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A Focus Group Study on Psychology Students' Experience of Assessments in Higher Education

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Introduction

Background

- Assessments affect the quality and quantity of student learning (Carless et al. 2006), the type and timing of assessments affect student learning Gibbs (2010)
- An understanding of students' perceptions and experience of assessments allows for better design of assessments by teaching staff (Fletcher et al 2012)
- Findings about students' perceptions of assessments are contradictory: Fletcher et al (2012) found students perceive assessments as irrelevant to learning; Carless et al (2006) found that students valued the learning experience of assessments

Rationale for this study

- Little research has been carried out to assess the students' experience of assessments (Fletcher et al. 2012; Hernandez 2012)
- Researchers have called for the exploration of student understanding and trust in the assessment process (Carless 2009)

Aims of current research

- The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of student perspective on assessments in HE
- The research questions are:
  - What are UWL psychology students' experience of assessments in higher education?
  - How do assessments affect their learning?

Method

Design

- Qualitative focus group study
- Preliminary study: 1st focus group of a 3 focus group study (Total n=23)
- Data was analyzed using experiential Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013)

Participants

- Preliminary study: 6 psychology year 2 undergraduates: 5 female, 1 male, mean age: 21, grade average 2:2 to 1st , mode: 2:2
- Recruited via advertisement on Blackboard and via Psychology notice board
- Inclusion criteria - Full time year 2 or 3 psychology students, proficient in spoken English

Procedure

- Questions used were semi-structured questions as devised by researcher
- One hour focus group was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis
- The 2 focus group facilitators were psychology lecturers at UWL
- A systematic approach was used to analysis the data as described by Creswell (2009)

Ethics

- Ethics approval was granted by the UWL Psychology Ethics Committee

Results
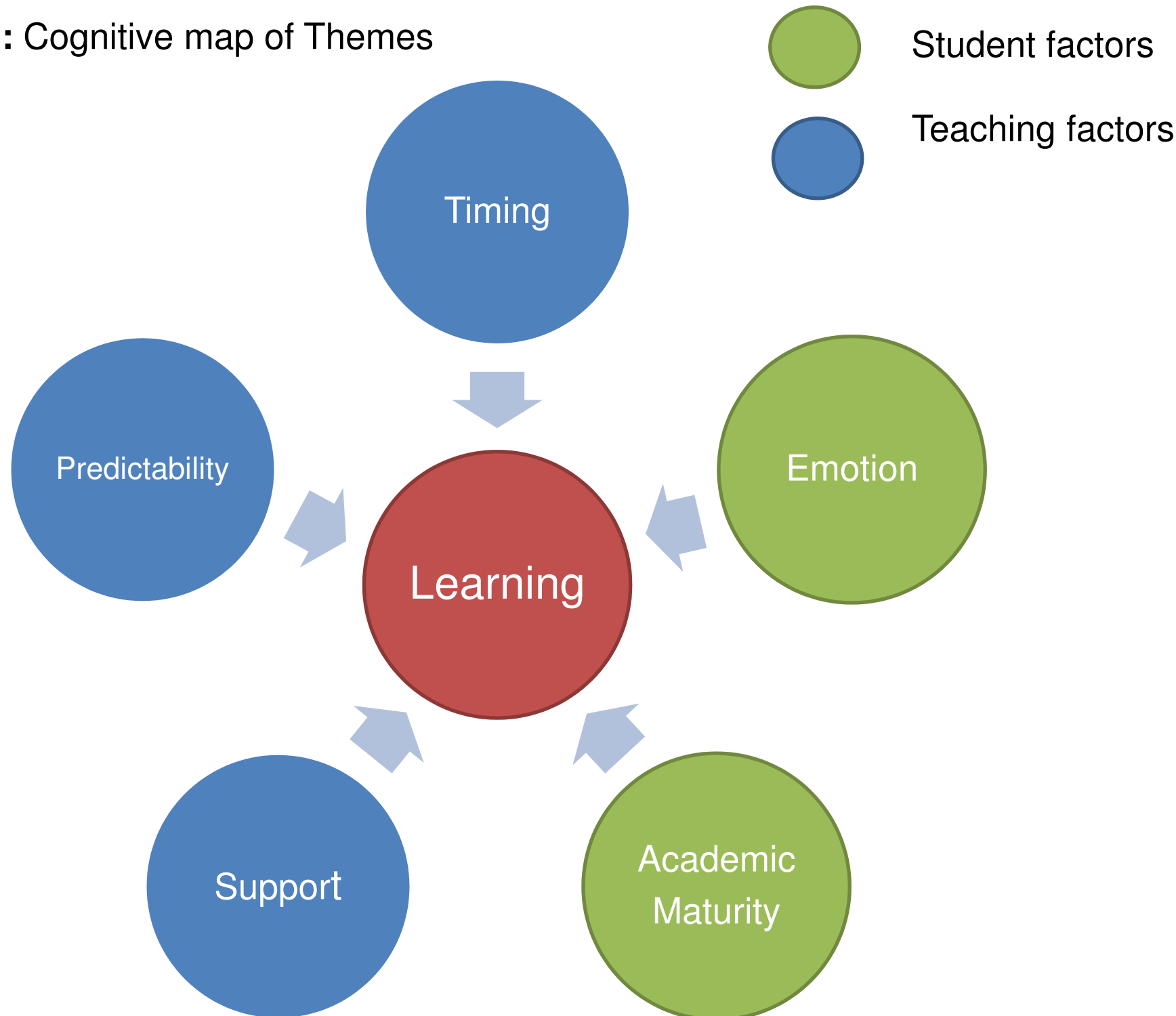
Figure 1: Cognitive map of Themes

Student factors
Teaching factors

Timing · Emotion · Predictability · Learning · Support · Academic Maturity

Table 1: Table of Themes and Subthemes and Quotes

Themes	Subthemes	Quotes
Teaching factors that affect learning from assessments		
Timing of..	• Assessment • Guidance	'I found that the X essay helped me to write the Y essay and because of that it helped me a lot on the exam because it was a similar method we had to use.' (P1)
Support	• Feedback and Guidance • Balanced Relationship with Tutor • Consistency	'I was forced to change my whole assignment a week before the deadline just because I got different opinions from different lecturer ... So it was quite rushed for me to change everything. So it was quite stressful.' (P4)
Predictability	• Preparation • Stress	'In exams like X you are forced to understand it first so you can learn it better and that way you know what to put in the exam. Then it is not going to be that easy. But with a seen exam it is just like writing it all out and memorizing it. The difference is that you are forced to understand X first.' (P1)
Student factors that affect learning from assessments		
Academic Maturity	• Self-Evaluation • Academic Insight • Academic motivation	'Because I knew X wasn't my strong point so like in X exam because I knew as a result I revised more for that than Y exam.' (P2)
Emotion	• Fear • Excitement	'Yes the X assignment was hard at first because it was something we had not done… for X I was more scared about that.' (P3)

Interpretation

Students' experience of assessments and the resultant learning are influenced by both student and teaching factors

Student factors:

- Include emotional responses to assessments. Negative emotions can hamper learning and are related to low predictability of assessments such as unseen exams and perception of inadequate academic support
- Academic maturity is linked with an understanding of the difference between deep and superficial learning, insight into the importance of balanced tutor support and an awareness of their own weaknesses

Teaching factors:

- Timing of assessments effects student preparation. There is also a knock-on learning effect with one assignment advancing the next
- Support for assignments needs to be balanced: too little causes feelings of abandonment; excess reduces academic independence and learning
- Predictability of assignments effects preparation: too much can adversely affects learning; too little causes student stress; cue-seeking reduces workload but increases grade success

Discussion and Implications

- In line with previous research the type and timing of assessments affects students' learning (Gibbs 2010)
- Students appreciate the learning outcome of assessments in line with Carless et al (2006) and contradictory to Fletcher et al.'s (2012) study
- Academic staff need to be aware that the timing of assessments and level of predictability might adversely affect student learning
- Academic support needs to be timely and balanced to avoid stress and promote independent learning
- Strategies to promote academic maturity and reduce stress and fear in students could foster a more constructive approach to learning

Limitations

- Students were high achieving psychology students; experience of less successful and non-psychology students may defer
- Focus group facilitators teach on the psychology course, this may have adversely affected student disclosure and biased the analysis

Future Direction

- Analysis of additional focus groups will add to these findings
- Scope to develop the study further using a quantitative survey

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