Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching
ISSN 2785-5104
Anno 6 n. 3 (2026)

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

From students to co-researchers: authentic assessment, agency and engagement in higher education

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Abstract: Engaging students in technology-enhanced higher education requires learning designs that move beyond participation in activities towards opportunities to exercise agency and assume meaningful responsibility. This study examines how students experienced engagement and agency within a co-designed authentic research assessment in a master's-level course in Pedagogy and Didactics of Inclusion. Fourteen students participated in the learning activities, contributing to an assessment involving interviews with people with Special Educational Needs, data analysis, and theoretically informed interpretation. Digital technologies supported peer communication, collaborative development of the research instrument, contact with interviewees, and continuity between classroom and independent work. Seven voluntary reflective accounts, collected after assessment and grading, were analysed through qualitative thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: authenticity through the encounter between theory and lived experience; active and responsible participation in research; cognitive, emotional and relational engagement; and, for some participants, scaffolding towards greater autonomy. Digital mediation did not emerge as an independent source of engagement but supported the participatory architecture of the research process. The findings suggest that the potential of authentic assessment lies not simply in active or real-world participation, but in creating opportunities for meaningful decision-making, epistemic agency, and responsibility in knowledge production within a digitally mediated learning environment.

Keywords: authentic assessment; epistemic agency; student engagement; co-researchers; technology-enhanced learning

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1. Introduction[1]

Student engagement is a central concern in higher education, particularly in the design of learning environments intended to move students beyond passive participation towards meaningful involvement in learning. Engaging students in

[1] Author Contributions: The article was jointly conceived by all authors. Barbara Baschiera wrote Sections 1 and 3; Fabio Filosofi wrote Sections 4 and 5; Helga Ballardini wrote the Abstract and Section 2.

technology-enhanced higher education requires learning designs that move beyond participation in activities towards opportunities to exercise agency and assume meaningful responsibility.

Engagement, however, cannot be equated with observable activity or task completion. Students may participate actively while having limited opportunities to influence the decisions that shape their educational experience. From this perspective, designing for engagement also involves creating conditions in which students can exercise agency, make meaningful choices and progressively assume responsibility for their participation in learning.

Student Voice and co-creation offer a useful perspective for understanding this shift. Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011) argue that involving students in pedagogical planning challenges conventional hierarchical roles and can reposition them as active participants in learning. This shift is not simply from passivity to activity: it involves greater opportunities for agency, reflection and shared responsibility. Co-creation can consequently take different forms, including students acting as consultants, pedagogical co-designers and co-researchers (Bovill et al., 2016). More recent scholarship has further emphasised the need to distinguish between forms of student participation. Matthews and Dollinger (2023), for example, identify access and responsibility as important dimensions differentiating student representation from partnership, while Omland et al. (2025), in a systematic conceptual review of 222 studies, identify dialogue, positioning, voice and agency as central concepts in higher-education co-creation.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to assessment, which strongly influences what students do with knowledge and the roles they are expected to assume. Authentic assessment has traditionally sought to connect academic learning with meaningful tasks and practices beyond conventional examinations. Recent approaches, however, have questioned the reduction of authenticity to resemblance to professional or "real-world" practice. Quinlan, Sellei, and Fiorucci (2025) propose the concept of educational authenticity, shifting attention towards meaningful engagement with assessment and highlighting the importance students attribute to choice and personal significance. Authenticity can therefore be understood not only in terms of what a task resembles, but also through the forms of participation and engagement that the task makes possible.

This shift intersects with emerging research on epistemic agency. Nieminen and Ketonen (2024) conceptualise epistemic agency in assessment as students' capacity to evaluate, produce, use and transform knowledge, thereby repositioning them from recipients or demonstrators of knowledge towards active knowers. From this perspective, assessment design matters because it can either constrain students to reproducing knowledge or provide opportunities to exercise judgement in relation to it. Nieminen, Haataja, and Cobb (2025) extend this argument empirically, showing how digitally mediated authentic assessment can support a progression from active learning to active knowledge use and contribution to public disciplinary knowledge. Therefore, authentic assessment may change students' positioning in relation to knowledge itself.

Yet this intersection between authentic assessment, agency and knowledge production raises an additional issue when authentic tasks involve inquiry into other people's lived experiences. In such contexts, students' decisions concern not only their own learning or the completion of an assessment, but also how empirical

material is elicited, interpreted and represented. While students' participation as co-researchers and knowledge contributors is increasingly recognised in higher education (Brown & Kimber, 2026; Timmis et al., 2024), and research ethics scholarship has examined the challenges faced by novice researchers working with human participants (Laas et al., 2025; Lenton et al., 2021), less attention has been paid to how these responsibilities are experienced within curricular authentic assessment. In particular, limited research has examined how students make sense of agency and engagement when producing knowledge requires them to listen to, interpret, and represent people's lived experience.

The present study explores this issue within a co-designed authentic assessment implemented in a master's-level course in Pedagogy and Didactics of Inclusion. The learning design drew on Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2024) and Student Voice to expand opportunities for choice and participation in decisions concerning the assessment. Students contributed to shaping the assessment and subsequently undertook a qualitative research task centred on the lived experiences of people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). They participated in developing interview questions, identified interviewees, conducted and transcribed the interviews, performed thematic analysis, and interpreted the resulting material through the pedagogical perspectives addressed during the course. Digital technologies supported communication, collaborative preparation and continuity between classroom and independent activity, while instructor scaffolding accompanied unfamiliar stages of the research process.

The study focuses on students' subsequent reflections on participating in this process as co-researchers. Rather than assessing whether the learning design caused higher levels of engagement or agency, it examines how students described and made sense of these dimensions within the experience. The study addressed the following research questions: (1) How do students experience engagement and agency within a co-designed authentic research assessment? (2) What features of the learning design shape their participation as co-researchers?

By examining this transition from students to co-researchers, the study brings together authentic assessment, agency and engagement to explore what happens when participation extends beyond completing an assessment towards making decisions within an authentic process of inquiry and knowledge production.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Context and pedagogical design

The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year within a 30-hour master's-level course in Pedagogy and Didactics of Inclusion at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Fourteen students from Languages, Philosophy, and Humanities participated in the in-person activities.

Drawing on Universal Design for Learning and Student Voice, students contributed to shaping the final assessment, which took the form of an authentic research task centred on the lived experiences of people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Students collaboratively developed and selected questions for a semi-structured interview, identified an interviewee, conducted and transcribed the interview, and performed a thematic analysis. The resulting themes were interpreted through pedagogical perspectives addressed during the course. Instructor scaffolding supported unfamiliar methodological stages while preserving

opportunities for student decision-making. Digital technologies supported peer communication, collaborative development of the interview questions, contact with interviewees, and sharing of materials.

2.2. Data generation and analysis

The dataset comprised seven written reflective accounts produced by students following completion of the assessment and communication of final grades. The object of analysis was not the interviews with people with SEN, but students' reflections on their experience of participating as co-researchers. Participation was voluntary. Three open-ended prompts invited students to reflect on: (1) their experience of selecting questions, interviewing a person with SEN, and relating lived experience to the pedagogical theories addressed in the course; (2) strengths and difficulties encountered during the process; and (3) what they had learned or would take away from the experience. Students submitted their reflections by email and no word or length limit was imposed.

The accounts were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, understood as an iterative and interpretive process in which researchers actively engage in the development of patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). An initial exploratory analysis identified four recurring themes: authenticity and the relationship between theory and lived experience; an active and responsible role in research; cognitive, emotional and relational engagement; scaffolding from uncertainty towards greater autonomy. For the present study, the corpus was revisited iteratively within and across cases, examining both the adequacy of the preliminary themes and the convergent, divergent and weaker evidence associated with them. Relevant excerpts were coded and compared across participants, with analytical memos used to distinguish empirical patterns from subsequent theoretical interpretation. The first author conducted the primary analysis, while a second researcher reviewed the thematic structure and cross-case analytical matrix as a critical examination of the interpretation. Sub-patterns concerning responsibility for interpreting another person's experience and the relational dimension of listening and voice were retained as elaborations within the four themes rather than treated as additional themes. Table 1 illustrates the cross-case variation in two of the four themes: active and responsible participation in the research process, and cognitive, emotional and relational engagement[2]. The matrix summarises the strength of evidence and the analytical interpretation associated with each participant's reflective account.

[2] Very strong = explicit, sustained evidence; Strong = clear evidence; Moderate = partial or indirect evidence. Participant identifiers are anonymised codes.

Table 1. Cross-case analytical matrix of agency, responsibility, and engagement

Participant	Agency & responsibility	Cognitive, emotional & relational engagement
AL	**Moderate**. Participates in question selection and reflects on the consequences of asking particular questions. *Agency is visible mainly within the interview relationship; the research role is less explicitly theorised.*	**Very strong**. Describes emotional difficulty, active listening, fear of being intrusive, and discovering that sensitive questions could enable the participant to feel genuinely heard. *Strong emotional, relational and ethical engagement.*
AN	**Very strong**. Contrasts the task with a traditional examination, describing the need to "put ourselves out there", use critical judgement and participate more directly. *Strong shift from task completion to enacted agency.*	**Very strong**. Describes the interview as the most engaging part of the project and expresses concern about doing justice to the participant's account. *Engagement combines interest with personal and interpretive investment.*
M	**Very strong**. Selects the interviewee, personalises questions, conducts, transcribes and analyses the interview; identifies conducting a genuine qualitative study for the first time as a key outcome. *Paradigmatic case of the student-to-co-researcher transition.*	**Strong**. Frames personalised questions as a way of "giving voice" to the participant and describes initial discomfort in conducting the interview. *Strong relational engagement and explicit concern with voice.*
J	**Strong**. Selects questions in relation to the aims, identifies the participant and organises the interview process. *Agency involves methodological and organisational responsibility.*	**Very strong**. Reports curiosity, desire to explore further and expand her knowledge, as well as active interaction and participation with peers. *Particularly strong evidence of cognitive and motivational engagement.*
SI	**Strong**. Explicitly describes the task as research and reflects on her own position in interpreting the data. *Agency is accompanied by reflexivity concerning interpretation.*	**Strong**. Describes the experience as both engaging and formative and emphasises awareness generated through dialogue. *Reflective and relational engagement.*
SO	**Very strong**. Balances theoretical constructs and openness to the participant, adapts questions, and describes critical and creative work in transforming data into themes. *Strong evidence of epistemic judgement.*	**Very strong**. Identifies empathy, listening, communication, creativity, critical thinking and active/critical participation. *Richest multidimensional account of engagement.*
V	**Moderate**. Emphasises the novelty and directness of the project more than her own analytical decision-making. *Useful less-convergent case: participation is clear, but epistemic agency is less explicitly articulated.*	**Strong**. Reports initial concern about being intrusive, followed by a fluent encounter that provided direct access to unfamiliar experiences. *Primarily emotional and relational engagement.*

2.3. Ethical considerations, positionality, and data availability

All participants provided informed consent for their reflective accounts to be used for research purposes. Identifying information was excluded from reporting. The reflective accounts are not publicly available because they contain qualitative data that may permit indirect identification of participants or interviewees. Pseudonymised excerpts supporting the analysis are reported in the Results using participant codes.

The instructor who designed and facilitated the learning experience was also the first researcher and collected the reflective feedback. Such insider research can provide privileged access to the educational context while raising issues of proximity, power and researcher positionality (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Urdal, 2023). This dual role, together with the voluntary participation of seven of the fourteen students, resulted in a self-selected corpus and may have influenced how participants represented their experience. The predominantly positive accounts were therefore not treated as evidence of the effectiveness of the pedagogical design or used to make causal claims about engagement or agency. Reflexivity was supported by attending to variation and less convergent evidence rather than only to dominant patterns.

3. Results

The analysis identified four interconnected themes through which students described their participation as co-researchers: (1) authenticity and the relationship between theory and lived experience; (2) an active and responsible role in the research process; (3) cognitive, emotional and relational engagement; (4) scaffolding from uncertainty towards greater autonomy. Although recurring across the corpus, the themes were not articulated with equal intensity by all participants; both convergent and less convergent evidence was therefore retained in the analysis.

3.1. Authenticity: theory and lived experience

The most consistent pattern concerned the opportunity to encounter theoretical constructs through the lived experiences of real interlocutors. Students described the research task as making pedagogical knowledge more concrete and meaningful. AL, for example, valued being able to compare "the pedagogical theories studied with lived reality in a concrete way", while J described the relationship between theory and "concrete reality" as enabling a deeper understanding of educational complexity and making learning more meaningful.

For some participants, however, the relationship extended beyond applying theory to practice. SO explicitly identified both convergence and discrepancy between pedagogical perspectives addressed during the course and the experience narrated by the interviewee, including tensions between theoretical representations of inclusion and lived reality. Authenticity was therefore experienced not only as applying theoretical knowledge to a real situation but, in some accounts, as an opportunity to reconsider and problematise theory through lived experience.

3.2. Active and responsible participation

A second theme concerned students' movement from completing an assessment towards taking decisions within the research process. Their accounts referred to selecting and adapting questions, conducting interviews, interpreting empirical material and performing thematic analysis. Comparing the task with a conventional examination, AN described the need to "put ourselves out there", exercising critical judgement and participating more directly in the educational process. M similarly identified conducting "a genuine qualitative research study for the first time" as one of the main outcomes of the experience.

In some accounts, increased decision-making was accompanied by concern about the consequences of interpretation. AN worried that his analysis might fail to "do justice" to the interviewee's experience or overlook significant elements, while SI, who interviewed her son, questioned how her personal involvement might affect her interpretation of the material. These concerns were not equally prominent across the corpus: some participants emphasised the novelty and directness of the experience more than their own analytical decision-making. Overall, however, the accounts suggest that assuming a more active research role could involve not only greater scope for judgement but also awareness of responsibility for how another person's experience was interpreted and represented.

3.3. Cognitive, emotional and relational engagement

Engagement emerged as multidimensional rather than simply as interest in an alternative assessment format. J described the experience as stimulating "curiosity, a desire to explore further, and a desire to expand my knowledge", illustrating the cognitive and motivational dimension. Other accounts foregrounded the interpersonal and emotional demands of interviewing.

AL, for example, described both the emotional difficulty of listening to experiences of prejudice and her initial concern that some questions might be intrusive. During the interview, however, she realised that some of these questions enabled the interviewee to narrate the experience and feel genuinely heard. M similarly associated the personalisation of questions with "giving voice" to the

interviewee, while SO emphasised active, non-judgemental listening and responsiveness to the unfolding narrative.

Engagement therefore took different configurations across participants, combining curiosity and cognitive investment with empathy, uncertainty, active listening and concern about the consequences of questioning and interpretation. These accounts indicate an investment extending beyond the procedural completion of the assessment.

3.4. Scaffolding from uncertainty towards autonomy

The fourth theme concerned support in managing unfamiliar methodological demands, although this pattern is less consistent across the corpus. SO provided the clearest example: initial uncertainty about thematic analysis was addressed through exchanges with the instructor, after which she reported being able to proceed with greater "confidence and autonomy". J likewise described the instructor's guidance as very helpful because it supported orientation throughout the research process.

This trajectory was not explicit in all accounts. Several participants described difficulties without linking their resolution to instructor or peer support. Scaffolding should therefore not be interpreted as a uniform developmental pathway. Where explicitly reported, however, support enabled students to manage unfamiliar demands while retaining responsibility for the task, suggesting that increasing autonomy was experienced through, rather than simply in the absence of, guidance.

Taken together, the findings show distinct but interconnected dimensions of the experience. Authenticity concerned the encounter between theoretical knowledge and lived experience; active participation concerned students' decision-making and responsibility within the research process; engagement concerned the cognitive, emotional and relational quality of their investment; finally scaffolding, where reported, supported the management of unfamiliar demands.

Rather than suggesting a linear relationship in which an authentic task automatically produces engagement or agency, the accounts point to an interplay between encountering real experiences, exercising judgement, becoming personally and relationally invested, and, for some students, receiving support while assuming increasing responsibility.

4. Discussion

The findings provide nuanced insights into how students experienced authenticity, agency and engagement when positioned as co-researchers within an authentic research assessment. Rather than illustrating a straightforward causal sequence in which an authentic design directly triggers agency and, in turn, engagement, the data point to a dynamic interplay among these dimensions.

First, authenticity extended beyond task realism or professional simulation. In line with Quinlan et al. (2025), the findings support a view of educational authenticity grounded in meaningful engagement and personal significance. Encountering lived experiences allowed students not only to apply theoretical constructs to concrete situations, but also, in some cases, to identify discrepancies and challenge theoretical assumptions. Authenticity thus emerged as an opportunity to reconsider theory through lived experience rather than simply to apply knowledge to practice.

This meaningful participation was also associated with a shift in students' positioning. Consistent with Student Voice and co-creation perspectives (Bovill et al., 2011; Omland et al., 2025), students participated in shaping questions and making methodological and interpretive decisions. By interviewing participants and analysing qualitative material, they moved from reproducing disciplinary knowledge towards contributing to its production. In line with Nieminen and Ketonen (2024), this can be interpreted as an expression of epistemic agency: students exercised judgement in producing, evaluating and transforming knowledge. However, the cross-case analysis also shows that this positioning was not articulated with equal strength by all participants, cautioning against treating co-researcher status as automatically equivalent to agency.

A particularly significant finding concerns the relational responsibility associated with knowledge production. When authentic assessment involved another person's lived experience, agency entailed more than cognitive investment or task execution. Students expressed concerns about intrusive questioning, respectful listening, accurate interpretation and doing justice to participants' accounts. Epistemic agency therefore appeared, for some students, to involve ethical attention to how another person's experience is elicited, interpreted and represented. This relational responsibility may constitute a distinctive dimension of authentic research assessment involving human experience.

The findings also invite a relational reading of Student Voice. Students were given opportunities to exercise voice by influencing their assessment design; subsequently, several described their co-researcher role through active listening, adapting questions, "giving voice" and creating space for participants' narratives. Without implying a causal relationship, this suggests that Student Voice may concern not only learning to speak and influence, but also learning to attend to the voice of others. Engagement similarly emerged as cognitive, emotional and relational, combining curiosity and critical investment with empathy, uncertainty and concern for the interlocutor.

These interpretations require caution. The study draws on seven voluntary reflective accounts from fourteen students, resulting in a small, self-selected and predominantly positive corpus. Moreover, the instructor was also the primary researcher. The findings therefore cannot establish the effectiveness of the pedagogical design or causal relationships between authentic assessment, agency and engagement. Rather, they illuminate how these students made sense of their participation as co-researchers.

5. Conclusions

This study suggests that co-designed authentic research assessment can create opportunities for students to participate in knowledge production while connecting theoretical knowledge with lived experience. Its principal contribution lies in highlighting the relational responsibility that may accompany epistemic agency when inquiry concerns another person's experience: becoming an active knowledge producer may also require learning how to listen, interpret and represent responsibly.

The findings further invite consideration of Student Voice as potentially encompassing both the exercise of one's own voice and attentiveness to the voices of others. Given the exploratory design, this proposition requires further

investigation. Future research should examine how relational responsibility develops across different forms of authentic inquiry and whether such experiences inform students' subsequent academic and professional practices.

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