Implementing standards-based assessment effectively: incorporating discussion of exemplars into classroom teaching

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Many universities are moving to greater use of standards-based assessment to support effective student learning. Implementing a standards-based approach includes involving academic staff in writing descriptions of standards for assessment tasks both to guide the marking process and clarify staff expectations for students. However, recent research shows many students find written descriptions of standards difficult to understand unless they are helped to engage with assignment exemplars. Teacher-led marking and discussion of exemplars in class result in increased student understanding of standards and higher achievement. This mixed-methods study explores students’ perceptions of the usefulness of exemplars, and the effects of different teacher styles in leading in-class marking of exemplars. An interactive style in which the teacher provides a balanced explanation of the standards embedded in exemplars is associated with higher student achievement. A minimal institutional approach to implementing standards-based assessment, in which staff simply construct and distribute written grade descriptors to students to support effective learning may have little or no overall benefit, particularly for students transitioning to their first year at university. Staff development activities may need to focus on helping teachers expand their conceptions of the role of assessment for learning while also supporting their development of written assessment standards.

**Keywords:** standards-based; standards; exemplars; effective teaching; student learning

**Introduction**

Increasingly many universities are moving to greater use of criterion-referenced or standards-based assessment to support effective student learning. The terms ‘criteria’ and ‘standards’ continue to be used interchangeably in the literature (Sadler 2005). A useful distinction is that standards are written descriptions of the quality of work expected at different levels, e.g., ‘pass’ (threshold) or ‘distinction’ (excellent). Standards are usually constructed with key criteria in mind. Criteria are the important things students are expected to be able to do as a result of their learning in the discipline or professional area (e.g., provide legal advice) and for a particular type of assessment task (e.g., reference sources). If students are clear about what is expected of them, then they should be able to target their learning efforts more effectively (Armstrong et al. 2008).
Implementing standards-based assessment includes involving academic staff in developing written descriptions of standards for assessment tasks, often called ‘grade descriptors’ (Hammer 2007; Tan and Prosser 2004), both to guide the marking process and clarify staff expectations for students. Marking sheets or ‘rubrics’ are documents which list criteria and descriptions of standards for each criterion, and can be distributed to students prior to each assessment task (Armstrong et al. 2008; Reddy and Andrade 2010). As Reddy and Andrade suggest, ‘rubrics have the potential to help students understand the targets for their learning and the standards of quality for a particular assignment, as well as make dependable judgements about their own work that can inform revision and improvement’ (2009, 3).

However as recent research has shown, many students find descriptions of standards difficult to understand (Carless 2006; Handley and Williams 2009; O’Donovan, Price, and Rust 2004; Rust, Price, and O’Donovan 2003) and/or apply (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2009) unless they are helped to engage with exemplars (Sadler 1987, 1989) or typical examples of work of each standard. In a study of middle school students’ essay writing, Andrade (2001) found that simply providing rubrics to students does not consistently improve the quality of their essays, compared to students who did not receive rubrics. Green and Bowser (2006) found no difference in the quality of Masters students’ literature reviews written with access to a rubric, compared to those written without access to the rubric. These results have important implications for university teachers involved in implementation of standards-based assessment: potential benefits to students may not be realised with just publication of grade descriptors or marking sheets.

In this article, we build on our previous research on the usefulness of exemplars compared to marking sheets, and in-class marking and discussion of exemplars for guiding law students’ learning and completion of their assignments (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2009). We confirm that students use exemplars more than marking sheets mainly to structure their assignment in an appropriate way and as a guide to the style of language (or genre) expected in the task. We also contrast teachers’ approaches to implementing in-class marking and discussion of exemplars. An interactive teaching style in which students are supported to mark a range of exemplars and participate in discussion about the reasons for grades awarded is associated with higher student learning outcomes.

Background

In our previous study (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2009), students found exemplars more useful and used exemplars more than a marking sheet to guide completion of their assignment. The exemplars showed both what teachers expected, and how to structure and write a good assignment. However, consistent with previous research on students’ understanding of criteria and standards (Rust, Price, and O’Donovan 2003) students who did not mark the exemplars and participate in a teacher-led discussion in class about how the exemplars were graded, rated the exemplars less useful and used them less. Rust, Price, and O’Donovan (2003) found that students who received a marking sheet but did not attend a ‘marking workshop’ which involved teacher-led discussion about how exemplars were graded, subsequently achieved lower results in their assessments compared with those who participated in this class. Taken together these results indicate that exemplars enhance students’ learning more than marking sheets, but only if students participate in marking and discussing exemplars with staff.
To help students make the most of exemplars for their learning, staff may need to develop enhanced skills in facilitating and leading student discussion of exemplars. As Handley and Williams reflected in commenting on the use of exemplars in their teaching, ‘what was needed [was] a dialogic process by which tutors could share their tacit ways of interpreting explicitly written [standards], so that students could begin to see those [standards] embedded in the exemplars’ (2009, 10). No study has investigated the usefulness of different teacher approaches to marking and discussing exemplars in class and the effects on student achievement.

Anecdotally, some staff have expressed concern that providing exemplars and explaining embedded standards in class could encourage students to simply copy or ‘plagiarise’ the exemplars. We also build on our previous research to further explore how students use exemplars in completing their assignment.

Context
This study was conducted at a large comprehensive multicampus 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.

A total of five teachers including the subject coordinator teach ‘Introduction to Law’. At the beginning of semester, the teaching staff (two who taught at campus A with the subject coordinator, and two who taught at campus B) were briefed by the coordinator about running a ‘marking class’ for students prior to completing their letter assignment. In this class, teachers were asked to distribute a set of three exemplars (a typical example of a fail, credit and distinction assignment) of past first-year students’ letter assignments about a different legal issue. Teachers were also asked to first distribute the marking sheet for students to mark the assignments, and then lead a class discussion to explain why each letter was judged to be the standard it was. However as revealed in individual interviews, teachers adopted different approaches to implementing this strategy.

Method
We used a mixed-methods approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004) that combined focus group methodology with administration of a self-report questionnaire. We also conducted post hoc individual semi-structured interviews with three teachers to follow up our quantitative findings. Mixed-methods research is defined by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie as ‘the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study’ (2004, 17). Mixed-methods research uses ‘multiple approaches in answering research questions’ (2004, 17).
We conducted focus groups before distributing our questionnaire, to explore students’ views of the usefulness of exemplars and the marking class, and also to check the questionnaire used in our previous study for content validity. We distributed our questionnaire after conducting our focus groups, then analysed our questionnaire data and combined it with the results from our focus groups. Somewhat to our surprise at this point, some of the questionnaire results were lower than we had expected, and we suspected that teacher effects may have influenced students’ perceptions, particularly of the usefulness of the marking class. So we then conducted a post hoc analysis of the differences in scores on our questionnaire between the five teachers, and followed-up our findings with further analysis that implicated three out of the five teachers. We then conducted an analysis of students’ grades from these teachers’ classes to investigate any effects on learning outcomes, and we also conducted individual interviews with these three teachers to explore their perceptions of the efficacy of using exemplars to help students in completing their assessment tasks.

Focus groups
All students enrolled in ‘Introduction to Law’ were invited by email to participate in one of three ‘exploratory’ focus groups (Morgan and Krueger 1998) to discuss their first semester university experience, including their perceptions of the usefulness of assignment exemplars. The focus groups (two at Campus A and one at Campus B) were held in week 10 of second semester after students had completed their letter assignment and received their feedback.

Six students (three females, three males) participated in the first focus group, five students (three females, two males) participated in the second, and four students (two females, two males) participated in the third focus group. The focus groups began with questions about the usefulness of the class in which students marked and discussed the example letters, and the usefulness of the marking sheet for writing their letter assignment.

The focus groups ran for approximately 30 minutes, and were digitally recorded and the recordings transcribed. All three researchers independently analysed the transcripts to determine common categories of response. 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 included Items 7–13 and Item 15 (eight items) from the questionnaire used in our previous study (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2009). We reworded our original Item 14 from ‘the marking sheet made me feel confident’ to ‘the marking sheet reassured me’, and added five new items (including an item about in-class discussion) which were based on both the current and our previous focus group data. The final questionnaire consisted of 14 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.
Students attending all teachers’ classes (including the subject coordinator’s classes) during their last week (Week 14) of semester were invited by the class teacher to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed anonymously.

**Interviews**

Following analysis of our quantitative data, three teachers were invited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews to discuss their conceptions of standards-based assessment, including their perceptions of the use of exemplars by teachers to help students in completing their assessment tasks. The interviews were held at the end of semester and ran for approximately 25 minutes, and were digitally recorded and the recordings transcribed. All three researchers independently analysed the transcripts to determine key categories of response.

**Analysis**

We used PASW Statistics version 17 to conduct non-parametric analyses on our questionnaire data, and parametric analyses on students’ grades. We used the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to compare scores between items on our questionnaire, the Kruskal–Wallis test to test for differences between teachers, and the Mann–Whitney U test to compare scores on our questionnaire between teachers. We used a Dunnett’s T3 test to compare students’ grades in classes taught by different teachers.

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

**Results**

Three main themes from the focus group data were identified: (1) usefulness of exemplars as templates; (2) generic marking sheet; and (3) usefulness of the marking class.

**Usefulness of exemplars as templates**

Students perceived the exemplars useful for their learning because they illustrated how to ‘approach’ the letter of advice assignment, and this was particularly important in their first year of the law programme. Exemplars showed what to do and what teachers were ‘looking for’ (i.e., the standard expected) in terms of the quality of the structure or format, and (plain) language of the letter. The exemplars provided a ‘template’ or ‘backbone of [the] structure [of the letter]’ to work from, and to which students then added their ‘own flair’. As one student commented:

> By you giving us those examples, we can determine what you deem to be the best answer, so we can kind of structure our own letter to match that, or improve on that.

Students thought that it was important to have a range of exemplars from poor to good, to be able to compare levels of quality, and to have at least one distinction example to aspire to. As one student commented:

> The first example they gave us, was one where the person had simply stated what was in the legislation rather than put into their own words, words that are plain English that the
client would be able to read, and the final example had done it maybe not to the best of – how it could be, but it was done and we could see the difference and therefore submit something like that, hopefully.

Most students were clear about the difference between using the exemplars as templates versus copying directly from them. They noted that the exemplars were about a different type of case in law (e.g. criminal versus civil) and thought that it would be ‘stupid’ to copy, although they acknowledged that ‘there’s always one idiot’. As one person commented:

I followed just the structure … sort of the language, but not so much. It was more, sort of, the sequential structuring of the ideas.

However some students also commented on the perceived ease with which they could complete their assignment by imitating the exemplar:

You just have to, sort of, mimic the structure and everything they’ve used, the terminology they’ve used, and then just put it in yours and then just change the topic.

**Generic marking sheet**

Students perceived the marking sheet as less useful for their learning because it is ‘extremely generic’ and only summarises ‘what [teachers] say they are looking for’, and is ‘not detailed enough’. One student commented that if they only had the marking sheet, then ‘you would fail’:

It says if you do it ‘comprehensively and clearly and concisely’, but it doesn’t tell you to do what comprehensively [etc.].

However some students agreed that the marking sheet provides effective guidance particularly in relation to correct legal citation style, because it clearly defines ‘areas that will be marked’. As one student commented:

It goes through, you know – it comprehensively does citations correctly and all that, so it helps you understand where the bar is, if you like, but just having that on its own – definitely not.

**Usefulness of the marking class**

The marking class was useful because using the marking sheet to mark the letters in class gave students another perspective on their work:

We were the teacher and went through with the grid next to us and marked it ourselves, and that helped a lot … Just seeing it from someone else’s point of view, and not being a student.

The discussion led by the teacher was also useful because it showed students how teachers judged whether different assignments met particular levels of quality or standards. As one student commented:

Because us marking it was nothing. But seeing what our teacher – we would say, ‘This definitely gets a distinction’, and [they’d] say, ‘No, it’s a credit’, and then [they would]
Students often marked higher or lower than the teacher:

We were marking it really low ... Or really high. We were thinking, ‘It’s a 7, or it’s a 6’, and [they’d] go, ‘It’s a 4’, or ‘It’s a 3’. We were like, ‘Wow!’

Students also found the marking class useful for the teacher explaining what not to do in the assignment, and ways in which marks might be lost. In some classes, however there was almost no teacher-led discussion; students in these classes found it harder to determine which was the typical example of a good letter:

Because the ones we were all picking, it was like, ‘Oh, this has to be good. Look at all the information!’ It’s like, ‘No, wrong!’ It’s like, ‘Well, this one has to be wrong. There’s not enough – that’s the right one!’ I’m like, ‘Oh, crap!’ ... Eventually, at the end, we got told, but it was like – for half an hour everyone was like, ‘Oh, I’ve got no idea!’

**Questionnaire data**

The dataset consisted of 181 respondents for five teachers, giving an overall response rate of 36.7%. While this is a low response rate, it nevertheless represents a sizable number of respondents.

We used the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test to compare students’ ratings of the usefulness of exemplars and the marking sheet. As in our previous study (Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2009), students rated the exemplars higher than the marking sheet for showing them how to complete their assignment, $z = -2.63$, $p < 0.01$.

For most students the exemplars provided guidance about the structure (64.6%) and the style of language (65.2%) expected in a good letter assignment, and most students (61.4%) used the exemplar of a good assignment to complete their own. However, the exemplars gave only about half of students (53%) the confidence to make a quality attempt on the assignment.

A majority of students thought that the process of marking exemplars in class (69.7%) and discussing the exemplars in class with the teacher (64.1%) was useful for completing their letter assignment. Although a majority, these results are lower than we expected, and we suspected that teacher effects may have influenced students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the marking class.

We used the Kruskal–Wallis test to test for differences in scores on our questionnaire between the five teachers. Questionnaire scores were significantly different between teachers for Items 2 ‘It was easy to tell which example letters were good and poor’ [H(4) = 13.10, $p < 0.02$], 3 ‘The process of discussing the three example letters in class with the teacher was useful for completing my letter assignment’ [H(4) = 14.22, $p < 0.01$], 9 ‘The marking sheet reassured me that my markers were marking fairly’ [H(4) = 19.76, $p = 0.001$], 10 ‘The marking sheet made it clear what was expected for a well-written letter assignment’ [H(4) = 11.71, $p = 0.02$] and 13 ‘I used the examples of letters to check the quality of my letter assignment’ [H(4) = 10.66, $p < 0.05$]. We then used Mann–Whitney $U$ tests to follow up this finding.

Mann–Whitney $U$ tests revealed differences between three teachers (labelled Teachers A, B and C) for three of the questionnaire items listed above: Items 3, 9 and 10.
We applied a Bonferroni correction so all effects are reported at a 0.025 (i.e. 0.5/2) level of significance. We also calculated effect size estimates, $r$, using $z$-scores (Field 2009). For Item 3, ‘The process of discussing the three example letters in class with the teacher was useful for completing my letter assignment’, there were differences between Teachers A and B ($z = -2.56, p < 0.025, r = -0.27$), and Teachers A and C ($z = -3.32, p = 0.001, r = -0.33$). For Item 9, ‘The marking sheet reassured me that my markers were marking fairly’, there were differences between Teachers A and B ($z = -2.64, p < 0.01, r = -0.28$), and Teachers A and C ($z = -4.01, p < 0.001, r = -0.40$). For Item 10, ‘The marking sheet made it clear what was expected for a well-written letter assignment’, there were also differences between Teachers A and B ($z = -2.56, p < 0.01, r = -0.27$) and Teachers A and C ($z = -2.86, p < 0.005, r = -0.28$). There were also differences between Teachers A and C on Items 2 ($z = -3.22, p = 0.001$) and 13 ($z = -2.65, p < 0.01$) above.

Overall there are small to medium effects for Teachers B and C; in particular, for Teacher C, there are medium effects for the usefulness of in-class discussion of exemplars, and reassurance provided by the marking sheet that marking was fair.

Of the 50 respondents for Teacher A, 42 students provided comments in response to the open-ended question about what was most helpful for guiding them in their completion of the assignment. Of these 42 students, 17 or 40% stated that the example letters provided the most useful guidance because they showed how to format or structure a letter, and indicated the standard of work expected, while 11 or 26% stated that teacher-led discussion of the exemplars was most helpful:

The most helpful aspect in doing my letter assignment was the workshop where we looked at example letters. It was very useful because we analysed the letter in great depth pointing out the weaknesses and strengths of the letter. The workshop provided a good guide in regards to writing a letter for legal purposes.

Other students thought that marking the exemplars; the teacher’s instruction and peers were most helpful for guiding them in their completion of the assignment.

Of the 38 respondents for Teacher B, 24 students provided comments, and of these students, seven or 29% stated that the exemplars provided the most useful guidance, while 25% stated that teacher-led discussion of the exemplars was most helpful; however some students mentioned that class discussion focused mainly on what not to do, with less emphasis on what was expected in a good letter:

I felt we were only shown what NOT to do in my class, not what actually should be done.

The letters we looked at all had faults which showed us what not to do in our letter. I think, however, that we needed a really strong letter to look at for guidance for our letter.

Other students mentioned the teacher, classes and the marking sheet as being most helpful for guiding them in their completion of the assignment. Of the 51 respondents for Teacher C, 16 students provided comments, and of these, six or 37% stated that the exemplars provided the most useful guidance. No students mentioned class discussion and one person stated that the letters were not discussed in class with the teacher.

To investigate potential teacher effects on student learning outcomes, we used the post hoc Dunnett’s T3 test to compare students’ ($N = 381$) grades on the letter assignment. Assignments were randomly distributed among all teachers for marking, so there could be no marker effects. Students in Teacher A’s classes obtained higher
grades on the letter assignment than students in either Teacher B’s (mean difference $= −0.52, p < 0.05$) or Teacher C’s (mean difference $= −0.97, p < 0.001$) classes.

A post hoc analysis using a Mann–Whitney $U$ test to compare scores on Item 12, ‘Seeing the examples of letters gave me the confidence to do a good job on my letter assignment’ showed that students in Teacher B’s classes also felt less confident to attempt their assignment ($z = −2.21, p < 0.05, r = −0.24$) than students in Teacher A’s classes; there were no differences between students’ levels of confidence in Teacher A’s and C’s classes.

Overall our qualitative and quantitative results indicate that students perceive exemplars useful for completing their letter assignment, and students in one teacher’s (Teacher A’s) classes perceived the usefulness of teacher-led discussion, the clarity of the marking sheet, and fairness of the marking, significantly more positively than students in two other teachers’ classes. Students in Teacher A’s class also obtained higher grades than students in these other teachers’ classes, which suggests that there may be a link between the quality of the teacher-led discussion and student achievement. We aimed to explore this possibility through our individual interviews with all three teachers.

**Teacher interviews**

Teacher A thought that the purpose of standards-based assessment was twofold: to ‘develop consistency in the quality of teaching within a particular context’, and to ‘make transparent to students what is required of them’. This teacher thought criteria and standards were ‘what I’m looking for’ (in students’ work), but was sceptical about the usefulness of the marking sheet for students. They thought that students ‘engaged’ with the standards when they read the exemplars (along with the teacher) in class:

I think the helpful bit is me going through the letter and saying, ‘See how poorly that’s written’, and ‘See this, this and this … Look at the layout – it’s ridiculous, or its good’ … And what I’m essentially doing is looking at criteria and standards but I’m not calling it that, and that makes more sense [to students].

Exemplars were particularly helpful to students in first year, when students ‘don’t know what things look like’. Overall this teacher thought that the focus of assessment was on learning: ‘good assessment … get[s] [students] to practice what they’ve learned, and [ensures] that they have learned something’.

Teacher B thought that the main purpose of standards-based assessment was to provide teachers with a ‘tool’ for determining whether students had acquired ‘threshold’ or ‘sufficient’ knowledge, ‘even before [students can] apply and address the law to a scenario’. They thought that the ‘core responsibility’ of a teacher was to match criteria or learning outcomes to the ‘requirements for legal practitioner admission’. The strategy of using exemplars was ‘credible’ but the risk was that ‘standards [could be] inconsistently explained’. In class, this teacher called the exemplars ‘A’, ‘B’ and ‘C’ and gave them marks out of 20 using their own judgement based on ‘my professional standards and my professional experience’, with the fail assessed as five out of 20, the credit as nine out of 20 (not a credit mark), and the distinction as 12 out of 20 (not a distinction mark). Teacher B told their students that the exemplars ‘are’ presented to you as a particularly poor, somewhat poor and somewhat ok example’ and focused on ‘things wrong’. This teacher seemed concerned to set high standards
for students by persuading them to lower their perception of the quality of the previous cohort’s work.

Teacher C thought that the main purpose of standards-based assessment was to tell students ‘what we expect of you and that you should … meet those standards’; a teacher ‘puts the standards before [students]’ and it is the role of ‘[students] to listen’. This teacher assumed that students would ‘think that an exemplar is something you just copy’, and was concerned that students ought to ‘work out for [themselves]’ how to complete the assignment; for example, Teacher C thought that writing in plain English is a ‘skill that needs to be worked out’. This was a general view that this teacher held (in relation to designing assessment tasks): ‘working out’ a task was ‘of incredible benefit’ to students. In class, Teacher C just handed out the marking sheet and exemplars to students, and asked them to discuss which example they thought was poor and which was good, and report back to the whole class. This teacher provided no explanation of the standards embedded in the exemplars.

**Discussion**

This study investigated the usefulness of exemplars, and in-class student marking and teacher-led discussion of exemplars for guiding students in their learning and completion of an assessment task. Our quantitative results suggest that in classes where the teacher explains why assignment exemplars were graded in the way they were (Teacher A), students achieve at higher levels than in classes where the teacher-led discussion about reasons for grading is biased toward students’ errors in the exemplars (Teacher B), or students mark exemplars with little or no teacher-led discussion (Teacher C). Our qualitative data lend weight to this conclusion, and show that students value a balanced discussion of exemplars and access to examples of high quality (distinction) work. Although all students received the same set of exemplars, students in Teacher B’s classes where there was a focus on errors and poor quality (and implied high standards) not surprisingly felt less confident to attempt their assignment.

Overall most students found it initially difficult to identify the poor and good assignments, until they engaged in teacher-led class discussion about the rationale for grading, or were eventually told. Although students in classes where the teacher led an interactive discussion about exemplars rated their understanding of the marking sheet higher, and were more likely to feel they would be marked fairly, all students still rated the marking sheet as less useful than exemplars for guiding them in completing their letter assignment. These results highlight the critical role of teachers’ facilitation skills in helping students understand the standards of work expected which are embedded in exemplars and summarised in marking sheets or rubrics. As Handley and Williams argue (cited in Vygotsky 1978), ‘students’ ability to unpack the required qualities [of a good assignment] is strongly influenced by facilitative dialogue with knowledgeable others’ (p. 11). Our results suggest that by explaining the exemplars, teachers can help students to achieve at a higher level, than if students are left to independently attempt their assignment and potentially needlessly achieve at a lower level or even fail in their attempt. Our results also confirm the significance of teacher-led dialogue and guidance about standards of academic work for students transitioning to their first year at university who are often unprepared for the kind of learning involved at university or for the conventions of constructing knowledge or communicating in their chosen discipline (Haggis 2006; Wingate 2007).
In contrast to Teacher A, Teachers’ B and C conceptions of standards-based assessment did not link assessment to students’ learning experience. In a study of university teachers’ conceptions of the role of assessment, Watkins, Dahlin, and Ekholm (2005) found that teachers’ conceptions varied along a key dimension of the relation between teaching and assessment. At one end of this dimension, called ‘purely external’, ‘the process of assessment is clearly separated from that of teaching and learning. Assessment is seen as an “after the fact” measuring of what has been learnt’ (2005, 290). At the other end, called ‘purely internal’, ‘processes of teaching and assessment are only analytically distinguished, in practice they are understood as overlapping and interacting’ (2005, 290). Watkins, Dahlin, and Ekholm (2005) argue that academic staff development activities in the area of assessment need to focus on enhancing teachers’ conceptions of the role of assessment to improve student learning, and our results appear to support this view.

When students understand the reasons why exemplars are graded poor or good, then the exemplars provide students with a concrete template to craft their assignment to the best of their ability. While we found evidence that some students may focus on ‘imitating’ (Handley and Williams 2009) exemplar structure and terminology, and so use minimal time and effort to complete their assignment, others aspire to improve on the template. In either case, when the assignment is case or scenario-based, then students must write on a different topic about relevant content and so cannot copy directly from the exemplars (obviously if the same or a similar question is used year after year, then students could easily copy). Further research is needed on how students with different typical approaches to study might use exemplars in different contexts, particularly when influenced by teacher explanation that focuses on positive, constructive guidance rather than mistake avoidance and/or overly high standards. Further research is also needed on how teachers’ approaches to teaching and their conceptions of assessment might influence their approach to facilitating exemplar marking classes.

This study adds to what we already know about the usefulness of exemplars (Handley and Williams 2009; Hendry, Bromberger, and Armstrong 2009) and a ‘marking workshop’ (Rust, Price, and O’Donovan 2003) by clarifying the key role of an interactive and balanced teacher-led class discussion about exemplars in guiding students’ learning. The implications for university teachers implementing standards-based assessment are that a minimal approach, in which staff simply construct and distribute written grade descriptors to students to support them in their learning may have little or no benefit. The benefits of marking sheets or rubrics may be that they may make marking more efficient and consistent (but only when markers share the same understanding of criteria and standards), and are a useful tool to generate class discussion about standards embedded in exemplars.

The limitations of this study are that students could not be randomly assigned to different teachers’ classes, and although unlikely, we cannot rule out the possibility that there may be student effects at a particular campus. We also cannot rule out the possibility that our effects were due mainly to the influence of our teachers’ approaches and styles on students’ learning over time, leading up to assignment submission, and not only during the marking class. However, comments from at least two students in Teacher B’s classes, in particular, about the helpfulness for their learning of this teacher’s overall approach during semester suggests that this is probably unlikely. Further research on the influence of teacher-led discussion about standards embedded in exemplars, controlling for the effects of other teacher variables, is warranted.
Helping students to achieve their very best is the goal of good teaching. Students perceive exemplars as useful for their learning and completion of their assignment, and it appears achieve at higher levels when they understand the standards embedded in the exemplars. Providing examples of past students’ excellent work and explaining why this work is excellent in class is part of good teaching, and is consistent with an approach to assessment that is learning-oriented (Carless, Joughin, and Liu 2006) or student-focused. A key challenge is to apply this exemplar-based good teaching strategy to other types of professional and discipline-based assessment tasks, across professions, disciplines and year levels.

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