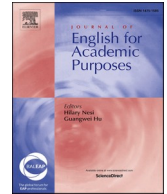





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Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

Understanding the collaborative assessment identity of English for academic purposes practitioners in higher education

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Collaborative assessment
English for academic purposes
Teacher identity
Written collaborative assignments

ABSTRACT

Collaboration is a valued learning outcome in Higher Education (HE) and students are likely to encounter collaborative assignments, such as a group essay or oral presentation, during their studies. While there are positive affordances to these types of assignments, their summative assessment may often represent a problematic area. In order to better understand the assessment practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners toward collaborative writing, a constructivist Grounded Theory approach was followed. Twenty practitioners were asked to evaluate four different models of collaborative assessment. In-depth discussion of these approaches highlighted the concerns and beliefs of EAP practitioners when it comes to collaborative assignments, with the key principles impacting practitioners' approach to collaborative assessment being fairness, transparency and simplicity. These in turn shaped three guiding orientations: reward, practical and defensibility. Understanding what guides teachers in collaborative assessment gives us the opportunity for training and professional development to enable more principled and consistent collaborative assessment practices.

1. Introduction

The assessment of student collaboration (e.g. students writing a group essay or delivering a group presentation) is acknowledged as a difficult task, with no easy solution suggested in the literature (see [Meijer et al., 2020](#); [Storch & Knoch, 2023](#)). While there has been considerable discussion about different ways to assess collaboration and the relative merits of assessing the product, complementary individual assignments and the quality of the collaboration itself, an important voice has been missing: that of practitioners and how they perceive and approach collaborative written assessment.

This paper explores a constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) ([Charmaz, 2014](#)) study into the perceptions and attitudes of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners working in a variety of Higher Education (HE) contexts regarding collaborative assessment. Through discussion of a pre-interview task in which participants had to evaluate different models of assessment for collaborative assignments, several concerns and considerations came to light. These helped illustrate the key principles and guiding orientations which appear to impact EAP practitioners engaging in collaborative assessment.

The assessment of collaboration is a complex area and one of particular concern in the field of EAP given its role in academic discourse socialisation ([Duff, 2010](#)) and potential gate-keeping role in universities ([Pearson, 2020](#)). There needs to be better understanding of the approach(es) EAP tutors make when assessing collaborative written assignments, how the grading of those assignments

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2025.101621>

Received 2 September 2025; Received in revised form 11 December 2025; Accepted 11 December 2025

Available online 19 December 2025

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is conducted, and how that process is perceived by teachers to help us move towards developing a principled approach to collaborative assessment. Meijer et al. (2020) called for research into “teachers’ actual rationale for and practices of the assessment of collaborative learning in higher education” (p. 1235), which is an area this paper hopes to address.

1.1. Literature review

One of the aims of education is preparing students for work and life, with collaboration being recognised as an important learning outcome (Mercer, Hockly, Stobart, & Lorenzo Galés, 2020). Collaboration is also a valuable experience in itself, with Panitz and Panitz (1998) arguing that collaborative learning is “the most effective form of learning” (p. 161). There is a long-standing sociocultural rationale for encouraging student collaboration, stemming from the work of Vygotsky (1978), which locates social interaction as the place where learning occurs. As Vygotsky wrote in *Thinking and Speech*, it is a “well known fact that with collaboration, direction, or some kind of help, the child is always able to do more and solve more difficult tasks that he can independently” (as cited in Rieber & Carton, 1987, p. 209). Through collaboration students are able to develop new knowledge (Edwards & Daniels, 2004) since, when working in groups, students can learn from each other, developing a collaborative scaffold, where students support each other through their learning (Donato, 1994; García Mayo, 2021; Ohta, 1995).

The benefits of collaboration can be seen in group writing tasks, which have been found to help with the development of collaboration skills (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009), improved oral skills due to the interactive nature of the task (Storch, 2013), and higher quality work (Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013). While collaborative assignments such as group essays or oral presentations clearly provide learning opportunities for students, a central tension remains: assessment. Collaborative assessment is recognised as a complex issue (Meijer et al., 2020; Strijbos, 2016) which remains under-researched (Li & Zhang, 2023; Storch & Knoch, 2023).

When discussing assessment in HE, Bloxham and Boyd (2007, p. 3) note that it “shapes the experience of students and influences their behaviour more than the teaching they receive”. The importance of assessment to students and how it focuses their attention is well recognised (Schellekens et al., 2021). As Gibbs (1999) puts it, the assessment system determines where students put their effort, which will hold relevance when later considering whether to assess collaboration itself in a group assignment.

Although collaborative assignments now feature across the majority of academic disciplines in HE, the focus of this particular study is collaborative assessment in EAP. EAP helps prepare students for higher-level education, in terms of language competence, academic skills and academic discourse socialisation, expanding the scope of the EAP practitioner beyond language into academic literacy and broader skill development (Bell, 2024). Assessment also plays a pivotal role in EAP, with Manning (2013) contending that “assessment can be considered as a prevalent practice associated with the teaching and learning of EAP” (p. 23). We assess to gain evidence students have gained the skills and competencies they will need in their future studies.

Across all academic disciplines, assessment occurs at different times for different purposes and Schellekens et al. (2021) provide a good overview of prevalent taxonomy. They chart the current conception of assessment to the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) who, in 1999, reimagined the former functions of assessment of ‘formative’ and ‘summative’ to ‘Assessment for Learning’ (AfL) and ‘Assessment of Learning’ (AoL) respectively. Earl (2013) added the conception of ‘Assessment as Learning’ (AaL), which emphasised the role of the student in assessment practices (e.g. utilising self-assessment and self-directed learning), locating students as “the critical connector between assessment and their own learning” (p. 3), positioning assessment as an arena where learning can take place.

Collaborative assessment can be located in AaL, at the nexus of dynamic assessment (DA), classroom-based assessment (CBA), and authentic assessments (AA) (see Fig. 1).

Dynamic assessment is the integration of assessment and instruction for the purpose of development (Anton, 2012). Within DA, the

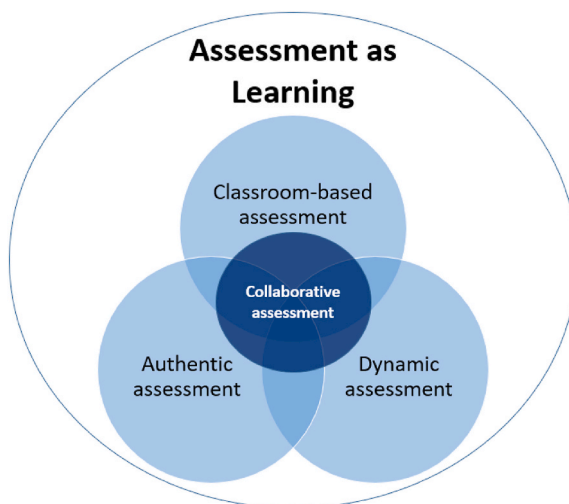


Fig. 1. Locating collaborative assessment within AaL (Levrai, 2025, p. 41).

key concern is what students may be able to achieve in the future with the use of scaffolding and feedback. The DA approach of the teacher intervening to improve student performance matches process writing approaches commonly found in EAP, where the teacher provides feedback during the drafting process to improve the quality of the final essay. DA also resonates with EAP as DA “aims at cognitive development and transfer of skills to future tasks” (Anton, 2012, p. 110), which is the very basis of EAP.

Collaborative assessments can also be considered CBA (Turner, 2012) since they are teacher-led class assignments. Note that ‘class’ is not classroom bound as a collaborative assignment may be completed through a blend of in-class and out-of-class activities, potentially mediated through collaborative virtual spaces. Collaborative assessment can also be considered a type of AA with assessment “being integrated throughout the learning process” (Searle & Poth, 2021, p. 424) and serving as what Mueller (2005, p. 3) called a vehicle for learning. Villarroel et al. (2017) highlight that AA replicates the kinds of tasks students will face in other contexts and can positively impact “student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation and metacognition” (p. 840), which chimes with the aims of EAP.

Since assessment can shape the student experience, teacher assessment literacy becomes a prime concern. Stiggins (1995) conceptualised assessment literacy as a teacher’s ability to understand, design, deliver and troubleshoot assessments, with Meijer et al. (2020) recognising that assessment literacy and assessment competence of language teachers is an area which needs to be improved because teachers must be assessment competent if the assessments are going to be fair to the students (DeLuca, 2012). This is particularly pertinent in the EAP sphere, where practitioners are engaged in high stakes assessments, which could affect their students’ academic careers.

Looney et al. (2018) investigated teachers’ relationships with assessment and conceptualised teacher assessment identity, which encompasses “beliefs, feelings, knowledge and skills” (p. 455). There is a rich field of literature devoted to identity, with Looney et al. drawing on the work of several additional researchers, notably Beijaard et al. (2004), Day et al. (2006) and Mockler (2011), to form understanding of identity as a socio-cultural construct. By this they maintain that teacher assessment identity is developed and evolves through context and experience, responding to events and circumstances (Looney et al., 2018, p. 446). As Rushton et al. (2023) put it, teacher identity is “socially constructed, dynamic and hybrid, that it is shaped by discourse, narrative and emotions, and influenced by social and organisational contexts” (p. 3). When conceptualising teacher assessment identity, Looney et al. (2018) closed their paper contending teacher assessment identity encompasses not only a range of assessment strategies and skills, and even confidence and self-efficacy in undertaking assessment, but also the beliefs and feelings about assessment that will inform how teachers engage in assessment work with students, and focuses not simply on what teachers do, but on who they are. (p. 456–457).

This quote encompasses the dimensions of teacher assessment identity, making the connection between teachers’ knowledge and beliefs and their subsequent engagement with assessment. Looney et al. (2018) illustrated teacher assessment identity as overlapping discs (see Fig. 2), giving a broad stroke view of what shapes a teacher’s assessment identity, incorporating knowledge, beliefs, feelings and experience.

Within teacher assessment identity Looney et al. (2018) discuss the contradictory feelings teachers may hold in relation to assessment, and this is very much the case when it comes to collaborative assessment. The over-arching research question for Levrai’s (2025) study is “How can we, if we can, best assess collaborative assignments in EAP?” and the goal of this paper is to explore the dimensions of EAP practitioner collaborative assessment identity, examining what EAP practitioners believe about collaborative assessment and how this shapes their approaches to it.



Fig. 2. Reconceptualising teacher assessment identity (Looney et al., 2018, p. 456).

2. Methodology

2.1. Constructivist Grounded Theory

To investigate EAP practitioner approaches and attitudes towards assessing collaborative assignments, a constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) approach was followed (Charmaz, 2014; Hadley, 2017). GT was ultimately selected because it is a methodology which several researchers have identified as being particularly suited to under researched areas (Charmaz, 2014; Schreiber, 2001), as is the case with collaborative assessment (Li & Zhang, 2023) and the EAP practitioner (Ding, 2024). GT is an exploratory process, where the researcher observes a social phenomenon and comes across something unusual or confusing, leading to closer investigation. This investigation is cyclical in nature as the researcher gathers data, analyses it, reflects and gathers more data, guided by emerging issues. The reflective aspect of GT is done through extensive memoing, which is a crucial aspect of conducting a GT research project (Charmaz, 2014; Hadley, 2017) as the researcher is constantly engaging with the data.

2.2. Participants

The focus of this study is the experience, attitude and beliefs of EAP practitioners. It is not bound to any specific context beyond practitioners teaching EAP in HE institutions. Twenty participants working in a variety of EAP contexts took part in the research (see Table 1). They come from diverse backgrounds, are well qualified (with 19 holding MAs), and have a range of experience (the majority having 10–15 years teaching EAP specifically) with a mean age of 45. Pseudonyms for participants will be used throughout this paper and the participants who took part in the pilot interviews are indicated with an asterisk.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

GT is an iterative approach (see Fig. 3) involving concurrent data collection and analysis, with the analysis shaping subsequent data collection. There were four rounds of data collection, with each round involving interviews with EAP practitioners. After each set of interviews there was a round of data analysis, which was conducted through a combination of immersion, coding and memoing. Immersion involves reading and rereading data, being submerged in it, reflecting on it and noticing ideas and concepts that crystalize (Borkan, 1999), which holds a commonality with the GT concept of emergence (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After the data analysis, the pre-interview task and interview protocol were refined to better investigate emergent themes and concepts in the next round of data collection with the next group of participants.

There were four pilot interviews, conducted as standardised open-ended interviews (Cohen et al., 2011) with close adherence to the protocol. This is reflective of early research design, which was more positivist in nature. After the pilot interviews, the approach to interviews became more reflexive, dialogic and conversational (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012), as typical in constructivist GT methodology. This helped with building rapport and creating a space where the participants could freely express ideas and opinions. Assessment of collaborative assignments is an area that has a lot of ambiguity and uncertainty about it and some of the uncertainties of the interviewer were shared with the participants through question stems like “One of the things I struggle with is ...” This was not intended to guide the participants but to locate the researcher as a peer rather than a distant objective outsider and to create space for the expression of doubts. There was also an effort to create dialogue *between* participants through question stems like “Some of the other people I’ve been talking to have said xxx. How would you take that?”. The in-depth interviews, which averaged an hour long,

Table 1
Participant profile.

| | Pseudonym | Nationality | Working in | Highest qualification | EAP experience (in years) |
|----|-----------|------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Andrea* | Greek | England | MA | 11–15 |
| 2 | Ava | Chinese | Macau | MA | 1–2 |
| 3 | Barry* | British | England | Postgraduate Diploma | 3–5 |
| 3 | Bertha | British | England | MA | 6–10 |
| 4 | Cristobal | British | UAE | MA | Over 15 |
| 5 | Dorian* | British | Finland | PhD | 11–15 |
| 6 | Dolly | American | Macau | PhD | 11–15 |
| 8 | Fay | Central American | Israel | MA | Over 15 |
| 9 | Fernand | British | China | MA | 11–15 |
| 10 | Gonzalo | American | America | MA | 11–15 |
| 11 | Humberto | British | Finland | MA | 3–5 |
| 12 | Jerry | British | Middle East | MA | 11–15 |
| 13 | Karen | New Zealander | Finland | MA | 6–10 |
| 14 | Kyle | British | England | MA | Over 15 |
| 15 | Laura | Turkish | Turkey | MA | 11–15 |
| 16 | Lorenzo | American | Finland | PhD | 3–5 |
| 17 | Olga | Taiwanese | Finland | PhD | 11–15 |
| 18 | Tanya* | American | Finland | MA | 6–10 |
| 19 | Van | British | Scotland | PhD | 11–15 |
| 20 | Wendy | British | England | MA | 6–10 |

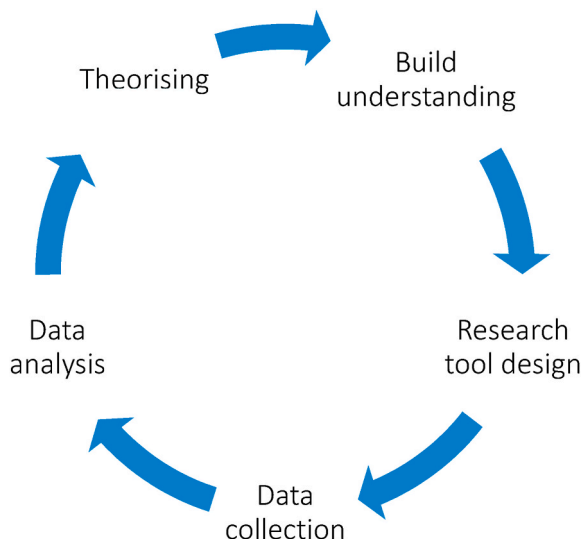


Fig. 3. The iterative process of GT.

provided a rich data set.

After the pilot round of four interviews, the following 16 interviews were preceded by a pre-interview task in which the participants had to evaluate different models of assessing a written assignment incorporating combinations of assessing the collaborative product, individual complementary assignments and the collaboration itself (see Table 2). These models were then discussed in the interview along with a broader discussion of collaborative assessment, its role in EAP and how self- and peer-assessment could be employed.

The pilot interviews provided the data set used for generating the initial codebook. A line-by-line coding approach was adopted, which would lay the foundation for future coding cycles. The aim of using line-by-line coding was to force a particularly close reading of the interview data and to avoid attention being directed by researcher bias. It also provided a contrast from the holistic reading and rereading of immersion. For the line-by-line coding several coding methods were utilised, shown below in Table 3 according to Saldaña’s (2016) nomenclature.

Simultaneous coding was allowed, with a single line of interview transcript potentially carrying multiple codes (see Fig. 4 for an example of simultaneous coding).

These methods were chosen so as to remain open to the data and to avoid premature theorisation, which could have been driven by bias or findings from the previous literature rather than the data itself.

As codes were developed, they were categorised under parent codes and this process served to increase researcher theoretical sensitivity and bring to light nascent concepts, which proliferated during this process. These nascent concepts would form the basis of the next cycle of coding when the study moved into focused investigation. Through focused coding, memoing and diagramming, the theoretical codebook was developed, with the theoretical codes emerging from the analysis. Theoretical coding in this context follows the Saldaña (2021) conception of bringing concepts together in a way that “suggests a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon” (p.314). The diagramming was particularly useful in trying to articulate the relationships between ideas and concepts and, indeed, Birks and Mills (2023) argue “diagramming is the creative tool to use when operationalising the logic of abduction” (p. 183, emphasis in original).

3. Findings

Interestingly, while the participants valued student collaboration, it was something they had had little experience of from their own student lives (see Bolster (2025) for a fuller discussion on the complex relationship between the EAP practitioner and collaborative learning). However, the small number of participants who had experienced collaboration as students themselves were very much

Table 2
Models of collaborative assessment used in the pre-interview task (Levrai, 2025).

| Model A | Group Grade | All students in the group receive the same grade, based on the quality of the group product |
|---------|--|--|
| Model B | Group grade + complementary individual assignments | All students in the group receive the same grade, based on the quality of the group product + an individual grade for complementary assignments. |
| Model C | Group grade + individual collaboration grade | All students in the group receive the same grade, based on the quality of the group product + an individual collaboration grade, based on criteria |
| Model D | Group grade x weighted collaboration grade | Students receive the grade for the group project, adjusted by their <i>relative</i> contribution to the other group members. |

Table 3
Initial coding methods of pilot data in Saldaña’s nomenclature (2016).

| | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|--|
| Elemental methods | Structural (p. 98) | To gather data linked to the research question together |
| | Descriptive (p. 102) | To gather data connected to key topics together (e.g. fairness) |
| | Process (p. 111) | Indicating the action of what is happening, a coding approach favoured by Grounded Theorists (Charmaz, 2008; Hadley, 2017) |
| Affective methods | Values (p. 131) | Encapsulating values, beliefs and attitudes |

Open coding

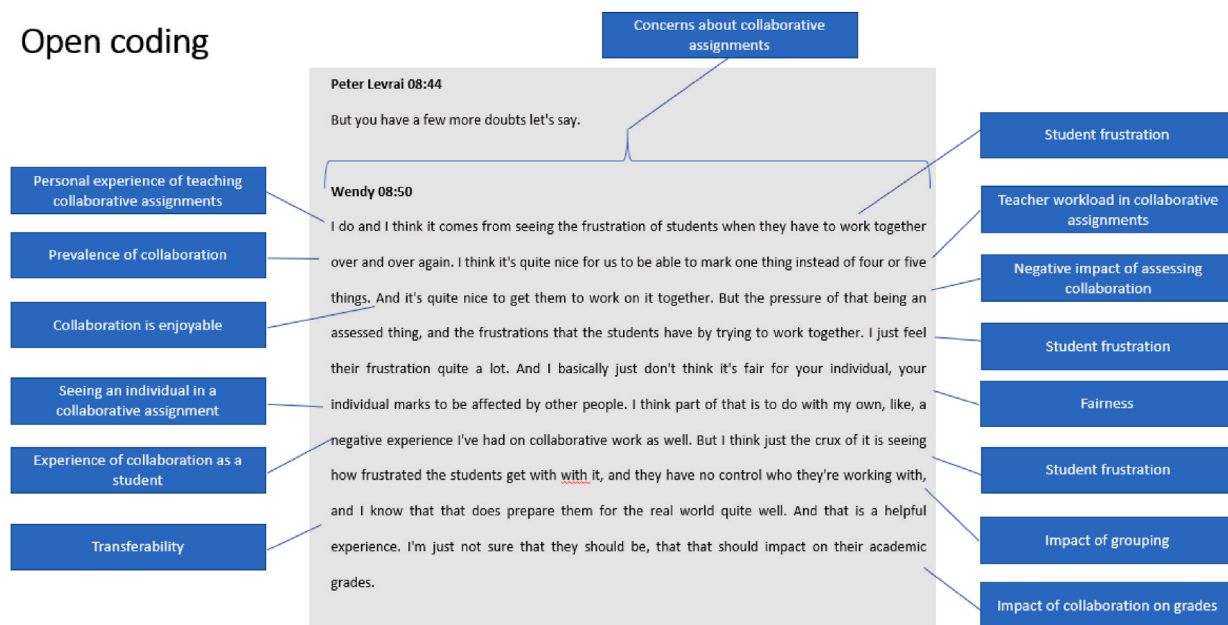


Fig. 4. Example of simultaneous coding.

impacted by it. For example, Wendy’s negative experience of being graded as part of a problematic collaboration perhaps feeds into her firm stance that collaboration should not be assessed. On the other hand, Fay’s positive advocacy toward collaboration may be the result of her own positive experiences of collaboration as a student. The resonance of personal experience as a student was also clear when Bertha was explaining her rating for Model B, saying “I think maybe I was thinking about my own experience as a student rather than as a tutor”.

The general lack of experience of collaboration as a student is compounded as collaborative assessment was not a feature of participants’ teaching training programmes, potentially since, as Dolly observed, there were so many other things to cover. Lorenzo realised collaboration was something he had learnt about on his own since “it’s not something that I received any explicit instruction in as a Bachelors, Masters or PhD student”. Tanya also had no experience of explicit instruction in facilitating collaboration, as ability to do so was just assumed, with teaching collaboration being “just one of those things that everyone is like, ‘oh, well, you know how to do this, right?’”. Indeed, evaluating the models of collaborative assessment and assessing them was valued as “a rewarding opportunity” to discuss an important area that was too often ignored, with Bertha acknowledging that “I think it’s a topic that’s not given enough focus really”.

The pre-interview task asking participants to evaluate different approaches to assessing collaboration assignments generated rich discussion, highlighting the key principles and guiding orientations that shaped participants’ beliefs about collaborative assessment. This section will provide an overview of each of the principles in turn, from simplicity to transparency to fairness, and then move on to the three guiding orientations these principles encapsulate: the reward, practical and defensibility orientations.

3.1. Key principles

These were the main principles that arose when discussing the participants’ beliefs and attitudes toward assessing collaborative assignments. Rather than traditional assessment concerns like validity and reliability, EAP practitioners were driven by the principles of simplicity, transparency and fairness.

3.1.1. Simplicity

One issue that was clear from the discussion of assessing collaboration is a desire for assessment to be simple. For Andrea, an

assignment with multiple components would be problematic as this approach “measures something different” rather than the piece of collaborative work produced and that it also in turn “furthers the task”. Barry considered trying to evaluate relative levels of contribution very complex and he admitted, “how simple I like my models of assessment to be”. Ava shared this preference for simplicity, in part because any assessment scheme has to be explained and justified to both students and the institution, and also because assessing collaboration would take time and resources which may not be available for an EAP course to devote to collaboration.

The urge for simplicity is part of the motivation for focussing assessment on the product rather than the collaboration, with Bertha recognising an assessment scheme she had set up for a group presentation lacked any mechanism for looking beyond the final presentation. Rather than looking into the development of the presentation and the collaboration, the focus was on the presentation and individual presentation skills of the students because “that was the most simple way”. Kyle shared this practical view, considering a product focus “easy to operationalize”, although he preferred an assessment scheme that went beyond the product, despite added complexity.

3.1.2. Transparency

Allied with simplicity is the need for an assessment scheme to be transparent and clear to the students from the outset. As Ava explained, “I think we have been very, very clear with how the grades are composed of at the very beginning, it’s on the course outline”. Her approach is by no means unique, with Olga and Lorenzo also agreeing on the need to be clear with students at the start of courses. Lorenzo provides a rubric so students “know what I was looking for” and Laura explains how “we go over the criteria with the students”.

Fay took a broader view, considering the transparency of expectations which must “be very clear and transparent for everyone so that you will always know what is allowed, what is not”. Van also expanded the concept of transparency to cover clear goal and objective setting, making the justification for tasks, activities and assignments clear to students. Jerry took the idea of transparency further, thinking not just about a teacher and a group, but about how a collaborative assignment is conducted across a wider programme, involving multiple teachers. In his view, “one of the worst things you can do in a collaborative assignment as an EAP tutor is that different tutors are giving different information. This is frustrating for students”. Transparency was also an issue in terms of how transparent a collaboration could be to a teacher who is outside the collaboration. As Dolly lamented, “I can’t assess what I can’t see”.

3.1.3. Fairness

Perhaps the dominant principle the participants held when it came to collaborative assignments was fairness, with a quote from Ava capturing the position of many of the participants. “The number one thing that I think I value is fairness and transparency”, which chimes with Dolly’s assertion that “I think, as a teacher, what I try to pay attention to is try to be fair”. Indeed, a form of the word “fair” was used by every participant in their interview, with 131 total uses across 20 interviews. Of the three principles, fairness seems to hold the greatest sway, with Gonzalo finding it important that students “know that they’re not doing any more work than anybody else for the same, the same grade”. This issue of fairness of student workload was also discussed by Kyle, who considered the impact on motivation if unequal workload was not addressed.

Fairness links back to transparency, with Karen explaining that she is always clear with students about the assessment criteria from the outset because she knows that in some other cases “students are told after they’ve done the task, what they’re going to be assessed on. And I think that’s horribly unfair”. She went on to refer to the transparency of collaboration to teachers questioning “how much do I know they’ve really done?” The challenge of fairly assessing collaboration was also discussed by Ava, who explained.

I actually observed the dynamics of groups in class when they’re working in class, and also from talking to people, but I actually, I really tried to shy away from grading them based on my perceptions because I don’t think that’s fair in the sense that some groups are just more open, they talk to me more, I’m more involved in their work. Or some students are just more talkative. They come to me more asking more questions. But I don’t think those are objective.

Her concern was shared by Lorenzo, who admitted “In some ways, yes, we should assess the collaboration. But my question is, how can you fairly and effectively put a point value or should you put a point value to that collaboration?” While Gonzalo would concur in part, accepting that, “I don’t think we’ll ever get it so everyone’s doing *exactly* one quarter of the work. That will never happen,” but going on to stress that, “I think *we* have an obligation to try and make it as fair as possible,” (emphasis in original).

3.2. Guiding orientations

Bound by the key principles, three guiding orientations also became apparent, speaking more to practitioner action and behaviour than belief. These are the reward, practical and defensibility orientations.

3.2.1. Reward orientation

The participants want students to benefit from their courses and value the positive learning outcomes from a collaborative assignment and the learning that takes place. The reward orientation means collaborative assessment schemes need to be geared towards being able to give the students the credit they deserve for the work they have done, requiring a level of visibility into the process. As Bertha put it:

I think the students gain a lot from collaborating and it would be a shame if they didn’t have, have a chance to do that. And I think, I think there are other benefits to it beyond just assessment, like the team building and the confidence building and all of those other factors that I think they’d be missing out if they didn’t experience that.

Wendy described a collaborative assignment as something of a “dry run” so students could develop the knowledge and skills for future individual writing assignments, which was a common position held by other participants who also saw collaboration having a preparatory role for future individual work. Collaborative assignments are, in and of themselves, rewarding and, when it comes to assessment, the participants also tended towards looking for opportunities to reward students.

It is important to note that while there was considerable awareness of the potential for dysfunctional behaviour during collaborative assignments e.g. free-riding or strongest student domination, this awareness did not translate into EAP practitioners wanting to penalise problematic behaviour. Van’s concern with free-riding and borderline students passing who should not “is not because I really want to, you know, weed these people out and fail them” but because other students would have to put in more work to compensate and because it is better to identify lower performing students earlier. In the case of unequal workload, for example, there was not a desire to punish or downgrade students who had not fully contributed, as the loss of learning was considered already punishment enough.

Rather than punishment, the participants had a reward orientation, where they wanted to reward the students who had taken on the greater load. The opportunity to reward students was one of the appeals of complementary individual assignments, with Dorian seeing them as an opportunity for students to “get something a little bit more for themselves”. Dolly considered effort as something which could be rewarded in the complementary individual assignments. It was something that other participants were also keen on rewarding, resulting in a kind of ‘sweat assessment’, where students who should be rewarded for their effort. What mattered, in terms of contribution to the group, was that the students did what they were able to do, to the best of their ability, and all the group members were making comparable effort.

Humberto considered sweat assessment in relation to differentiation, arguing students would appreciate an assessment scheme that allowed for differentiation as “they can see that *their* effort has been rewarded” (emphasis in original). Despite Wendy’s concerns about assessing collaboration, she conceded the use of individual complementary assignments (such as an individual summary of a source) could be beneficial because they enabled a teacher to see “how much work they’ve put in”. Cristobal suggested that effort was central to the conception of collaboration and would be a necessary assessment criterion since, “what is collaboration, it is making an effort to work with other people, isn’t it?”.

3.2.2. Practical orientation

For EAP practitioners, potential collaboration assessment schemes have to be practically actionable and worth the time and effort put in by both students and teachers. Time has to be available for teacher and student training, with the assessment scheme clear and justified to all involved. While the participants were keen to find opportunities to reward students for the work they did, they were also very aware of what they as teachers could realistically and practically do. Collaboration was valued for its real-world relevance, but there were concerns about their own expertise gaps, the need for both tutor and student training, awareness of their own limits, workload and assessment overload.

Before a student collaboration begins, preparation work is needed, although for some participants, such as Cristobal, actively teaching collaboration skills to students was a novel idea and others, such as Dolly, chose not to spend time on teaching collaboration explicitly, mirroring her own experience of just having to get on with it when she was a student. More widely, however, there was an awareness of the need to prepare students. The need for learner training at the start of a collaboration was discussed by Ava and Karen, with Jerry reflecting on what can go wrong during a collaboration if that learner training does not take place. For Cristobal, learner training is essentially linked to assessment as “you can only test people or assess people on what you’ve taught them”.

A concern then becomes when such learner training can take place. Wendy felt that “there’s too much of everything at the moment, it seems, in the courses. There are too many students. There’s, there’s a lot of input, there’s not enough hours”. When discussing preparing students for self-assessment, which is known to require prior training (Rasooli et al., 2024; Topping, 2003), Dolly discussed the choices that would have to be made about where to allocate resources asking “how much time do you want to devote in class to like doing this?” Although Bertha felt learner training was necessary, she was also wary of “the time investment that would go into training, like training the students and, and talking through all of those things with the tutors as well”.

It was clear in the discussion of the models of assessment for collaborative assignments, the participants were aware of what they were not able to do. There were limits to how much of a collaboration they could observe, either because collaboration may take place through channels they were not aware of, the collaboration may not look like how they expect collaboration to look, or there simply was not the time or bandwidth to go through track changes to try and identify every student contribution in an online document. There were further concerns about “scalability” of an assessment approach when the number students/groups increase and the challenge of paying attention to everything involved in collaborative assessment. Although Bertha and others pointed out the practical value in having fewer overall pieces of work to assess in collaborative assignments, Tanya would qualify this as it is “a lot harder to grade” the collaborative work. This was further illustrated during the evaluations of the models of assessment and assessing collaboration itself. One of the concerns was the “degree of oversight” needed and the fact that it “sounds like more work for the teacher”. As Fay explained, she would not feel comfortable assessing collaboration “unless I had cameras going on and all the groups all the time, and took the time to watch all these films and analyse them and then give grades”. Cristobal went further, challenging the value of the putting work into assessing collaboration, considering it a case of “just jumping through hoops, the teachers doing all this admin having to collect all these different things” when the product could reflect the quality of the collaboration.

So too can the assessment tools become onerous for students, who are documenting and diarying, potentially performatively rather than productively. Fernand spoke directly to the workload, talking about the admin and reporting for a collaborative writing assignment where both students and teachers were “getting burnt out and fed up with it”. The act of looking closely at collaboration can distort it, paralleling a concern of Humberto’s regarding teacher intervention in writing when he said, “too much intervention and

feedback can actually undermine their writing skills". If students are always thinking about and discussing and getting feedback on how they are collaborating the danger is they will not collaborate naturally so "the more I interfere with collaboration, the less collaborative it becomes".

3.2.3. Defensibility orientation

Superseding the reward and practical orientations is the defensibility orientation of the participants. Defensibility speaks to preparedness, of being aware of what could or might happen and the need to be ready to explain decisions and results since assessment schemes in EAP have to be robust and justifiable to a range of stakeholders. This is in line with Stiggins' (1995) conception of assessment literacy being able to recognise what could go wrong and the ability to prevent such problems before they happen. In this way the defensibility orientation encourages consideration of the key principles and other orientations, as a robust assessment that is defensible should also be fair, simple, transparent, rewarding and practical.

The defensibility orientation is shaped by experience and expectation, which have interinfluence, within the context of the HE environment (see Fig. 5).

The prominence of environment on shaping practitioner beliefs is not unexpected as "teachers' conceptions of assessment are ecologically rational in that they reflect the legal, cultural or social priorities placed on assessment for their work environment" (Brown, 2011, p. 65). EAP practitioners work in the university context and are consequently aware that assignments and assessment schemes need to be defensible to students, colleagues, direct language centre management, wider university management, exam boards and external examiners, and, in the UK context, United Kingdom Visas and Immigration (UKVI). As such, the wider university culture can either foster or stifle assessed student collaboration. This was reflected in Ava's consideration of how much time could be devoted to assessment of collaboration in an EAP and wondering whether it would be accepted by the board of the University to spend a lot of time on collaboration in an EAP course.

With little to no personal experience of collaborative learning to draw on, and no guidance in terms of training, many practitioners were guided by their initial expectations. Some, such as Van, approached his first experience with collaborative assignments with scepticism, explaining, "I guess I just wasn't used to it. And because I never did it. You know, it's something you're not familiar with, and you don't understand how it works. And so yeah, I was just a bit sceptical to start with." However, once participants gained experience, they became more aware of what might happen during collaborations and became, as Tanya explained, "more confident myself in what I expected", enabling more effective facilitation as they had a better idea of what they wanted students to do and of what could go wrong. Dolly expressed this as a desire to "vaccinate my students in advance", meaning making students aware of various pitfalls of collaboration at the outset and advising them how to avoid them.

Participants held a range of expectations related to the impact of student profile or behaviour on collaborative assignments (see Fig. 6). Many of these expectations were coloured more toward hampering rather than facilitating collaboration, leading to the defensive posture. That does not mean participants expect, for example, all students to freeload or fall out with group mates. Rather,

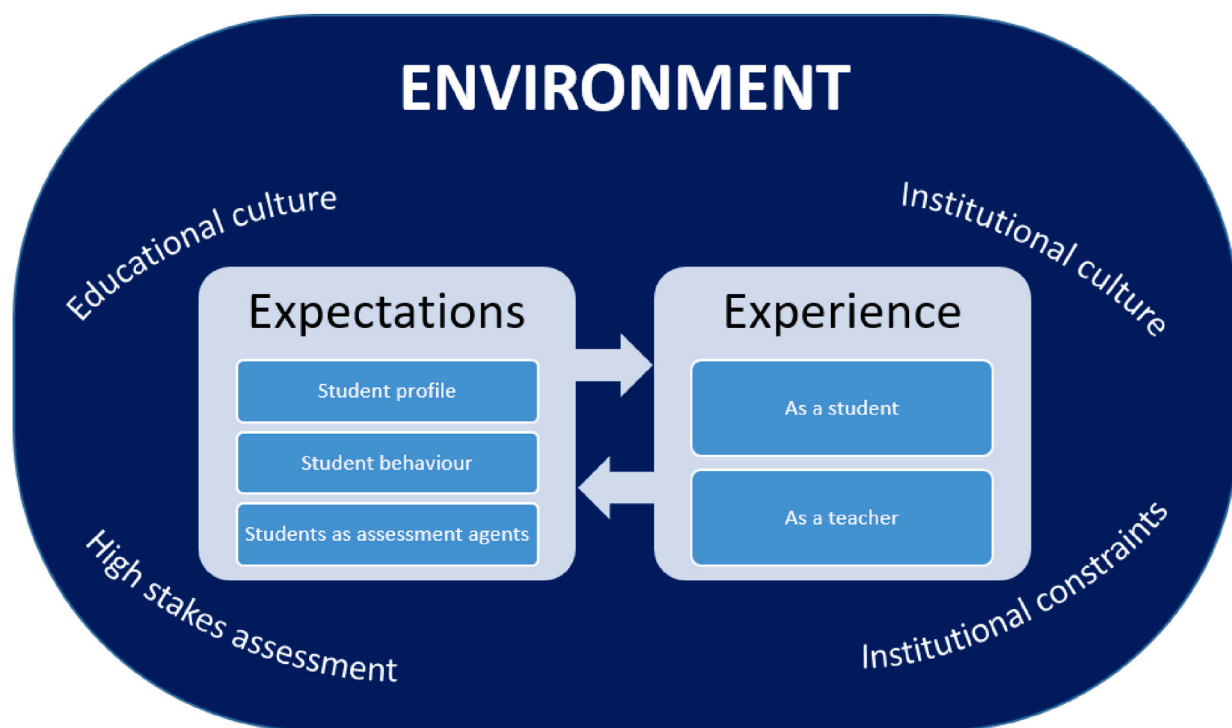


Fig. 5. Factors shaping the defensibility orientation (Levrai, 2025).

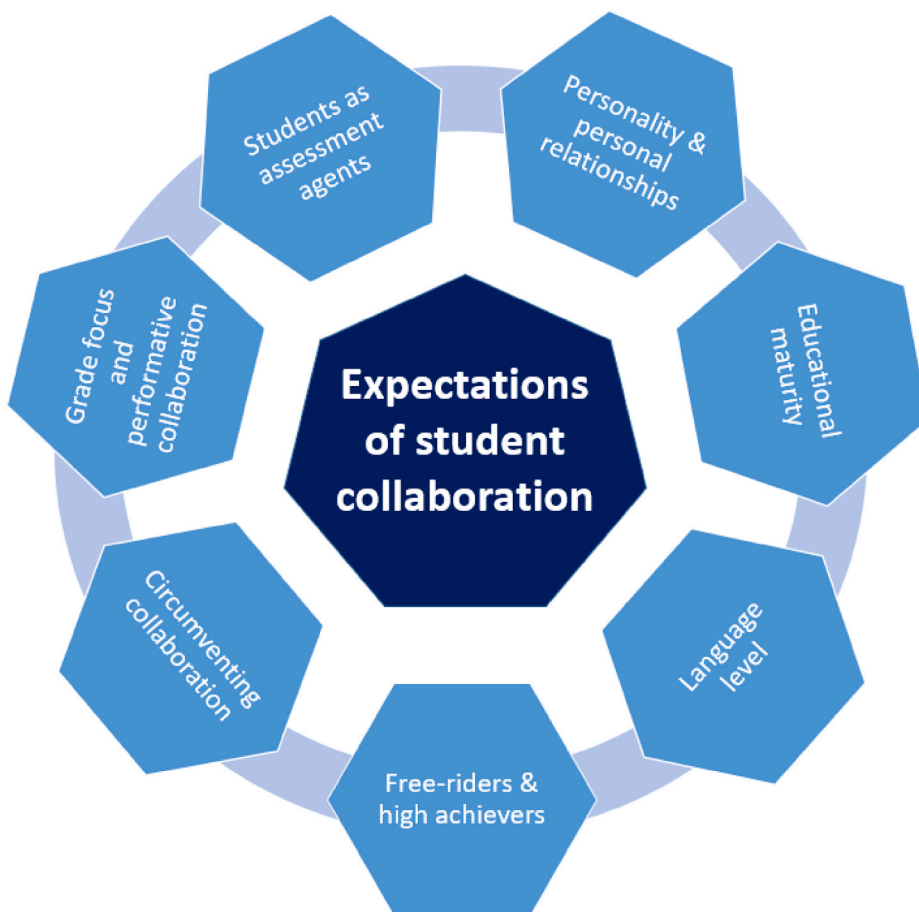


Fig. 6. Practitioners' expectations of student collaboration (Levrai, 2025, p. 237).

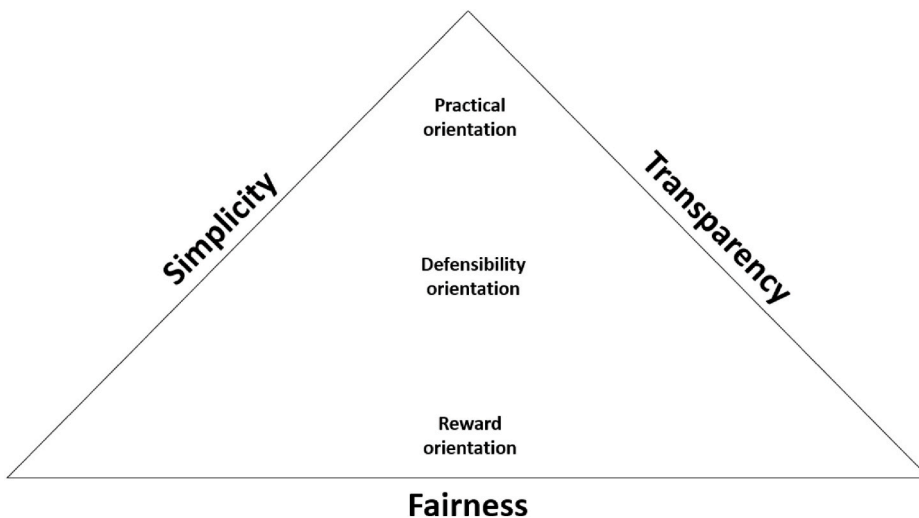


Fig. 7. The collaborative assessment identity prism: key principles encompassing guiding orientations (Levrai, 2025, p. 294).

there was awareness that such behaviours could happen, which has an impact on practitioner attitude and decision making.

4. Discussion

The key principles and guiding orientations described in this paper together form the dimensions of collaborative assessment identity and this section illustrates how they interact.

4.1. Collaborative assessment identity

Through the data analysis, it became increasingly clear that the participants were bringing a lot of themselves into the assessment of collaborative assignments. This is not unexpected, but the interplay between beliefs and practices and the potential for a gap between the two, as identified by James and Pedder (2006), took on particular resonance, as did Brown's (2011) contention that conceptions about assessment influence practice. What we believe about assessment impacts the way we approach and enact it. It became clear during the data analysis that in the same way teachers hold an assessment identity (Looney et al., 2018), they also hold a collaborative assessment identity, influenced by the unique features of collaborative assessment. While EAP practitioners could hold a high degree of confidence in their assessment abilities in one sphere (i.e. several of the participants were experienced IELTS examiners), they could feel very differently about assessing collaboration, meaning we can more properly talk about assessment identities rather than a single assessment identity. This resonates with Bolster's (2025) recognition of the hybrid identity of EAP practitioners and their duelling dualities.

The components of teacher assessment identity outlined by Looney et al. (2018) are still apparent in collaborative assessment identity in that it is influenced by knowledge, beliefs, experience and feelings. However, when diagramming the collaborative assessment identity of EAP practitioners, more specific dimensions are brought to the fore. These are the three overlapping key principles of fairness, transparency and simplicity, which, in turn, encapsulate the three guiding orientations and together encapsulate the collaborative assessment identity, with fairness serving as the principle that grounds everything else (see Fig. 7).

Fairness, as the most widely discussed and strongest principle, is the base consideration and has a direct connection to both transparency and simplicity. Assessment schemes being transparent to students is an aspect of fairness (de Hei, Strijbos, Sjoer, & Admiraal, 2016) and having assessments that are not overly-complex and transparent also speaks to fairness. While there is a synergy between the principles, transparency and simplicity are not fully subsumed in fairness. Although they often work in concert, they can also operate in opposition. A product-focused assessment is the simplest approach to assessing a group assignment. It is also, arguably, the least fair means of assessing collaborative work, particularly if it is the collaboration itself which is being assessed. The rationale for an assessment scheme, regardless of its fairness, could be made fully transparent to students, or could be kept opaque. In this way, the three principles must be seen as connected yet distinct.

The three principles of simplicity, transparency and fairness set the foundation for collaborative assessment identity. While all three are positive principles, dogmatic zealotry toward any one of them is problematic. Full transparency, for example, could lead to fine point assessment criteria which actively deform natural collaboration through codifying and encouraging very specific behaviours. Absolute simplicity could see the product being the only means of assessment. The quest for complete fairness could create an incredible amount of work which could have a deformative effect on the collaboration in question. The principles therefore have to be tempered. Within collaborative assessment identity this is achieved via the three guiding orientations, which sit within the frame of those principles.

There is an ongoing pull between these principles and orientations, creating a dynamic collaborative assessment identity. In this conception, the principle of fairness is a major driver of the reward orientation, with participants wanting to ensure students get the credit their work deserves, demonstrating sweat assessment matters in the reward orientation. It is not fair for a free-rider to get the same result as students who fully participated and collaborative assessment requires differentiation so higher-performing students and students who make good effort can be rewarded. Consequently, while the reward orientation is driven by the fairness principle, close adherence to fairness can run counter to collaborative assessment where such differentiation can be difficult, problematizing such assignments for the reward orientated. The reward orientation is also limited by the practical orientation. To differentiate between students, a teacher could invest a lot of time and energy in tracking the collaboration, which would enable fairer rewards, but the practical orientation limits how much resource can be dedicated to assessing collaboration in light of other course demands.

That is not to say fairness has no role in the practical orientation, rather that the degree of fairness has to be in line with what is practically possible. For the practical orientation, assessment has to work and be of benefit and, for this to be the case, it needs to be simple and transparent. Fairness is still a concern, but it can be compromised to some extent to keep assessment deliverable and manageable. This does not mean that unfair practices are embraced, but rather there can be acceptance of some weaknesses in an assessment scheme if the scheme overall is felt to be deliverable and generally effective and if the nature of the assessment scheme is transparent to the students. Concerns of overload for teachers and students mean not every assessment lens is brought to bear, adhering to the principle of simplicity. However, the assessment still has to be robust and justified, feeling the pull of the defensibility orientation.

The defensibility orientation necessarily sits at the confluence of all three principles and is central to EAP practitioner collaborative assessment, sitting between the other two orientations, holding them in check. The defensibility orientation requires assessment that adheres to the three key principles and also satisfies the other two guiding orientations, as far as is pragmatically possible. It is where practitioner experience and expectation come into play and where assessment is weighed and measured to ensure it is fit for purpose for the HE environment. It is also where idealism meets realism and the necessary compromises for collaborative assessment are

negotiated.

5. Conclusion

Learner collaboration is a feature of the student HE and EAP experience through written group assignments and, if collaboration is an intended learning outcome, then it follows that collaboration has to be assessed. As the main assessment agents, practitioners are central to the assessment process in its design and implementation. However, practitioners are not neutral avatars, they bring their beliefs and experiences with them into the assessment. Consequently, it is important to consider the particular drives practitioners have in collaborative assessments.

This work was conducted as a broad context study, drawing on the experience of practitioners from a variety of backgrounds and teaching institutions. This width was valuable in developing a general conception of EAP practitioner collaborative assessment identity, but also serves as a limitation as there was no opportunity to evaluate the role of institutional culture and a valuable avenue of research would be examining the beliefs and attitudes of EAP practitioners working in the same context. This research is also limited in the sense that it took a snapshot of practitioner thoughts at a particular time. Wendy's shift further away from collaborative assessment suggests attitudes are not fixed and, as such, a longitudinal study of practitioners through multiple iterations of collaborative assessment would be of value.

What is apparent, however, is that EAP practitioners value simplicity, transparency and, above all, fairness in collaborative assessment practices. In addition, they are driven for assessment to be rewarding for the students, practically possible, and defensible to various stakeholders. These principles and orientations work in concert, forming EAP practitioner collaborative assessment identity and shaping approaches to collaborative assessment. Understanding this can help us rationalise collaborative assessment schemes and can help inform teacher training to improve collaborative assessment literacy.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Peter Levrai: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.
María del Pilar García Mayo: Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Funding was provided

No.

Competing interests to declare

No.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the research participants for sharing their time and expertise and to Dr Averil Bolster for her valuable feedback on the developing work.

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