

**Show AND tell: using peer  
assessment and exemplars to help  
students understand quality in  
assessment**

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**Abstract**

The importance of formative assessment has been widely evidenced; but it has also been shown to be under threat in a higher education world of shrinking finances, increasing student numbers and decreasing student/staff ratios. How is all this formative assessment to be carried out and marked? And at the same time, how is the concept of 'quality' to be conveyed to the students? D. Royce Sadler has written about the value of using exemplars as a means of *showing* what quality is; this article explores the use of exemplars alongside peer assessment as part of a mixed approach to formative assessment, and provides evaluation and feedback from the first-year students involved. It reinforces Sadler's own conclusion that exemplars can convey messages in a way that nothing else can, and suggests that a mixed approach to formative assessment – involving peer as well as tutor marking, together with the use of exemplars – could provide both an effective and efficient way forward.

**Keywords**

Formative assessment; peer assessment; exemplars; quality; criteria; assessment; feedback; learning; learners; judgement; judging; marks; grades.

**Introduction**

The idea behind the title for this article – show and tell – is taken from a chapter by D Royce Sadler (2002). He is describing his own struggle with getting students to understand what is meant by quality in an assessed assignment. Focusing merely on a list of criteria, he argues, invites students to think about *qualities* rather than *quality*.

*'How could I, as a university teacher, improve my ability to convey to my students a concept of quality?'* (2002:135)

The answer he gives provided the spark for both this article and innovations in my own practice as a new lecturer in higher education. Sadler's account describes one instance where he used exemplars of other students' work as a vehicle for conveying the concept of quality:

*'The old adage: "I cannot really describe what quality is, but I know it when I see it" has more than a grain of truth in it.'* (2002:135).

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This article explores my own experience of using exemplars alongside peer assessment as part of a mixed approach to formative assessment, and provides feedback from the first-year students involved.

### Background

Previously, as a visiting lecturer, I had taught first-year journalism students on a module entitled News and News Sources. This was a mainly theoretical module, which aimed to get students thinking about the role of journalists and the factors that influence their work. Part of the assessment – worth 60% of the total mark – was a group project report in which students had to investigate a topic by exploring and analysing a diversity of news sources and products. The specific brief was outlined in the module handbook and time was spent in class exploring the brief in detail, together with specific case studies illustrating the points. Students were also shown the marking criteria for the assignment. In addition, students had to present a progress report to class, showing the areas they had chosen to explore for their report and some initial findings. They received oral feedback in class, followed up with written feedback.

In their final summative group reports, the majority of students (eight out of the 13 groups) received a mark of between 50 and 59; the highest mark achieved was 65%. Perhaps this could be construed as not a bad result, particularly for first-year students. But I was left with the definite feeling over the course of this module (based partly on reaction, or sometimes non-reaction, from students) that they were struggling to ‘get’ what was being asked of them, and in particular, what they had to do to achieve that elusive idea of ‘quality’. This sense was reinforced by the module evaluations, which showed that the statement ‘*I was clear about how the module would be assessed*’ received the lowest satisfaction rating of all the questions (71%). Interestingly, that same lowest satisfaction rate was shared by one other statement – ‘*I enjoyed the learning experience*’. Yet the statements ‘*The content was appropriate*’ and ‘*Guidance from the tutor helped me to improve my understanding of the subject*’ both scored better (88% satisfaction and 80% respectively). I was left asking myself the same question voiced by Sadler. It didn’t seem to matter how many times I *told* them, they still found it difficult to grasp what a really good assignment would consist of.

The chance to try something different came with a new cohort of first-year students taking a Research and Writing module in the first semester of their course in Sports Marketing and PR. The learning outcomes for the module included the following:

- Demonstrate the ability to translate news and public relations messages/content into a range of different communications tools.
- Show the ability to write effectively and accurately to deadlines (i.e. at speed and under pressure).

Summative assessment for this module (worth 100%) was by unseen exam, when students would be asked to write a press release from a brief, plus one other piece of specialist writing. I decided to implement a programme of formative assessment which I will outline in more detail, to include practices such as peer assessment and the use of exemplars which were innovations to my own teaching practice.

## Formative assessment

Although Pickford and Brown (2006) acknowledge a range of interpretations of the term 'formative assessment', like them I will use the following working definition from Cowie and Bell (1999):

'The process used...to recognise, and respond to, student learning in order to enhance that learning, *during learning*' (quoted in Pickford and Brown, 2006:14 – their italics and ellipsis).

The importance of formative assessment is widely evidenced in the literature – not least by Sadler himself (1998). Pickford and Brown assert that:

*'...formative feedback is one of the principal means by which students learn and improve'* (2006:13)

while Bloxham and Campbell (2010) – referring to the 'tacit knowledge' which students have to learn in order to achieve success – cite growing evidence about the importance of frequent engagements with a task. Torrance (2007) notes the increasing claims for the effectiveness of formative assessment, and the argument that assessment has to move from 'assessment of learning' to 'assessment for learning'. A central argument of Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) is that formative assessment and feedback should be used to empower students as self-regulated learners.

Yorke (2001) says formative assessment is of critical importance, not only to student learning, but to retention as well. That point is echoed by Pickford and Brown (2006:17):

*'If students haven't a clue about how they are doing, a negative mind set can easily develop, leading to a downward spiral and ultimate drop out.'*

In the context of widening participation, there is also evidence that students from lower socio-economic groups arriving at university could be demoralised if large, cognitive jumps are demanded of them (Knight and Yorke, 2003:127), and frequent feedback is needed. This therefore supports the need for formative assessment in the first year, when students are particularly prone to drop out.

Knight and Yorke (2003) and Pickford and Brown (2006) all agree that given this evidence of the importance of formative assessment, there is a need for a quantum shift in higher education.

*'Our view is that the curriculum needs to be developed so that it contains more low-stakes assessment, and more (and richer) formative feedback, if students' potential for learning is to be realised to the maximum extent possible.'* (Knight and Yorke 2003:44).

The argument for formative assessment, then, is well made. But many of the above authors also point to the fact that it is under threat in a higher education world of shrinking finances, increasing student numbers, decreasing student/staff ratios and growing pressures for teaching staff to be 'research active'. One student quoted by Price, Handley, Millar and O'Donovan (2010) in their study on feedback echoes what most students would wish for: 'I just think that if someone could spend a little time...' But time is just what many tutors don't have. So how is all this formative assessment to be carried out and marked? There are other risks associated with it, too. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note that in higher education,

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formative assessment and feedback are still largely controlled by and seen as the responsibility of teachers. Boud (2007) says the problem with that dominant view of assessment is that it constructs learners as passive subjects; there is a danger of students developing a learned dependency. Peer assessment seems to offer a way of addressing all these concerns – and more.

### Peer assessment

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) note that there has been a shift in the perception of student learning in higher education, away from a simple acquisition process based on teacher transmission to:

*'...a process whereby students actively construct their own knowledge and skills.'*

Boud (2007) points out that once they leave higher education, graduates have to construct themselves as active subjects:

*'They have to determine what is to be learned, how it is to be learned and how to judge whether they have learned it or not... The passive construction of learners in the dominant assessment focus of higher education does not do this.'* (2007:18)

Assessment, he says, needs to be around the theme of learning to form judgements – and peer assessment can be one example of this. The Leeds Metropolitan University guide, *Designing First Year Assessment and Feedback* (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2009), says students:

*'...ultimately need to be able to work out for themselves what constitutes quality and how to evaluate both themselves and others.'* (2009:11)

Sadler has written extensively about these aspects of peer assessment (among the most recent 2007, 2009a, 2009b).

Gibbs (2010) refers to two case studies in which growing student numbers meant that the marking of weekly problem sheets by the tutor had to be abandoned. In both cases, the average mark in the summative assessment dropped significantly. When peer marking/assessment was introduced for formative tasks, the final exam marks increased – in one case, from an average of 45% to 75%. Gibbs (1999) also notes that peer marking generates new forms of appropriate learning activity.

*'The act of marking brings with it a heightened focus of attention to detail and a new perspective on one's own work which simply tackling the problems may not achieve.'* (Gibbs, 1999:46).

The peer marking in itself becomes a learning activity. Nulty (2011) has highlighted the importance to first-year students, in particular, of developing the skills of judging their own performance and that of their peers from the very start of their studies.

The evidence for using peer assessment is therefore strong. The literature does sound one note of caution, however, which I will expand on further when evaluating my own experience. Knight and Yorke (2003), among others, warn that:

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*'...students need to be convinced that the task of peer assessing is educationally worthwhile for them (and not merely an example of the teacher abrogating responsibility for assessment), lest they refuse to take part.'* (2003:34).

### Exemplars

The seed for this idea was sown during a session with Leeds Metropolitan University National Teacher Fellow Dr Cath Sanderson, and became crystallised on reading the chapter by Royce Sadler. He examines the difficulty of conveying the concept of quality through a mere list of criteria, acknowledging that somehow we know quality when we see it. He talks of the 'potency' of using exemplars in the case study he is describing, and concludes: 'It was *show and tell*' (Sadler, 2002:135). The very title of his chapter (*Ah!...So That's 'Quality'*) implies a lightbulb kind of moment for the student, which may strike a chord with learners and teachers alike.

Sadler (1987) has described exemplars as key examples chosen to show levels of quality or competence. So the exemplars are not standards in themselves, but are indicative of them. Handley and Williams' study (2011) on the use of exemplars showed that students made significant use of the facility, and that they found it 'a very valuable resource' although there was no quantitative effect such as an increase in marks compared to the previous cohort. They note the potential danger of students seeing *exemplars* as *models*, pointing out that **imitation** is not the same as **learning**. They highlight the need for what they term 'intervening dialogue' to ensure students understand this.

Another study – by Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong (2011) – showed that of a range of methods used in formative assessment, students found the process of marking three exemplars most useful (scoring 4.49 where 5 is strong agreement). Giving students marking sheets alone did not help them much; but when used with the exemplars, they saw how to apply the standards. Both these studies mention the risk of plagiarism from using exemplars, making the point that they should only be used in a situation where the problem or essay question is changed every year. This fitted my situation with my Research and Writing students.

### A mixed methods approach

I therefore designed a stepped programme of formative assessment, aimed at allowing the students to build gradually on their knowledge, to close the all-important feedback loop (Boud, 2007 and Sadler, 1998) and begin to take control of their own learning. It was a case of:

*'...building in opportunities for students to use feedback shortly after receiving it, to reflect on learning and to close the gap between current and desired performance'* (Designing First-Year Assessment and Feedback, Leeds Metropolitan University, 2009:11).

What follows is an outline of the model I used, together with some evaluation of how it worked.

### Week 3

*Press release exercise, using informal peer assessment followed by written tutor feedback*

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The students had a go at writing their first press release based on some common information they were given. They used a list of do's and don'ts and pointers they had received in lectures and the first two weeks of seminars. In small groups, they then read each other's and decided amongst themselves which was the best. The 'best' one from each table was read out to class, and the whole class voted for an overall winner. Because these were first-year students in their first weeks together, I asked them to close their eyes when voting by putting their hands up. This gave them more confidence that it was an anonymous vote in front of their peers whom they did not yet know very well. However, when I gathered in all the scripts, I realised on closer reading that the class as a whole had chosen as the 'winner' a script which actually did not meet the criteria of a good press release that had been outlined to them. I realised I needed to address this quickly, so I posted some generic feedback on the university intranet and also an anonymous version of what I thought was a good example written by a student. I returned the scripts with individual comments in Week 4 in class and went over the generic feedback to reinforce the message. These feedback steps, with the chance to put the feed-forward comments quickly into practice in Week 5, were aimed at meeting Price, Handley, Millar and O'Donovan's assertion (2010) that:

*'...students want to see applicability in the content and timing of the feedback provided; staff want to see the feedback applied in subsequent work.'*

### **Week 5**

*Press release exercise using anonymous, written peer assessment and written tutor feedback*

This was a chance for the students to put into practice some of the feed-forward comments. Again I wanted to make use of the learning that Race and others agree can be achieved when students assess each other's work (Race, 2007), but as he and others have pointed out, this needs to be well facilitated. I wanted to retain the students' anonymity as I felt they were still at an early stage of getting to know each other; Sadler (2009b) highlights:

*'...fear of exposure, loss of face or impending sense of humiliation...'*

as one of the obstacles that need to be overcome in order for peer assessment to work. So each student was given a letter of the alphabet which they marked on their own script; I was the only one to know which letter referred to which student. After they had written their press releases, I collected them in, mixed them up and redistributed them, ensuring that no-one got their own to mark. I then did this a second time. So each script was marked by two peers, and each student got to see two other scripts to compare to their own. One interesting reaction when we did this exercise came from one student who told me:

*It's not my job to mark other students' work, that's your job.*

This reinforced for me what the literature had already highlighted – that there can initially be resistance among students to the idea of peer assessment and that, as Sadler (2009b) has acknowledged, students need to learn these skills in the same way as they do other skills, and they also need reassurance along the way.

As part of the facilitation for this exercise, I also gave the students a list of clear criteria for their own and others' press releases. These criteria – in the form of a marking rubric – were the same ones as would eventually be used to mark their own summative assessment.

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Arguments have been put forward – most notably by Sadler (2007, 2009a, 2009b) – about the shortcomings of pre-set criteria, and the need to allow students themselves to develop their own criteria as part of learning what quality is. Sadler points out that this ability would make an important and authentic graduate skill, because appraisal schemes like rubrics and scoring keys are impractical and artificial in the world outside academe (Sadler, 2009a). His point is well made, but my own experience – particularly with students just starting out at university – leads me to believe we have some way to go to persuade students to take this further step; at a recent conference at Leeds Metropolitan University (First Level Assessment and Feedback Project, Leeds Metropolitan University, May 2011), first-year students who had taken part in a peer assessment exercise said they neither wanted to nor would feel confident about going so far as to draft their own criteria for marking each other's work. In addition, there is evidence to show that students like to see the pre-set criteria, as this reassures them that markers are marking fairly against defined criteria and standards (Hendry *et al.*, 2011).

Once the students had marked each other's work, I then collected all the scripts in and added my own feedback before returning the work to the students in Week 6. Some students showed in their comments that they had understood and were applying the criteria better when judging their peers' work, but the majority still failed to show they could identify 'quality' in others' work or produce it in their own. They had not yet acquired that 'tacit knowledge' but 'repeated cycles of formative and/or summative assessment' (Bloxham and Campbell, 2010) could help them get there – provided, the authors say, that this is an active, shared process, not a passive engagement.

### **Week 7**

*Mock exam press release exercise (previous year's exam paper used) in class, following by written tutor feedback and a mark*

Until this week, I had not given any students a mark as such, only feedback/feed-forward in the form of comments. There is evidence to show that grades can be counter-productive for formative purposes (Pickford and Brown, 2006, Gibbs, 2010), as students only focus on the grade and not on the feedback, which they then fail to use constructively. So for the first two exercises above, I did not grade the students. However, as Pickford and Brown (2006) also point out, many assessors feel that some kind of indication of level of achievement is valuable to students. This was borne out by my experience with the students themselves; in the earlier exercises, they had specifically asked me for grades and at this point – with a mock exam – I felt it appropriate to give them a mark. The importance to first-year students in particular of 'psychological stroking' has been documented by Hartwell and Farbrother (2006); first-year students like to know how they are doing and although good feedback should give them an indication of this, the message may not be as clear as we (or the student) would wish. One student, following her summative assessment in another module, contacted me to say her mark was a disappointment and had come as 'a complete surprise' to her, even though I had given her formative feedback (but no mark) throughout the module.

## **Week 8**

### *Using exemplars*

Scripts from the mock exam and feedback were returned in class. Then students were shown three answers to the same exam by the previous year's students – a good (68%), a middling (52%) and a fail (35%) – but without the marks on them. Students had to grade the papers and use the same feedback/marking sheet to explain their marks as I had used for their own paper. This time, the majority of students arrived at the 'right' grade; most were now recognising 'quality' – or indeed the lack of it – when they saw it. Torrance (2007) has highlighted the dangers of focusing on formative assessment so that achievement can come to be seen 'as little more than criteria compliance in pursuit of grades' – or what Gibbs and Simpson (2004) have called 'faking good'. But the students had been working to the same criteria when they sat the same paper themselves, and yet they had not been able to 'fake good' at that point; now, they were demonstrating that they understood what 'good' was, and just as importantly, what 'bad' was. The feedback on their own attempt, together with being asked to then judge someone else's, created a turning point in their understanding. It was the 'Ah!...So That's Quality' moment that Sadler refers to.

## **Week 9**

### *More exemplars, this time real-life ones*

To follow up the mock exam exercise and the use of exemplars, this week students were given three real press releases – all sports-related, to make it relevant and authentic to their course. The task this time was to say which they thought was the best one and why. All were press releases written by professionals, and published by the relevant groups – Greenpeace, Oxfam and MBNA – on the press areas of their websites. All the students picked what I also thought was the best one, and were able to justify their decision by citing the very criteria we had used to mark their own attempts, and which would be used to mark their summative assessment. These included attention-grabbing headline; tightly-written news paragraph supported by relevant background information; uses appropriate quotations. The students had now been able to not only identify but correctly apply these criteria. As Sadler (2007) puts it, my learners could be said to have learned something:

*'The person has to understand the essential similarities and differences well enough to know how to tackle, not the same task over and over, but an "essentially similar" one.'*

The assessment becomes about both 'knowing **that**' but also 'knowing **how**'. So in this instance, 'knowing that' an attention-grabbing headline, for example, is one measure of quality is reinforced by 'knowing how' to recognise and apply that to their own and others' work. Sadler (1987) says students need to be able to see what is in the head of the professional judge; and as Nulty (2011) suggests:

*'What better way to accomplish this learning journey than to involve students in practising the act of judging?'*

Using a stepped approach, my students had by now had practice at judging their own work, that of their peers and former students, but also that of outside professionals working in the industry.



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**Findings**

A questionnaire sent to the students after they had taken their exam asked them to rate the peer assessment exercise and the use of previous exam paper exemplars in terms of how useful they were, where 5 is 'strongly agree' and 1 is 'strongly disagree'. Eleven students out of 41 replied, with the results and individual comments as follows:

1	2	3	4	5
		3	7	1

**Figure 1.** Peer marking exercise.

*5 – I found this task really helpful. The advantage of this was that the people writing their press releases were at the same stage as me in learning about how to do them. So it was interesting to see how people went about doing them without a clear structure which we then learnt about how to write them*

*4 – Useful as it showed how an examiner would view and mark the answer which was a big help*

*4 – Found both exercises very useful and they definitely helped me in preparation for the exam*

*3 – I liked the idea of marking the papers and it did give me some guidance but writing my exam I didn't really feel like I knew how I had done as I found it hard to mark someone's work*

1	2	3	4	5
			4	7

**Figure 2.** Past exam exemplar marking exercise.

*5 – I found this exercise really helpful. It made me aware of even though you may have all the information you think you need in a press release the way in which you write it and the structure is just as important*

*5 – I found the practice exams very useful as it helped me and in the exam I knew what to do and what was expected*

*5 – Found this exercise the most useful as I then knew what to expect from the exam and how best to structure it*

Because of the way this module was structured (with other students from another faculty also being taught elsewhere), separate module evaluation satisfaction rates were not available for my own cohort. However, anonymised individual comments from my students on the module evaluations were made available, indicating that – contrary to the News and News Sources module mentioned earlier – at least some students had felt well prepared for the assessment and enjoyed the learning experience:

*This has been my favourite this semester, well prepared for the exam*

*Good seminars, helping with exam preparation*

*Good feedback, practice exams in seminars very helpful*

*Very good feedback on work*

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*Interesting module, a lot of practical work e.g. exam questions*

While Handley and Williams' study (2011) did not find any improvement in marks from the group which used exemplars, when compared to the previous year, the final exam results for my cohort did show some improvement on the previous year's. The average mark was 56% compared to an average of 50.8% the previous year, and there were fewer fails – 2 out of 41 failed (or 0.05%) compared to 9 out of 59 the previous year (or 0.15%).

### Discussion

*I still don't know what you're after from me*

So speaks Jane, one of the students in Bloxham and Campbell's study (2010) on student perceptions of assessment and feedback. That could have been any one of many of the students I taught on this module – up until Week 8, when their 'learning journey' (Nulty, 2011) took, if not a dramatic turn, then at least a perceptible one. Their (and my) journey reinforces the views already put forward in this article of the importance of formative assessment – that chance to have plenty of go's at a task (Bloxham and Campbell, 2010, Pickford and Brown, 2006); the importance of feedback at a time and in a form where students can make use of it (Sadler 1998, Boud, 2007, Leeds Metropolitan University, 2009); and the need to reframe assessment around the theme of informing judgement (Boud, 2007, Sadler *passim*). My own experience echoes that of Nulty (2011) who concludes that first-years *are* capable of making judgements about their own performance and that of their peers, and that they need help to develop this skill from the very start of their studies.

For me, however, it is the value of the exemplar exercise which stands out here, as demonstrated by the comments of the students themselves, and the fact that they were able to go on and identify quality in a separate exercise. The inclusion of a poor exemplar was also important. As one student commented in Bloxham and Campbell's study (2010):

*'Find it useful, of how people have approached it and how that's worked, so like not just shining examples but where people have gone wrong perhaps and how to avoid that.'*

### Conclusion

My students' shift, then, from 'I don't know what you're after' to 'Ah!...So That's Quality' lends weight to Sadler's own conclusion:

*'If I were to formulate a theorem in teaching and learning similar to those in mathematics, this would be it: **Exemplars convey messages that nothing else can.**'*  
(Sadler 2002:136)

It also allows the students to take control of their own learning, and if I were to explore one aspect further, it would be Bloxham and Campbell's idea (2010) that we should try to 'capitalise on existing peer discussion of assessment', given that students are always discussing assignments with one another in an informal way.

I have continued to use both peer assessment and exemplars for all levels of students – most recently, with final-year journalism students tasked with doing some investigative reporting. Showing them the successes and failures of the previous year's students gave them 'concrete illustrations of the style of language and structure expected and not

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expected in a good assignment' (Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong, 2011). In a perfect world, that earlier student would get the individual time he or she so desired in order to understand what was wanted; but as Bloxham and Campbell (2010) and many others before them have noted, teacher-student dialogue is costly and resource-heavy. The mixed approach to formative assessment described in this paper – involving peer as well as tutor marking *and* the use of exemplars – could provide a way forward. Making an example of students' work – in the best possible sense – can help them to find their own answer to that difficult question: 'What is quality?'

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