

USING EXEMPLARS TO ENHANCE LEARNING AND SUPPORT ACHIEVEMENT

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WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

When we present students with unfamiliar assessment formats, it can be difficult for them to work out what is expected of them and more difficult on occasions for them to recognise what kind of work is good enough to match required standards. If we are able to show rather than just tell them what we are looking for, they are more likely to achieve higher standards. Exemplars are a well-established means of helping students get the hang of new-to-them assessment genres and can save a lot of anguish on both sides.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Exemplars are not model answers. They are carefully selected examples of authentic student work from previous cohorts (anonymised and with permission) or tutor-constructed examples (based on your extensive experience of the kinds of responses and common mistakes students make). They are chosen to typify and illustrate different levels of quality or competence.

The concrete nature of exemplars means that they are able to convey messages in a way that nothing else can (Sadler, 2010). Carefully selected examples can not only help students to 'see' what the tutor expects with regard to the task in hand (Scoles, Huxham, & McArthur, 2013) but they can also enable students to:

- gain a feel for what the final product looks like in terms of layout, structure and language;
- develop their insights into the nature of academic writing;
- raise their awareness of the diverse ways a task might fruitfully (or erroneously) be tackled;
- hone their evaluative skills.

Used judiciously and skilfully, exemplars have the potential to act as powerful learning tools (Sadler, 2010), helping students gain insight into the nature of quality and standards, ideally through close analysis and discussion (Hendry, White, & Herbert, 2016). In terms of supporting their assignment preparation and enhancing their learning students typically find exemplars to be more useful than standalone lists of criteria, grids and rubrics (Hawe, Lightfoot, & Dixon, 2017).

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1. CHOOSE EXAMPLES WHICH WILL HELP STUDENTS FIRMLY GRASP TASK REQUIREMENTS

Seeing examples of, say, how to organise a report or answer a particular type of exam question can develop students' insights into the required style and help them develop their technique appropriately. You can also raise awareness, if appropriate, of diverse high-quality ways of addressing a complex task (when there isn't a single 'correct' answer, but multiple inventive and creative responses are possible).

2. HELP STUDENTS PRACTICE APPLYING CRITERIA TO SAMPLES OF WORK

Building learners' capacity to monitor and evaluate their own work entails developing their ability to 'see' what distinguishes good work from that which is less effective. Giving students access to a range of exemplars of varying standard is useful, e.g. give them examples which illustrate expected standards of quality or competence in each grade.

3. ENABLE STUDENTS TO REFLECT DEEPLY ON, AND DISCUSS, WHAT HIGH QUALITY WORK LOOKS LIKE

Opportunities for analysis of the samples with extended discussion (peer-peer, but also, importantly, tutor-guided) is important here. The conversation and dialogue which flows from collaborative analysis of exemplars can be a vital ingredient to the successful use of exemplars. Social interaction, balanced with clear tutor guidance, provides feedback whereby interpretations are shared, meanings negotiated, and expectations clarified.

4. CHOOSE EXAMPLES TO PROMOTE SELF-EFFICACY

Judiciously-selected sound-standard examples can boost students' confidence and encourage anxious learners to feel that they can develop the ability to do the task. It's useful to think about when it might be best to introduce examples of a similar 'finished product' to the one students are tackling on your module. Too early and you may alarm or dispirit students who are unfamiliar with the content, too late and they won't have time to adjust their approach, if necessary.

5. CAREFULLY ORCHESTRATE DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING OF FRUITFUL LEARNING STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO SUBJECT-MATTER, AND TO PROMOTE THE IDEA THAT FEEDBACK FOCUSES ON IMPROVEMENT

For example, if you choose a range of brief examples, you could role-play the 'author' of each example and ask students verbally to give you feedback which will help you improve your approach, making clear (by your reactions, in role) that feedback carries emotional freight. However, when taken in the spirit of constructive criticism and when a concerted attempt is made to share meanings/check for (mis) interpretations, it can feedforward in highly productive ways.

6. USE EXEMPLARS-BASED ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP STUDENTS' SKILLS TO MONITOR THEIR OWN WORK WHILE THEY ARE PRODUCING IT

Learning to evaluate 'peers' work, via exemplars, helps develop their assessment literacy in low-stakes situations. By comparing and contrasting examples students can be supported to learn to make evaluative judgments about the extent to which subject content has been mastered and generate feedback, so they're gradually enabled to become less reliant on external regulation. Help them see the importance of practising making evaluative judgments about examples, whereby they're learning to ask themselves questions (self-assess) about the quality of their own work e.g. 'How am I doing?' 'Is this right?' 'How can I tell?' 'Should I go further?' 'What other steps could I take?'

7. COMBINE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TASKS WITH EXEMPLAR-BASED FEEDBACK DISCUSSIONS AND ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES TO ADVANCE STUDENTS' SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE AND HELP THEM CHECK THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF RELEVANT CONTENT AND ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS

Some tutors are wisely wary of using 'finished product' exemplars in the same content-area as high stakes summative assessment, for fear of stifling creativity or encouraging plagiarism and imitation. Using examples drawn from students' early attempts at 'interim' formative tasks (which mirror some aspect of what students need to do in high-stakes assessment) offers one alternative. The task might engage students, for instance, in a challenging domain which is known to cause difficulties for novices.

8. HELP THEM RATE THEIR WORK BY COMPARISON WITH THEIR PEERS

Carefully chosen exemplars, with the requirement for students to rank their own work in relation to a range of examples, coupled with guided discussion/feedback on the quality of their self-evaluation, can provide sensitising feedback. 'Weak' examples can, for example, alert students to potential missteps or partial understandings, which could interfere with their capacity to do well in high-stakes assessment, so they can remedy misconceptions before it's too late. Examples of 'good or excellent' work can motivate students and help them understand what is required to achieve a good grade.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In so far as it is possible, we want to 'open the black box' for students to demystify assessment requirements, enabling them to work confidently knowing they are heading in the right direction rather than struggling to guess what is wanted. By providing exemplars we can help them feel confident to tackle new kinds of assessed tasks and to achieve to their potential. Hence, we can pre-empt some of the necessity for post-hoc explanatory feedback by front-loading our guidance.

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