

## **Developing students' capacities for evaluative judgment through analysing exemplars**

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Carless, D., Chan, K.K.H., To, J., Lo, M. & E. Barrett (2018). Developing students' capacities for evaluative judgement through analysing exemplars. In D. Boud, R. Ajjawi, P. Dawson & J. Tai (Eds), *Developing Evaluative Judgement in Higher Education: Assessment for knowing and producing quality work*. London: Routledge.

**Abstract:** The analysis of exemplars is a potentially useful tool for developing student capacities for evaluative judgment. The aim of the chapter is to analyse implementation strategies for the principled use of exemplars. We consider two ways of addressing the challenge that students may perceive exemplars as models to be imitated. The first strategy is scaffolded use of exemplars which affords students opportunities to start assessment-related work prior to engaging with exemplars. The second strategy is to involve students in purposeful dialogue about exemplars. Key implications for the development of evaluative judgment and student uptake of feedback are discussed.

### **Introduction and rationale**

Exemplars are defined as carefully chosen samples of student work used to illustrate dimensions of quality. The analysis of exemplars is a potentially powerful way of familiarizing students with academic standards and supporting their capacities to make informed evaluative judgments. By producing accounts of strengths, weaknesses and how samples could be improved, students gain experience in making judgments and compare their appraisals with those of peers and the teacher (Sadler, 2010). Analysing exemplars supports the development of student assessment literacy and has potential to be a high leverage strategy requiring relatively modest investment of time and resources (Smith et al., 2013). In short, when teachers and students analyse exemplars together a number of important goals may be achieved: clarifying expectations and standards; enabling students to develop an evolving sense of what good work looks like; enhancing their capacities to make sound evaluative judgments; and potentially improving learning outcomes.

A theoretical rationale for exemplar use is based on the notion of tacit knowledge, aspects which are hard to transfer verbally or in writing (Polanyi, 1958). Acquiring tacit knowledge has particular potential to emerge through student participation in observation, imitation and dialogue (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010). A key aim of analysing exemplars with students is to support them in beginning to acquire tacit knowledge by making visible some of the expert thinking and judgments of the teacher. Knowing what is worth noticing is an essential element of a competent appraiser's tacit knowledge (Sadler, 2010).

Exemplars appear to be commonly, but not universally, used in higher education. One of the main concerns about using exemplars lies in the risk that students may perceive them as model answers to be imitated (Handley & Williams, 2011). Viewing an exemplar as a model may lead to a superficial or surface approach to learning; may impede student ownership of the task; and may inadvertently reduce some of its originality and intellectual challenge.

The aim of the chapter is to analyse implementation strategies for the principled use of exemplars. The co-authors were participants in a teaching enhancement project in which we all experimented with different ways of using exemplars. We see the incorporation of exemplars into the curriculum as being a pedagogic tool to develop student capacities in evaluative judgment as well as a means of clarifying assessment requirements. We embed our analysis within three varied accounts of practice involving co-authors, Margaret, Elizabeth and Kennedy. We use the cases of Margaret and Elizabeth to address scaffolded use of exemplars; and Kennedy's case to illuminate the nature of productive dialogues around exemplars. These interweave because dialogue is part of the scaffolding for students to develop their evaluative judgment capacities.

### **Scaffolded use of exemplars**

Exemplars provide a form of scaffolding for students. Scaffolding refers to support provided during the learning process, focused on helping students achieve learning goals and gradually reduced or faded according to the progress of the learner (Sawyer, 2006). The intention is that the support not only assists learners in accomplishing tasks but also enables them to learn from the experience to improve performance in future tasks (Reiser, 2004). There is an important social aspect to scaffolding in which learning occurs through interactions with more capable others, primarily peers or teachers. Timing is a factor in scaffolding and the desirability of immediate or delayed forms of guidance depends on various contextual factors (Wise & O'Neill, 2009).

The first strategy we discuss involves students in working on a task *before* analysing exemplars. We refer to this as scaffolded use of exemplars to denote pedagogical sequences which combine student work in progress; interaction with peers and teachers; and the support provided by high quality exemplars. Requiring students to begin the act of production before analysing exemplars reverses the dominant trend in the exemplars literature where students are exposed to exemplars and then work on the assessment task. Our thinking is that through reversing the process, students may be more cognitively engaged and primed to develop skills in evaluative judgment through comparing their own work with exemplars. Conceptually this use of exemplars resonates with Sadler's seminal article on formative assessment in that for improvement, learners need to possess a concept of the standard being aimed for; compare current performance with that standard; and engage in appropriate actions which lead to closing the gap (Sadler, 1989).

Scaffolded use of exemplars is a particularly prominent theme in the teaching of Margaret and Elizabeth. One of their aims is to develop students' ownership and voice before they are exposed to exemplars. During the comparison of their own work with that of the exemplars, students see different ways of approaching the task. By engaging students in assignment-related work first, we aim to tackle the challenge that providing an exemplar at the outset might reduce student creativity or limit student aspirations to the kind of approach used in the exemplar.

#### *Teacher education example*

In one of Margaret's undergraduate teacher education units, part of the assessment involved pairs of students planning a lesson and developing a lesson plan; teaching the lesson in a local secondary school; and writing a reflection about the experience. There were two texts that

students needed to write for this assignment: a lesson plan and a post-lesson reflection. Working with understandings of written texts as genres, and Vygotskian theories of language as mediating thought, students' writing of the lesson plan was developed through the following instructional stages. Students first wrote an outline of the main steps of the lesson and posted this on the learning management system (LMS). Second, students developed an initial draft of their lesson plan using a provided lesson planning template. Third, students analysed an exemplar lesson plan, examining the relationship between the exemplar and the template material. The students worked in groups which were each assigned a section of the plan to analyse. Each group then reported to the class their analysis, scaffolded by the teacher through questions, prompts and reformulations. On the LMS forum, students were then invited to post comments on their peers' lesson plans. Students then revised the lesson plan based on this feedback and posted it on the LMS prior to the actual taught lesson.

The second part of the assignment, a reflective piece of writing, was also scaffolded in similar ways. After the students taught their lesson, they met with Margaret to discuss their experiences. To facilitate their reflections, students were guided to explore what factors impacted upon the lesson events and to think about what they had learned both about the learners and themselves. Students drafted their reflections and then were exposed to a strong reflection written by a senior student. Students were asked to post on the LMS an evaluation of this exemplar reflection before the next classroom session but only a few students did so due to time and motivational constraints. In the next session, the discourse of the exemplar reflection was examined, including exploring how the student provided evidence from the lesson and how she theorised her practice. Finally, as the assignment also required students to reflect upon their developing identity as a teaching professional, students were exposed to a second exemplar reflection written by another previous student which wove her concrete experiences of teaching with her journey of becoming a teacher. In class, ways that she had expressed her developing teacher identity were examined, and students shared with each other their own drafts of their reflections on their professional development.

In terms of the student response, they were judged by the teacher to be engaged during the activities, and positive about both the use of exemplars and the scaffolding provided. In relation to the intended learning outcomes, all students produced satisfactory written reflections with some students excelling in linking theory, practice and personal beliefs. They were less competent in relation to the peer review stage of the lesson planning because they did not have the teaching experience or depth of thinking to provide many useful suggestions.

In this case, exemplars are woven into the teaching and learning processes which make assessment firmly integrated into the unit pedagogy rather than a separate element. The focus on examining the discourse of exemplars and students' own written work helps students understand the relationship between language, meaning and social purpose, and how written texts are embedded in wider professional practices. This aims to facilitate greater text awareness when students attempt other written assignments in their university study. The analysis of exemplars is interleaved with the development of student work in progress, so that there is interplay between student assignments and the exemplars. This may promote 'noticing the gap' between student production and the target standard evidenced by the exemplar (cf. Sadler, 1989).

*Problem-based learning example*

Elizabeth is teaching a tutorial class loosely based on Problem-based learning (PBL) on a Bachelor of Science program in Speech and Hearing Sciences. In her unit, each week the students are presented a case description and some suggestions for possible readings. After the students carry out some reading, they submit a 500 word assignment (reading response) which relates key concepts from student reading to the PBL problem. Exemplars were introduced after the students received four rounds of written feedback from Elizabeth. This teacher written feedback provided comments on the organization of the writing, the logic of the arguments, and how well the ideas were supported by information from the readings. A key aim was for students to work independently to incorporate teacher feedback before comparing their work to the exemplars.

The exemplars were selected from the best work produced by this tutorial class and each week two exemplars were chosen and discussed without the name of the student writer being revealed. Students reflected on the strengths and possible weaknesses of the exemplars individually. They were encouraged to identify what traits the exemplar demonstrated that their reading response lacked, reinforcing the need for students to compare exemplars with their own work. During tutorials all students, including the anonymous student writer, presented their comments on the exemplars. Elizabeth encouraged students to explain their points in detail and identify specific useful aspects of the exemplars. A common student observation was that their reading response and the exemplars involved similar arguments, yet the organization of ideas in the exemplars added clarity and logic. The writing style of the exemplars was also frequently identified as strong. After students shared their opinions, Elizabeth facilitated a discussion which highlighted how the two exemplars differed, yet achieved similar outcomes, and elicited from students how their reading response could incorporate some of the exemplar's strengths. The analysis and discussion took about 15 minutes each week.

From Elizabeth's point of view, it seemed that the students needed much prompting to identify qualities of the work beyond a surface level description. One of the first qualities the students pointed out about the exemplars was that they used 'good English'. However, when encouraged to refer to the unit objectives and explain how the assignment achieved some of these, students highlighted other strengths. For example, many students were able to identify how the exemplars provide support from high-quality sources of information to justify clinical decisions.

From the students' perspective, they expressed enthusiasm for the process because they felt they made significant improvements in organizing ideas and using appropriate academic formats. Students also reported feeling more confident because they had a better understanding of what high quality reading responses looked like. However, one area that remained difficult for several students was how to justify their ideas by integrating information from the reading. Students could identify this as a strength of the exemplars, but found it difficult to do so themselves. This highlights that exemplars may be an effective way for students to appreciate what constitutes quality but translating that into practice may remain a challenge.

The timing of sharing the exemplars seemed to be important. Before the exemplars were introduced, students used the teacher written feedback to improve their first two reading responses but then their performance plateaued. However, after the exemplars were introduced, the students evidenced steady improvements to their reading responses. The students explained that seeing how other students wrote up their reading helped them better

understand and use the teacher's written feedback. This suggests that there may be positive relationships between exemplar use and student uptake of feedback.

### Pedagogical insights from these two cases

These two cases evidence interplay between student production of assessed work; analysis of exemplars; peer interaction; and teacher scaffolding. Students were afforded ample opportunities to compare their views on the exemplars with those of their peers. In Margaret's class, student participation was promoted by extensive use of pair and group work. In Elizabeth's class, students took turns to express their views which were scaffolded by the teacher. Both teachers incorporated peer review into the exemplar analysis process, by creating a collaborative learning environment which allowed students to learn from peer comments. By critiquing exemplars and/or the work of peers, students may benefit from taking a somewhat detached perspective to evaluate a piece of work and then use insights to monitor their own work which is the cornerstone of developing evaluative judgment (cf. Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014).

Excellent samples were chosen for analysis in both cases. Although there are often advantages of analysing exemplars along a quality continuum and this enables useful comparisons of standards, we tend to believe that there is more to be learnt from an excellent sample than a mediocre one. Excellent samples also embody the standard being aimed for (cf. Sadler, 1989).

Students developed their own ideas and work prior to analysing exemplars. They then had opportunities to refine their own work after analysis of the exemplars. In Margaret's case, students could transfer insights from the exemplars process to improve their own lesson plan and post-lesson reflections, whereas in Elizabeth's case students had opportunities to apply what they had learnt from the exemplars to their future reading forms. Both teachers provided feedback and managed dialogues which highlighted important qualities embedded in the exemplars and indicated connections between the assignment and wider program level learning outcomes. The crucial aspect of dialogue is explored in more detail below in terms of its rationale; in relation to Kennedy's teaching; and on the basis of the wider discussions of our team.

### **The role of dialogue in analysing exemplars**

Dialogue is an important aspect of university education because learning is a dynamic and mediated process in which meaning is constructed through social interaction with others (Ashwin et al., 2015). Dialogic approaches involve an exploratory constructivist pedagogy through which students think and reason together; and develop critical, divergent perspectives (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). Dialogue is a key aspect of analysing exemplars in that through sharing their perceptions, students develop a vocabulary for articulating their judgments; practise expressing their views; listen to the responses of others; and then may reconsider their judgments in light of the interaction. The purposeful conduct of the dialogue phase of analysing exemplars encourages students to move beyond the idea of a model and notice different ways in which quality can be manifested. Discussion of exemplars is consistent with the idea that tacit knowledge is hard to communicate and needs to be experienced through interaction. The nature of the dialogue around exemplars has been a focal point of our project and is a primary focus of the work done by David and Kennedy (Carless & Chan, 2016).

Through video-taping and coding how Kennedy orchestrated an exemplars dialogue with undergraduate teacher education students majoring in Science, we analysed how dialogue was carried out. Kennedy emphasised eliciting students' views, whilst withholding his own judgment until the student voice had been extensively shared. Our analysis of the classroom talk revealed that this exemplars dialogue:

- Prioritized elicitation of student opinions and airing of divergent viewpoints;
- Privileged student thinking and reasoning about the exemplars;
- Developed linkages between peer talk and whole-class discussion;
- Evidenced some development of student views;
- Scaffolded some key qualities of the exemplars (Carless & Chan, 2016).

We have also tried individually and collectively to explore what a good exemplars dialogue might look like. We have some consensus that an exemplars dialogue should involve full student participation in articulating their views; the development of student ability to analyse the exemplars critically; show the relationship between the exemplars discussion and the wider learning outcomes for the unit; and encourage reflection on students' own work. Through dialogue, tacit knowledge may start to be gradually acquired.

Other elements of exemplars dialogue identified by one or more of us include: the exemplification of how abstract assessment criteria are operationalised into a specific assignment; going beyond surface features of the exemplars to a wider picture of quality; reaching some form of consensus in evaluating exemplars; and student learning from exemplar processes which can be transferrable to other future units. A challenge is that it is not always easy to convince the students of distinctions between an overall judgment of a sample and aspects of its constituent parts. For example, surface features may sometimes distract students from more holistic judgments.

Productive exemplars dialogue seems to share similarities with other forms of dialogue in higher education but may even more complex because of the tacit knowledge that is involved. Students seem to have strong motivation to engage in discussing exemplars because they carry implications for assessment and grading. The grading elements can, however, result in power dynamics becoming especially salient in that students are likely to perceive teachers as the gate-keeper of assessment and this hierarchical relationship may present a challenge for student-centred exemplars dialogues.

## **Implications**

To draw out wider implications for evaluative judgment, we discuss three inter-related themes: the timing of exposure to exemplars; peer feedback as part of the judgment process; and the role of exemplars dialogues in supporting students to decode teacher feedback.

First, scaffolded use of exemplars whereby students attempt a task or part of a task, interact with peers and the teacher, and then benchmark their work against exemplars has several advantages. The risk of unproductive copying from an exemplar is reduced because students are engaged in production prior to exposure to samples. Student cognition is potentially enhanced because there is a two-stage process of engagement with the task followed by dialogue around exemplars. In this way, students are involved in reflecting on task compliance: the congruence between the response stipulated in the assessment specifications and that produced by themselves (Sadler, 2010). By benchmarking their work against that of an exemplar, students may generate internal feedback or inner dialogue in analogous ways to

those described by Nicol et al., (2014) in relation to peer review. Using the terminology of Tai et al., (2016), there is an internal application of evaluative judgment through student self-evaluation of their own work and an external application through judging the quality of exemplars.

Second, the processes of student discussion of exemplars involve some similarities and differences with peer feedback or peer review processes. Similarly, students are evaluating the work of someone else through the exemplar as well as comparing that performance with their own but differently the work has usually been produced by someone other than the immediate interlocutor. Carrying out numerous, purposeful peer evaluations represent the crucible through which task compliance, quality and criteria interact to extend students' tacit knowledge (Sadler, 2010). Acquiring tacit knowledge is a key strand in the development of evaluative judgment because it relates to the visibility of expert reasoning. Whereas in some forms of peer feedback, students sometimes miss the voice and expertise of the teacher, in exemplars dialogues the teacher generally mediates the discussion and is able to scaffold learning transfer or adjudicate differing student judgments. In our cases of practice, student evaluative judgment is mediated through peer and teacher-student exemplar dialogues.

Third, dialogue about exemplars carries implications for feedback processes (To & Carless, 2016). By developing capability in making complex judgments, students are being equipped to decode feedback (Sadler, 2010). Through obtaining access to the processes of how teachers make and justify judgments, students gain insights into expert thinking. Only after students have acquired a sufficient basis of appropriate tacit knowledge can they understand the content and implications of teacher feedback (Sadler, 2013). Importantly, when the exemplars process facilitates students' generation of internal feedback, this may help decrease their reliance on teacher feedback. It may also increase student understanding and engagement with the teacher feedback they do receive. Students probably do not need more teacher feedback or more detailed explanation of it but enhanced capacities to make their own evaluative judgments.

There are, of course, a range of unresolved issues requiring further research. For example, an issue currently being investigated by Kennedy and Jessica involves tracing students' transfer of insights from exemplar discussion to their own assignments. Preliminary analysis of student assignments and interview data collected shortly after their submission evidences some student perceptions of how their work is influenced by exemplars. Dialogue around exemplars seems to enable students to develop cognitive skills in aspects, such as in-depth analysis, reflective thinking and connections between assessment criteria and wider learning outcomes. This ongoing research, in line with the experiences of Margaret and Elizabeth, is suggestive of the value of incorporating exemplar use into pedagogy for developing students' evaluative judgment. An even more challenging future research and development endeavour could explore how exemplars might help learners carry out future unrelated tasks and how they contribute to medium-term refinements of capacities for evaluative judgment.

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