

Fostering student agency and engagement: taking a programme approach

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Today's talk

Reframing assessment and feedback

Agency and student engagement

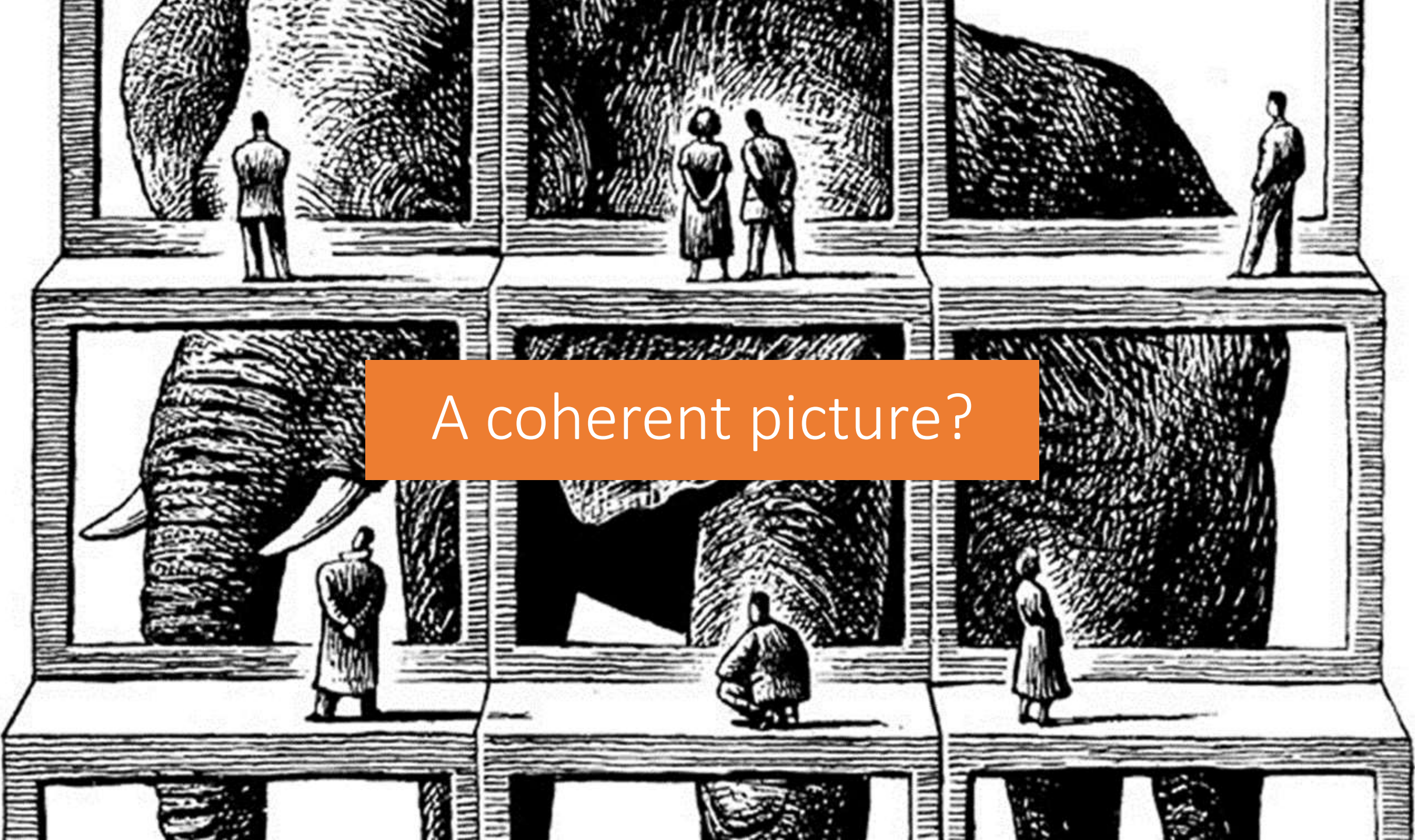
The case for a programme approach

Assessment ideas to engage students

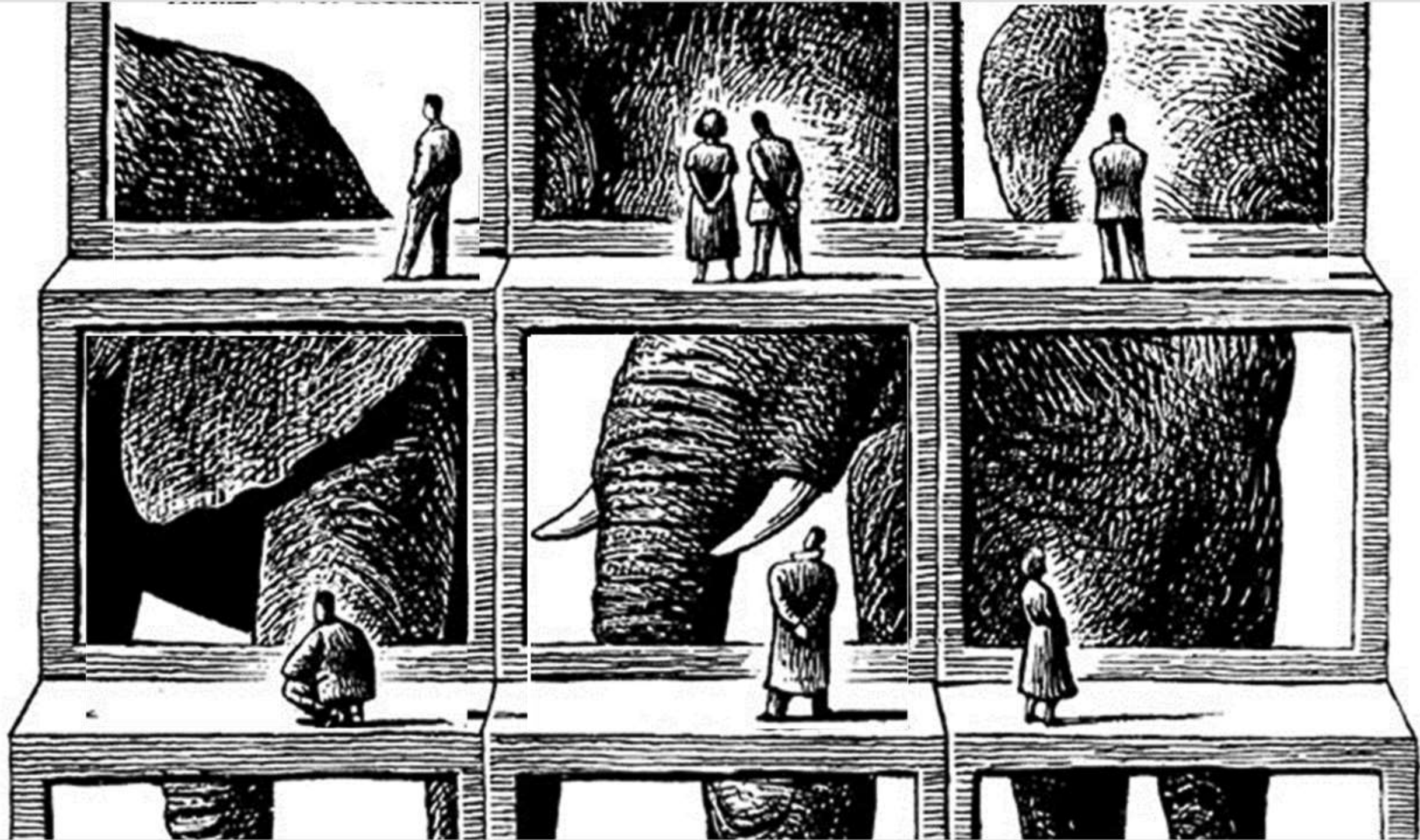
Feedback ideas: dialogue, relationship,
action

Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment





A coherent picture?



Student perspectives from TESTA focus groups

It's like getting six people to do one-sixth of a painting, jamming it together and wanting it to be one painting.

I expected a lot more structuring around assessments in terms of building upon what you've already done. It often felt like lecturers weren't aware of any of the units that had happened before when they were teaching you 'their' thing.

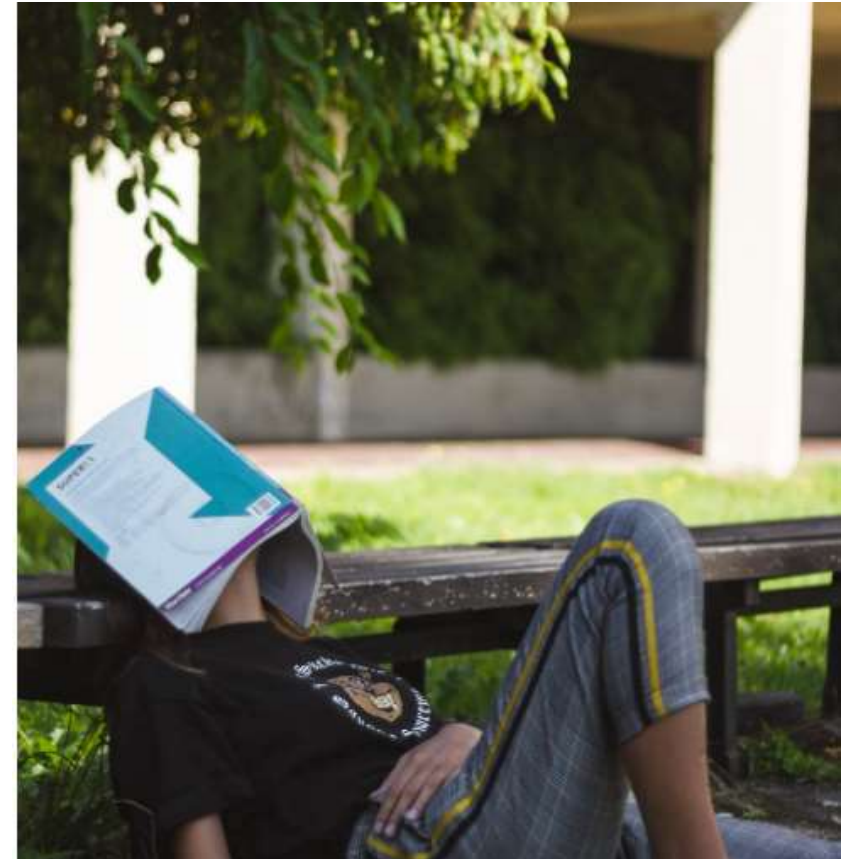
All of it I feel is just very repetitive like reports, reports, reports, essay, essay, essay, multiple choice questions, multiple choice questions and then we will do the statistics exam and then we will do the statistics exam – it's always the same thing.



Students feel
overwhelmed

They express signs of alienation

- **Lacking power:** I feel overwhelmed by the high volume of assessment
- **Lacking agency:** I feel passive - assessment feels 'done' to me
- **Uncertain about norms:** The standards vary from module to module, tutor to tutor - it feels unfair
- **Lacking meaning:** What difference does this assessment make to me and to society?





How much agency students experience in assessment

- The power of individuals to choose what happens next (Lindgren and McDaniel 2012)
- Ability to “Make choices in purposeful and autonomous ways” (Nieminen et al. 2022)
- Requires persistence, self-efficacy, self-regulation (Stenalt and Lassesen 2022)
- Assessment and feedback ecosystem constrains or enables agency (Nieminen et al. 2022).

Reframing assessment & feedback...

From



To

- Mainly psychological theories of learning
- A modular perspective
- Exams and essays as the mainstay
- 'Final word' feedback as advice and 'telling'
- Making a few incremental tweaks to improve things

- Sociological theories about alienation and engagement
- A programme perspective
- Diverse ways of learning from assessment
- Feedback as asking the right questions, prompting reflection and action
- Using evidence and external disruptions to prompt a step-change in assessment

Putting a step change into practice

- Individual versus team approach
- Disciplinary versus generic assessment theories
- Evidence and ideas are sometimes not enough

But...

- Administrative burden & complexity of change
- Post-Covid bandwidth and fatigue
- Generative AI: advance or retreat
- Student mental health challenge



Tansy Jessop



Student Agency and Engagement

Transforming Assessment and Feedback
in Higher Education

Routledge 20% Discount Code: **AFLY02**

Staff and Educational

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A preposition problem: assessment *of* trumps *for* learning

- Low formative to summative ratio of 1:5
- Formative squeezed out (not @Oxford!)
- High-weighted and high-stakes summative
- “Assessment arms race” (Harland et al. 2015)
- Summative as a ‘pedagogy of control’

Agency and engagement?

In weeks 9 to 12 there is hardly anyone in our lectures because we're too stressed. I'd rather use those two hours to get my assignment done.

S3: Once in the second year we had five – five! – group projects, plus one or two individual ones. All done in the exact same time.

S4: I nearly quit the course. I couldn't handle it.

S6: I stopped going to lectures and things like that – didn't have time.

You learn what the lecturer tells you. They say that you shouldn't learn things outside of the notes because you might not be able to use them in the exams. I'd prefer some way of making it more about wanting to learn a topic.

High stakes exams

I find exams easier, but I learned less because basically I just memorised what I need to know in practice questions and then regurgitate in one or two hours, and that's it.

It's just cramming. I want to leave that behind in secondary school and actually learn from an argument, not feel like I'm having to learn a huge amount of information.

I call them like tricks because it's not like an intuitive way of thinking. You know, if you haven't seen a trick before that comes up in the exam you are pretty much doomed. There's no critical thinking involved.

Something to take the stress off exams would be good but maybe also assessing us in a more interesting way.

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Engaging assessment design ideas

- What excites you most from these ideas and why?
- How could you adapt or develop it in your discipline?
- What programme thinking does it require?



Writing tasks with a difference on 'Politics of Rebellion' module

- 300-word weekly written personal responses to readings
- Students asked to write creatively and personally: poems, memory, meaning
- 10 x formative through the term
- Feeds into seminars
- Summative: students submit portfolio of best five
- Personalised feedback using audio feedback
- Builds relationship, engagement, and confidence





Stem Cell and Regeneration Unit

Formative: complete three short pieces relevant to the field

- Grant proposal
- Impact analysis
- Communication portfolio

Peer and tutor feedback

Summative: choose and refine one as a longer 100% assessment





History of Economic Thought Second year Unit

- Student choose topic they are passionate about
- The topic connects to own interests, areas of curiosity, and background
- They write a research proposal, get formative feedback
- Task is to write a full research paper
- Must use orthodox historical and analytical methods, and engage in philosophical discussion
- Much more interesting to mark, more varied
- Students are super-engaged.

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A pronoun problem:
I write, *I* talk, *you* listen, *you* receive

- Monologue versus dialogue
- Feedback as 'telling' rather than inviting reflection
- One-off feedback, short-lived and disposable
- Feedback as a product and an outcome, not a process

We need to move from feedback as 'telling'...

*They tend to talk **at** you instead of talking **to** you. It's not a two-way conversation.*

How am I going to make that better for the next essay, because I thought I was doing it right? You've told me I've done it wrong but you're not telling me how to do it right.

I feel very much, when I hand in an essay, I'm being churned through a factory machine. Like they literally have a script and they're copying and pasting stuff that might apply to your essay.

...to feedback
as a
relationship



Formative feedback with a rebuttal

Students' write grant proposal

- In pairs
- Access to exemplars

Teachers and students engage in anonymous peer review

- It's formative
- Students attend mock grant panel

Write rebuttal, revise and resubmit both rebuttal and revision

- Accept and reject comments: say why
- Revision = summative

Tony Harland, Navé Wald & Haseeb Randhawa (2017) Student peer review: enhancing formative feedback with a rebuttal, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42:5, 801-811.

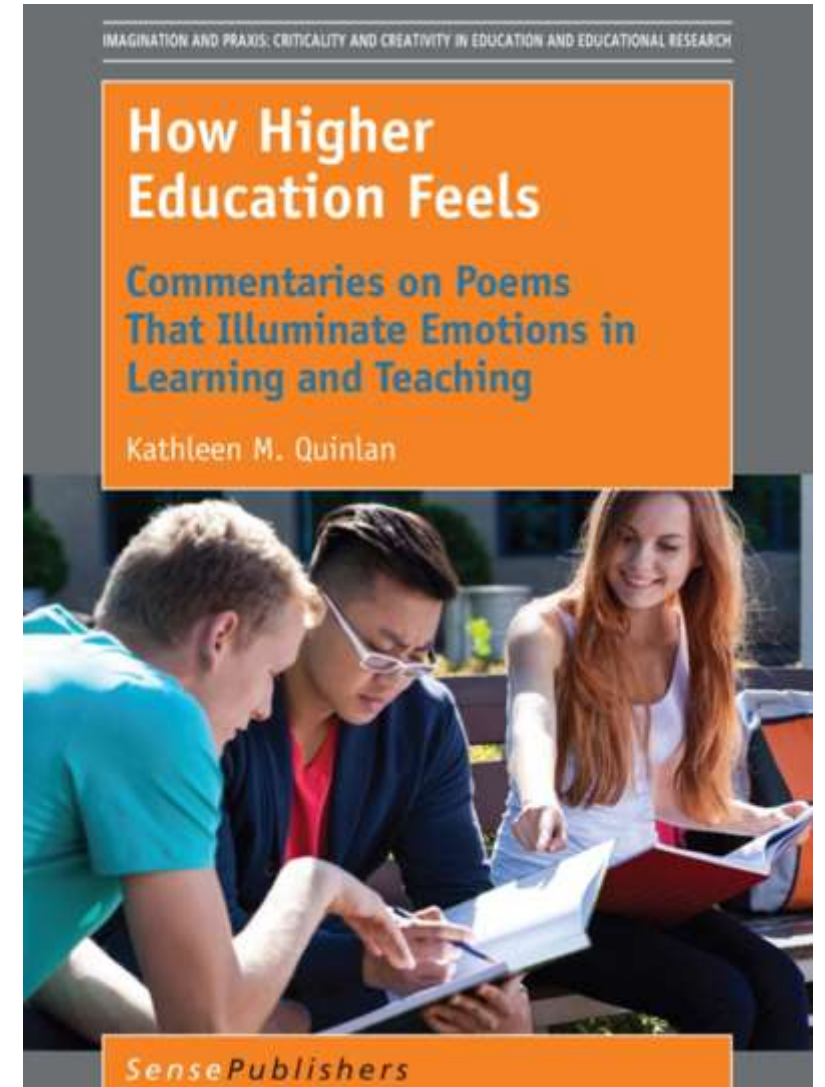
Feedback as...

A head and heart thing

A conversation

A personal connection in mass
higher education

An I-thou relationship



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