

ual:

Is it safe to share?

Psychological safety in online learning



Nikshay Auchoybur, In the studio |
Photograph: Alys Tomlinson

Yasi Tehrani | Learning Designer

Presentation | January 2025

Contents

- Positionality
- Understanding psychological safety
- Why it is important
- Research design
- Thematic analysis results
- The elephant in the room...



Framing the research

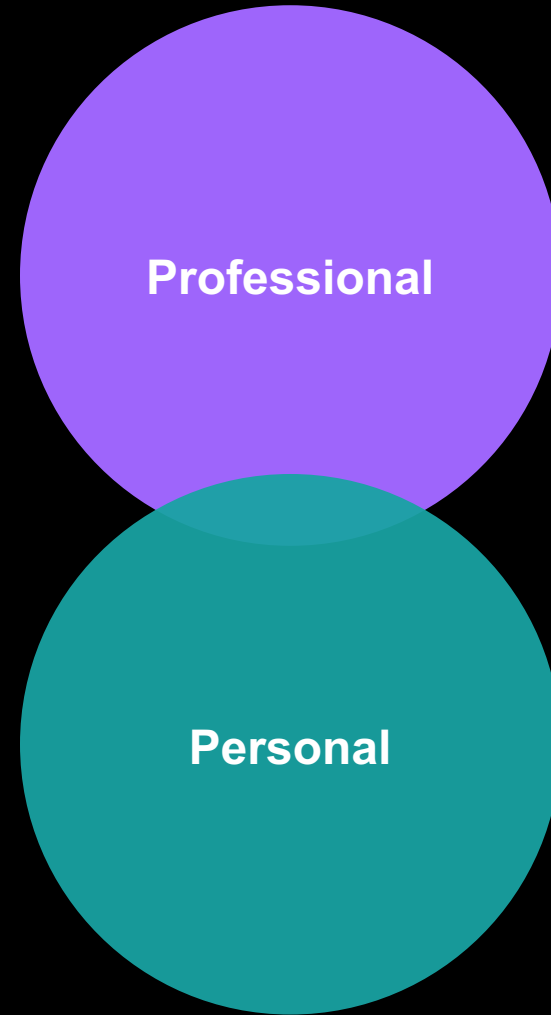


Positionality

“Indifference towards people and the reality in which they live is actually the one and only cardinal sin in design.”

- Dieter Ram

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Understanding psychological safety

What is psychological safety?

*“...freedom from **fear**, **embarrassment**, or **humiliation** in groups”* (Edmonson, 1999)

Why is it important for our students?

There is an **inherent vulnerability** in creative practice, where making and **sharing** involve risking **failure**, **critique** and **misunderstanding**.

The work is synonymous with the person[hood] of the student and an integral part of their professional identity. (Orr and Shreeve, 2017).

When it goes wrong...

“

*I wanted to explore my culture, in terms of reggae music and the dancehall scene, being originally Jamaican, with links to Cuba also. Unfortunately, it was frowned upon by the tutors. I guess they were scared they couldn't relate to my experiences... it was very much a Western approach you were allowed to explore. Anything outside of that was a **no-go zone**.*

”



Yui Yamamoto, 2021 MA
Performance: Design and
Practice, Central Saint Martins,
UAL | Photograph: Alys Tomlinson

Research question



Matt Graysmith, Fine Art
(Painting), Camberwell, UAL |
Photographer : Alys Tomlinson

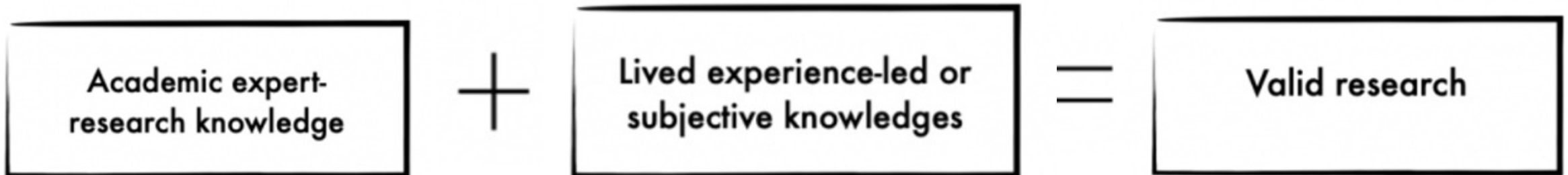
“

*How do students' **perceptions** of
psychological safety in online learning
environments affect their willingness to
share creative work?*

”

Research design

- Extended the ethos of action research through participatory action research design (Lennette, 2022).
- Phenomenological research centres on lived experiences of participants.



Data collection and analysis

Data collection method	Mode of delivery	Respondent(s)
Questionnaire	Online Survey (JISC)	7
Semi-structured interview	MS Teams	3

Creswell (2003) suggests that a reasonable sample size may range from 3 - 25 participants for a phenomenological study.

I used a thematic analysis approach following the six steps outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017).

Theme 1

Creating conditions for trust

Includes:

- Conscious curation of psychological safety through structured activities
- Non-judgmental, non-competitive atmosphere development
- Comfort in sharing draft work

*...a space where it's safe to share your thoughts, which **might not be completely formed or factually correct yet.***

*There's no one formula to it, but I think it's a lot of **conscious curation** to creating that safe space. You have to almost build up to it.*

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*It would help if the university embedded principles of **care** and **empathy** in the pre-curriculum or the curriculum itself.*

Theme 2

Structure and empathy

Includes:

- Actively designing opportunities for psychological safety into the curriculum
- Clear, structured, instructional design and guidelines
- The role of the tutor

Theme 3

Cultural barriers to sharing

Includes:

- Understanding the influence of cultural backgrounds on sharing.
- Challenging assumptions about the perceived value of cultural capital
- Building cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity

*Acknowledgment goes a really long way to make **you feel cared for**. Acknowledging **language** and **cultural realities** helped people **feel cared for**.*

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*Academia is **competitive**, and it's hard to create non-competition within it. But you can create moments of **pause to reflect and connect**. The competitive culture of academia sometimes discourages **vulnerability** and **sharing**.*

Theme 4

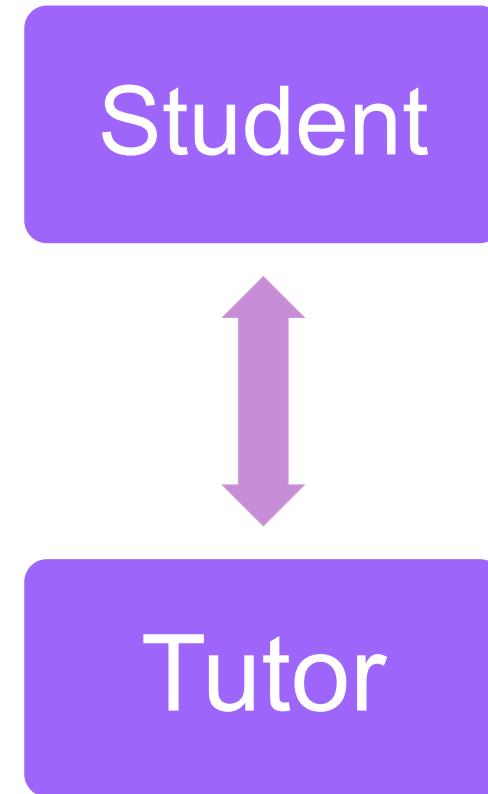
Power dynamics in groups

Includes:

- Fear of work being copied
- Implicit hierarchies in learning environments
- Encouraging rewarded vulnerability

The student and the tutor

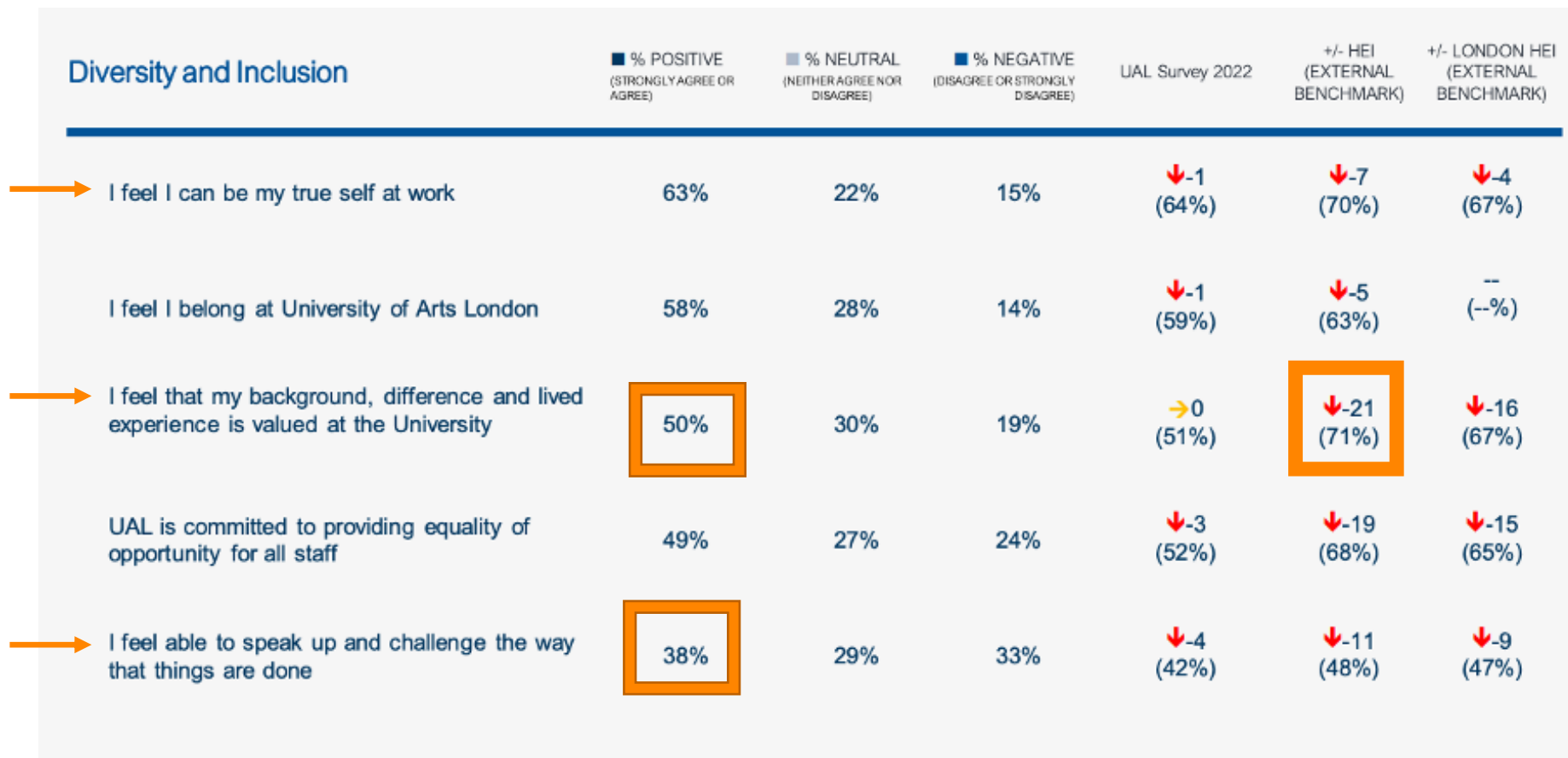
- Students repeatedly spoke about the role of the tutor in creating a psychological safe space
- Perception that all the responsibility for building psychological safety falls onto the tutor
- How do tutors/staff feel?



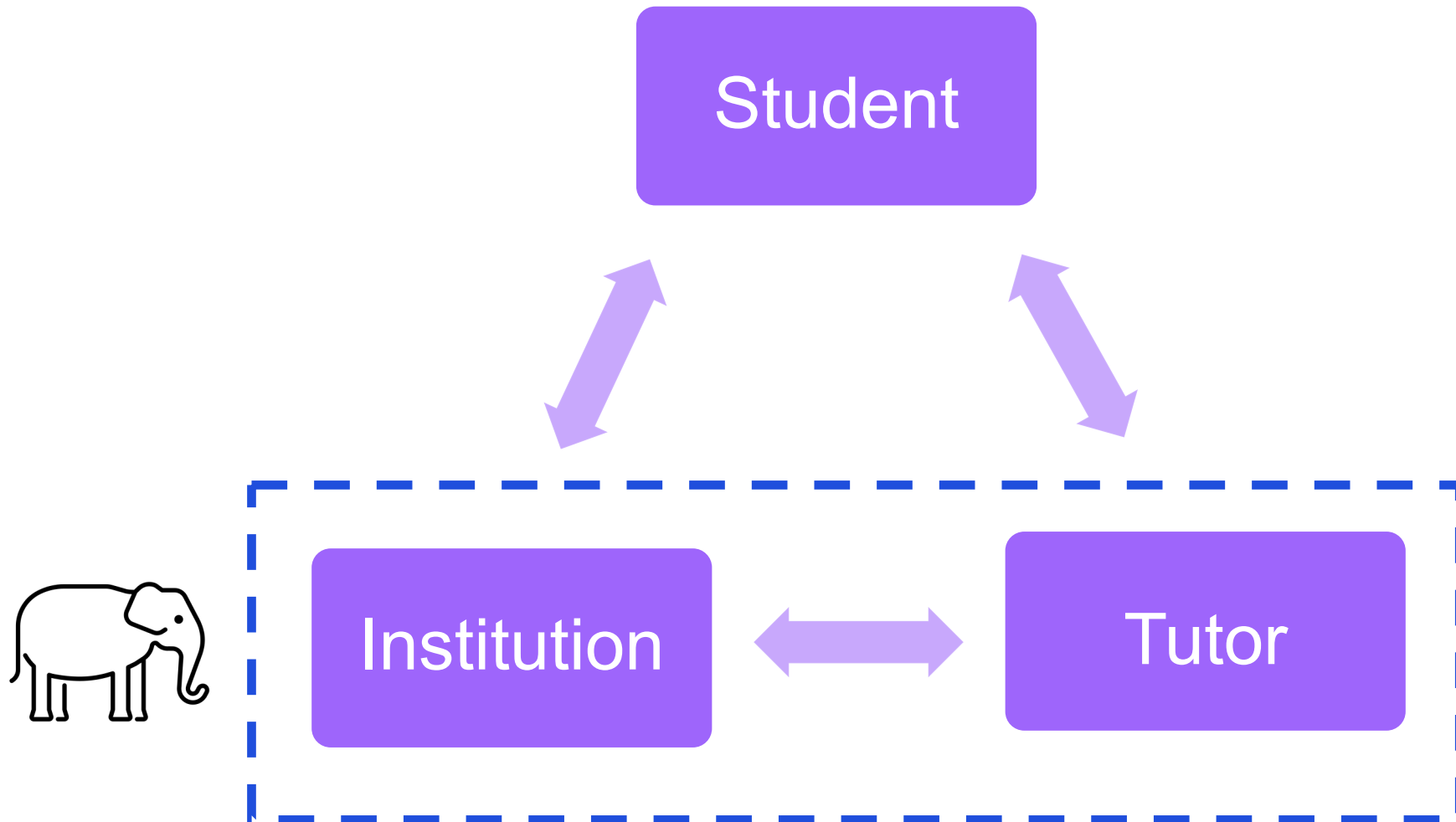
Staff voice

Diversity and Inclusion				UAL Survey 2022	+/- HEI (EXTERNAL BENCHMARK)	+/- LONDON HEI (EXTERNAL BENCHMARK)
	% POSITIVE (STRONGLY AGREE OR AGREE)	% NEUTRAL (NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE)	% NEGATIVE (DISAGREE OR STRONGLY DISAGREE)			
I feel I can be my true self at work	63%	22%	15%	↓-1 (64%)	↓-7 (70%)	↓-4 (67%)
I feel I belong at University of Arts London	58%	28%	14%	↓-1 (59%)	↓-5 (63%)	-- (--%)
I feel that my background, difference and lived experience is valued at the University	50%	30%	19%	→0 (51%)	↓-21 (71%)	↓-16 (67%)
UAL is committed to providing equality of opportunity for all staff	49%	27%	24%	↓-3 (52%)	↓-19 (68%)	↓-15 (65%)
I feel able to speak up and challenge the way that things are done	38%	29%	33%	↓-4 (42%)	↓-11 (48%)	↓-9 (47%)

Staff voice



The student, the tutor...and the institution



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Co-creating psychological safety

How do we intentionally create the conditions from which psychological safety emerges for both students and staff?

- For students and tutors we want to cultivate “...*freedom from fear, embarrassment, or humiliation in groups*” (Edmonson, 1999)
- By not being indifferent “...*towards people and the reality in which they live.*” Dieter Ram

References

- Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2017) 'Thematic analysis', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), pp. 297–298. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>.What made you feel that way?
- Edmondson, A. (1999) 'Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), pp. 350–383. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999> (Accessed: 16 December 2024).
- Lenette, C. (2022) *Participatory action research: ethics and decolonization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Orr, S. and Shreeve, A., 2017. *Art and design pedagogy in higher education: Knowledge, values and ambiguity in the creative curriculum*. Routledge.



Thank you





Questions





Appendix



Interview questions (sample)

Section 1: Understanding psychological safety

- What does psychological safety mean to you in the context of online learning?
- Can you describe a moment in your online learning experience where you felt psychologically safe?
- What made you feel that way?
- Have you ever felt unsafe or hesitant to share your creative work in an online environment? What factors contributed to those feelings?

Recommendations

Curriculum design

- Building structured opportunities for low-stakes sharing
- Incorporating reflection points about psychological safety as a value
- Designing assessments that value process as much as product
- Supporting and rewarding vulnerability in creative arts practice
- Reframing failure as a valuable part of learning
- Creating spaces where diverse lived experiences are valued

Recommendations

Institutional changes

- Embedding psychological safety in course documentation
- Developing staff training around creating safe spaces
- Establishing clear support frameworks for both students and tutors
- Creating feedback mechanisms to monitor psychological safety