clarity of assessment expectations for authentic assessment. Benefits and challenges in rubric co-design and implementation are discussed within each of these themes. Findings reveal that 82% of participating learners reported a greater understanding of assessment criteria, with several describing the co-creation process as transformative and one likening the experience to ‘entering a forbidden territory’. The collaborative development of the rubric promoted inclusivity, deepened assessment literacy, and enhanced learners’ confidence and motivation. Findings also suggest that the experience of co-creating the marking rubric may have contributed to higher student achievement in the associated summative assessment task. The research demonstrates that co-creating assessment rubrics can not only enhance academic performance but also build a more inclusive, student-centred educational environment. These findings support broader implementation of co-creation practices as a means to enrich active learning and foster collaborative academic communities.

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Introduction

Robust assessment and marking processes are key in higher education. Marking criteria have been used effectively to work towards consistency, fairness, and transparency in the marking process, especially within the context of increasing student numbers with the massification of higher education in the last 40 years (Barnett & Coate, 2007). Also, in this timeframe, there has been a significant growth of student engagement across the sector (Kuh, 2008), including an increasing focus on curriculum co-creation resulting from the positive outcomes found for both students and teachers (Bovill et al., 2011; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017, 2023).

There are many different forms of curriculum co-creation, which have been described as: 'students and academic staff working in partnership to create some or all aspects of the planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning experience' (Bovill et al., 2011, p. 137). There is now growing interest and informal practice in student/staff co-creation of marking rubrics (Crozier & Russell-Westhead, 2018; MSUD, 2022; Tang et al., 2023), although there is limited research exploring the benefits of engaging in this process, with the notable exception of several excellent publications in this area (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Fraile et al., 2017; Meer & Chapman, 2015; Stranford, 2024).

This study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring learners' experiences of active learning while co-creating a marking rubric for a formative assessment in the *Assessing Learning* module. The module is part of a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, delivered by the Academic Development team at the University of Stirling. Participants are new teaching staff, referred to here as learners. The campus-based, Scottish university has around 16,000 students and saw a rise in international enrolments and new staff, with one-third of teaching staff joining post-COVID-19. Consequently, the cohort in this study was three times larger than in previous years. Despite growing workloads, the university prioritises active learning and inclusive curricula.

Literature Review

Active Learning in Higher Education

Fundamental to the advancement of the learning experience of students and the teaching experience of academic staff, active learning is an innovative model for the provision of high-quality, collaborative, engaging, and motivating education (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Misseyanni et al., 2018). 'Active learning engages students in the process of learning through activities and/or discussion in class, as opposed to passively listening to an expert. It emphasises higher-order thinking and often involves group work' (Freeman et al., 2014, pp. 8413–8414). Different active learning methods, including collaborative learning, peer teaching, enquiry, and problem-based learning, enable learners to be actively involved in the instructional process itself. Walsh and Inala (2010) state this approach seeks to engage students in their own learning, promoting active participation in the learning process rather than one where instructor direction is the key focus.

Whilst there has been some resistance to shifting towards active learning, there have also been numerous calls for more, as noted by (Børte et al., 2023). Reasons for resistance can include

ingrained beliefs and mindsets of lecturers that can lead to a lack of adoption of active learning practices (Jordan et al., 2014; Price & Kirkwood, 2014). Clearly, active learning pedagogy has been a significant change in the last 30 years, and curriculum co-creation is a further change to the status quo that benefits students, since it gives students even more ownership over their learning (Bovill, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017).

Curriculum Co-Creation as a Form of Active Learning

Curriculum co-creation promotes high levels of student engagement with active learning. Its collaborative ethos makes it distinct from other forms of active learning since curriculum co-creation is a relational and dialogic pedagogy where students and staff share ownership over the learning and teaching experience (Bovill, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019; Matthews et al., 2019; Moore-Cherry, 2019). Building strong working relationships via curriculum co-creation can promote an open dialogue between students and teachers about meaningful teaching and learning, which helps both to understand their responsibilities and creates a 'third space' with a more equal balance of power between them (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019; Moore-Cherry, 2019). For example, Lubicz-Nawrocka (2023, p. 13) describes:

> Curriculum co-creation is a relational way of working underpinned by shared responsibility, reciprocity in learning from each other, mutual respect, care, trust, and empathy. This values-based, creative process helps staff and students work together to share and negotiate decision-making about aspects of curricula, which often leads to mutual benefits for learners and teachers.

Focussing on mutual benefits in curriculum co-creation for students and teachers is important, since teachers' enthusiasm and passion for teaching can have a strong effect on students' engagement with learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Co-creating marking rubrics specifically has been deemed to have numerous benefits, including: promoting active learning by sharing ownership over assessment standards, being more inclusive in defining assessment standards, enhancing understanding of expectations, and developing critical thinking and communication skills (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Fraile et al., 2017; Meer & Chapman, 2015; Stranford, 2024).

Marking Rubrics

A marking rubric – also called a grading, scoring, or assessment rubric – has three features: (1) evaluation criteria; (2) quality definitions which include a range from excellent to poor quality work, and (3) descriptors of the quality of engagement with the evaluation criteria that inform a scoring strategy (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). The use of marking rubrics across the higher education sector varies, and teachers from various disciplines have used them to articulate the expectations for an assessment task and apply these expectations when grading student work (Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

Students tend to perceive that marking rubrics increase transparency and fairness, which can reduce their anxiety and uncertainty about expectations, help them produce higher quality work, develop their evaluative judgements about their own performance, and reflect on how to improve on subsequent assignments (Andrade & Du, 2005; Bolton, 2006). As in the studies cited above, marking rubrics that are introduced in a student-centred way ahead of an assessment task being submitted are seen to have educational benefits to students as well as evaluative benefits to teachers using these marking tools (Arter & McTighe, 2001). However, students find rubrics to be far

less useful if they are only used in the marking process with the criteria shared at the point of giving marks and feedback (Schneider, 2006). Similarly, some studies have found that student-centred use of marking rubrics can lead to higher student achievement in assessments (Panadero et al., 2023; Reitmeier et al., 2004), although this is not always the case and can depend on student engagement with the marking rubric (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). A study by Li and Lindsey (2015, p. 78) highlights teachers' and students' impressions of rubrics can be very different, noting that what may be clear to teachers 'may be perceived as abstract, vague, or ambiguous by the students'. As such, co-creation provides a way to bridge these different views between students and teachers (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Stranford, 2024; Yan, 2024).

Teachers who choose to use marking rubrics have felt they enhance consistency, reliably and efficiently in grading (Andrade & Du, 2005). This was particularly the case with feeling that marking rubrics facilitate objectivity when marking presentations (Reitmeier et al., 2004) and creative assessments (Powell, 2002). That said, some teachers are hesitant or unwilling to use marking rubrics, and their use is mixed across the higher education sector (Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

Methodology

Study Context

This research contributes to the growing literature on active learning and the evaluation of learning and teaching by examining the benefits and challenges of learners co-creating a marking rubric with their teachers. The Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education supports lecturers new to UK higher education – often experienced professionals or researchers, and sometimes lecturers with experience in international contexts – who are developing their university teaching practice. As learners, they apply insights from the programme to their own teaching across disciplines.

In the programme's second module, *Assessing Learning*, a strong learning community formed among the 33 participants while exploring assessment and feedback. A formative task promoted assessment for learning by building digital skills, deepening understanding of assessment practices, and fostering collaboration to create a digital resource to support students. This task was constructively aligned with the authentic, summative assessment, where learners designed their own digital resource to enhance assessment literacy or engagement with feedback.

In the second class, learners co-created a marking rubric for the formative assessment through activities designed to build community, explore assessment concepts, and clarify expectations for these creative and authentic assessment tasks. After an introduction to rubrics and curriculum co-creation, learners worked in small groups to draft marking criteria descriptors based on the tasks and learning outcomes. Although most sessions were hybrid, this class was fully online, which was new for some. Teachers began synthesising group inputs into a single rubric, with further online feedback gathered before finalising it. The co-created rubric was then implemented in the fourth class for giving peer and teacher feedback on presentations of the digital artefacts. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

This research received ethical approval from the University of Stirling. Data collection included a focus group, interviews, and module evaluation feedback from the 2022 to 2023 *Assessing Learning* module and used anonymous, aggregated learner achievement data from both that cohort and the previous year's cohort. The participant pool included all module participants. They were all

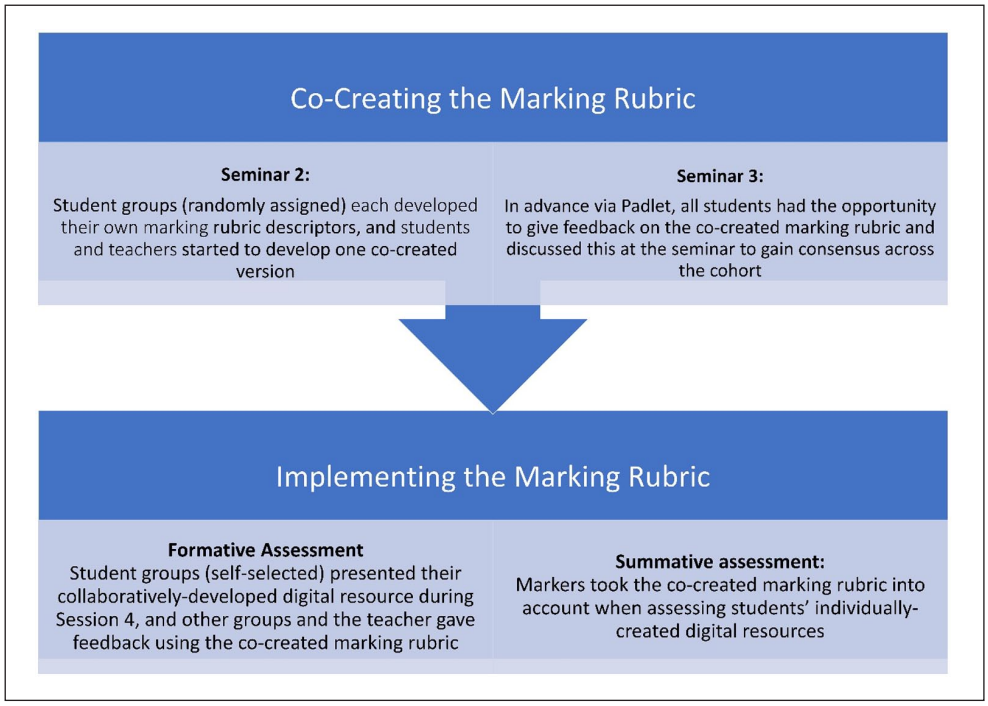


Figure 1. Visual representation of the class activities contributing to co-creating the marking rubric ahead of its implementation in relation to formative and summative assessment tasks.

mid-career professionals (approximately 25–50 years old), new to Lecturer roles in UK higher education, and from diverse academic backgrounds and subjects (all University Faculties were represented).

After assessments had been completed for the module, all 33 learners were invited to complete an evaluation. This included standardised University module evaluation questions as well as four module-specific questions focusing on the co-creation experience. Learners were informed that, by continuing with the evaluation, their anonymous, aggregated feedback could be analysed for this study and shared beyond the university without direct quotations. Eleven responded (33% response rate). Achievement data were anonymised and aggregated by staff.

In addition, all learners on the module were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. Learners received a participant information sheet ahead of registering for the focus group and indicated their informed consent. Participants were informed about their rights, making it clear that participation was voluntary. The focus group took place after teaching and marking had been completed to mitigate learners feeling coerced into participating. Although there is a power imbalance with the module coordinator also serving as the lead on this research, learners on the module are also teaching staff who are colleagues. The aim of the focus group was to explore experiences and perceptions with learners and no potential harms were foreseen for participants.

The qualitative data collection focussed on enacting a partnership approach based on the values of shared responsibility, reciprocity in learning from each other, mutual respect, care, trust, and empathy. Therefore, we highlighted the spirit of reciprocity in learning from each other about whether this learning and teaching approach benefitted learners and teachers. To add to this,

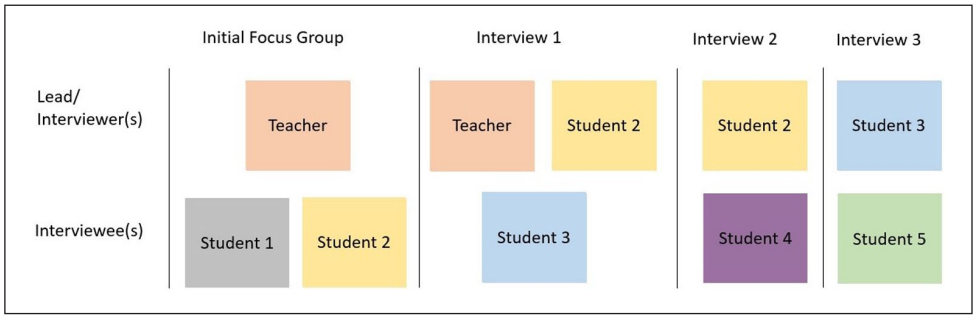


Figure 2. Visual representation of the qualitative data collection.

participants were invited to become co-researchers, collaborating on data analysis and dissemination of this research.

Five learners agreed to participate in qualitative data collection, coming from different disciplines with four out of the five University Faculties represented. Only two learners could participate in the initial focus group discussion with the teacher. One of these participants (learner 2) volunteered to become a co-researcher and helped interview an additional participant (learner 3); subsequently, these two co-researchers separately interviewed two other participants (learners 4 and 5; Figure 2). Therefore, four of the five participants went on to become co-researchers involved in data collection, analysis, and write-up. All learners who engaged in the focus groups appeared to show interest in co-creation, and this was especially so for those who also became co-researchers. This potential bias was mitigated by explicitly seeking to understand not only the benefits but also the challenges of this process by being open and honest.

Similar semi-structured discussion questions were used in both the focus group and interviews (see Supplemental Appendix 1), focussing on learners' experiences of marking rubric co-creation including perceptions of: (a) the learning environment and shared values that facilitated this process, (b) benefits and challenges, and (c) perceptions of outcomes using the collectively-developed rubric to give and receive feedback on the formative assessment presentations.

The focus group and interviews were all held online and recorded via Microsoft Teams, which auto-generated transcripts. The co-researchers divided the work of evaluating and editing these for accuracy, taking responsibility for transcripts of sessions that they did not participate in themselves to add rigour and reduce potential bias.

Data Analysis

The research team collaboratively analysed the data collected. The lead researcher collated and shared relevant aspects of the anonymised survey and achievement data with the learner co-researchers. Learner co-researchers who were not involved as a lead/interviewer or interviewee led on the first round analysing that qualitative data, drawing on a reflexive thematic analysis that was rigorous, systematic, fluid, reflective, and creative (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For the research team, as for Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 591), 'qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated'. Using Padlet, co-researchers iteratively identified salient anonymised quotations and generated associated themes. This Padlet aided the initial analysis by sharing and categorising key quotations using an accessible, creative digital platform with which the whole team was familiar, which helped promote flexibility and transparency as the themes were initially generated, discussed, and agreed in regular

meetings. Subsequently, the team worked to transfer the Padlet content to a shared Excel spreadsheet that helped the team collectively to identify key quotations. Each of the five researchers independently assessed principal quotations using Likert-scale rankings (1–5), confirmed groupings, and drew links to relevant literature. Researchers acknowledged their positionalities and met regularly to discuss the collective data analysis process and gain consensus iteratively and reflectively in clarifying the key five themes.

Findings

Following thematic analysis of the data, four themes emerged as key findings regarding learner perceptions of co-creating marking rubrics. They (1) saw them as novel learning experiences; (2) experienced agency and creativity; (3) advanced belonging and community; and (4) developed understanding of assessment expectations. Benefits and challenges in the co-creation experience are discussed within each of these themes presented below.

Theme 1: Novel Learning Experiences

The first theme suggests that co-creation is a novel learning experience for learners. One referred to how the teacher typically creates marking rubrics and co-creating it '*felt like I was entering a forbidden territory almost*'. Another participant noted '*It was the first time that I had done anything like that, as a student*'. Other participants echoed this sentiment about the novelty of the learning experience, since this is typically an activity reserved for academic staff who often take full control over assessment. Sharing responsibility and gaining ownership in the marking process by co-creating the marking rubric was new and innovative for learners.

Initially learners created the rubric descriptors on a shared Word document, with one noting: '*at the beginning, it was hard to know what to include, what not to include*'. Although many learners used rubrics in their own teaching, the idea of student-staff co-creation of a new rubric proved challenging for some. This intentionally chosen pedagogy facilitated discovery teaching and allowed learners to co-construct rubrics based on their current knowledge. The next stage of developing the new rubric then scaffolded learners' work, providing a framework for providing feedback from peers and teachers alike. One learner described how the co-created rubric framework:

> . . .helped shape my thoughts and perspectives and that was what drew me more to the task than the word document . . . When you have a little bit of steer of structure that helps you to explore the process or structure a bit more . . . I could formulate my thoughts and perspectives around that.

Notably, the pedagogic style chosen must be carefully considered when implementing co-creation. Once all groups' draft marking rubric descriptors were shared and discussed, the teacher and learners tried to collate ideas into one shared, co-created marking rubric. Gaining consensus was difficult online since energy was waning towards the end of the three-hour online seminar and it was difficult to know whether all learners did in fact agree with all contributions to the shared marking rubric. One learner shared:

> I think near the end . . . I got the impression that people were just wanting an answer to the riddle.

It is interesting that, after engaging well throughout the session, learners got to a point where they wanted the teacher to decide on the rubric, rather than continuing the hard work of collaboration. The learners' perceived role and their identity within this context could help explain their

perceptions of involvement with co-creation. It is also worth acknowledging the learners within this context were also staff, which perhaps resulted in a deeper self-reflexivity and attention to such teacher-learner roles.

One participant noted the process of co-creation, whilst new, enabled understanding of '*How to put rubrics together and working with students, so it did bring some clarity to the assessment*'. The novelty of co-creation presents a unique opportunity for development. A key finding was that 9 out of the 11 learners who completed the module evaluation agreed or strongly agreed that co-creating a marking rubric for the digital artefact was a beneficial experience, with one learner being ambivalent and only one learner disagreeing. Overall this result helps to demonstrate how the novelty of co-creation can be considered as a beneficial and potentially transformational approach to learning and teaching practice.

Theme 2: Agency and Creativity

The rubric co-creation process is an excellent tool for learner-teacher partnership and offers an opportunity to enhance learners' agency, creativity, and critical thinking in understanding different perspectives. One learner said:

> It has been helpful for me because I've learned from other peers, from the wider university faculties and departments. That's really helpful for my own learning and actually looking at things perhaps in a different way when thinking about creative processes. It's only really been a good experience for me.

Furthermore, another participant reflected on benefits of co-creating rubrics and stated, '*Students might come up with something that I hadn't thought of, and it can be better than what I thought, and that's more beneficial*'.

Even if learners develop similar content to what a teacher would have developed for a marking rubric, partnering with learners during this process can help them share agency with teachers. One learner reflected that, if they co-create a rubric with their own students in the future:

> I would have a rough idea of what I was looking for them to answer anyway [in the marking rubric descriptors] and if they came up with that, then brilliant, because they'd have the ownership, meaning they understand and believe in the rubrics.

Therefore, allowing learners to engage with the process of co-creating rubrics can not only help them gain greater understanding of assessment expectations but also enhance learners' engagement and ownership in the assessment process.

The opportunity for learners to collaborate and learn from each other is extremely important, and it can spark new ideas and perspectives that help them to be more creative. However, when considering learner agency and empowerment in this learner-teacher dialogue, there can be some cultural challenges with the collaborative responsibility. One learner reflected on possible future challenges of co-creating a marking rubric:

> Another [potential] issue can be a cultural issue . . . particularly between home and international students . . . [since in] some cultures it's more prescribed so students have more expectation that the lecturer will do a, b, c, etc. So they may struggle with this co-creation, where with other cultures it may be more familiar.

Alongside this learner-teacher dialogue, one learner commented on the barriers of developing a consensus when there is a limit to shared ownership. They reflected on their role as a teacher and another potential challenge of co-creation:

> I don't know how students would feel if they co-created a rubric and then they're marked, and if the rubric is used for marking, how might they feel if they don't agree with the marker?

This is an important reflection on the limits of sharing power within such learner-initiated, discovery learning. What happens when learners are given power in designing the marking rubric but then power is taken away in the marking process itself? It is hoped that the initial partnership work would empower them to hold a more informed discussion with the teacher about their mark.

Theme 3: Belonging and Community

Experiencing how the process of co-creation could work in practice tended to positively impact on learners' sense of inclusivity, belonging, and community. This was something that learners clearly valued, not only in terms of individual learning, but sharing with wider colleagues across the University. For example, one participant described how they '. . .*liked the collaboration and conversation and having that dialogue back and forth*' and another stated that it '. . .*was definitely a good thing to share ideas and also learn from each other*'. Several participants echoed similar views and one highlighted the importance of learning from peers in other disciplines:

> You have that greater opportunity to interact with peers from other faculties and departments, which I really like. You do tend to learn a lot from colleagues who have different experiences.

Within this particular seminar, co-creation took place online which was more challenging to some than if it were to have taken place in person:

> . . .online did make it a little bit harder and I probably didn't say as much as I was maybe thinking and I didn't say all my thoughts out loud.

Such groupwork and active learning pedagogies, online or in person, can be a challenge, as is striking the balance between structure and space to innovate:

> In the group I was in, it took a while for us to really get into it and I think it's because there was a lack of direction.

That said, another learner commented:

> You feel supported and participate in things and also in learning to see how you will be assessed.

The benefit of learners being able to learn from and support each other in this way should not be overlooked, with co-creation being at the very heart of this. Learning about assessment expectations also connects to the next theme.

Theme 4: Understanding Assessment Expectations

Nine out of 11 learners (82%) who completed the module evaluation agreed or strongly agreed that co-creating the marking rubric helped them understand assessment expectations relating to the digital resource. This was reinforced by the qualitative data. One participant described how co-creating the marking rubric supported them in the assessment since '*it reinforced that I was doing the right approach*'. Another reflected on how the co-creation experience helped them understand assessment expectations:

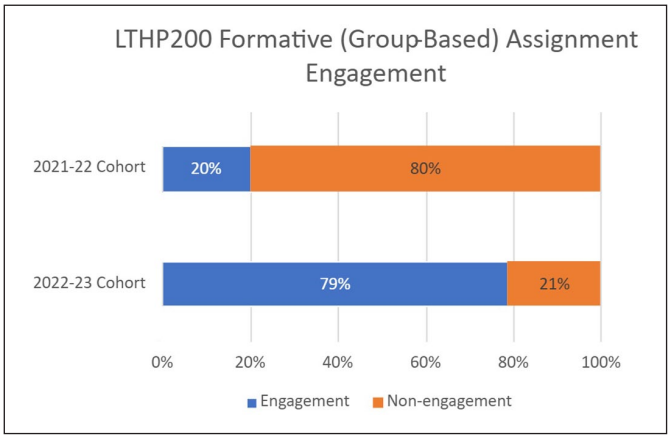


Figure 3. Formative (group-based) assignment engagement.

> . . .it took me a little while to get my head around the digital artefact [assessments] and what kind of thing I would be developing . . . [Co-creating the marking rubric] helped me understand the construction of a rubric: it's not just a case of plucking things from anywhere . . . [and] it makes more sense to me now . . . I'll be approaching all of that [assessment] in a completely different way.

Engagement with co-creating the marking rubric and completing the formative assessment also appeared to benefit learner achievement outcomes. While recognising that each learner cohort is unique (although participants were largely similar in that they were all new to teaching in higher education) and that there were different module coordinators for the 2021 to 2022 cohort and the 2022 to 2023 cohorts of this same module, the engagement with the redesigned teaching (including co-creation), the formative assessment task, and the summative assessment pass rates were markedly different. When the redesigned formative assessment task included group-based presentations and implementing a co-created marking rubric with the more recent cohort (as opposed to an online submission with feedback only from the tutor), engagement with the formative assessment rose from 20% of the cohort in 2021 to 2022 to 79% in 2022 to 2023 (Figure 3).

The teaching and formative assessment also appeared to boost pass rates with the summative assessment task. In the evaluation, 8 out of the 11 respondents (73%) agreed or strongly agreed that using the co-created marking rubric helped their group to receive effective feedback from peers and the teacher on their collaboratively-developed digital resources. While there were similar pass rates for the summative assessment overall with the previous smaller cohort, it is notable that that was significantly higher achievement of the learning outcome associated with the digital teaching resource summative assessment task in 2022 to 2023. Achievement of this learning outcome ('demonstrate the utility of learning technologies in your teaching') rose from 70% in 2021 to 2022 to 97% of those who submitted the assessment with the 2022 to 2023 cohort (Figure 4).

Discussion

The literature suggests that marking rubrics that are co-created with students are most beneficial to students and staff, and that those that are introduced in student-centred ways ahead of assessment submissions yield the greatest benefits to student learning and academic performance (Arter & McTighe, 2001; Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Reddy & Andrade, 2010; Stranford, 2024) . As there is a

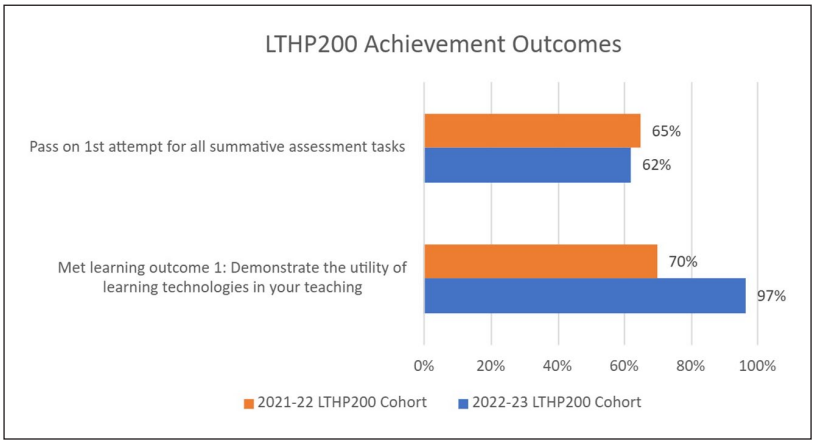


Figure 4. Overall pass rates for all summative assessment tasks as compared to achievement of the learning outcome associated with the digital resource task (for which a co-created marking rubric was created).

paucity of current peer-reviewed research on co-creation of marking rubrics, our study was undertaken to explore this further. In this section we discuss the benefits and challenges of the key findings that co-creating marking rubrics was (1) a novel learning experience, (2) promoted agency and creativity, (3) advanced belonging and community, and (4) developed students' understanding of assessment expectations.

Benefits of Co-Creating a Marking Rubric

Participants described many benefits of co-creating marking rubrics which we discuss here in relation to the novelty of this active learning approach including ownership, agency, empowerment, creativity, intrinsic motivation, strengthened relationships and sense of belonging, assessment literacy, and student achievement. As education systems shift towards more active and participatory models (e.g. Freeman et al., 2014; Hicks & Sinkinson, 2021), understanding the theoretical and practical benefits of rubric co-creation is important. Active learning practices are prevalent across higher education and, although there are limited examples of co-creating marking rubrics (see, e.g., Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Meer & Chapman, 2015; Stranford, 2024) they are still rare. The novelty of the co-creation experience was a key theme that emerged from this study with one participant strikingly describing it as an inclusive practice that felt like '*entering a forbidden territory*', which chimes with other studies on curriculum co-creation where 'Participants spoke of the power of allowing students to see into . . . the "black box of teaching"' (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2017, p. 10).

In this study, the co-created rubric was well received by the learner participants, noting it was a tool for strengthening student-staff relationships and a space for being creative and gaining ownership in the learning process. Creativity thrives when learners are engaged in tasks that require problem-solving and critical inquiry (Miri et al., 2007; Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019), which are key aspects of co-creation (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2023). Co-creating rubric descriptors makes the criteria for creativity explicit, yet flexible (Stranford, 2024).

Involving learners in the creation and negotiation of marking rubric descriptors leads to their improved empowerment and autonomy (Fraile et al., 2017), since learner agency is grounded in the concept that learners have control over their educational experiences (Klemencic, 2015).

Co-creating rubrics gives learners a voice in the assessment process and increases their intrinsic motivation, thus acknowledging their capacity to set meaningful criteria for success (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Stranford, 2024). This aligns with other literature showing how active learning promotes Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises how autonomy, choice, and flexibility can increase learners' motivation (Bockorny et al., 2024; Chamberlin et al., 2023). This is in contrast to how traditional grading systems often undermine learner autonomy and motivation (Chamberlin et al., 2023). When rubrics are co-created, they shift from being tools of compliance to frameworks for learner-driven growth, promoting a sense of ownership over learning (Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Stranford, 2024). Our study reinforced these findings.

Co-Creation generally offers benefits for students' academic and personal growth by improving learners' self-efficacy and self-confidence (Jamouli et al., 2022; Quesada et al., 2019; Stranford, 2024). Participants in this study reinforced this, discussing how they benefited from improved critical thinking by learning from colleagues with a wide variety of academic experience, during both the experience of co-creating the marking rubric and also implementing it during peer assessment. This supports wider literature that co-creation contributes positively to 'learning from each other within a collaborative learning community' (Kaminskienė et al., 2020, p. 343). Such benefits include 'productive shifts in identity and relationships, as well as increasing participants' understanding of other perspectives and roles' (Pounder et al., 2016, p. 1199). Developing trust between teachers and learners and enhancing learners' sense of belonging to their institution or discipline is also evident, which reinforces others' findings (Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Moore-Cherry et al., 2016).

Feelings of belonging developed via resilient learning communities have also been cited in the literature correlating with successful academic achievement (Bovill et al., 2016; Yorke, 2014). Others have found that curriculum co-creation may enhance learners' academic performance (Jamouli et al., 2022; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021), although they indicated that further research in this area is needed. In our study, learners' increased motivation and engagement while co-creating the marking rubric may have contributed to significantly higher formative assessment submission rates (along with the change from group submissions being submitted online to being presented in class with peer feedback given using the co-created rubric) and led to higher pass rates associated with the authentic summative assessment of creating a digital artefact. Participants felt that co-creating the marking rubric improved their assessment literacy by increasing transparency and fairness in the marking process, which reduced anxiety about the assessment expectations. These are also findings in other literature on co-creation of marking rubrics (Crozier & Russell-Westhead, 2018; Deeley & Bovill, 2017; Stranford, 2024) Since assessments are invariably stressful, opportunities to understand the marking and facilitating supportive teaching strategies are likely to be well received (Bockorny et al., 2024; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Crozier & Russell-Westhead, 2018).

This has implications for learners' further development. According to McIver and Murphy (2021), having the ability to judge each other's work changes the way learners approach assignment tasks, whilst increasing their confidence regarding professional development, translating to equally satisfying teaching experiences for staff. Developing the transferrable skills of self-assessment and reflection and having the confidence to share professional judgements is highly beneficial (Fraile et al., 2017; McIver & Murphy, 2021). Participants in our study also benefitted in these ways while co-creating the marking rubric and implementing it during the peer assessment. Since these learners are also teachers, it is notable that modelling these active learning practices also inspired reflection on how they could co-create marking rubrics in the future with their own students, which would further magnify the effect of this co-creation activity (Tan, 2009).

Challenges of Co-Creating a Marking Rubric

Alongside the benefits of co-creating marking rubrics, participants also reflected on the challenge of the hard work of active learning and sharing ownership, and these learners reflected on some potential challenges in implementing co-creation with their own students. The process of co-creation involves learners stepping beyond passive acquisition of knowledge in the classroom to being actively engaged in shaping the learning process, and some learners may become fatigued from engaging and reach a point where they want to be more passive. This was the case in our study when some learners were 'just wanting an answer to the riddle' by the end of the three-hour online session. Negotiating decisions and finding a consensus on the marking criteria wording and weightings is a challenge that also aligns with findings by Bacchus et al. (2020). Such open dialogue between learners and lecturers allows for strong working relationships (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019) yet learning from each other is not without its challenges.

In this research, learners were also teaching staff, so they reflected on potential challenges they may encounter if co-creating rubrics with their own students. One participant felt that different cultural expectations may affect some learners' willingness to engage so actively. Another also wondered whether co-creating rubrics would be better suited to learners beyond their first year due to the nature of the challenging task and building relationships with the lecturers. However, these challenges were hypothetical rather than based on experience, which was also the case in the majority of the challenges in co-creating rubrics in the work of Stranford (2024).

In this study, results showed most learners were empathetic partners in co-creation, aligning with a study by Bacchus et al. (2020, p. 56) where students liked building the marking rubric as it 'showed the difficulty of making one'. Yet a few learners responding to the module evaluation disliked taking on a role they perhaps believed was the responsibility of teachers, a finding also discovered by Bacchus et al. (2020). Further to this, Bovill (2019, p. 15) states 'students as partners in assessment takes a huge shift of thinking–for (some) teachers; for (some) students; for (some) policy makers'. As Lubicz-Nawrocka (2019) states, this shift during the co-creation experience fosters a third space in ways of working, creating a shared identity and impact on performance. However, this challenging process of co-creation can be transformational (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2021).

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this qualitative study lies in its novel contribution to the emerging literature on co-creation in assessment, specifically the context of marking rubric design. This study offers new insights into how shared responsibility in assessment design can influence learners' perceptions of fairness and ownership of learning. The exploratory design enabled in-depth, rich, and contextualised accounts of co-creation, capturing its nuances. Iterative discussions and collective decision-making within the team of co-researchers – including both learners and teachers – also proved beneficial for the insights and inclusivity of this research.

The small number of participants limits the breadth of perspectives captured and reduces the generalisability of findings. The study was also conducted within a single institution in the United Kingdom. As such, institutional cultural practices may have contributed to a positive response bias. Participants involved in the research may have viewed the experience favourably given the collaborative nature of this project. Whilst efforts were made to encourage honest reflection and critical perspectives, social desirability may have influenced participant responses.

Conclusion

It appears that the practice of co-creating marking rubrics is a growing form of active learning, and this research contributes to the small but important body of literature in this area. In summary, co-creating marking rubrics can offer a transformative experience that supports novel learning experiences, provides agency and creativity, enhances feelings of belonging and community, and enhances assessment literacy. Learners move from passive recipients of learning to active partners who share ownership over and understanding of assessment criteria, and there is some evidence to suggest that this leads to higher achievement outcomes for learners. This is a strong area for future research to address to corroborate our finding. Through this collaborative engagement, learners can enhance their motivation in a supportive learning environment. If this co-creation process is intentionally meaningful and all views are heard, a shared understanding of the task can enhance autonomy and nurture belonging. While challenges do exist, the benefits to both learners and teachers suggest a strong potential for broader application in academia.

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Ethical Considerations

University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel (GUEP) approved this research on 28 April 2023, review reference number GUEP 2023 13974 9732.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was given at the start of the evaluation (written) and at the start of the focus group and interview (verbal).

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Data available on request from the authors.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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