What if listening rooms could become a method of assessment?

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Abstract

This brief communication proposes that Heron's Listening Rooms data collection method could be adapted for use as an assessment method in higher education (HE), potentially replacing some forms of written assessment. Their adoption would enable students to demonstrate capabilities they may find challenging to evidence in written form. The author offers suggestions for the use of Listening Rooms in assessing different subjects. This is followed by a discussion on the challenges and suitability of using Listening Rooms as an assessment method. The piece concludes by reaffirming the need for a diverse and inclusive range of assessment methods in contemporary HE.

Keywords: Listening Rooms; assessment; speaking; oracy; inclusivity.

University assessment experiences are frequently rated low by students and viewed as being outdated (Buckley, 2021). As such, there is an increasing realisation across the higher education (HE) sector of the need to provide a wider range of inclusive assessments to support students in evidencing their true academic potential by providing opportunities for engagement and agency (Jessop, 2023). HE teaching and learning practices often overlook oracy (Heron, 2019), instead focusing on other skills that direct students towards the convention of the written assessment. Some students may shine in written assessments, but others struggle to showcase their abilities. Written tasks undoubtedly form the largest part of many students' university assessments, with speaking options being more limited. Yet if we consider that one of HE's roles is to prepare learners for the world of work, surely speaking should take a more prominent role in developing transferable skills (Byrne, 2020). Successful oracy requires a range of skills, including

cognition, linguistic expression, and social awareness (Oracy Cambridge, 2019). To allow students to develop these skills, we should provide more opportunities in teaching, learning, and assessment for them to be practised. One potential option for this is to allow students to work with a partner to develop a dialogue for assessment. This could be done by using a Listening Room activity.

Developed by Heron (2020) to use friendship to hear student voice on belonging at university, Listening Rooms have since emerged as a research method for collecting qualitative data (see, for example, Greaves et al., 2021; Lister et al., 2022; Parkin and Heron, 2023). Listening Rooms involve a pair of friends participating in a discussion with prompts provided in a 'room'. The discussion generates primary data to be used in a subsequent research project. One important aspect is that there is no authoritarian presence in the room, just the two friends chatting about what they see on the cards in front of them. As a research method, Listening Rooms have proven successful in their purpose. The approach has gained awards and made a significant impact on the student experience at its parent institution (Guardian, 2020; Sheffield Hallam University, 2024), demonstrating its strengths in harnessing student-centred approaches. But what if Listening Rooms could be adapted as a form of assessment?

Research indicates that some students perform better in group assessments compared to individual assessments (Mbalamula, 2018; Heron, 2019). They may prefer the peer collaboration and self-management involved in collaborative activities (Burcu, 2020), supporting the rationale for providing collaborative assessment options. In bringing a pair of students together, there is the support of a partner that could provide a psychologically safe and less stressful environment than being in an exam room. These conditions can foster discussion of ideas that students had perhaps not previously considered, fostering new pathways of knowledge and criticality. Potential assessments for Listening Rooms could be:

- A pair of Maths students discussing their workings and answers to questions rather than taking an exam.
- A pair of Sociology students constructing an essay verbally.
- A pair of Language students demonstrating their communication skills rather than face to face with an assessor.

To remove the presence of an assessor, a visual or audio recording of the Listening Room should be initiated to allow for subsequent grading.

Naturally, there would be questions over how to assess student performance in these situations. Would these activities be group or individual assessments? If they are individually marked, how would grades be assigned? Providing both students with the same grade when one is perhaps more proactive and provides stronger answers than the other could lead to questions over the fairness of the process (Dix, 2024). Additionally, if pairs of students are alone in a non-proctored assessment, assessors need to consider how they would be able to view and hear student output. Another issue in the assessment process is the scheduling of each Listening Room and the selection of assessment tasks. If each Listening Room is scheduled to take place sequentially and the same tasks are placed in each one, there is potential for the content of the tasks to be communicated to subsequent candidates. There are three possible solutions to this obstacle:

1. All candidates wait together in a location until it is time for their Listening Room assessment.
2. Multiple Listening Rooms are scheduled to take place concurrently.
3. A selection of tasks is generated by the assessors, and these are randomly assigned to each Listening Room so that no two rooms have the same tasks.

A further aspect to ask of Listening Rooms is the role of friendship and its suitability in assessment. Heron (2020) created Listening Rooms as a data collection method for students to voluntarily share their opinions. If Listening Rooms are used as an assessment method, it might not be possible or even ethical to require students to participate with a friend or indeed be contrary to individual learning plans. One potential way to deal with the friendship aspect of Listening Rooms is to randomly assign students into pairs, but this could still raise questions over inclusivity. Some students may prefer, want, or be required to be assessed independently. In these circumstances, they could be offered the option to undertake a Listening Room activity alone in which they would need to verbalise all their thoughts as though in conversation with themselves.

Of course, it may be considered challenging to train both students and assessors to undertake an unfamiliar assessment. For this reason, Listening Rooms could instead be used as a formative method of assessment to build oracy confidence and competence.

This formative assessment could then be used to scaffold students through to more frequently used spoken assessments such as presentations (Heron, 2019).

The use of Listening Rooms as a method of assessment is unexplored. Allowing for the option of spoken assessments alongside written outputs could provide students with the opportunity to evidence their true abilities that are potentially restricted by longstanding assessment norms. To advocate for the use of Listening Rooms as a method of assessment, learning developers and similar practitioners can support students to develop their confidence in speaking and articulating information. Such skills are not only necessary for Listening Rooms but also for HE learning environments and future workplaces. We can provide students with opportunities to help them decide on their preference for a Listening Rooms assessment. In doing so, using Listening Rooms could be the answer to reducing anxiety in speaking assessments.

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