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

Graham D. Hendry,
Teaching Development Unit, University of Western Sydney
Susan Armstrong and Nikki Bromberger
School of Law, University of Western Sydney

Assessment has a profound influence on student learning, particularly among first year students. 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, particularly students in the first year of university.. Exemplars or examples of previous students' work of high and low quality can make criteria and standards concrete. This mixed methods study explores first year law 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.

Introduction

Student engagement with learning is a key indicator of the quality and nature of the first year university experience (Krause et al, 2005; Kift & Nelson, 2005). Early student experiences establish values, attitudes and approaches to learning that will endure throughout their tertiary experience (McInnis & James, 1995). Assessment has a profound influence on student learning, especially among first year students. Constructive guidance and feedback to assist first year students to know what is expected of them in assessment is likely to enhance their immediate learning, their assessment outcomes and experience of first year at university, whilst also providing a framework for assisting first year students to understand how to approach university learning in subsequent years.

As Krause (2005) has observed, it is important that first year students have opportunities to learn how to learn as part of their transition to university. Criterion-referenced or standards-based assessment offers the promise of assisting students how to learn. Students may be able to target their learning efforts more effectively because they understand what they are expected to do in an assessment task (criteria) and how well they are expected to do it (standards) (Armstrong, Chan, Malfroy, & Thomson, 2008). It is important that staff provide feedback referenced to defined criteria and standards, for example by using marking schemes (rubrics) (Armstrong et al., 2008) or 'pro formas' (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell & Litjens, 2008). However, recent research shows that students can find written descriptions of criteria and standards difficult to understand (Carless, 2006; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004; Rust,

Price, & 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 (Sadler, 1987).

Additionally, students need to know what is expected of them in order to benefit from any feedback (Sadler, 1989), and to be beneficial, the feedback itself has to provide guidance. Feedback on academic performance is particularly important for first year students. (McInness, 1995). 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 & Little, 1998; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hattie & Temperly, 2007; Hounsell et al., 2008). Hounsell et al. conclude that effective guidance and feedback must be considered as "an integral whole" (p. 65).

In this study we build on previous research on engaging students with descriptions of criteria and standards (Rust et al., 2003) for assessment in a first year law subject. We use a mixed method approach to explore and compare the perceptions of first year law students about 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. We conclude that a combination of engaging in marking and discussing exemplars, and receiving individualised and standards-based feedback provides the most helpful guidance for effective learning, particularly for first year university students.

Background

To help undergraduate business students understand criteria and standards, Rust et al. (2003) provided students with a marking sheet and an exemplar of a borderline and '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" (p. 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" (p. 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" (p. 160). It could be that students' engagement with exemplars is the key to shaping their effective learning.

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Sadler has argued that exemplars make concrete the verbal descriptions of standards and that students need to be provided with both to understand what they are expected to do in assessment and to develop their own 'evaluative expertise' (Sadler, 1987, p. 207). Exemplars have been used in Biology (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2002) and their use has been planned in Sports Studies (Bloxham & 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" (p. 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" (p. 312). This led to increased agreement between student self and peer and tutor assessment of posters. Burton (2007) 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" (p. 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. In research on the value of using portfolio assessment in teacher education, students rated examples of previous portfolios among other resources such as lecturers, peers and workshops, as being most helpful to them in preparing their own portfolio (Woodward & Sinclair, 2002). No study has investigated the relative usefulness to students of using written criteria and standards, and exemplars to complete assessment tasks.

Context

This study was conducted at a large comprehensive multi-campus 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 specific 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, which is the first independent assessment task for most new law students. 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 & Ellefsen, 2002) or a mixed methods approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) that combined focus group methodology with administration of a self-report questionnaire grounded in our qualitative data.

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 two 'exploratory' focus groups (Morgan & 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 5-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.

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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 Chi-square test 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."

The exemplars were particularly important for first year students to understand how to approach their first assessment task:

> It makes it easier for first year students … You don't really have that much of a concept.

Having examples which illustrated the completed task was valued by students who had come straight from school and also those who had been working prior to attending university who found the study experience 'a shock.' 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%. 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. Students at campus A rated the exemplars highest and the marking sheet lowest, X^2 (2, n = 38) = 21, p < 0.001, for showing them how to complete their assignment. They also thought that it was easier to tell which exemplars were good and poor, than understand the marking sheet, X^2 (2, n = 39) = 24, p < 0.001; although 79% of students agreed that the marking sheet made it clear what was

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expected for a well-written assignment. Students at campus A also rated individual feedback comments (but not whole-class feedback) more highly than ticks on the marking sheet for helping them to prepare for their next assignment, X^2 (3, n = 39) = 10, p < 0.02; although 61% of students thought that the ticks were helpful.

Students at campus B rated the guidance provided by the exemplars (z = -2.22, p < 0.05) 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 < 0.05), and they used the example of a good letter to structure their assignment less (z = -2.55, p < 0.02).

Of the 55 respondents, 16 students at campus A and 5 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

In their analysis of a decade of national studies on the first year university experience Krause et al observed that, 'For many students, the most pressing assessment questions include 'how do I know what is expected of me?' and 'what does a good assignment in this subject look like?'" (Krause et al, 2005). Our qualitative and quantitative results show clearly that exemplars marked and discussed in class provided the most useful guidance to these law students for completing their first assignment, compared to a marking sheet explaining criteria and standards. 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 (2007) argue, "exemplars are effective because they define an objective standard against which students can compare their work" (p. 66). Our results confirm the view of Sadler (2002) that, "*exemplars convey messages that nothing else can*" (p.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 (2002) to "take time to go through … criteria with students … and get students to assess … exemplar work in relation to their own interpretations" (p. 254). Whether the process of marking exemplars or simply

participating in discussion with teachers 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, particularly those is their first year, 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. (2003) 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" (p. 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 & 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.

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. (2004) 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 it s own weight" (p. 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. If activities and resources are targeted to supporting first year university students to understand what is expected in their assessment tasks this will not only enhance their learning, but also provide a useful foundation for assisting first year students to understand how to approach university learning in subsequent years

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