Assessment by examination is widely used in higher education but often exempted from the effective practices applied to other assessment activities, especially in the area of feedback. This paper describes an investigation into an approach to enhancing the quality and impact of feedback provided to students on their performance in examinations.


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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the anomaly between the increasing interest in feedback in current education research, the continued role of time-limited, unseen examinations as a form of assessment and the dearth of literature on feedback related to such exams. We argue that while exams have long been regarded as different from other forms of assessment, it is not justifiable to exempt them from the good practice that can, and does, inform these other types of assessment. We suggest a solution to providing timely, effective feedback for end of course examinations is to move the feedback emphasis to ‘feedforward’ by implementing exemplars (examples of real students’ work, generally of different qualities). This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to investigate whether there was a relationship between student use of exemplars before the exam and the final exam grade achieved (n = 520), and to explore students’ and lecturers’ perspectives about the effectiveness of and engagement with exemplars.

Quantitative findings suggested that those students who accessed exemplars did score better in their exams than those that did not. Qualitative data revealed that exemplars were received positively by students and lecturers, and we use this to provide practical suggestions on exemplar good practice. (p. 631)

Keywords: feedback; feedforward; exemplars; exams; higher education

Introduction

The investigation into how exemplars can be used to provide students with feedback on examination performance is contextualised through a discussion of:

- feedback concerns, especially those expressed by students
- a consequent increase in the attention given to feedback in the assessment literature
- the anomalous dearth of literature on feedback on examination performance despite the continued use of this form of assessment
- factors that explain the relative absence of feedback on exam-based assessment.

‘Feedforward’ (material that focus students efforts on future tasks) through the use of ‘exemplars’ (key examples typical of designated standards) is proposed as a promising strategy for providing examination feedback and justified with reference to a review of relevant literature.
Methodology
A mixed method approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was adopted for a study undertaken with 520 students in 12 modules in a school mainly comprised of life sciences. Anonymised exemplars illustrating three passing levels of performance were selected (with permission) from student examination scripts from previous years. The handwritten exemplars were typed with examiner comments included through use of the Word “Comment” function and made available to students on a website. Students were informed of the availability of the exemplars and provided with guidelines on how to use them.

Quantitative methods
Data were collected automatically on which students had accessed the exemplars and when they had done so.

Quantitative methods
In-depth group interviews were conducted with six volunteer students to investigate their experience of the exemplars with regard to attitudes towards their usefulness, how they were used, accessibility practicalities, and future suggestions. Individual interviews were conducted with eight module leaders to elicit their perspectives on the intervention. Interviews were taped and transcribed. The self-selection of interviewees was acknowledged as a limiting factor to keep in mind when considering the study findings.

Results and analysis
All modules employed end of semester assessments, all but one (a time-limited report task) involving time-limited, unseen examinations.

Quantitative results and analysis
This indicated that:
- 76% of students accessed the material
- a mean score of 54.8 was obtained by those who accessed the exemplars (95% CI)
- a mean score of 48.7 was obtained by those who did not access the exemplars
- differences between the means for both groups were highly module-specific
- the largest positive difference between the two groups was found in the largest module cohorts
- exemplars may be most effective in large classes.

Qualitative results and analysis
Student perceptions and experiences of exemplars indicated:
- a favourable response to the exemplars because of their clarification of lecturer expectations and provision of tacit information about standards and criteria
- that the material served as study tools which students drew on in a variety of ways
- no instances of memorisation of exemplars by interviewed students (though an acknowledgement that this may not hold for all students in the study).

Lecturers interviewed reported:
- positive responses of the use of exemplars
- appreciation of this additional option for providing feedback
- the importance of appropriate timing when introducing exemplars (too early in the semester risks both discouragement and complacency)
- lower levels of exemplar-initiated discussion than that reported by students
- the effectiveness of the authentic student voices inherent in the exemplars (as opposed to lecturer generated examples)
• intentions to continue using exemplars and to draw on the examples and statistics provided by this study to encourage take-up by future cohorts.

Discussion
Points made in the discussion of findings include:
• the effectiveness of conveying tacit knowledge through exemplars rather than verbal descriptions
• the benefits (as demonstrated through examination scores) of including exemplars in a multi-faceted approach to teaching and learning
• the additional student control over the learning process enabled through exemplars
• the enhanced impact when feedback is integrated into the learning process (feedforward) rather than used as an isolated adjunct to assessment (feedback)
• potential risks (e.g. spoon-feeding, suppressed creativity, memorisation) and their circumvention through active engagement with exemplars
• the inadvisability of misguided attempts to prevent superficial learning strategies by withholding resources (such as exemplars) from conscientious and highly-motivated students
• the usefulness of further investigation of the factors that caused exemplars to work differently in different settings
• the potential of feedforward approaches incorporating exemplars to assist students to more quickly understand the conventions of different disciplines
• the limitations of statistical data that fail to capture all of the ways students used the exemplars (e.g. access without engagement or engagement with exemplars provided by peers rather than accessed directly from the monitored module website).

Suggestions for future exemplar use
The authors note the need to adopt a transparent, reassuring and unthreatening approach when introducing students to an unfamiliar technique and the inadequacy of providing exemplars without the provision for engagement in face-to-face or online dialogue with peers. In addition, a summary of practical implementation recommendations is provided (p. 642):
• Allocate a resource to produce an appropriately commentated ‘stock-pile’ of exemplars.
• Ideally, given the time restraints, lecturers will revisit the scripts chosen to be typed as exemplars and add more thorough, and helpful, comments to the original annotations.
• Exemplars to be in typed script, Font 12, Arial on off-white background and uploaded onto the university’s Virtual Learning Environment, such as WebCT.
• Introduce exemplars midway through the module so students do not get ‘scared-off’ or complacent.
• Note on typed-up exemplars, roughly, how much script the answer would take-up if handwritten so students can mediate between text and handwriting.
• Include an exemplar of a ‘poor’ example to complete the spectrum of quality.

Conclusions
The study concludes that students who access provided exemplars tend to gain higher assessment scores on examinations. While acknowledging that individual student and contextual characteristics and individual may be key (but unexplored) factors contributing to this outcome, the authors suggest a feedforward approach incorporating exemplars as a worthwhile cost-effective way of breaching the feedback ‘desert’ currently associated with examinations.
References

The paper provides 32 references which would be of interest to anyone seeking authoritative literature in the area of feedback.

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