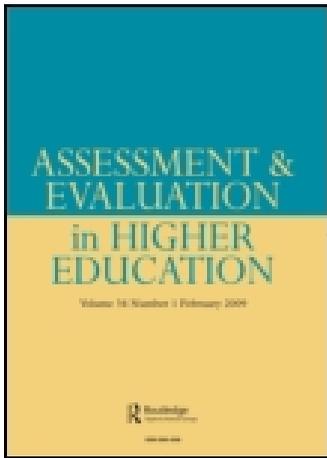


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No longer exempt from good practice: using exemplars to close the feedback gap for exams

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In this paper, we discuss the anomaly between the increasing interest in feedback in current education research, the continued role of time-limited, unseen examinations as a form of assessment and the dearth of literature on feedback related to such exams. We argue that while exams have long been regarded as different from other forms of assessment, it is not justifiable to exempt them from the good practice that can, and does, inform these other types of assessment. We suggest a solution to providing timely, effective feedback for end of course examinations is to move the feedback emphasis to ‘feedforward’ by implementing exemplars (examples of real students’ work, generally of different qualities). This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate whether there was a relationship between student use of exemplars before the exam and the final exam grade achieved ($n=520$), and to explore students’ and lecturers’ perspectives about the effectiveness of and engagement with exemplars. Quantitative findings suggested that those students who accessed exemplars did score better in their exams than those that did not. Qualitative data revealed that exemplars were received positively by students and lecturers, and we use this to provide practical suggestions on exemplar good practice.

Keywords: feedback; feedforward; exemplars; exams; higher education

Introduction

In recent years, feedback has emerged as a key issue in educational and institutional policy terms. In the UK, a strong stimulus for this has been the annual National Student Surveys of completing students that have highlighted widespread student dissatisfaction with feedback (e.g. see Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE] 2010). As a result there is abundant, and ever-growing, literature on attitudes to feedback (e.g. Carless 2006), good practice in feedback (e.g. Gibbs and Simpson 2004–2005; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006) problems with feedback (e.g. Hounsell 2003) and new directions for feedback (e.g. Hounsell 2008). The emphasis is predominately on feedback of assessed work (for an alternative view on this see McArthur and Huxham 2012) and the type of assessed work is nearly always coursework.

In this paper, we highlight the anomaly between this growing interest in feedback, the continued role of time-limited, unseen examinations as a form of assessment and the dearth of literature on feedback related to such exams. Such an

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anomaly is consistent with a broader conflict between the increasing understanding of learning in constructivist terms and an enduring reliance on ‘testing’ (Shepard 2000). We argue that while exams have long been regarded as different from other forms of assessment it is not justifiable to exempt them from the good practice that can, and does, inform other types of assessment and other areas of teaching and learning. This need is reinforced by the continuing use of exams as a significant part of course assessment strategies in many subject areas.

There are a number of factors that help explain the failure to integrate feedback into exam-based assessments. Few students are given access to their exam scripts, either because of real or mythologised barriers to this practice. Increasing modularisation often means that the quick turnaround between modules makes it difficult to ‘make any kind of arrangement that would make feedback flow forwards effectively’ (Gibbs 2006b, 17). Time-consuming quality processes also impact upon the time available to offer such feedback (Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2002). There is a problem providing timely, specific feedback, aimed at closing the gap between current performance and anticipated future performance in a similar task (Gibbs and Simpson 2004–2005; Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton 2002; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Sadler 1989) after summative examinations. Hence, Yorke (2003) concludes that modules that use end of module exams for summative assessment are poorly situated to provide effective feedback. We suggest a solution is to move the feedback emphasis for end of course examinations to ‘feedforward’, and to this end, explore the use of exemplars (examples of real students’ work, generally of different qualities) as effective mechanisms for introducing feedback good practice into the examination arena. Feedforward is a strategy that aims to

increase the value of feedback to the students by focusing comments not only on the past and present ... but also on the future – what the student might aim to do, or do differently in the next assignment or assessment if they are to continue to do well or to do better. (Hounsell 2008, 5)

Sadler (1987, 200) defines exemplars as ‘key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence. The exemplars are not standards themselves but are indicative of them ... they specify standards implicitly’. He argues that the challenge for tutors is to help students *recognise* quality, not just define it for them. He believes students should be shown a ‘quality continuum’ of authentic student work to help them make judgements about what constitutes quality. Although in this study we assume that the tutor’s view of quality is equated with the assessment criteria, Sadler (2005) makes the point that the interpretation of standards and criteria is ultimately the professional judgement of the university tutors and is, therefore, subject to the tutor’s personal expectations. In this paper, we outline an empirical study that trialled the use of exemplars for undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in exam-based modules in a school of biological sciences.

Sadler’s (2010) summary of the effective use of exemplars emphasises how students can engage in feedforward to better understand the disciplinary discourse and its expectations:

Students need to be exposed to, and gain experience in making judgements about, a variety of works of different quality ... They need planned rather than random expo-

sure to exemplars, and experience in making judgements about quality. They need to create verbalised rationales and accounts of how various works could have been done better. Finally, they need to engage in evaluative conversations with teachers and other students. Together, these three provide the means by which students can develop a concept of quality that is similar in essence to that which the teacher possesses, and in particular to understand what makes for high quality. (544)

The use of feedforward exercises thus enables students to understand the tacit quality of what is required from them in an exam (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). These tacit features of what is expected may be very obvious to tutors, but easily misinterpreted by students (Carless 2006). Bruner's (1996, 20) concept of 'intersubjectivity' is useful here; referring to 'the human ability to understand the minds of the others'. The role of the tutor is therefore 'to focus students' attention onto a common object [in this case, the assessment criteria] and bring shared framing assumptions into play so that all are attending to the same aspect of the world (Northedge and McArthur 2009, 113). However, intersubjectivity is not achieved by simply 'telling' students to do something: it is about finding connections between the familiar and unfamiliar that help lay a path for the students' own learning. It is in this sense that we suggest the use of exemplars as a form of exam feedforward.

Exemplars allow room for students to construct their own learning because of their tacit nature, unlike approaches that concentrate too heavily on explicit, formal criteria. As Yorke (2003, 480) argues, these more formal 'statements of expected standards, curriculum objectives or learning outcomes are generally insufficient to convey the richness of the meaning that is wrapped up within them'. Unlike model answers, exemplars encourage students to question, judge and compare the script with their own work prompting active learning rather than 'unthinking mimicry' (Hounsell 2008, 7).

There have been a number of studies looking at exemplars for coursework (Handley and Williams 2011; Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2011; Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2000, 2002). In contrast, the use of exemplars for exams remains a relatively unexplored area. One practical reason for this is the continuing tradition of handwriting exams, while written coursework is generally typed. Thus, the process of sharing coursework essays with other students is far easier than sharing exams. For this project, we have invested the time to transcribe exams so that they can be easily shared. We acknowledge that while this is initially a time-consuming exercise, results suggest that it may be worth the investment in order to bring feedback/feedforward to summative exams. We also anticipate a time when many universities move towards typed examinations (Mogey et al. 2012).

In an empirical study of the utility of online exemplars (using the virtual learning environment WebCT), Handley and Williams (2011) found that students responded positively to exemplars; 73% said they found the exemplar facility 'very useful' (6). The authors found 'a positive though relatively weak correlation between students' 'hits' on WebCT and their coursework marks' ($r=0.28$, p (two-tailed) <0.01) (6). However, the research was limited by the inability to accurately track the exact folder the students 'hit': 'hits included all WebCT resources including – not limited to – the exemplar assignments' (6).

In the present study, our aims were twofold. First, to investigate whether there was a relationship between student use of exemplars before the exam and the final exam grade achieved. This was done by tracking student use of exemplars on WebCT. Second, to explore students' and lecturers' perspectives about the effective-

ness of and engagement with exemplars as a feedforward opportunity. We have used a mixed-methods approach recruiting a large sample size ($n=520$) across a number of different modules and levels. A fine-grained quantitative analysis was utilised along with in-depth interviews to allow us to examine the possible effect between exemplar use and the grade achieved. In addition, we have used these data to explore the wider impact of exemplars in the exam feedback process.

Methodology

We chose a mixed-methods approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis for this study because it offered the robustness that comes from drawing on the strengths of both methods, while minimising their weaknesses, within such a single study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2005). The quantitative analysis allowed us to establish boundaries around the picture that the data was painting of the sample while the qualitative methodology provided richer insights into possible interpretations of these quantitative sketches. As such the two forms of analysis are complementary and offer a more complex picture than either method could alone.

Data were collected during a single semester from 12 modules in a school mainly comprised of life sciences at a post-1992 Scottish University. For each module, we selected a small sample of previous students' exam scripts to be typed up on a Word document and used as exemplars. Our criteria for selection was to ensure a range of answers that demonstrated an average (50–60%), a good (60–70%) and an excellent (70%+) performance against the assessment criteria. Student permission was obtained to use their work and all work was anonymised. Answers of 50% and under were not used as we believed students may have been more reluctant to give permission in these cases, and we considered them less useful feedforward mechanisms than the three pass examples.

Comments made on the original scripts by the examiner at the time of marking were displayed using the 'Comment' function on Word. The Word scripts were then converted into PDF format and uploaded into purpose-made 'Feedback First' folders on the university's virtual learning environment, WebCT, for the students to access in the lead up to their exams. Lecturers were asked to inform their students in class that these folders were available to view and brief them on their purpose. A 'pop-up' announcement was also created on the WebCT module homepage to inform students of the folders' availability. Guidelines on how to use the exemplars were provided. Appropriate ethical consent was obtained from the university's ethics committee before data was collected.

Quantitative methods

Analysis of the WebCT data focused on establishing whether individual students enrolled on our modules had accessed the 'Feedback First' folder for that module before the final exam. By accessing WebCT tracking records, we were able to identify which student (identified by replacing the student's name with anonymous numbers), and at what time, had accessed the 'Feedback First' folder. A simple 'access vs non-access' measure of potential student engagement was used, giving a categorical variable, rather than using a continuous measure of numbers of 'hits' on the folder. Although frequency of access may have correlated with student interest or engagement, it was also possible for students to access the folder once, download

and print the exemplar; in such cases a single ‘electronic hit’ would not imply little engagement. Hence, a categorical measure was adopted as the most robust (if rather crude) indication of student engagement.

The possible influence of the exemplars on final student grades (achieved in the appropriate final assessment) was explored using Analysis of Variance models. Data were checked for normality and homogeneity of variance and log transformed where necessary. The response variable in all cases was final assessment mark. Factors were ‘feedback first folder access’ (yes or no; fixed factor) and module (random ‘blocking’ factor).

Qualitative methods

Six students volunteered in response to an open invitation to participate in in-depth group interviews exploring their experience of the exemplars. These discussions covered issues including: the students’ attitudes towards the usefulness of exemplars; how the exemplars were incorporated into their learning and studying patterns; the practical nature of the exemplar’s accessibility; and suggestions for how exemplars should be used in the future. In addition, we conducted one-on-one interviews with eight of the module leaders to discuss their views on the exemplars and how they felt students had engaged with them. All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As is common in such projects, the self-selection of interviewees is unlikely to lead to a representative sample (Sarantakos 1998). Our student sample included a number of particularly high-achieving students, along with several international students. We acknowledge that the student sample is small and unrepresentative; however, we regard this as rich illuminative data that makes a useful contribution to this broader study, as well as providing a basis for further work.

Results and analysis

The sample size included five Level 8 modules, five Level 9 modules and two Level 11 (Master’s level) modules, on which a total number of 520 students were enrolled. All of these modules were assessed using end of module assessments; in 11 cases these were time-limited, unseen exams. One module (with 28 students) used a time-limited report, rather than a sit-down exam, as the assessment.

Quantitative results and analyses

Seventy-six per cent (397) of the students accessed the ‘feedback first’ folders (thus 123 eligible students did not). The mean ($\pm 95\%$ C.I.) marks obtained by students in their end of module assessments were: accessors, 54.8 (± 1.5) and non-accessors 48.7 (± 3.64) – see Figure 1. Although the standard deviation for non-accessors was higher than for accessors (20.3 vs. 15.2), the ranges were similar (89 vs. 93). Hence, some students who did not access the folders still did very well in their final assessment, although on average they performed more poorly than accessors.

One-way ANOVA showed that this difference in mean marks was highly significant ($F_{1,518} = 12.6$, $p < 0.001$). However, two-way ANOVA with ‘module’ as a blocking factor gave non-significant results for ‘access’ and ‘module’ factors but a highly significant ‘access \times module’ interaction term ($F_{11,496} = 3$, $p = 0.001$). This

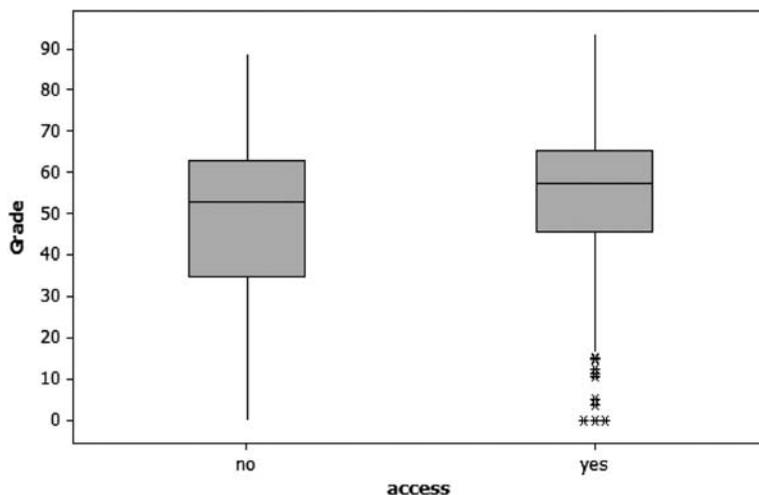


Figure 1. Boxplot of median marks for students who did ($n=397$) and did not ($n=123$) access feedback first folders. Boxes show medians and interquartile ranges, and whiskers include all data within 1.5 box heights above and below boxes.

was driven by the amount of variation in responses between modules. In some cases, there was little difference between the mean marks of the two student groups, in others there were large differences. Hence, the effect of accessing the feedback first folders was module-specific. The number of students studying each module ranged from 122 to 14 (with a mean \pm SD of 43 ± 31), with only the three largest modules having more than 50 students. One factor driving the significant interaction term might have been this variation in student numbers. The largest three modules also showed the largest positive differences in mean marks between students who did and who did not access the folders. This suggests that exemplars might be particularly effective in larger modules

Qualitative results and analyses

Students' perceptions and experiences of exemplars

Overall, the students we interviewed were very much in favour of the exemplars. It helped them understand what was wanted from their lecturers. In particular, it helped impart tacit information about the standards and criteria expected of the student that they may not have picked up in any other way. Furthermore, the students who accessed the exemplars drew on them in different ways.

Students reported that the exemplars slotted easily into their regular study routines, based on course notes and textbooks. One noted that he used them to form 'a sort of general revision session'. Most importantly, the students did not report trying to memorise or copy the exemplars, but rather using them simply as additional study tools. A student explained:

in terms of, you know, recalling the exemplars and in terms of kind of ... considering them in an exam ... their usefulness had already kind of taken place in preparing to do that rather than recalling them in the situation.

Some students did acknowledge that there might be a temptation for some other students to try to simply recreate exemplars in the exam. However, they did not think this ‘misuse’ altered the benefits to be gained for those who wanted to use the exemplars as feedforward mechanisms to inform their study. As one student noted: ‘if certain people are going to do that then they’ll do it’. Such problems, another student, argued, are hardly unique to exemplars: ‘it would happen with text books anyway if it didn’t happen with exemplars’.

The exemplars proved particularly useful for some students who were enrolled on a module outside their main discipline. For these students, coming to grips with the tacit expectations of assessment was even more difficult than for many of their peers. A Psychology student, explained how he used the exemplars to make strategic decisions about how best to allocate his time revising for this unfamiliar subject:

it’s a good benchmark really I think because Animal Behaviour is not a core module in Psychology so I found it quite hard ... [I’ve] got no connection to all this material and to background ideas and to the way knowledge is organised [which] is very different.

One student commented that using exemplars opened up the opportunity to talk and engage with lecturers in a dialogue situation that they may not otherwise have had. He found this both useful and enjoyable:

it’s quite nice to use it in conjunction with conversations with lecturers as well because something you didn’t know before you can also clarify with a lecturer; if you are unclear why a certain person got a grade um for a particular answer and you can’t see it any differently to another answer that got a lower grade.

Although all the students liked the layout and the consistency of the exemplars, the issue of student equality of access surfaced for one student with learning disabilities. The font and layout need to be considered to allow for ease of access for every student, especially at such a stressful time. One student explained:

black on white it moves around the page quite easy because there is a lot of depth ... they would get too disorientated and obviously they are disorientated with the stress of doing the study as it is.

Lecturers’ perceptions and experiences of exemplars

All participating module leaders spoke very positively about the use of exemplars and all agreed to use them again. In the interviews, lecturers discussed both the logistical and pragmatic impact of the introduction of exemplars as well as the broader impact of exemplars on the nature of student learning.

The timing of when to introduce the exemplars was extensively contemplated during the interviews. Many lecturers felt that introducing the exemplars halfway through the module would have maximum impact. If they launch them too early the students may become complacent with the new tool, and their enthusiasm or curiosity would wane before they are ready to engage with them:

I would put them a bit more targeted towards the end when people are starting to think of exams and revision. Um because otherwise it’s just there and they get used to it and it’s just another item on the screen that you ignore every time you go in. When

the time comes they've maybe forgotten and never actually click on it when it really does matter. So just target it a bit more appropriately.

Furthermore, some lecturers noted that exposing students too soon to the exemplar content could 'scare' them off, overawing them with what they were expected to produce by the end of the module. However, they did not think this was a reason to delay the introduction of the exemplar to the students:

they were very put off but um I'm not really very worried about that because a lot of universities have past papers available without the answers and past papers are terrifying when you are near the beginning of the module. Of course you can't do them but by the end of the module, and by the end of the revision, they can. So I just told them that but they didn't really believe me. But then we got nearer the end and they found that they were able to understand things better. And then they revised and they were able to say yeah I pretty much could answer this stuff now, so.

Unlike several of the students interviewed, none of the lecturers felt that exemplars encouraged any more actual conversation or dialogue between student and lecturer. They all reported that no students had approached them to discuss the exemplars: 'I didn't get anybody wanting to talk about them'. In contrast, however, one lecturer did remark that the exemplars had initiated dialogue *between students*:

a few very keen students who set up a study group but literally it was five or six students once a week and I'm sure they trawled through them and discussed it at length.

The lecturers believed that the students responded well to the authentic student voices inherent in the exemplars and engaged with the exemplars as a form of peer support and learning:

some of the comments on the exemplars just reassures them

I'm not sure they listen to me telling them what I think is good for them but they do want to know what last year's students said and did. I've said to students that the students who submitted an essay plan all got much better marks significantly better marks.

In this light, both the students and lecturers recognised the power of using actual examples or statistics to show the positive effect of exemplars as an incentive for the next cohort. For example, lecturers suggested that they could present the positive correlation between those who accessed the exemplars and their grade when introducing exemplars at the beginning of a module to encourage students to engage with them:

people who do extremely well they may have done extremely well anyway. However they might have done that little bit better, I'm sure, with the exemplar use and that way if we can get that information we can feed it back into tutorials for the students to see and to hopefully drag in the ones who are likely to fail: 'actually you know the people who failed last year didn't look at these exemplars'.

Furthermore, to increase the authenticity the lecturers were in favour of offering students a 'poor' exemplar as they believed that this would boost the students'

confidence that they could do better than the example and thus encourage attendance to lectures:

maybe it makes them feel better

if they actually saw the exam questions, if I caught them early and gave them an example of a bad answer, there you are, then maybe it will spur them into attending a little bit more because people think they can coast and they don't have to attend and just cram at the end and they will do ok.

The lecturers agreed that exemplars helped portray the tacit nature of what examiners are actually asking for from the students in exams and thus aiding better understanding of the criteria:

perhaps having something in concrete in front of them that they can see, and they can see evidence, that has got to be helpful

I think that's much more valuable than me talking to them

I think it would have helped them certainly and I think that um it was useful for me to point them in the direction of the exemplars for people who wanted to know what revision to do for exams. So I could say, 'have a look at the exemplars the exam format has changed slightly since then but it will give you an idea of um how to answer the questions'.

Lecturers expressed enthusiasm about the idea of feedforward and were appreciative of the greater range of feedback options being introduced with higher education. Comments include:

it's something that I try to do when I am marking exams or essays or something is to say 'this is good because' or 'that is not good because', but by then it's a bit late so if I can feed it in earlier on, and while they've got the motivation of the upcoming exams, they look carefully at it.

the one thing that universities can give that students can't get anywhere else, not off the internet or in books or anywhere, is feedback. So I think it becomes more and more central to what we are trying to do in teaching as a whole.

especially in places like [this] where you put the emphasis on added-value to students and high quality undergrad education I think they're going to do more and more feedback and less and less standing in a lecture theatre.

On a practical note, the lecturers agreed that they could have improved the quality of the annotations on the exemplars, adding more detail to the examiner's comments on the scripts now that they been through the process and fully understood its purpose:

I took marked scripts from the previous year and usually the annotated scripts are really just for the external examiners but if I had this in mind that this could be used as an exemplar I would have written a lot more detail.

Discussion

The positive reactions to the exemplars indicated, as Sadler (2002, 136) suggests, that exemplars do indeed ‘convey messages that nothing else can’. As the lecturers agreed, the tacit nature of ‘quality’ is harder to tell in words than show on paper. Tacit assumptions about the hard to articulate criteria and standards can be ‘aired’ through exemplars to help students understand what is being asked of them. Engaging in such ‘assessment dialogues’ can also help close the misperception gap between the student and the tutor (Carless 2006). As O’Donovan, Price, and Rust (2004, 333) point out, such exercises are important as ‘tacit knowledge provides the backdrop against which explicit knowledge can be interpreted and understood’.

Offering students access to exemplars allows them to take control of the feedback process. Moreover, it can contribute to an approach to feedback that shifts it from being an adjunct of assessment in isolation, to being part of a broader learning experience (McArthur and Huxham 2012). We found that there was a greater tendency for students who engaged with the exemplars to adopt a critical and reflective stance towards learning the particular task, interpreting the actual meaning of the exemplar. As one student noted, the exemplar’s ‘usefulness had already kind of taken place in preparing to do that rather than recalling them in the situation’. As this comment suggests, a key aspect to the successful use of exemplars is enabling students to actively engage with them and to make the links themselves between the exemplars and the subject knowledge they are also engaging with.

While both lecturers and students noticed the potential for misuse with exemplars commenting it could encourage a ‘cutting corners’ approach through the spoon-feeding effect or memorisation of the text, such problems can be avoided if one understands the critical importance to using exemplars of the type of active engagement outlined above. Bloxham and Boyd (2007, 75) note that the tutors must take responsibility in presenting ‘exemplars as examples rather than formulas for fear of suppressing creativity’. As noted in the interviews, those students who want to ‘play’ the academic game strategically will find a way of doing so even if exemplars are not provided, using past papers or textbooks. Therefore, we argue that those ‘conscientious’ students who are intrinsically motivated and seek feedback which will help them engage with their subject in this active way should not be penalised in a misguided attempt to thwart those who want to adopt more superficial learning strategies.

Our results show a significantly higher mean achieved by those students who accessed the exemplars, compared with those who did not; this resonates with the findings from the smaller study by Handley and Williams (2011). Based on this quantitative evidence for a positive effect of exemplars, there is apparent value in their being added to the students’ ‘tool-kit’ as part of a multi-faceted approach to help students understand the standards and criteria of exams. Our measure of engagement was more precise than that used by Handley and Williams (2011); they tracked student use of module virtual resources, whilst we isolated the exemplars only. Although the significant results in both studies support a causal effect of exemplars on exam performance they do not prove it; that would require randomised trials beyond the scope of this work. Given the unique combinations of individuals and lecturers involved in any module, we would expect differences in effects between cohorts and modules, and our findings found strong interactions between these factors. A fruitful area for future research would be to explore the

causes of these interactions; why exemplars might work well in some settings and more poorly in others? We found the biggest positive effects in the largest modules in our study. This could be because such modules make one-to-one instruction and feedforward more difficult (thus making virtual provision of exemplars more valuable) or it might reflect sampling issues; large modules will have students with a wider range of abilities and motivations and are thus more likely to include less engaged students.

Exemplars can provide an important tool for an increasingly diverse student population. As Gibbs (2006b) notes, retention continues to be a problem in many institutions and students need support now more than ever from feedback. Feedforward exercises such as exemplars would encourage those ‘at risk’ to persevere, easing them into the discourse community by providing concrete evidence of what is required from them before it is too late. Exemplars can act as a bridge or aid into a disciplinary discourse and because they are not model answers constructed by experienced academics they may more effectively ensure the complementary development of students’ own voices and their disciplinary fluency (McArthur 2009). In addition, the use of exemplars could assist students in interdisciplinary fields to understand and switch between the different conventions of each discipline. As Bloxham and Boyd (2007, 67) note, ‘students have to contend with diverse understandings of academic literacy within and between subject communities because tutors develop their own implicit view of what good writing is’. Therefore, as the student who engaged with exemplars as a benchmark claimed, the exemplar can be used as a concrete example of the tacit information required from them to engage effectively, and in a short time, with a new academic discipline’s conventions.

We recognise that some students may have accessed the exemplars but not engaged with them while other students may have attained copies from peers but not themselves technically ‘hit’ the WebCT resource. Despite these limitations, we still suggest that the results indicate that for some modules there is a likelihood of a positive relationship between exemplar use and grade.

Suggestions for future exemplar use

Considering what we have found as a successful introduction of exemplars into exam-based modules, the data gathered from the interviews can be used to inform future implementation of exemplars. It is worth noting that the lecturer’s championing of exemplars was admitted to be due partly to the minimal time and effort needed in producing the exemplars, as this was the responsibility of the researchers. Therefore, such a resource needs to be considered especially in the current economic times. If institutions perceive lack of resources as a barrier to producing exemplars, then we suggest students could undertake the writing up of exemplars as a group learning exercise. Thereafter, a ‘stock pile’ of exemplars can be used repeatedly rewarding the initial investment in time and resources.

Furthermore, such a feedback device needs to be supported in an integrative approach to be effective. As Gibbs (2006b) notes, students are wary of unfamiliar techniques that are offered to them that could result in unpredictable outcomes. The students need to trust the lecturer that the new innovation is unthreatening. This can be achieved with an active collaboration between the tutor and student to understand and share expectations of what the assessment process entails as this ‘transparency builds trust’ (Carless 2009, 86). One lecturer who we interviewed

noted the importance of clarifying with the students their expectations of the word length expected in an exam answer. She commented, ‘I thought there was brevity in the answers and I just wondered if students thought that a short answer was all that was required because obviously type written is going to be shorter than a handwritten script’. If exams remain handwritten, and exemplars are converted into typescript, this visual discrepancy needs to be highlighted to the student so they do not equate half a page of typed answer with the same length required from a handwritten answer.

This move towards a social construction of knowledge can help students to participate in their disciplinary discourse (Northedge and McArthur 2009). Price and O’Donovan (2006) argue that just seeing the exemplar without engaging in a dialogue around it is insufficient for it to be effective. In their study, Handley and Williams (2011) offered an online discussion forum to support the introduction of exemplars but not one student used this. As a lecturer in this study suggested, perhaps such facilitation needs to be made part of the module’s interactive, participatory culture by actively incorporating it into the module curriculum:

you know obviously in the future I could perhaps um take that on set up a study group of people that have used them and maybe not intervene but try to support them with discussions and the lecturer can join in and get some comments from them.

On the basis of this study and the resulting discussion points, we can offer the following practical recommendations when implementing exemplars into higher education exam practices:

- Allocate a resource to produce an appropriately commentated ‘stock-pile’ of exemplars.
- Ideally, given the time restraints, lecturers will revisit the scripts chosen to be typed as exemplars and add more thorough, and helpful, comments to the original annotations.
- Exemplars to be in typed script, Font 12, Arial on off-white background and uploaded onto the university’s Virtual Learning Environment, such as WebCT.
- Introduce exemplars midway through the module so students do not get ‘scared-off’ or complacent.
- Note on typed-up exemplars, roughly, how much script the answer would take-up if handwritten so students can mediate between text and handwriting.
- Include an exemplar of a ‘poor’ example to complete the spectrum of quality.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the students who accessed exemplars tended to gain higher assessment scores than those who do not access exemplars. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to suggest any definite causal link. Our intention has not been to examine the individual motivations of the students that may effect their use of exemplars: as one lecturer noted ‘you are going to get some keen people who just want help in any fashion and will absorb everything and pursue everything and other people will think they’ve got enough and other people don’t want any’.

However, in exploring the concepts of feedback and feedforward in the summative assessment arena, this study suggests a practical tool that some students can access to help close the gap between feedback and exams. As Gibbs (2006a, 33) notes, ‘ultimately the fastest and most frequent feedback available is that provided by students to themselves from moment to moment as they study or write assignments’. Therefore, using such tools as exemplars may well be the most cost-effective use of lecturer’s time in an era of financial strain. While there are still some practical hurdles (such as the issue of handwritten exams) to overcome, we argue that exemplars can make a useful contribution to some students’ learning when final exams are used – and thus help breach this former feedback desert.

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