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Constructive guidance and feedback for learning: the usefulness of exemplars, marking sheets and different types of feedback in a first year law subject

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Constructive guidance and feedback for learning; the usefulness of exemplars, marking sheets and different types of feedback in a first year law subject

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Criteria and standards-based assessment models are increasingly being adopted by universities as effective practice. However the promise of these models of assessment may not be realised unless teachers can find ways of making criteria and standards understandable to students. Exemplars or examples of previous students’ work of high and low quality can make criteria and standards concrete. Recent research has focussed on the use of exemplars to help students understand criteria and standards, and less emphasis has been given to exemplars simply as guides for students. This mixed methods study explores students’ perceptions of the usefulness of exemplars and different types of feedback for guiding them in completing assessments. A combination of engaging in marking and discussing exemplars, and receiving individualised and standards-based feedback provides the most helpful guidance for students’ effective learning.

Keywords: criterion-referenced; standards-based; criteria; standards; exemplars; assessment; feedback; student learning

Introduction

Criterion-referenced or standards-based assessment increasingly is seen as the most appropriate model for assessment across the higher education sector. The promise of criteria and standards-based assessment is that it has the potential to shape effective student learning. The rationale is that students should be clearer about what they are expected to do in an assessment task (criteria) and how well they are expected to do it (standards), and so be able to target their learning efforts more effectively (Armstrong et al. 2008). Staff should also be able to provide feedback referenced to defined criteria and standards, for example by using marking schemes (rubrics) (Armstrong et al. 2008) or ‘pro formas’ (Hounsell et al. 2008).

However, recent research shows that students can find written descriptions of criteria and standards difficult to understand (Carless 2006; O’Donovan, Price, and Rust 2004; Rust, Price, and O’Donovan 2003). Sadler (1987, 1989) argues that exemplars, or typical examples of work of high and low quality, make concrete the descriptions of standards. He contends that students need to be provided with both exemplars and descriptions of standards to understand what is expected of them (1987). Additionally, students need to know what is expected of them in order to benefit from any feedback (1989), and to be beneficial, the feedback itself has to provide guidance.

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Students’ perceptions of poor feedback is that it is vague, overly critical and unrelated to assessment criteria, and contains no guidance or suggestions about how they could improve their future performance (Carless 2006; Weaver 2006). Good feedback focuses on learners’ needs for improving, with concrete suggestions about what they could change and how they might go about changing it (Brinko 1993; Hewson and Little 1998; Hounsell et al. 2008; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Hounsell et al. conclude that effective guidance and feedback must be considered as ‘an integral whole’ (2008, 65).

In this study, we build on previous research on engaging students with descriptions of criteria and standards (Rust et al. 2003). We use a mixed method approach to explore and compare students’ perceptions of the efficacy of using a criteria and standards marking scheme or sheet, and exemplars of past students’ work to guide them in completing an assessment task. We also investigate students’ perceptions of the usefulness for their learning of feedback provided in the form of ticks on the marking sheet, together with individualised comments and whole-class feedback.

### Background

To help undergraduate business students understand criteria and standards, Rust et al. (2003) provided students with a marking sheet, an exemplar of a borderline and an exemplar of an ‘A’ grade assignment, and asked students to individually mark the assignments. In an optional 90-minute ‘workshop’ held one week later, students discussed and shared the justification for their marks, and staff explained how the criteria and standards were applied to the assignments. While all students were equivalent in their performance on subject assessments at baseline, students who participated in the optional workshop subsequently achieved significantly better results in their assessments compared with those who did not attend the workshop (O’Donovan et al. 2004; Rust et al. 2003). Rust et al. conclude that the workshop was the ‘distinguishing aspect’ (2003, 161) in supporting ‘transfer of tacit knowledge’ about assessment ‘through the use of exemplars, marking practice and the opportunity for dialogue between staff and students’ (161).

Although students’ performance clearly improved, we cannot be certain from the Rust et al. study whether this was due mainly to an increase in students’ depth of understanding about criteria and standards, or more simply the nature and quality of work expected, as a result of their seeing and discussing exemplars. Rust et al. report only that students remarked that the workshop ‘contributed “a lot” to [students’] understanding of marking criteria and their assignment’ (2003, 160). It could be that students’ engagement with exemplars is the key to shaping their effective learning.

Exemplars have been used in biology (Orsmond, Merry, and Reiling 2002) and their use has been planned in sports studies (Bloxham and West 2004) mainly to help students understand criteria and standards. Orsmond et al. provided student groups with exemplars of a poster assignment, ‘simply as illustrations of different design styles’ (2002, 317) to help them develop self and peer assessment criteria for their own poster work. Students ‘discussed in their groups and with staff the merits of individual posters’ (312). This led to increased agreement between students self and peer and tutor assessment of posters.

Burton suggests that the ‘transparency’ of criteria and standards could be increased for a ‘drafting exercise and memorandum of advice’ task in law, by providing students ‘with examples of marked assessment … and [asking students] to apply the criteria and … standards to [this] assessment’ (2007, 60). In another study in law, Cuffe and Jackson (2006) trialled the use of a range of strategies – including an activity in which students
‘critiqued’ exemplars – to engage students with criteria and standards for a variety of assessment tasks in a first year subject. However they did not formally evaluate their trial, and report anecdotal student feedback only that the strategies were ‘very positive’.

Armstrong et al. (2008) recommend the use of exemplars both to help teachers articulate their standards and illustrate these standards to students. Overall, within the literature exemplars are seen more as a means to helping students understand marking criteria and standards, and less as an end, provided to students simply to guide their performance in assessment (e.g. as recommended by James, McInnis, and Devlin 2002). In research on the value of using portfolio assessment in teacher education, students rated examples of previous portfolios as being more helpful to them in preparing their own portfolio than other resources such as lecturers, peers and workshops (Woodward and Sinclair 2002). No study has investigated the relative usefulness to students of using written criteria and standards versus exemplars to complete assessment tasks.

Context
This study was conducted at a large comprehensive multi-campus Australian university. Participants were first year students enrolled in a 14-week subject, ‘Introduction to Law’ which is offered at two campuses (A and B). Students are introduced to key legal concepts and discipline skills, and their learning is assessed by a group work research assignment, an individual letter of advice, a case note assignment and a final exam. Teachers on each campus follow the subject outline and syllabus, but have discretion in the way that content is delivered and classes are run.

In this study we focus on students’ completion of the letter assignment. This assignment is an authentic assessment task in which students must use research information generated by their group work assignment to compose a legal letter of advice to a client about the client’s legal issue.

Prior to completing their letter assignment all students were provided in class with a poor (fail), borderline (or ‘pass’) and excellent (or ‘high distinction’) exemplar of past first year students’ letter assignments about a different legal issue. Students at campus A used the letter assignment marking sheet to practise marking the exemplar letters in class. The teacher then facilitated a discussion about and explained why each letter was judged to be the standard it was. Students at campus B did not practise marking the exemplars in class and the teacher did not facilitate a discussion. Students were simply told where on the subject website they could download the marking sheet.

Following completion of their assignments students at both campuses received their marking sheets with ticks indicating the quality of their work as well as two types of feedback: individual and whole-class. Individual feedback was written at the end of the assignment and consisted of up to four sentences of comments that began with praise and contained information about a student’s key error(s) as well as suggestions for how they could correct their error(s) and/or improve their performance overall. Some corrections were also written directly on the assignment. The whole-class feedback summarised where many students had performed well on the assignment and highlighted common errors.

Method
We used ‘triangulation’ (Foss and Ellefsen 2002) or a mixed methods approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004) that combined focus group methodology with
administration of a self-report questionnaire grounded in our qualitative data. Our quantitative results complement our qualitative findings and the combination of both lends weight to our conclusions.

Focus groups
In 2008, we invited students from each of the two classes of ‘Introduction to Law’ taught at campus A to participate in one of the two ‘exploratory’ focus groups (Morgan and Krueger 1998). The focus groups were held in week 10 of second semester after students had completed their letter assignment and received their feedback.

Six students from one class participated in the first focus group, and four students from the other class participated in the second. The focus groups began with an open invitation for students to discuss the usefulness of the assignment feedback. In each group it quickly became clear that students also wanted to discuss the usefulness of exemplar letters for their learning.

The focus groups ran for approximately 45 minutes, and were digitally recorded and the recordings transcribed. All three researchers independently analysed the transcripts to determine common categories from which valid questionnaire items could be developed. Once the transcripts had been analysed the researchers discussed their findings to reduce categories and generate themes for comparison. Shared themes were confirmed and discrepancies debated to find common ground.

Questionnaire
Questionnaire items were worded to capture the issues students had discussed in the focus groups about the usefulness for their learning of the exemplars, marking sheet and types of feedback. The final questionnaire consisted of 18 items rated on a five-point Likert scale anchored ‘Strongly disagree’, ‘Disagree’, ‘Undecided’, ‘Agree’ and ‘Strongly agree’, and included an open-ended question about what was most helpful for guiding students in their completion of the letter assignment.

A total of 92 students enrolled in ‘Introduction to Law’ completed all assessment requirements of the unit. The questionnaire was distributed in class to students attending at both campuses during their last week of semester.

Analysis
We used SPSS version 15 to conduct non-parametric analyses, although we also calculated means (which offer a more familiar description of our data rather than ranks). We used the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks and Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation tests to compare scores between items on our questionnaire at campus A, and the Mann-Whitney U test to compare scores on our questionnaire between campuses.

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results
Five themes from the focus group data were identified: (1) usefulness of individual feedback, (2) usefulness of whole-class feedback, (3) usefulness of exemplars, (4) usefulness of the marking sheet, and (5) feelings about feedback and exemplars.
Usefulness of individual feedback
The individual feedback was more detailed compared to the whole-class feedback because it usually explained a student’s error(s) and included specific information for students about how they could improve. As students commented:

I thought it was pretty detailed for mine. I found it useful … after reading through it and reading the comments I was given I kind of saw what [they] meant. Where I went wrong and what I did right.

[The teacher] went through each paragraph and pointed out what was wrong … And like the layout of the words that I used, [they] said I could have improved and I could have chosen other words. So it helped me better understand … what to do next time.

Usefulness of whole-class feedback
The whole-class feedback explained common or generic issues and errors, and how to correct them. Students found it useful because of the way it was structured (dot point form) and it made clear what the marker(s) expected: ‘It was easier to improve on next time. We know what the issues were. We know what she was specifically looking for because of the way she put it down’.

Some students saw that they had made a common mistake, and learned how to improve; others saw that other students had made a mistake which they could learn from and prevent themselves from making in the future. The whole-class feedback also highlighted what most students had done well and demonstrated that there were different ways to approach the task.

Overall, students thought that both types of feedback were easy to understand and ‘equally relevant and useful’.

Usefulness of the marking sheet
Despite using the marking sheet in class to mark exemplar letters, students thought that the sheet was hard to understand and ‘congested’, or not ‘user friendly’. They did admit that with extra effort ‘you could make sense of it’ but the meaning of the ‘boxes’ was not immediately apparent. When they received their marking sheet with ticks and individual comments, most students ‘looked at it where [their] ticks were’; however they thought that the individual feedback was more useful.

Some students did find the marking sheet helpful because it showed them the quality of work expected. As one student commented: ‘We’d look at [the column called] “exceeds expectations” and think “Okay so that’s what they want us to do so we’ll do that”’.

Other students perceived that the marking sheet was mainly for the benefit of markers to aid them in justifying their marks.

Usefulness of exemplars
Students perceived the exemplars useful for their learning because they illustrated what was expected in terms of the style of language, and how they should structure and present their assignment. As one student commented:

Well it kind of just gave you direction how to answer the question … if you got [the question] and straight away you had no idea what to do, you’re kind of lost … ‘how do
you start this?’ But if you have like [an example of what] a good student like has done well in previous semester or previous years, it gives you kind of an idea how to base it.

Students stated that they did not copy directly from the exemplars; rather they used them as guides to what was expected and as ‘templates’ to structure their own work:

And you had a look at what you needed to do. Not copy it but you had a look at what was needed.

You had an indication of roughly where to go and what [the teacher] expected … so you were able to look at every single one and try and figure what and what not to do for when you do your assignment.

One student admitted that if they had not seen the exemplars, then they would have submitted a poor example of an assignment, because they thought that this was the type of content and format required:

I was like ‘oh my God this is …’, I would not have thought to do it that way, there is no way I would have done [it] that way, I would have definitely done it the first way, checking all the legislation and showing what I know. Just like [secondary] school you know you just want to show how much you know.

For some students it appears that the exemplars illustrate teachers’ expectations in more concrete ways, whereas the marking sheet describes expectations in an abstract manner:

Well those [the exemplars] sort of told us what to do and what not do, so that was really helpful. And then I mean this [the marking sheet] just tells us the expectations and how well we are to write something if we want it to be.

Other students thought that the marking sheets complement the exemplars; the sheets illustrate the areas of expectation (standards) that explain why the exemplars are poor or good: ‘In conjunction it [the marking sheet] fills in the spaces to say they’re not good responses because of the reasons that are set out in the criteria [sic].’

Overall students valued the ‘real examples of previous [peer] work’ and used the exemplars in a practical way to complete their assignment.

Feelings about feedback and exemplars

Some students found the whole-class feedback ‘informative’ and ‘interesting’. Knowing that they were not the only student to make a mistake was comforting, and/or knowing that others had made a mistake which they had not was also reassuring. Students felt more motivated to engage in their study, as one student commented: ‘It makes me more motivated to focus harder next time because I don’t feel so … bad’.

The positive feedback and praise for what students had done well both as a whole-class and as individuals raised students’ self-esteem and increased their confidence. Students valued using the exemplars because this also generated self-confidence that they were being successful at the task; it increased students’ self-efficacy. As one student commented: ‘I don’t really doubt myself so much when I hand in my assignment because I know that I’ve had these things to look at, to compare it to’.

The marking sheets reassured some students that markers were marking fairly against defined criteria and standards.
Questionnaire data

The dataset consisted of 55 (39 campus A; 16 campus B) respondents giving an overall response rate of 60%. Table 1 lists the mean score for items on the questionnaire from greatest agreement to least agreement. For most students (95% campus A; 75% campus B) the exemplars provided guidance in completing their assignment. Most students (90% campus A; 63% campus B) used the exemplar of a good letter assignment to structure their assignment, and the exemplars gave most students (82% campus A; 87% campus B) the confidence to make a quality attempt on the assignment.

Almost all students (95%) at campus A thought that the process of marking exemplars in class was useful for completing their letter assignment. We used the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to compare campus A students’ ratings of the usefulness of exemplars and the marking sheet. Students rated the exemplars higher than the marking sheet for showing them how to complete their assignment, $z = -3.84, p < 0.001$. They also thought that it was easier to tell which exemplars were good and poor, than understand the marking sheet, $z = -3.41, p = 0.001$; although 79% of students agreed that the marking sheet made it clear what was expected for a well-written assignment.

We used Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation test to compare campus A students’ ratings of individual feedback comments and ticks on the marking sheet in helping

Table 1. Mean scores for students’ perceptions of the quality of guidance and feedback in the subject ‘Introduction to Law,’ where a score of five is strong agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The process of marking the three example letters in class was useful for completing my letter assignment (campus A only)</td>
<td>4.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was easy to tell which example letters were good and poor</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used the example of a good letter to structure my letter assignment</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing the examples of letters gave me the confidence to do a good job on my letter assignment</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The examples of letters showed me how to do the letter assignment</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole-class feedback (the sheet of general comments) was easy to understand</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The marking sheet made it clear what was expected for a well-written letter assignment</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual written feedback comments that I received on my letter assignment were easy to understand</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The marking sheet was easy to understand</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt motivated to do well as result of all the feedback that I received</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident in my learning as a result of all the feedback that I received</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The individual written feedback comments that I received on my letter assignment helped me to prepare for my next assignment(s)</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The marking sheet made me feel confident that my markers were marking fairly</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ticks I received back on the marking sheet helped me prepare for my next assignment</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was interesting to see from the whole-class feedback how I compared with my peers</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The marking sheet (tick-a-box column sheet) showed me how to do the letter assignment</td>
<td>3.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole-class feedback pressured me to do better</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole-class feedback helped me to prepare for my next assignment(s)</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
them prepare for their next assignment. There was a large correlation between the helpfulness of individual feedback comments and usefulness of ticks on the marking sheet, \( r = 0.64, p = 0.01 \).

We used the Mann-Whitney U test to compare scores on our questionnaire between campuses. Students at campus B rated the guidance provided by the exemplars \((z = -2.22, p = 0.03)\) less highly than students at campus A. Students at campus B also thought that it was less easy to tell which examples were good and poor \((z = -2.25, p = 0.02)\), and they used the example of a good letter to structure their assignment less \((z = -2.55, p = 0.01)\).

Of the 55 respondents, 16 students at campus A and five students at campus B provided comments in response to the open-ended question about what was most helpful for guiding them in their completion of the assignment. Of the 16 campus A students, 15 or 94% stated that the exemplars provided the most useful guidance, because the example letters showed both what teachers expected, and how to write and structure a good letter. Some students also added that seeing, analysing, marking and/or discussing the exemplars were most helpful: ‘The three example letters and the discussion of them in class helped me understand how one might look and what the marker would be looking for’.

**Discussion**

This study investigated the usefulness to students of exemplars and criteria and standards marking sheets in guiding students to complete an assessment task. This study also evaluated students’ perceptions of the usefulness of different types of feedback for their learning. Our qualitative and quantitative results show clearly that exemplars marked and discussed in class provide the most useful guidance to students for completing their assignment, compared to a marking sheet. Exemplars are useful because they provide concrete illustrations of the style of language and structure expected and not expected in a good assignment.

Although students rated the marking sheet as difficult to understand and tended not to use it as a guide to writing their letter, they also rated the marking sheet as clearly specifying what is expected in a good assignment. To explain this apparently contradictory result, we suggest that students perceive the wording of standards on the sheet to be clear, but they do not know how to apply these standards to create a product; the marking sheet is an abstract representation of teacher expectations (cf. Sadler 2002). In engaging with the exemplars, students can see how well their peers have applied the standards in the past; the exemplars are a concrete representation of what the teacher is looking for. Students can also use the exemplars to check the quality of their completed assignment. As Nicol and Milligan argue, ‘exemplars are effective because they define an objective standard against which students can compare their work’ (2007, 66). Our results confirm the view of Sadler that, ‘exemplars convey messages that nothing else can’ (2002, 136).

This study adds to what we already know about the usefulness of a ‘marking workshop’ (Rust et al. 2003) by clarifying the key role of exemplars in guiding students learning. It supports the recommendations of Elwood and Klenowski to ‘take time to go through … criteria with students … and get students to assess … exemplar work in relation to their own interpretations’ (2002, 254). Whether the process of marking exemplars or simply participating in discussion with staff about exemplar quality has the most effect on students’ learning was not addressed in our research, and in any
case may not be relevant. The important point is that students need to engage with exemplars of previous work.

Our results also show that a combination of a limited number of personalised, concrete comments (that explain how students could specifically improve their performance) and standards-based, ‘checklist-like’ feedback is perceived by most students to help them target their learning efforts effectively. In the current climate of increasing class sizes and shrinking resources this result is encouraging. Lunsford (1997) argues that less, rather than more, ‘purposeful’ comments may promote student uptake of feedback. In an ‘exemplar-rich’ criteria and standards-based assessment system it might be interesting to explore what are the optimal combinations of feedback comment quantity and quality, and marking sheet ticks for shaping students’ effective learning.

The findings from our study also reveal that exemplars, marking sheets and feedback influence students’ feelings and motivation in similar and overlapping ways. Exemplars give students confidence that they can complete an assignment of the same quality, and the marking sheet reassures students that their work will be marked fairly. Rust et al. also report that after the marking workshop students in their study felt more confident about completing their assignment, ‘although a small minority stated that they felt less confident … because although they better understood the level required to pass, they were concerned about their ability to meet it’ (2003, 160). Students in our study were also reassured by individual feedback and whole-class feedback that focuses on error correction for future assignments. Research in secondary education shows that students’ pride and sense of worth is related strongly to feedback and grades (Peterson and Irving 2008). The link between students’ feelings and motivation for learning, and exemplars and feedback is a neglected area in the higher education literature.

The limitations of this study are that our quantitative results are based on small sample sizes in a single discipline with one authentic assessment task. Further research with larger cohorts is required to investigate the usefulness of exemplars for guiding students in completing different types of assessment tasks. A sample size of 120 or more students would also provide an opportunity to conduct factor analysis on our questionnaire.

The advantage of the letter assignment task is that it is a relatively short assignment (500 words) and easy to read during class. It is also based on a new problem each semester, and so students may find it more difficult to accidentally plagiarise from letter exemplars than exemplars of a more conventional task (e.g. an essay) that is based on the same topic each semester. Students in our study stated that they did not copy from the exemplars, and anecdotally the perceptions of the markers were that students did not plagiarise. However further research is required to investigate the usefulness of exemplars for guiding students in completing longer, more conventional assessment tasks, such as essays and scientific reports.

With more institutions moving to criteria and standards-based assessment, there is a risk that potential benefits to students may not be realised unless teachers are supported to find practical ways of making written criteria and standards concrete and providing constructive feedback. O’Donovan et al. also warn that ‘we must refrain from [giving] … yet more and more explanatory detail and guidelines to assessors and students … lest the whole edifice crumbles under its own weight’ (2004, 333). The use of exemplars and personalised, standards-based feedback in an integrated wholistic approach may help substantially to guide and support students’ effective learning.
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Notes on contributors
Graham D. Hendry is a senior lecturer in higher education. His research interests include teaching and student learning and academic staff development.

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Susan Armstrong is a senior lecturer in law. Her research interests include the first year experience in higher education and criteria and standards based assessment.

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