

Sent With Love: Love letters as ways of thinking about relational pedagogies of assessment.
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Abstract

What kind of assessment might emerge if attention is paid to posthuman and collaborative pedagogies? In our chapter we propose a relational praxis to assessment in higher education that builds upon a collaborative, affirmative ethics, that speaks to an embodied and affective experience. We explore alternatives to normative assessment practices to resist traditional structures of individualisation, competition and alienation. We reflect on our attempt to dismantle hierarchies through the form of writing ‘love letters’ between each of the four authors. The exchanges, movement and duration implied in the sending, receiving and re-sending letters to each other by post in a process of posthuman, collaborative writing, created a space to think about, and experience, care and joy. It prompted us to consider how we can create joyful experiences for both the student and lecturer in assessment. We asked ourselves what potentia is evoked by writing ‘love letters’ as a relational pedagogy of assessment?

Introductions: joyful encounters (When we met for the first time, we smiled at each other)

Care in folding

Love in unfolding

Some ways this chapter might be read, a cartography.

Our chapter is an entanglement, sometimes a scattering, sometimes a stammering, of multiple modes of writing, researching and thinking to, ‘...expose power [relations in assessment practices] both as entrapment (potestas) and as empowerment (potentia)’ (Braidotti, 2019a. p. 33). In some places we describe what happened and what we thought and felt about the processes of sending and receiving love letters. In others we reflect on our own values as educators and how other thinkers and practitioners have helped us construct our individual and collective ideas. In some instances, we want to show you the affects of the processes we went through by creating a woven rhythm of different writings that hopefully helps re-create the joyfulness of our experiences with these letters of love. We want to show that, ‘A post-human approach [...] allows us to use languages and methodologies that do not restrict the emergence of assemblages under the assumption of their a priori ontological separation, but rather examine their reparative potential based on the efficacy of situated relationships.’ (Blanco-Wells, 2021. p. 1). We attempt to use the idea of assemblage in its pre-translated

form as ‘agencement’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp.4-5), which, “is an arrangement or layout of heterogenous elements” [and is] ‘the rejection of unity in favour of multiplicity, and the rejection of essence in favour of events’ (Nail, 2017, p. 22). In embracing the idea of assemblage we hoped to model an approach to relational assessment that creates mutuality, is nourishing and affirming. Our work becomes a map, continuously folding and unfolding, nomadically.

As in Waterhouse, Otterstad, and Jensen, article ...anything but synchronized swimming / methodologies . . . artistic movements in/with unknown inventions, our Sent With Love experimentation, ‘...invites the reader to think and do research differently by unfolding the conditions of what is not yet thought of to come in research,’ and in our case assessment practices. As they ask and we do, ‘...we challenge. written language by bodily surfacing haptic technology that interfaces through vibrations and sensations in with us/them/you’ (p. 201). In our art and design Higher Education Institute (HEI) we assess many things, which are made of many things. Multiple materials and multiple concepts are given to us to evaluate and give feedback on. We argue that these objects that are to be encountered, could be assessed in ways that are not just in written or spoken forms, but as objects, smells, things that can be handled. As with the newly arrived Marco Polo, in Italo Calvino’s (1974), *Invisible Cities*, ‘...totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, [he] could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes...’ (p. 21). These nonverbal articulations given other more sensorial types of feedback. We ask with our multimedia love letters can they give more compassionate, more than human, types of assessment and feedback.



Fig 1: The thing that winks at me from the other side of the room. The folding and unfolding of our love letters. By (AMLV). 2022.

An 'emergent collectivity sited in the encounter'

Dear Reader,

We are a group of four people who work across different departments at University of the Arts London - Ana, Mark, Liz, Vikki - who are drawn to posthumanism as a lens for relationality and mattering as ecologies of belonging and care and to consider the entangled complexity of institutional assessment policies and pedagogies. In our work as educators and creative practitioners, we enact social justice in higher education in our aim of assembling agency in nurturing educational communities where all staff and students thrive, feel valued and accepted for who they are.

We started this project with conversations about our entanglement with assessment in our multiple roles as educational developers, lecturers, external moderators, supervisors, and post-doctoral students. In our contexts as Higher Education educators, assessment in art and

design often involves an encounter with the materiality of the bodies of work that are being assessed. But how does this encounter play out in the pedagogic relation that is formed through the assessment process? What kinds of possibilities and impossibilities emerge in the mattering of assessment and how can we inhabit such fields of emergence? Our 'Sent with Love' project aims to reframe this encounter by taking on the invitation by Gravett et al. (2021, p.12) to look at the pedagogic relation of assessment as a 'material-discursive apparatus'. The material-discursive apparatus is offered by Karen Barad (2007) as a posthuman performative account of mattering, where discourse is not simply referred to as what is written or spoken but as a practice where language and matter are entangled in a field of possibilities and impossibilities. Involving an ongoing, affective, embodied and relational intra-action. In other words, the material-discursive apparatus acknowledges the ability of all bodies to have entangled agencies. In Barad's quantum thinking, reality is nonbinary, there is no separation between bodies and things. Reality, the world, is something that is not outside of ourselves. "'We' are not outside observers of the world', but we are part of it and in relationship with it, materialised in intra-activity. (Barad, 2003, p. 828)

We asked the question "What kind of assessment might emerge if attention is paid to the posthuman and collaborative pedagogies?" To contemplate this question, it was necessary to imagine otherwise. In Sent with Love, we developed a praxis that fostered resistance and thrived in the potentia of thinking-doing otherwise, of exploring alternatives. We resisted maintaining the status quo of the educational frameworks, such as assessment, that hinder collaboration because relationships are formed through individualisation, competition and alienation that serves the capitalisation of knowledge. We wanted to '...enact assessment as a more open-ended, material practice that pays better attention to the situated particularities of students' learning journeys and takes better care of their developing subjectivities as learners' (Gravett and Winstone p. 12. 2021). What emerged from our relationship was the mapping of a praxis of care grounded in affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2018), a praxis of transforming the negativity associated with assessment into something workable. And as Braidotti (2018) also suggests, 'a praxis of composing a people that aims at actualizing affirmative alternatives' (p.180).

We asked ourselves what if we reframed assessment as meaningful intra-actions centred on care for the cultivation of a caring and just society? Assessment could offer a space for hope. As Rosi Bradotti (2013) writes, "Hope constructs the future by opening up the spaces to

project active desires onto; it gives us the force to process the negativity and emancipate ourselves from the inertia of everyday routines.” (p.38).

Our conversations about our experience of assessment - both as students and as educators - highlighted our need and desire for collective, collaborative and co-produced practices that disrupt the individualistic, neo-liberal and normative structures that are so difficult to transform. In our letters, which moved into something beyond that, we explored ways to be reciprocal, generous and compassionate in how we might think and be when creating and receiving feedback and our assessment practices. We were guided by Prof Rosi Braidotti's work on affirmation and joy. Braidotti writes that, 'A joyful ethics rests on an enlarged sense of a vital interconnection with a multitude of (human and nonhuman) others by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism and anthropocentrism on the one hand and the barriers of negativity on the other.' (Braidotti, 2018a. p. 221).

We approached thinking-through the question “What kind of assessment might emerge if attention is paid to the posthuman and collaborative pedagogies?” via a creation process of letter writing, 'Sent with Love', over a period of three months (July- September 2022). We wrote and we also drew, made collages and objects, collected objects, detritus, smells, and ephemera- many things. We corresponded with each other as we packaged and re-packaged our responses to send back to one another. A process of being-with the many folds, extensions, pockets and fissures of an evolving material collaborative conversation.

As a collective, we began a process of “plunging” - what Carol Taylor (2016) explains is a “messy” and “ungainly” practice of freefall (p. 20). To plunge in posthuman research would be to dive into the unknown and to resist the safe comfort of methodological norms. We embraced our 'potentia' (Braidotti, 2019) to explore the complex web of our interconnectedness through the writing of 'love letters' to one another. We drew on potentia to provoke radical experimentation and to embrace our ethico-onto-epistemological exploration. We thought of the 'love letter' as a way of writing feedback to each other - holding that person close and thinking about what we value about them and their contributions. The challenges they have shared with us. The joy we've felt in our collective journey. We agreed that, 'Relational pedagogies position meaningful relationships as fundamental to effective learning and teaching and explore ways of fostering connections, authenticity and responsiveness' (Gravett and Winstone, 2020). We created a space for

exploration of collaborative writing as a non-hierarchical cacophony of multiple voices, entangled, with no one being intentionally louder than the other.

The act of posting these love letters to each other slowed us down and made gaps for us to forget and remember. To wait in expectation. What fragment of deliciousness might appear from the postie, the front door letter box, or from the end of the driveway?' These journeys the letters took, our journeys to the post office, to send them, and then to collect the ever-expanding box of collaged and written letters, contrasts with the ubiquitous digital assessments our student receive and are given. We started to see the value in the personal thoughts each entangled letter brought to us. They stop us skimming over what had been given to us and made us want to dive even further into the correspondences we had been offered. The most recent letter/collage/bricolage had been joined on to all the other previous manifestations, so we could look back on all the others. They resonated with us in different ways. They became valuable. There were invaluable. We thought, could this be a way of making assessment and feedback 'sticky' (Orr and Shreeve, 2017), inviting and help motivate learning?

Our differences matter. What does it mean for us to think and feel differently about assessment, to 'think thought and being differently, to think difference itself' (St Pierre, 2021, p166). What do we understand the embodied and relational collective to be for us? Can we care for each other as we work together? When we write our letters on paper made from trees and fill our packages with earth and flowers from the places we live, will this connect us in ways we haven't yet experienced? As Anna Tsing (2015: 20) says, '...precarity makes life possible and it 'is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves ... we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others ... everything is in flux, including our ability to survive'.

We became voyagers without maps, creating new maps along the way. In our multimedia letters to each other, we wrote texts, questions, statements that created a non-linear narrative. Each iteration of our collaged/bricolage/written letter was joined in some way to all the previous ones. String, glue, stickers, wool, all were used to join the letters together to each other. Where one ended and another began became an adventure. They could be started wherever we wanted them to. The paths we took each time we unfolded each new offering created new paths for us to explore. As Gilles Deleuze (1998, p. xviii) writes, 'We have to

see creation as tracing a path between impossibilities... Without a set of impossibilities, you won't have a line of flight...'.

We started our mapping of paths by sending hand written mixed media, letters to each other. Creating fragments of a love letter to be continued by the recipient and resent to each other again and again and again. Collaging a text from the fragments that appear. We came to feel that we were, '...part of an entangled material-discursive formation collectively producing,' (Strom, Mills, and Ovens, 2018). We are deterritorialising ourselves (Carlyle, 2019) from the normative structures and boundaries of educators and assessors. Becoming instead nomadic visionaries, driven by desires of resisting hierarchical, mechanical, competitive norms of assessment. Together we are messily reimagining assessment as relational through affective means. Attempting to reveal that which is embodied and ordinarily goes unnoticed.

Compassionately yours

Ana, Mark, Liz, Vikki. (AMLV)

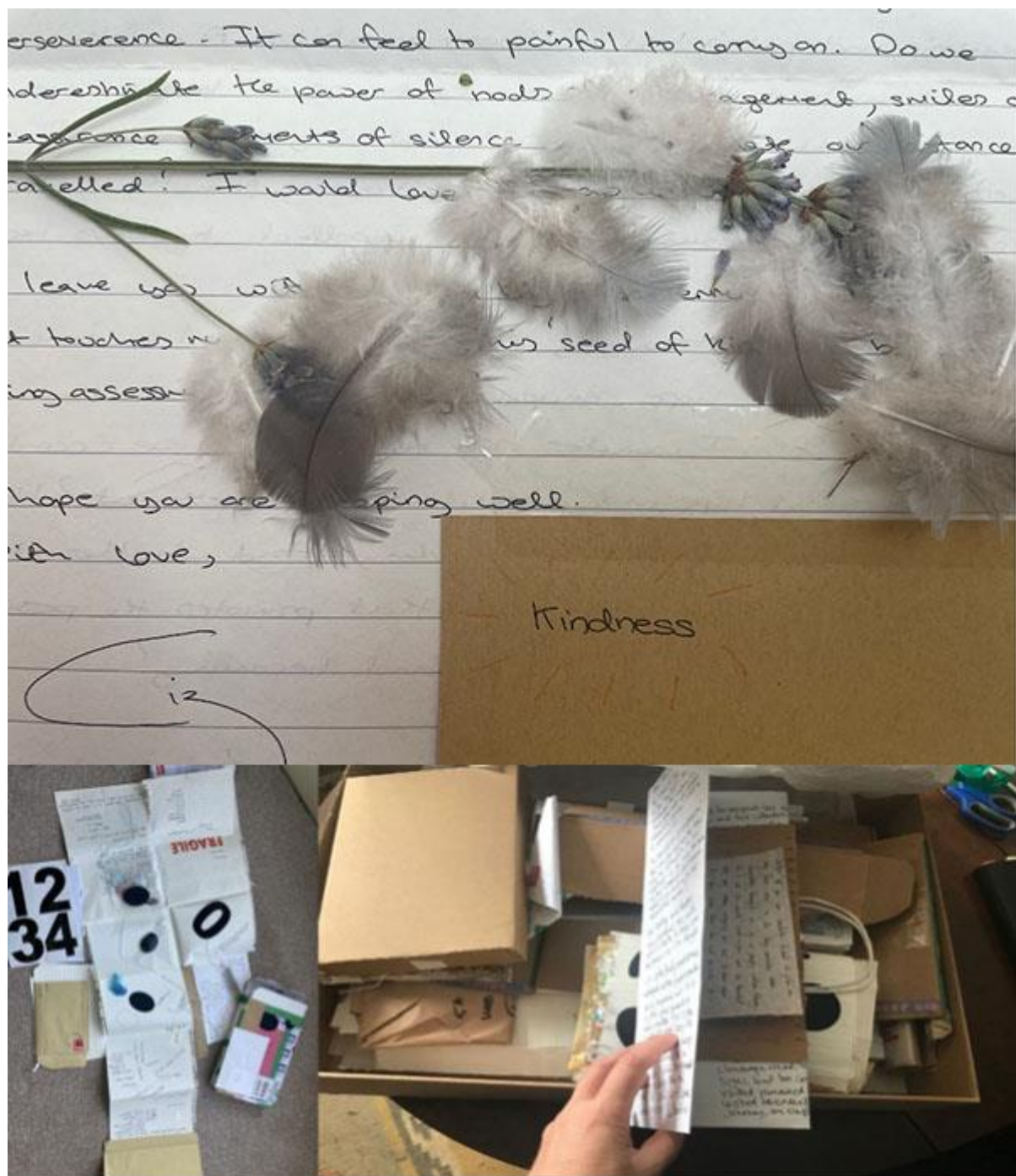


Fig 2: Intermezzo Kindness: Care in folding Love in unfolding. Our love letters halfway through their journey by (AMLV) 2022.

Bumpy journeys: research creation

An imprint

*exchanging. being-with. handling reading touching making feeling
smelling caring. writing to and with each other. a creation through
correspondence and things growing as it was sent back forth and
around. paving the way of time feeling the days of space. the waiting
and anticipation the not knowing and the revealing. the curiosity of the
cats and the dogs and the postperson. what is left behind what spills
out and the dilemma of what to do with it. the walking to the post office
the weight of the package. the forgetting and remembering in between.
the emptying stuff onto the floor the surprises and finding little pockets
of things. quiet words in between under inside. sentences that touch
and cuddle other sentences echoes of words and feelings. care in
folding and love in unfolding. the not being able to fold it back
together into the box. the wanting to control the object and organise it
and not being in control. the touching of other's making. the worrying
the overwhelm-ness the love and the care. it will be ok. a cacophonous
messy growing complex collection of gentleness and tenderness.*

We adopted a research-creation approach to thinking through the question “What kind of assessment might emerge if attention is paid to the posthuman and collaborative pedagogies?”. As Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman propose, ‘Research-creation can be described as the complex intersection of art practice, theoretical concepts, and research. It is an experimental practice that cannot be predicted or determined in advance. (...) Research-creation is attuned to processes rather than the communication of outputs or products.’ (Springgay and Truman, 2016). We adopted the format of the love letter and its associated process of exchanging correspondence as a creative practice. This practice involved writing letters and also drawing, making collages, collecting objects, gathering detritus, smells and ephemera; things. All of which we packaged and re-packaged in a postal box we ‘Sent with Love’ to one another in turns.

Care in folding

Love in unfolding

Unfolding onto our tables or onto our floors, ‘Sent with Love’ became an expanding field resisting to stay put for too long, off on many bumpy journeys from South London to North London, Scotland, Essex, and back. Resisting confinement to a set shape or form, as each of us received ‘Sent with Love’, it had changed. The box had become bigger as its contents grew. Accumulated over time, contents had been expanded on, re-organised and reshaped. While it felt different each time it was passed around, as things were added, there was also a familiarity to it alike to that of re-encountering ‘old friends’. Yet entangled with the wonder and surprise of finding new ones in-between and in the interstices of the *many things*. Both nomadic and mutant, could this postal-box-turned-assemblage-of-things be itself *thinking* as it moved around? Could it have been *thinking-with us* in cradling foldings and unfoldings? Thinking happened in the encounter with the unrecognizable and it was very much felt-with the contents of this ever-changing postal box as they announced themselves to us. In doing so they gained a presence amongst each of us, making a difference in our ‘world’. Thinking lingered in a multilogue, always with the many.

The *many things* which built over the course of our postal exchanges emerged from an ethos of spontaneous acts of relation arising from the affect of the encounter. Love was not the subject of our letters, rather the methodology intended to affect how we might build posthuman and collaborative pedagogic relations. The correspondence of letters and *things* loosely acting as an analogy for assessment and a ‘love ethic’ (hooks, 2000, pp. 87-101) as a dimension from where to think about it. In hooks’ words, a dimension encompassing “care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge” (p. 14).

Our evolving material collaborative conversation does not seem to have a trackable clear beginning and end, it does not follow a linear chronological narrative. Rhythm, direction and connection were created at the point of encounter with the object-in-becoming. In this sense, our conversation formed as a rhizome because it followed principles of connection and heterogeneity. As in Deleuze and Guattari, ‘at any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.’ (1988, p. 5). Our correspondence was always to the many, the whole, the collective. Creating, therefore, an ‘undercommons’ (Moten and Harney, 2013), an ‘emergent collectivity sited in the encounter’ (Manning, 2016, p. 8), an unspoken energy, a field of relation and a praxis of care. Our collective rhizomatic experience allowed us to

gather in a place beneath the normative institutional curriculum control. A place where we created our own meaning with each other arising from the affect of the encounter.

Our choice to approach our question via a creation process was so that it immediately placed us in this field of relation not only with one another as humans, but also with the materialities of the *many things* that we made, the words and ...light blue wool, pebbles, oval stickers, feathers, brown paper, numbers, crumbling stones, dry leaves ,woof woof, wool, tracings, origami, little square book, bettys red ribbon, orange plasters, dried flowers, envelopes, hold up to the light, pinecone, striped table cloth, rug, harry the dog, fragile, cat paws, fish stickers, brown paper bag, white paper bag...and words. Collected and exchanged while we became more attuned to our/ each other's physical and geographical environments. This process resembles that of research-creation, as described by Erin Manning (2016, p. 27) as a process conducive to being generative of new forms of experience and forms of knowledge that are 'extralinguistic', not bound to the confines of language. Research-creation as an activity conducive of new processes that emerge from the entanglement between theory and practice. Manning argues that the hyphenation of research with creation proposes an approach where the art process is generative of thought, connecting the thinking through making to a writing practice (p. 240). Manning further elaborates that research-creation 'tremulously stages an encounter for disparate practices, giving them a conduit for collective expression' (2016, p. 27). The nomadic and mutant postal box and its contents act both as the platform for these encounters, as well as being a heterogeneous assemblage of disparate practices, the collective expression itself.

Inbetween-ing delights

In this section we describe our feelings and thoughts about the processes of receiving and sending our generative bricolage love letters to each other.

Care in folding

Love in unfolding

Joyful wilding

We, with our love letter postal telehaptic entanglements, challenge forms of assessment practices through collective and collaborative processes of sending each other hybrid bricolage love letters. Through their journeys in-between, Tolleshunt Major and Bridge of Allan and Enfield and Woodside South Norwood, the letters grew into multiple rhizomatic assemblages of joy. As Deleuze and Guattari (2005), explain, ‘...there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds constitutes an assemblage.’ (pp. 3-4)

They grew: being collaged - becoming bricolage - vitally assembled - drawn on - collecting objects – entwined plants - floating fur - seeds scattered. Sometimes glued or stitched together, sometimes loosely rattling around in the boxes they came to us/me sporadically. The joy each parcel of ‘love letters’ brought was immense. We did become voyagers without a map, creating new maps, new directions, new thoughts, new connections.

In Derek Walcott’s Nobel prize speech, *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*, he says, ‘Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape.’ Our broken vases are what assessment has become, and the fragments we created in *Sent With Love* are pieced back together to create more loving ways of assessment and feedback.

Every time I opened a new package of love letters it felt like we were creating something new, vibrant and vital. ‘...as queer theorist Sara Ahmed (2013) has also aptly put it: The reproduction of a discipline can be the reproduction of these techniques of selection, ways of making certain bodies and thematics core to the discipline, and others not even part. (n. p.)

Non-reflexive disciplinary and other forms of knowledge get reiterated through the praxis of citing, as Ahmed also writes here, therefore fortifying “problematic hegemonies of knowledge production and authority” (Mott and Cockayne, 2017, p. 959) (Geerts and Carstens. 2021 p. iii). These actions, this praxis, was a becoming in answering the question, what kind of education might emerge if attention is paid to the posthuman and collaborative pedagogies?

Care in folding

Love in unfolding

I thought that joyful wildness is not only “committed to mis/readings, refusals, dreaming, fugitivity, insurrection” (Halberstam, 2019, n. p.), but also to seeking out new intimacies, joys, pleasures, and affirmations (Geerts and Carstens, 2021). I felt this is what we were doing. Putting a collective idea into a collective practice. A co-praxis if you like. Could this be a model of how compassionate peer-led feedback can be produced? With each other and for each other in a creative process that was joyful and productive. Where assessment and creation were entangled into the process. Not seen as separated, but one and the same thing (Strom and Mills. 2022).

Ana Tsing (2015) ‘...refers to the art of noticing— noticing assemblages, synched and un-synched rhythms, polyphony, and various world-making processes around us (both human and non-hu-man).’ The processes and assemblages we went through in experimenting with love letters as possible forms of assessment practices felt we were tuning in to different forms of communication, beyond the verbal and beyond the written. This collective act of making a work that was about, for assessment and in assessment made me feel these acts became one and not separate. This resonates with her idea that ‘[...] Making worlds collectively sometimes helps humans to look around rather than ahead. Making worlds happens beyond humans and within ecological systems where every organism has potential to operate as a change agent— ‘patterns of unintentional coordination develop in assemblages. To notice such patterns means watching the interplay of temporal rhythms and scale in the divergent lifeways they gather’ (Tsing 2015, p. 23).

Anticipation

Opening

Unfolding

Sensing
Contemplating
Looking
Reading
Feeling
Unfolding
Thinking
Tinkering
Plunging
Tele-hapticing
Collaborating
De-making
Re-making
Re-writing
Constructing
Collecting
Taping
Re-folding
Re-packaging
Sending
Waiting
Re-anticipation...

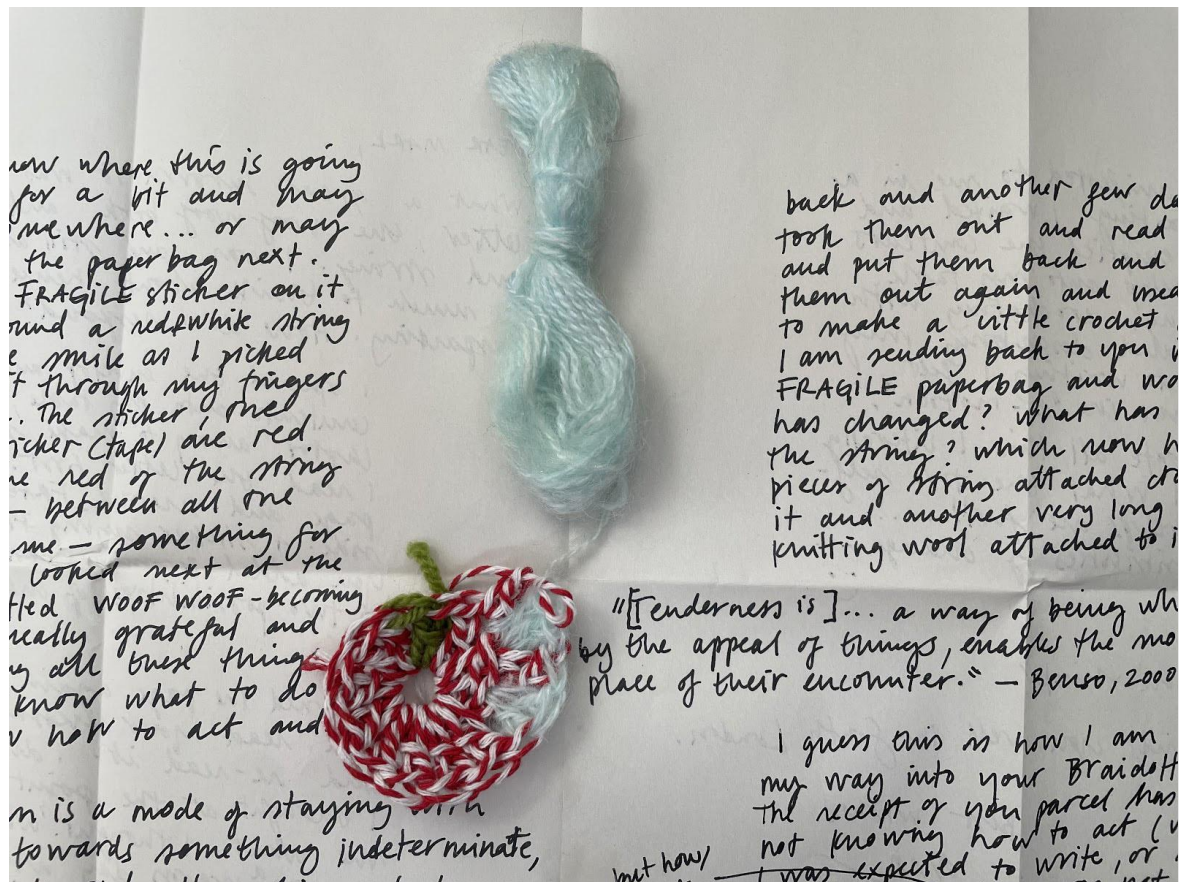


Fig 3: '[Tenderness is] ... a way of being...'. Love letter detail. By (AMLV). 2022.

Braidotti (2019a, p. 43-44) argues that 'There are at least two ways to go about assessing the proliferating discourses of the critical posthumanities. The first approach takes them as expressing new meta-discursive energy on the part of the disciplines. Fuelled by self-reflexivity, they enact an intensive shift and get inspired to move outwards, towards extra-disciplinary encounters with issues and events in the real world. In so doing they also re-assert their institutional power and renew their profiles.' We have tried to avoid this approach in 'Sent With Love' and have used what Bradotti (ibid) calls, 'The second approach [which] takes these developments as a nomadic expansion of multiple practices and discourses. This rhizomic growth works through relational assemblages and generative cross-pollination, which is likely to continue releasing hybrid offspring and new heterogeneous assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994)' The next section looks more closely at the possibilities of releasing these diverse types of hybrid assemblages.

Affirmative alternatives.

In this section we offer alternatives to assessment “to undo the current ways of doing – and then *imagine, invent and do the doing differently.*” (Taylor, 2016, p. 8). We are reflecting on what we have learnt. Which aspects of our collaborative assessment practice can be taken into a learning context and how this can become transformative for both the students and staff?

Assessment as a collective act

We loved the idea of collaborative assemblages in education. We want to break away from ideas of learning being an individual process, an only human process towards collective and cooperative forms of learning that create affective posthumanism in education. There is a generosity in the sharing of wisdom within our letters. These are acts of community. As Kimmerer (2013) posits, “What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together.” (p.15) We feast! The collectivity of our endeavour brings an abundance of intellectual, spiritual and emotional nourishment. We guide one another, noticing what might otherwise have gone unexplored in an individual endeavour;

Letter 3rd September 2022

Dear Ana, Liz and Mark

I’ve been thinking a lot about affirmative ethics and what this means for our collective collaborative coproduced practice. Prof Rosi Braidotti talked about “transforming negativity – extracting knowledge from pain without drowning in the sorrow”. This is what we are doing, making, thinking and becoming. What practices can work as transformation, as healing? I have been thinking about our practice as a form of potentia – as relational and positive.

With much love

Vikki

Letter 11th September 2022

Dear Mark, Ana and Vikki

My heart lifted as I read Vikki’s letter, thinking about the prospect of learning from our more than human teachers about moving assessment practices to collective acts. I

was immediately reminded of Prof Robin Wall Kimmerer who posited that; “The trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective. Exactly how they do this, we don’t yet know. But what we see is the power of unity. What happens to one happens to us all. We can starve together or feast together.” I love the idea of assessment as a feast with our companions! A feast of reciprocal learning and wisdom. A nourishment full of joy and love.

Taking this notion towards the concept of kinn-ing, what if we considered assessment as an ethical responsibility to share wisdom within a “constellation of companions”. A process led with intention and gratitude for connection. Where might this notion of assessment lead us? I wonder about assessment and feedback centring on what we learn together in our tangle of relations. Of it being an experimental, active and reciprocal process. What if as a ‘constellation’ we collectively envisioned what feedback is. What if we co-created when and how it happens, what it looks like, and how multitudes of knowledges manifest within it? If kinn-ing requires slowing down so we can listen more deeply with our entire bodies, might we be able to foster HE cultures that welcome slowing down in assessment processes? Robin attests that kinn-ing is fighting for what you love, out of love. As a group our cup of love and potentia is overflowing. I keep this hope close to my heart.

With love,

Liz

Ideas swarm from our exchanges. How might assessment practices mirror our co-created voyage of discovery? Our letter writing was an enactment of working alongside each other collectively as partners to unearth and share wisdom. This prompted us to think about how assessment processes traditionally reinforce that our judgement as academics are the only ones that matter. Fiona Blaikie, Christine Daigle and Liette Vasseur (2020) challenge us to consider learners and teachers as co-creators of knowledge rather than inferior and superior beings. Paulo Freire promotes dialogue rooted in horizontal power relations that disrupt the student teacher contradiction so that, “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, the one who is himself, but taught in dialogue with the students...” (Freire, 1970, p.3). How then can we take these approaches of a collaborative curriculum and apply them to assessment practices which are informed and restricted by regulatory processes? Can we provide an invitation to co-create the rules?

In the process of writing our love letters, we explored negotiating assessment by asking our co-authors for their feedback. We relied on collective knowledges to resist binary power relations. We wrote and responded to each other in our feedback in a way that centered relationality as a form of potentia. These different experiences of assessment, informed our thinking about what a relational pedagogy of assessment might feel like.

We can reframe relationships by giving students a voice and agency in assessment, whereby they mould assessment into a personally meaningful act. We can embody this in all aspects of our assessment practices; from the project briefs we write, to the feedback we offer, and the way that we mark (Bunting and Hill, 2023). We can enable students to work on topics that relate to personal interest and goals through the form of negotiated assessment or flexibility within assessment briefs (Kleiman, 2005). We can collectively co-create learning outcomes, discuss and agree grades in dialogue to redistribute power (Stommel, 2021). This turn to relational ontology demands intentionality. A conscious designing-in of sociality for learning climates of interconnectedness and interdependence to flourish.

In our quest for reciprocity, could we recreate the natural moments for pausing from our letters? The inbetween-ing. The continual unfolding of ideas that ebb and flow at their own pace through our letter chain was delightful. The slowing down embedded in waiting for the letters to journey back and forth from Scotland to London to Essex was an embodiment of care. A welcome invitation to rest, renew, contemplate. With each round there was an opportunity to be replenished. We found comfort in our time being shared. Slowness and assessment might feel alien, as assessment is time bound, pressured and can increase stress and anxiety for staff (Hill, in press). But need it be? Pauses can be scaffolded into the assessment process. We can build in moments of stillness and silence to contemplate how far we've come. We can share the labour of assessment as an act of social justice for both students and staff as a collaborative act. Rather than creating a race to the finish line, we can intentionally design assessment to distribute and disperse 'doing' with 'being' together, fostering cultures of deceleration.

This collective, posthuman approach to assessment practice relies upon trust. Trust of our students, but also trust in ourselves. As Karen Gravett, Carol Taylor and Nikki Fairchild (2021) posit, "The question for us as teachers is – do we trust ourselves enough to pass the job of assessment over to students and do we trust our students enough to do it properly?" (p. 12). The dismantling of humanist power legacies requires us to engage in a continual

questioning of whose ideas and practices are valued, whose are not, and bravely resist the status quo in hopeful affirmation.

Assessment as healing

Throughout the process, we have thought about how healing this collaboration has been, but have also been conscious of multiplicity and how, at times, the pressure to respond became overwhelming when already experiencing anxiety from work, family and health pressures. We have created an embodied, embedded and compassionate practice that creates joy, healing and connection - how then, do we offer this as an approach for educators as we enmesh relational assessment within the curriculum? Our letters delve into tangles of tensions and hopeful pursuits of change;

Letter 16th July 2022

Dear Liz, Ana and Mark

*I'm on the floor of my bedroom sitting amongst all these ideas. Ideas as text and image and object. Once again, I struggle to capture inwards how this feels, but I wanted to share something important that Ana wrote to me in her quote from Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. She connected compassion and healing. We've been thinking about how we can change assessment practices by holding the ethical principle of do no harm at the heart of our work and we've talked about being trauma informed. I'm wondering if we can think of assessment as a form of healing? Can feedback be this emergency blanket? Could it bring safety, security, belonging, care, understanding? Is it love? I'm going to explore this a bit more and can't wait to hear your response. With love,
Vikki*

Letter 23rd July 2022

Dear Mark, Ana and Vikki

Vikki posed whether we could think of assessment as a form of healing. It immediately takes me to the words of bell hooks that teaching is caring for the souls of our students. This goal of education as a soul-based act to support healing is close to my heart. The wake-up call of current collective traumas make this an urgent need, do they not? Trica Kress and Christopher Edmin argue it requires us to tackle the causes of 'dis-ease' in society rather than focus on white eurocentric and

patriarchal wellness narratives. This seems like life work without a clear path, but might we be brave enough to take a small step and linger in liminal spaces of uncertainty? If we adopted radical love as a value might this offer movement towards it? Mays Imad talks about the importance of hope and purpose in healing. But how much space do we hold for this within assessment? And is this even possible within a graded framework that encourages the pursuit of self-esteem over self-compassion and becoming?

I am brought back to my own experiences of non-human wisdom guiding and supporting healing. Of the feathers that land in my path reassuring me I'm heading in the right direction. And the butterflies that sit beside me during painful moments symbolising beauty in transformation. How might we apply this wisdom in feedback? What if we went beyond words, activate other senses and consider symbolic feedback? Might we learn from the gentle nudges of nature and offer micro-feedback that supports students in finding strength and perseverance? I think of nods of encouragement, smiles of reassurance, a doodle left to fire an idea. What do you think?

With love,

Liz

We sense the process of sending and receiving love letters might be what Yusef Waghid (2019, p.71) calls 'rhythmic caring'. That is, of caring with. Of mutually enriching "back-and-forth fluctuations" (Waghid, 2019, p.vi) which recognise our interdependence as both givers and receivers of care. The letter exchanges did not feel like a familiar paternalistic form of care, rather reciprocal intra-actions that nurture feelings of togetherness and connection. We appeared entwined. Entwined not only through the physicality of our ribbon-tied bundles of love letters, but by the shared vulnerability and intimacy of sharing parts of ourselves. There is a felt intention and gratitude, which is oh so powerful. The process surfaces affective, sensorial dimensions and leaves us pondering that which is often not ordinarily considered valid knowledge. We agree that, '...the challenge is to push this further to enable an assessment to become an intra-active mattering – to move beyond assessment as something which is considered as primarily cognitive, rational and technical toward a more complex understanding of affective, embodied, and relational processes' (Gravett and Winstone, p. 12. 2021). The process of our love letters highlights a way to rethink approaches to a pedagogical practice that is plural, heterogeneous and caring, in resistance to what Dennis Atkinson referred to as the "umbilical authority of control curriculum orders" in his

paper entitled 'Practices, Interstices, Otherness and Taking Care'(2021) . Writing as caring. Feedback as caring. Assessment as caring.

There is a felt transformative power of this ethics of care. Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher (1990) describe care as a 'species activity' for repairing the world. We recognise the complexity and stickiness of care within higher education cultures. It is problematic to assume there is adequate support and capacity for sustainable caring relationships to be enacted. Yet we call for a reframing and rethinking of care to that of mutuality. Of reciprocal trusting relationships that equally recognise one another's achievements and value as an act of mutual healing. It is vital we connect with the multiplicity of our feelings and consider in our own contexts how we might plant these seeds of care within assessment.

Conclusions: Re-imaginings, towards posthuman forms of assessment

We tried to 'make a map' not 'a tracing' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005), to critically and nomadically question the sometimes-stubborn thinking about assessment practices in Higher Education. At the start of this adventure, we proposed to think through the question "What kind of assessment might emerge if attention is paid to the posthuman and collaborative pedagogies?". This was by a process of collaborative writing using the form of the love letter. Our chapter emerged from the exchange, movement and duration implied in the sending/receiving/ re-sending letters to each other by post. We saw this as an 'affirmative alternative' to the business-as-usual approach or the tinkering around the edges of making assessment better for learning. This process may not even be recognised as an assessment practice as it avoids value judgements. What we wanted to show is that we can help each other learn from each other in ways that are not harmful or that create false hierarchical positionings in education. As bell hooks argues in *Love as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), 'Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed' (p. 1). We agree with her that, 'the moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others' (p.5).

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Bios: (AMLV)

Ana: I am an artist-educator-researcher currently undertaking a practice-based PhD in the area of the body in art practice and learning at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. My research draws on a posthuman feminist framework and concerns the body as a site of active learning in art-based practice-research with the aim to develop a new form of artistic-pedagogic practice that is founded on the reconfiguration of the body as a thinking tool in art & design. I previously studied MA Performance Making and MA Education Studies (Art & Learning) at Goldsmiths, University of London and I have

worked in creative education for the past fourteen years, primarily in FE, as Senior Lecturer and Course Leader in Art & Design and Media. I am currently a Senior External Moderator for the University of the Arts Awarding Body supporting Centres nationwide with the delivery and assessment processes of creative qualifications.

Mark: As a educator, artist and researcher, my pedagogical enquires and creative practices over the last 30 years have been entangled encounters with: images of thought and memory, rhizomatic and meta-cognitive learning theories, fuzzy narratives and virtual and physical liminal teaching spaces. My research is an adventure into relationships between autobiographical memory and photography, Deleuzian and Guattarian ideas of ‘becoming rhizomatic’, assembling agency, nomadic thinking, active blended learning, mixed with ideas of belonging and critical pedagogies. I am a Reader in Critical and Nomadic Pedagogies, a National Teaching Fellow (2021), Co-Chair of UAL’s Professoriate, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a UAL Senior Teaching Scholar. I am the co-founder of UAL’s Experimental Pedagogies Research Group (EPRG). <https://eprg.arts.ac.uk/>

Liz: I’m an educator, researcher and creative strategist. In my role as an educational developer I support colleagues in enacting social justice in higher education, to nurture educational communities where everyone thrives. My research explores ecologies of belonging and compassion, entangled in institutional cultures, policies and pedagogies. I’m drawn to posthumanism as a lens for considering relationality and mattering as key concepts of belonging, rooted in my teaching philosophy of education as a space for hope in resistance to injustice. I am a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, recipient of the AdvanceHE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (2020), and co-director of the consultancy Belonging through Compassion <https://www.belongingthroughcompassion.com/>

Vikki: I am an Educational Developer, an artist and researcher. I’ve been working in arts education for over 20 years and spent over half of this teaching young people in Further Education where relationality and wellbeing are integral to the learning experience. My work aims to develop compassionate pedagogies, practices and policies to create strategies to address racism, bias and unbelonging. My research focuses upon compassionate assessment practices and policies and I experience my thinking and being as a posthuman praxis. I am a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and I received the AdvanceHE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence in 2020. I am co-director of the consultancy Belonging through Compassion <https://www.belongingthroughcompassion.com/>

