

Case Study: Using Exemplar Assignments to Enhance Student Feedback

Abstract

This exercise used exemplar assignments as a means of creating dialogue around assessment criteria and feedback. The exercise was conducted in advance of students submitting an assessed coursework essay.

Key words:

Context	Project rationale (link to pedagogic research)
<p>Subject: Health Care Management</p> <p>Level: 5/2nd year Bachelors degree</p> <p>Number of students: 40</p> <p>Format: (e.g. seminar) 2 hour seminar</p>	<p>The trial of this exercise stemmed from a desire to engage students with feedback so that they could understand what is required of them when writing essays; prompted by previous cohort's poor essay marks and a lack of application and understanding of the academic requirements. Previous feedback had been written, using a standardised template, with option of student contacting tutor for further information and clarification (transmission model)</p> <p>The exercise has focussed on enhancing feedback using exemplar assignments, with the following research questions, taken from the NFTS Project (It's Good to Talk: Feedback, Dialogue and Learning):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How can a 'transmission' model of feedback be replaced with a model of feedback directly linked to learning and reflection?• What practical strategies can we develop for encouraging staff-student and student-student dialogue? <p>In terms of objectives, they are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To give students an opportunity to discuss and allocate marks to exemplar essays• To enable students to get a better insight into the marking and assessment

	<p>process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To help students to understand the key requirements of essay writing and written assignments • To help students to improve their own marks <p>Furthermore, I was interested in seeing whether previous attainment meant that students were better equipped to understand what makes a 'good' or a 'bad' essay, so in the initial exercise (described in the next section), students were streamed into groups based on their first year attainment, with an expectation that those who had attained higher marks would be more likely to spot the difference between good, average and poor work.</p> <p>This exercise arose as a result of seeing how exemplars had been used in exam situations and was then applied to written coursework. This could again be transferred into other assessment forms, such as poster presentations or variances of these methods used in other written assessment forms.</p>
<p>Initiative outline</p> <p>Using 3 essays (from the previous cohort and standardised for text/font and with reference lists removed) – one a high achiever, one a low achiever and one in the middle – students were asked to mark the essays without any reference to mark descriptors and reliant on their own interpretation of what mark each essay should receive. They were arranged into 10 groups of 4 students based on their average marks from their first year of study. They were given the following instructions:</p> <p><i>You have been arranged into groups of 4 to work on an exercise</i></p>	<p>Implementation advice (including resources)</p> <p>The exemplars should be prepared in advance – in this case genuine work submitted by previous cohorts was used. These essays were formatted identically and bibliography (although not in- text references) removed.</p>

that should help you with essay preparation. In front of you are three essays submitted by students from last year's class. The essays have been anonymised and presented in the same font and style without a reference list. They are marked as X, Y, Z. Individually I want you to read all 3 essays and give them a mark. Give them a mark based on what you think the essay should receive. There is no guidance or marking criteria to help you. Once you have read each essay, record your individual marks for each essay on a proforma. Put your name and table number on your proforma and hand in your individual marks to me. Now collectively discuss the essays and the marks you awarded with your group members. Following your discussion, award a collective mark for each essay and record your collective mark on the proforma. Make sure you have put your name at the top of the group proforma. Hand in the group proforma as soon as you have agreed a collective mark and then have a break!

The exercise took place in a two-hour class (in week 8) with a view to helping them prepare for submitting their essay in week 11. After they 'scored' the 3 different essays, both individually and collectively, there was a plenary feedback session and their marks were revealed alongside the tutor's given marks, with opportunities for reflection on how they marked and why they gave a certain essay a particular mark.

In week 10, students reflected on the usefulness of the week 8 session (before their week 11 submission) and a small group of students agreed to take part in a focus group

Benefits for teaching and learning

On the plus side, students said the exercise had helped them:

- To understand the importance of focussing on and answering the question set rather than just stating every single fact, e.g. understanding what is required from a question beginning 'describe' or 'evaluate' or 'analyse'
- To understand the relevance of applying theory to practice, e.g. looking for real life examples
- To identify work that was too descriptive
- To identify work that could be structured better (use of paragraphs)
- To understand concepts such as 'critical analysis'
- To plan and prepare work in advance
- To take the time to write work properly
- To understand the importance of referencing

Overall, the students felt the exercise had been useful, but the extent to which all students had benefited is uncertain. In terms of its usefulness as an exercise, a number of comments were made:

Yes, it made me kind of like understand how I would write my essay now, you know, compared, I think from the second essay, you know, when I was marking it I looked back on my first year, I'm like, oh I wrote like that. So right now it kind of like helped me. If I'm doing my own essay I would know if it makes sense and if I'm answering the question or if it's well structured.[focus group]

I think it will make me work harder because we kind of over marked it and we were thinking, oh it's a really good essay, like the last one where we put 75% and it only came to 62. I was like, that's when I suddenly realised that I have to work a lot harder than I thought I did. So it was really good because now it's made me think of different things that I have to do and made me realise that it is a lot harder than you probably think. [focus group].

It makes you aware of mistakes and what markers are looking for when critically analysing an essay. [larger class]

It was useful, but it didn't help with the assessment. [larger class]

In terms of whether students did anything differently as a result of the exercise (noting that this took place before the essays were submitted), one student noted:

Like the descriptive thing because I've like broken my down into sections rather than paragraphs, well that as well, the structure of mine, like I really sort of noticed how long and short some of my paragraphs were, so I sort of muddled them about a little bit. But yes, the first bit of mine was just far too descriptive and had no relevance to it. And I found I didn't have enough like words left to sort of include everything in, well I did, I just had words in the wrong sort of area. So I changed that around a bit, so I think it helped me in that sense. [focus group]

In terms of how feedback could be done differently, all of the six groups from the larger class noted that there should be more tutorials, 1-to-1's and/or verbal feedback in addition to written feedback. This led to a change in the class schedule and the introduction of a one-to-one session in week 19.

However, results comparing performance in 2010/11 against 2011/12 on the essay component shows an improvement in pass rates and a modest improvement in attainment above 60%, alongside a large reduction in failure rates.

	2010/11	2011/12
Students	32	38
Average	48.56%	53.42%
% pass	72%	97%
% 70+	0%	5%
% 60-69	22%	24%
% 50-59	31%	37%
% 40-49	19%	32%
% <40	28%	3%

Troubleshooting tips

The students identified a number of issues relating to the exercise in week 8:

- Too many essays (x3; 9000 words) for students to read in the time slot (c.75 minutes) made it difficult and a bit boring;
- Lack of mark descriptors made it difficult to know what mark to award;
- Not really a group work exercise – some groups just averaged out their individual marks rather than engaging critically with the exercise;
- Use of an unknown topic (marketing – this was deliberate) meant they didn't know the subject area
- The exercise was held too late on in term (week 8) to help with essay submission in week 11
- Scheduling of classes and lead lectures with relevant topics.

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