Question/ Answer Transcript

This transcript records the live responses to the Q&A and has been lightly edited for clarity and length. The audience names of those asking questions have been redacted; all responses are from Dr Krystalli. The Q&A accompanies the keynote delivered by Dr Roxani Krystalli on feminist practices of reflexive assessment.

**Question 1:** **I want to start at the other end of it so you have a module and you have a body of reflexive, thoughtful, creative work from the students. What do you do with it afterwards? Because this is my problem, I have coursework that I'm so proud of, that I am so impressed with that the students have put in so much of their lives and energies into particularly this year and it's going to sit on MMS forever. I want to do something with it and what would you? What should I do?**

**Answer 1*:*** *I love that and we should definitely think about that question together. I'll start by saying my students are far more creative than I am and so I do encourage them to take things forward. And so one of the students in my module this year said that they would start a sort of feminist magazine at St Andrews and beyond. They want to go beyond the community to sort of pull this work together. So the first thing that I tell them is just because this was your assessment, it doesn't have to end with me. What do you want to do with it? And they often find creative ways to share it.*

*The second thing is I encourage them to publish a lot, so I've had a couple of students submit things to literary publications at St Andrews and beyond. I also nominate my students for prizes because I think it's really important that prize committees read work that challenges ideas of ‘the mainstream’. But I think it's important to put that work in places where it will be read by people who don't necessarily share these pedagogical commitments. I also have an amazing colleague, Dr Laura Mills, who does displays. So her students do really material things, so she displays textiles and art and has a website which I can put in the chat box in which her student work is shared. So I think there are ways for the work to find its way and spills out of the classroom, if you will.*

*I'll say the last thing is it's actually quite important that I tell my students this will NOT be read by other people because they really worry, initially: I want to write about my dad, but I don't want my dad to read it or I want to write about a sexist thing my boyfriend said, but I don't want everyone else to know. And I say to them very clearly: This is not a blog. This is a private form of assessment, read by me and whoever the moderator or external examiner is, and so that security of “you choose whom to share with, when and how” is really initially important for them to practice creativity. I love the question and would love to speak to you more.*

**Question 2: I wondered what in your experience is the difference between applying your teaching and assessment methods in undergraduate and then postgraduate teaching?​**

*This is potentially a taboo answer, but I actually don't see a distinction. I teach in the exact same way [at undergraduate and postgraduate level]. It sort of starts from a principle of if you treat students as worthy and capable, they rise to the standards. So if you look at my third year honours module booklet for Feminist Theories in Global Politics, I suspect I could teach the exact same reading list at the MLitt level. The conversation might be different than the standard of writing might be different, but the texts I teach are not necessarily different. The number of pages I assign are different. The priors I assume are different; I don't just happen to mention Foucault, assuming everyone knows what's going on. (Although to be honest half the time I don't know what's going on when I mention Foucault.) So I treat these groups of students as equally interested and curious, just bringing different skills with them and being at different points along their journey. As I said, that's potentially a taboo answer, but but I find that my undergraduates actually love being treated as adults and as capable of this kind of thinking and learning.*

**Question 3: Do you have any pushback from students ( such as "Why am I doing this assessment, I'm not going to be doing this in real life. This is useless.") If so, how do you respond to this? ​**

*I love the question, in part because my father had no tolerance for it. So when I was little and I said to my father “But why am I studying trigonometry? What am I going to do with it?” He would say you don't do education for use, like you don't know how your learning will shift your life. So how will this be useful is not a good question for learning. Now, my father was a coal miner in socialist Greece and therefore potentially not the subject of the neoliberal education system that I currently work in. But that changed my life and I repeat it to my students. And I say to them, “use is not a good framework for learning, which is not to say this [learning] is not useful. It's my job to tell you how it might be useful, but I just resist that line of inquiry at the very beginning”. And to be honest, I don't get that pushback a lot, because if you think about it, writing 500 words on something you care about might actually be more fun and you're less likely to complain.*

**Question 4: This is a question specific to St Andrews: with our terms, if you spend the first half of the module using these exciting systems, do you then not find there is just not enough space or that you don't have enough time left to help who are not very good at essay writing to produce a final essay? Because as a teacher that would be my anxiety, that quiet often students, particularly those who come from not very privileged backgrounds and didn't go to a private school are not very good at writing essays, and yet they have to write them. How do you teach them to write essays in a short amount of time? ​**

They build a lot of the writing skills for essays in the reflexive responses. The level of feedback I provide is really handy for improving their essays at the very end, and I've seen tremendous improvement at the bottom end of the scale-- so students who started at 11 or 12 in reflexive responses tend to pull it up to 14 or 15, and their final essay, correspondingly, is pulled up as well. I do a writing workshop on how to write a good essay. It's two hours. It's separate from class time. Happy to share slides and resources for that, or invite you to it next year if you would like. And I do a lot of peer support for the essays as well. One of the pieces of feedback I got from an external examiner at some point is this is a writing class. It's not a feminist theory class--and it's like look, it's one of the best things you can learn as an undergraduate student: how to think and write. And so I enjoy that part of the job a lot.

But the short answer is the the writing practice that students get in the reflexive responses and the feedback they get on how to write well and precisely and generously actually helps them with the essay. But I have tailored learning for the essay as well. I hope that's helpful and I'm very happy to chat more.

**Question 5: How you conceptualise progress- as a cherished goal for students and also an anxiety inducing framework. Especially now. The increased need to matter as young thinkers and the irreconcilability of that with a world that refuses to let us reconceptualise what ‘mattering’ means, is that something that can be drawn into pedagogy to help unpack progress?**

*So, three things: At the start of the semester, and especially the pandemic semester, I asked my students to set their own goals. And we read Audre Lorde about poetry not being a luxury and survival not being a given matter, and so we start the goal setting exercise with my saying “if your goal is to survive the pandemic semester, I am with you. I am not going to expect you to do a whole lot more than that, and especially at a time of tremendous death and grief, surviving is no small matter.” So I actually set the bar really low for what I expect them to aim for, and then over the course of the semester, as you say, that anxiety creeps in, so they come to office hours. And it sometimes comes from affection, you know, they say, “I really love your module and want to do well for you”, or, “I don't want to disappoint you.”*

*It always comes from such benign sources that almost make me cry. And I always say to them I will forever be your teacher and my relationship to you is not predicated on how you do in this module. And I reassure them that in the several years that I have been a teacher I have maintained contact with my students, because I see teaching as a lifelong relationship, not a one-time encounter, at all points on the marking scale. I don't say, “Right. Eighteen and above: we’ll stay in touch. The rest of you can go away.”*

*Then I also tell them that they don't need to do their best work in a pandemic, and I share with them how I have not done my best work in a pandemic, and they always find it surprising because I have to perform excellence for them, right? I need to work Panopto, and talk fluently for an hour, and be too cheerful in tutorial, and so on. And when I say,”Let me tell you about everything I did not get done this week and all the people I disappointed,” and it sort of lets the room settle. And so I think sometimes when we perform excellence in having it together for our students, we reinforce those ideas about progress. Whereas when we say, as I often do in my classrooms, “Look, I am carrying grief right now. A lot of it. And my priority is to show up for you, and that is my primary commitment, and I hope I'm keeping that commitment up. Here are the things that are falling by the wayside,” they tend to find that reassuring as well. And then finally at the end of the semester I ask them to write down two things they learned, and they don't have to be substantive content. It could be about writing, it could be about life, and it always makes our final tutorial amazing, because they all share them and they're always really incredible.*

*And I say to them, “Look, whatever else happened this semester, you have your two things”. And we sort of look at them on the board, or the digital board, and I say, “This is no small matter.” The fact that we were able to do this at a time of great loss is no small matter. I don't know how we'll do this when it's no longer a pandemic, like in a sense, the pandemic has given me a vocabulary for talking to them about grief, and loss, and building a life in the in the shadow of them. I don't know whether and how we’ll be able to unsettle these neoliberal anxieties around progress when the pandemic vocabularies are less close to the surface, so thanks for getting me to think about that.*

**Question six: This is also about the grading in the essays, because you mentioned that you encourage them to be reflective in it and I was wondering if your how much your rubric changed and if students feel anxiety about that change to writing an essay versus the 500 word reflexive journals.**

*There's a lot of anxiety around that. One of my practices is that I try to answer questions in public, because it's very much a [socioeconomic] class issue in terms of which students feel comfortable emailing me for further support versus which students sit with their question on their own. So I say, if you have questions about the essays you need to post them on [Microsoft] Teams and I post the answers publicly, and if it's about the subject matter just come to office hours. And so the first question on the Teams thread is always, “Can I write my essay in the first person?” and I always turn around the question and I say, “Okay, from everything we've read and everything we've thought about reflexivity, do you think you can write your essay in the first person?” They say “Yes”. But it's funny that they think about reflexivity as the task when it's on the name of the assessment as opposed to as a as a practice that spills through everything we do. They tend to be able to make those connections pretty well, once I make room for them.*

*It's a whole other matter for the school actually, because the school has an essay marking rubric. They do not have a reflexive response marking rubric. You can imagine why. So convincing the school that I'm going to use a different rubric than their essay marking rubric was not easy, but I basically said, “Look, this is what matches what I expect from students. The students are clear on what rubric I'm using, what's the loss?”* I'm not actually interested in the rubric that doesn't correspond to what I'm learning. *So resistance doesn't really come from the students on that part, it’s a bit of an institutional, ‘but this is the essay cover sheet and this is the essay marking sheet. Why are you using a different one?’ And again, they've been quite receptive once I spelled it out. But I'm also comfortable being a bit of an alien in any setting, like “oh, Dr Krystalli does feminist things.” It's like sure, like, if this is what you think this is, I am totally, totally fine with that.*

**Question 8: I have to say it: should we be grading at all?**

*Answer 8: It's a great question. I have an amazing colleague in the US who's an anthropologist, Dr Angela Lederach , and she uses ungrading. If you're not familiar with the philosophy, I’ll also put that in the chat box. I find it very interesting. I have thought about my institutional barriers--I'm also enjoying picturing what would they say if I said “Right, yes, I'm not marking next semester”. You know, I'm just picturing the reactions. I would like to move towards ungrading, but I will say–––and perhaps this is my own latent conservatism–––I don't believe in “anything goes” in education. And one of the moments that surprises my students is they sometimes say: But I told your personal story; how did I get a 15? Like, look just because it’s your truth, it doesn't make it good. And that's a provocative thing to say. It is a valid experience and it's valued. And there's a way to render experience compellingly. And so I want to teach them that standard. Like, how do you write compellingly about personal experience? And I don't want to throw that out.*

*I would love to be able to do it outside of the 20 point scale, and with less pressure. And I don't know what it would take for St Andrews to embrace that. I imagine it would be much harder than in the US where you have a lot more freedom. You know, I don't know how many of you are on Twitter, but sometimes my American colleagues say, “It’s been a long pandemic; I just cancelled the final”. And I just love picturing what would happen if I went to the Director of Teaching here and said, “So I just cancelled one of my assessments”. So yeah, that's where I am, but I'd love to hear others’ views.*