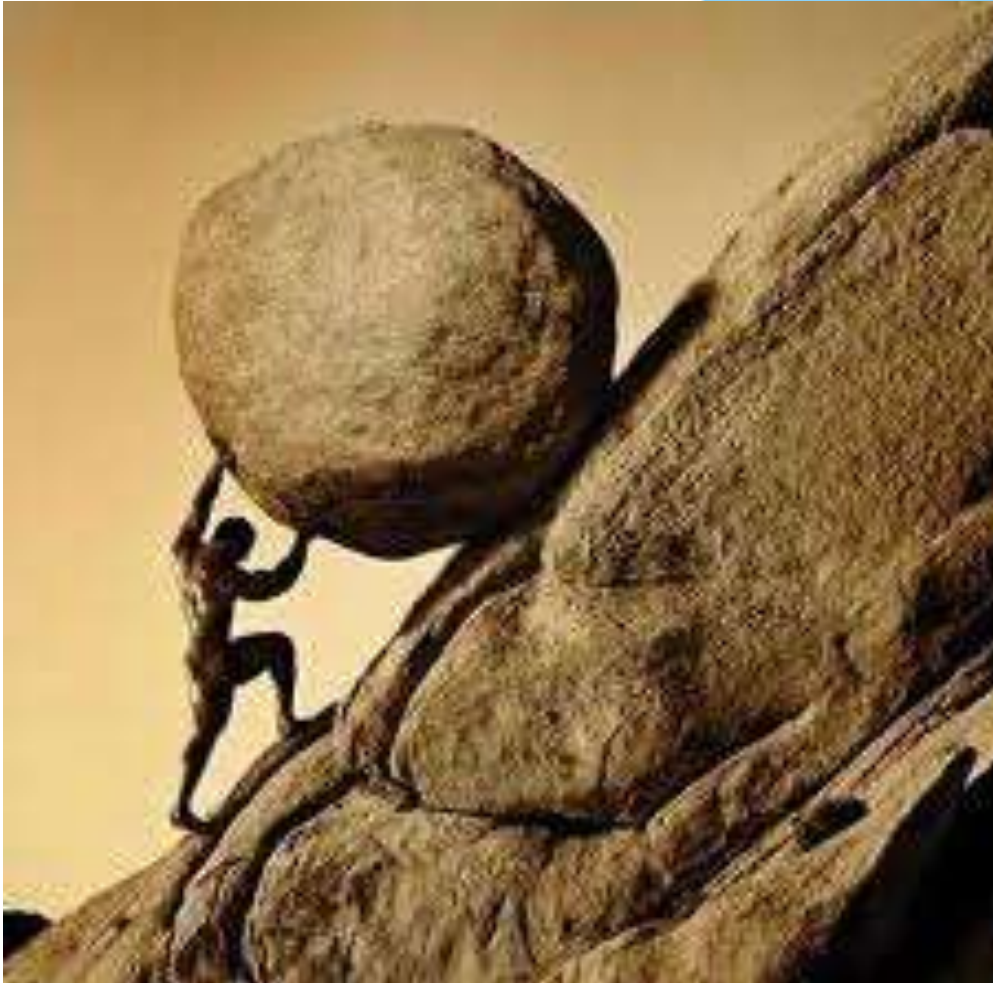# Dispelling myths and challenging traditions: Evidence about assessment from TESTA 5 years on

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Myths about assessment and feedback

Sisyphus rolls a boulder up a hill

"an eternity of endless labour, useless effort and frustration"

Homer, 8th Century BC

21st century equivalent

"You end up assessing for assessment's sake rather than thinking about what the assessment is for".

Programme Leader, Winchester (2008)

Today's keynote

* Why TESTA – three TESTA premises
* What TESTA is
* The TESTA community
* The Methodology and change process
* Evidence for the myths
* Enhancement strategies from the evidence

Three TESTA premises

1) Assessment drives what students pay attention to, and defines the actual curriculum (Ramsden 1992).

2) Feedback is significant (Hattie, 2009; Black and Wiliam, 1998)

3) Programme is central to influencing change.

What is TESTA?

Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment

* 200k HEA funded research project (2009-12)

* Seven programmes in four partner universities

* Evidence-based research and change process

* Programme the central unit of change

* Based on established (and new) assessment principles

TESTA 'Cathedrals Group' Universities

Durham Coventry

Canterbury Christchurch

BathSpa

Edinburgh Napier

Chichester

LiverpoolJohnMoore

Keele Winchester

Worcester

Dundee

London

EdgeHill Saurashtra

Birmingham

Metropolitan

UCL Nottingham

Delhi

SouthamptonSolent

NewSouthWales Kent

Essex

Glasgow

Greenwich RobertGordon

Sheffield Hallam

Roehampton

LondonMetropolitan

University of West Scotland

QueenMary

Lady Irwin College University of Delhi

TESTA
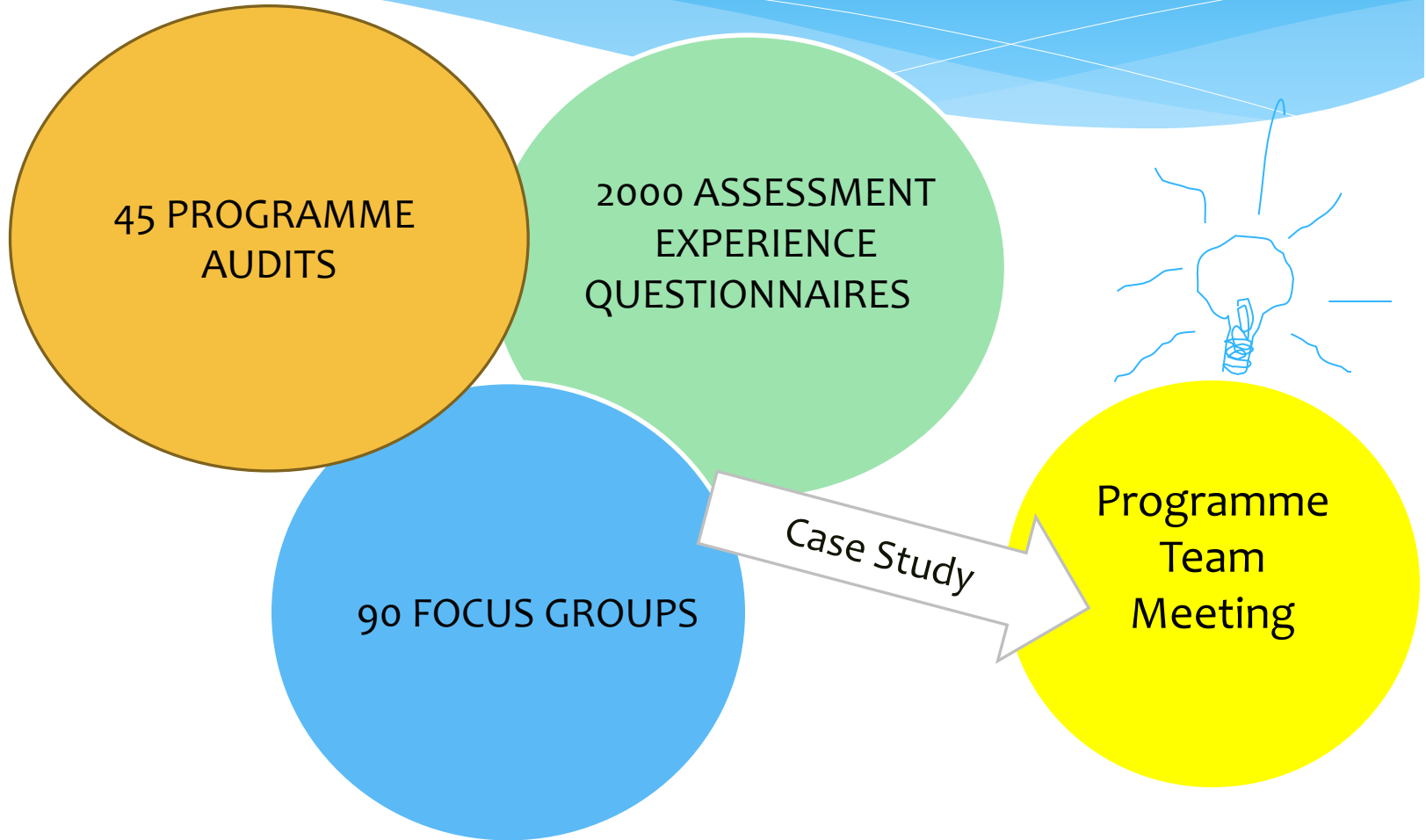
"…is a way of thinking about assessment and feedback"

Graham Gibbs

Based on assessment principles

* Time-on-task
* Challenging and high expectations
* Internalising understand goals and standards
* Prompt feedback
* Detailed, high quality, developmental feedback
* Dialogic cycles of feedback
* Deep learning – beyond factual recall

TESTA Research Methods

(Drawing on Gibbs and Dunbar-Goddet, 2008,2009)

45 PROGRAMME AUDITS

2000 ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRES

90 FOCUS GROUPS

Case Study

Programme Team Meeting

Themes, patterns, and myths…

Myth 1: Modular design always leads to a coherent programme of study

A selection of typical student viewpoints from different programmes….

What students say about integrating learning…

* *It's difficult because your assignments are so detached from the next one you do for that subject. They don't relate to each other.*

* *Because it's at the end of the module, it doesn't feed into our future work.*

…about shared practices

You'll get really detailed, really commenting feedback from one tutor and the next tutor will just say 'Well done'.

We know some people had a hell of a lot more feedback.

Some of the lecturers are really good at feedback and others don't write feedback, and they seem to mark differently. One person will tell you to reference one way and the other one tells you something completely different.

…about shared standards

Every lecturer is marking it differently, which confuses people.

I know that there's a particular lecturer and when you hand a piece of work in to them I know I'm going to do better than I would with another person. That may not be a good thing, because they're not actually looking at it properly or being critical enough, but yes. Mostly it's consistent maybe!

Q: If you could change one thing to improve the course what would it be?
A: More consistency with everything. More consistent marking, more consistency across everything and that they would talk to each other.

Is the module the right metaphor for learning?

modulus (Latin): small measure

"interchangeable units"

"standardised units"

"sections for easy constructions"

"a self-contained unit"

How well does IKEA 101 packaging work for Sports Studies 101?

Furniture

* Bite-sized
* Self-contained
* Interchangeable
* Quick and instantaneous
* Standardised
* Comes with written instructions
* Consumption

Student Learning

* Long and complicated
* Interconnected
* Distinctive
* Slow, needs deliberation
* Varied, differentiated
* Tacit, unfathomable, abstract
* Production

TESTA changes based on evidence

1) Integrated assessment across modules
2) Multi-stage assessments (formative feedback feeding forward)
3) Changes in QA validation processes – from lego assembly of degrees module by module via email to discussion and team based development
4) Strengthening team approaches to marking

Myth 2: Assessment is mainly about grading

Hercules attacked the many heads of the hydra, but as soon as he smashed one head, two more would burst forth in its place! Peisander 600BC

Audit data

* Range of UK summative assessment 12-68 over three years

* Indian and NZ universities – 100s of small assessments – busywork, grading as 'pedagogies of control'

* Average in UK about two per module

More summative = more learning?
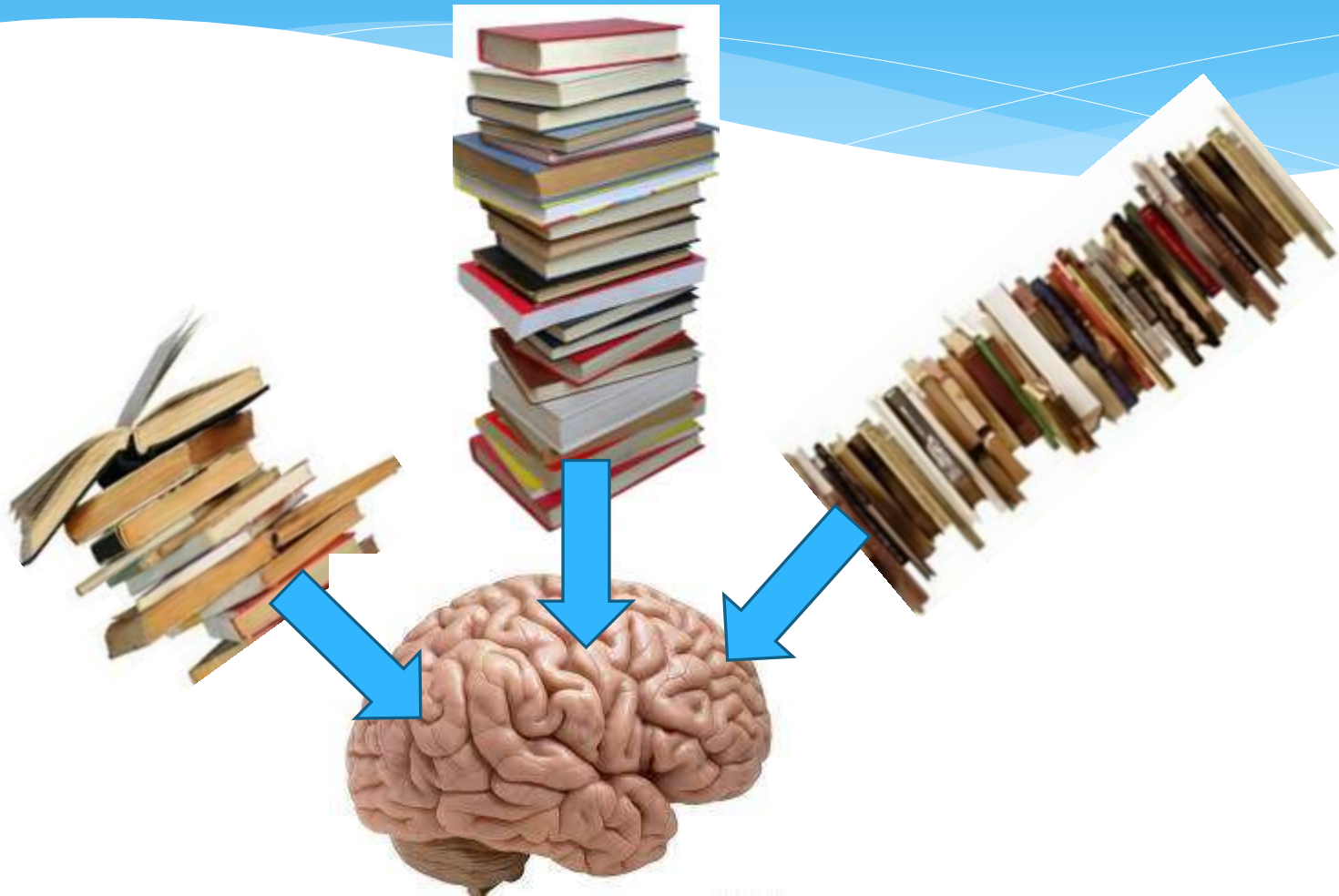
What students say…

* *A lot of people don't do wider reading. You just focus on your essay question.*

* *I always find myself going to the library and going 'These are the books related to this essay' and that's it.*

* *Although you learn a lot more than you would if you were revising for an exam, because you have to do wider research and stuff, you still don't do research really unless it's directly related to essays.*

* *Unless I find it interesting I will rarely do anything else on it because I haven't got the time. Even though I haven't anything to do, I don't have the time, I have jobs to do and I have to go to work and stuff.*

Effort Map: Holland Vs Alps (Graham)

Max effort

Modest Effort

Low Effort

Week 6   Week 12
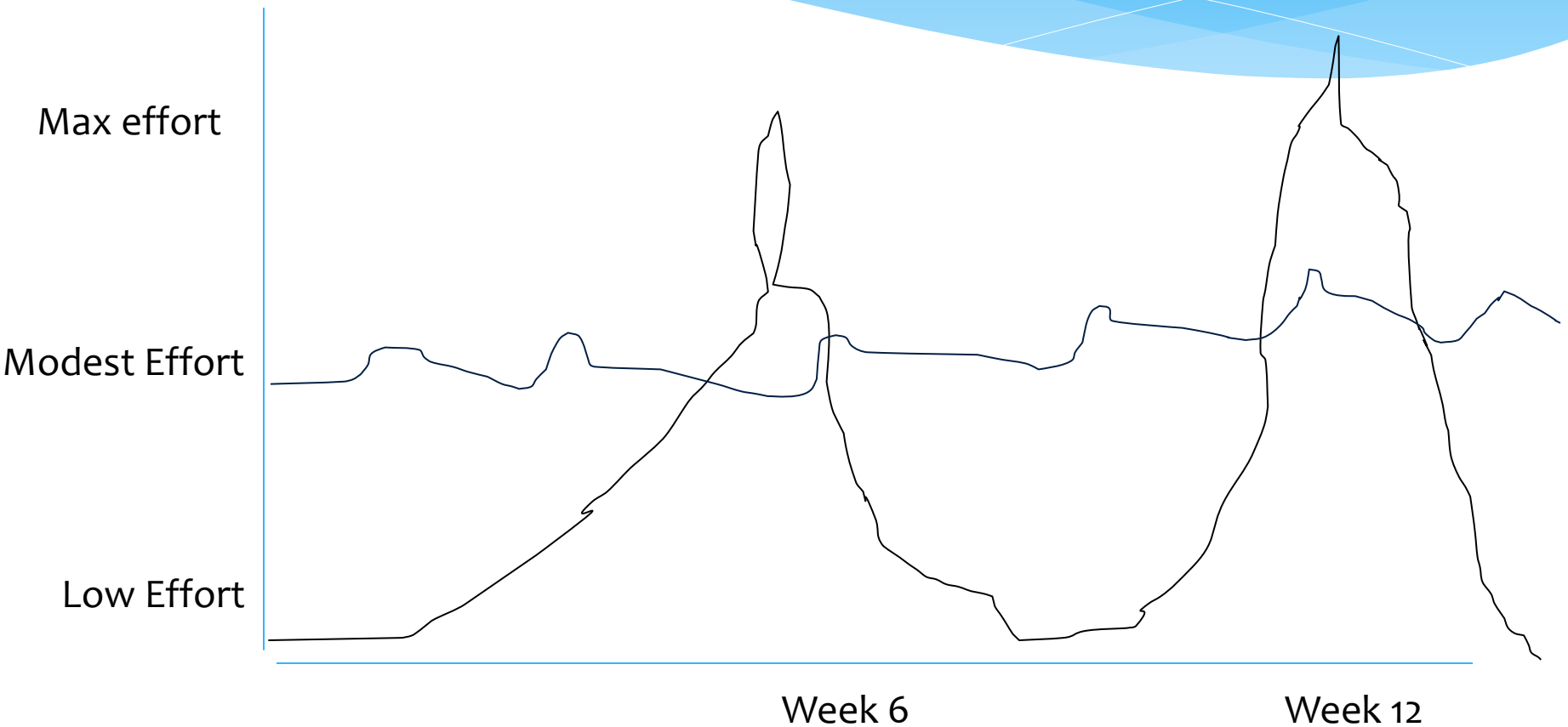
TESTA changes based on evidence

* Reduce summative assessment
* Increase meaningful formative assessment
* Construct challenging integrated tasks involving research, case studies and authentic assessment tasks
* Create scaffolding which supports independent study
* Shift culture from instrumental grading to reflective engagement in learning

Myth 3: Formative assessment is difficult to do, and not worth doing

Defining formative assessment

* "Definitional fuzziness" Mantz Yorke (2003)

* Basic idea is simple – to contribute to student learning through the provision of information about performance (Yorke, 2003).

* A fine tuning mechanism for how and what we learn (Boud 2000)

TESTA's definition of formative

* Ungraded, required and eliciting feedback

Audits across 18 UG degree programmes in 8 universities

Disciplines	Humanities (Mean)	Sciences (Mean)	Professional (Mean)	Ideal?
No summative assessments	42	43	32	12
No formative assessments	12	31	10	24
Ratio formative : summative	1:4	3:4	1:3	2:1

What students say about formative tasks…

* *It was really useful. We were assessed on it but we weren't officially given a grade, but they did give us feedback on how we did.*

* *It didn't actually count so that helped quite a lot because it was just a practice and didn't really matter what we did and we could learn from mistakes so that was quite useful.*

* *I find more helpful the feedback you get in informal ways week by week, but there are some people who just hammer on about what will get them a better mark.*

* *He's such a better essay writer because he's constantly writing. And we don't, especially in the first year when we really don't have anything to do. The amount of times formative assignments could have taken place…*

What prevents students from doing formative tasks…

* *If there weren't loads of other assessments, I'd do it.*

* *If there are no actual consequences of not doing it, most students are going to sit in the bar.*

* *It's good to know you're being graded because you take it more seriously.*

* *I would probably work for tasks, but for a lot of people, if it's not going to count towards your degree, why bother?*

* *The lecturers do formative assessment but we don't get any feedback on it.*

TESTA changes based on evidence

* Increase formative assessment
* Require formative tasks, using QA and validation processes
* Public tasks to motivate students to undertake formative tasks (presentations, posters, blogs)
* Authentic and challenging tasks linked to research, case studies and large projects
* Multi-stage tasks – formative to summative
* Set expectations about formative in first year
* Be consistent as a programme

Myth 4: Feedback is written monologue from lecturer to student

* Getting feedback from other students in my class helps. I can relate to what they are saying and take it on board. I'd just shut down if I was getting constant feedback from my lecturer.

* I read it and think "Well, that's fine but I've already handed it in now and got the mark. It's too late".

What students say…

* *I read through it when I get it and that's about it really. They all go in a little folder and I don't look at them again most of the time. It's mostly the mark really that you look for.*

* *I'm personally really bad at reading feedback. I'm the kind of person, and I hate to admit it, but I'll look at the mark and then be like 'well stuff it, I can't do anything about it'.*

Two educational paradigms…

Transmission Model

Social Constructivist model

TESTA changes based on evidence

* Giving feedback on formative, not on summative
* Cycles of feedback through self and peer review of work
* Technology to personalise feedback
* Developing dialogue through cover sheets
* Students initiating feedback through questions
* Getting students to give feedback to teachers – formative evaluation

Myth 5: Students engage in good learning practices without scaffolding

* Definitely, because I think when you get feedback, you look straight at the number, and you're like 67/70, fine that's a decent mark, put that aside, what else can I do now. If it's a bad grade, then you'll read why you got it, maybe

* … but having it audibly, where you don't know what you've got, and you're waiting to hear it, and you can't help but listen to what he's saying, you can kind of judge … so if words like but or however, you think oh no what have I got … but you've listened to the whole feedback to you. You've got to process what he's been saying.

How can scaffolding learning effectively?

1. Zero weighted, compulsory assessments (gateways)
2. Sequenced formative into summative points
3. Enhanced use of peer and self assessment
4. Forcing engagement with the feedback before releasing marks
5. Creating richer forms of feedback that provide close contact or personalised
6. Using evidence to inform students about good learning habits and principles to improve performance

Myth 6: Staff won't change what they do!

Proteus the god of "elusive sea change'' is capable of changing appearance to escape capture

* I think the team truly thought that because we offered so many different types of assessment that we were quite innovative and this was great for the students, and I think having listened to the work that Graham has done, and the work that's come out of the project, it's made us re-think that element of variety. So that's been very useful.

* In terms of the assessment, formative and summative, the second year students now will have benefited that. They have formative examinations next week and then their summative exams are not until January. So we're giving them a long time to get the feedback, think about what they need to look at and their exams will be two weeks after their clinical placement has finished.

* Going through the process does something to people, but I'm not sure how you get it, where you get it... but I think you do pick up little stories that you can (act on)... So I'll now say to students 'You now get to see FYP examples earlier' because in TESTA (students said) 'I want to see them'. Oh God! So they get to see them. Oh it's very simple!

Impacts at Winchester

* Improvements in NSS scores on A&F – from bottom quartile in 2009 to top quartile in 2013
* Three programmes with 100% satisfaction ratings post TESTA
* All TESTA programmes have some movement upwards on NSS A&F scores
* Programme teams are talking about A&F and pedagogy
* Periodic review processes are changing for the better.

www.testa.ac.uk

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