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ENhance QUICK GUIDE

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 hard for them to work out what is expected of them and even harder 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 well. 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 teacher-constructed examples (based on your extensive experience of the kinds of responses and common mistakes students make). They are chosen to typify and illustrate designated 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 teacher expects with regard to the task in hand (Scoles, Huxham, & Mcarthur, 2013) they can 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 awareness of the diverse ways a task might fruitfully (or erroneously) be tackled;
- hone students' 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 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 is useful e.g. examples which illustrate designated 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 but, taken in the spirit of constructive criticism and a concerted attempt to share meanings/check for (mis) interpretations 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 salience of practising making evaluative judgments about examples, whereby they're learning to ask themselves questions (self-assess) e.g. 'How am I going?' '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.** Some teachers 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 mis-steps 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.

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 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 forestall some of the necessity for *post-hoc* explanatory feedback by front-loading our guidance.

References

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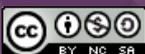Using exemplars to enhance learning and support achievement

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