"We need to change what we're doing." Using pedagogic action research to improve teacher management of exemplars

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Abstract
This paper outlines two cycles of pedagogic action research exploring the pre-emptive formative use of exemplars which were embedded into teaching sessions mid-way through a module entitled 'Perspectives on Childhood.' Students were asked to bring their own formative work to a workshop in which exemplars-based activities were provided. The activities were intended to enable first-year students to perceive the quality of their conceptual grasp of important subject-matter, giving them a timely opportunity to change and improve their approaches to study if necessary. The research question was: how could the teaching team improve their pedagogic practices surrounding exemplar-use to develop their students' capacity to identify the quality of their own formative work and hone their self-regulatory learning skills? The first cycle of action research revealed that a surprisingly high proportion of participating students experienced considerable difficulty in drawing valuable inferences and, hence, in using the exemplars-based activities effectively to review and adjust their own current task-related performance. These findings productively disturbed the teaching team's assumptions and practices about managing the exemplars-based activities, leading to important transformations in their thinking and the subsequent management of the exemplars in the second cycle and beyond.

The paper reports the fresh insights, conceptual changes and practice-developments this process of collaborative enquiry promoted. These include the pedagogic transformations that were collaboratively developed amongst the team in the highly situated local context, but also the theoretical inferences that may be drawn for the sector more widely. The implications for teacher management of exemplars, and, especially, the value of adopting an 'inner feedback' (Nicol, 2018) perspective - focusing on students using exemplars explicitly to make comparisons to simulate the pedagogically-valuable elements of the processes of peer review (Nicol, 2019) -are particularly highlighted.

Overview

This paper is based on two full cycles of pedagogic action research encompassing two academic years. Mindful of Cook's (2009) argument that action research is necessarily often 'messy,' because it productively engages in a complex, iterative and collaborative web of interrelationships, ongoing interactions, reflections, change-making and sense-making, this overview presents the stages that our action research took. Our aim here is to help the reader to understand our overall project, and, importantly, its context, before drilling down into the findings and theoretical implications of the research, which focus on using exemplars to enhance students' self-evaluative capacities.

The action research was carried out by a whole teaching team, including two of the authors of this paper, in the discipline area of Childhood Studies. We aimed to reflexively explore our own pedagogic approaches to systematically engage first-year undergraduate students in learning to gauge their own progress with a challenging and counter-intuitive, yet vital, core theoretical concept- the social construction of childhood- in the study of childhood at this level. As a teaching team, we were keen

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to discover how far students were getting to grips with this concept in the first few weeks of their degree, and the extent to which learners were recognising its importance in terms of their approaches to study, half way through the module delivery. One motivating factor was to enable the students to guide us to make adjustments to our teaching, if necessary, so we could put further support in place during the rest of the module. However, we knew - from prior experience and from our engagement with the literature on threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2006) - that the required shifts in (re)conceptualising childhood would take considerable engagement and time on the students' part. Thus the 'wicked problem' (Ramalay, 2014) to be addressed by our research centred on how best to engage all students with seeing their own progress in relation to this key perspective shift, earlier rather than later, and in a meaningful but supportive way.

Figure 1. aims to represent, in diagrammatic form, the stages of our action research project. While in practice, these were typically iterative and more fluid than the diagram may suggest, due to the constant and ongoing collaborative interplay of the 'action,' and the 'research' elements of the project running reflexively in tandem rather than discretely, we include it to offer the reader a better sense of the overall nature and direction of the project.

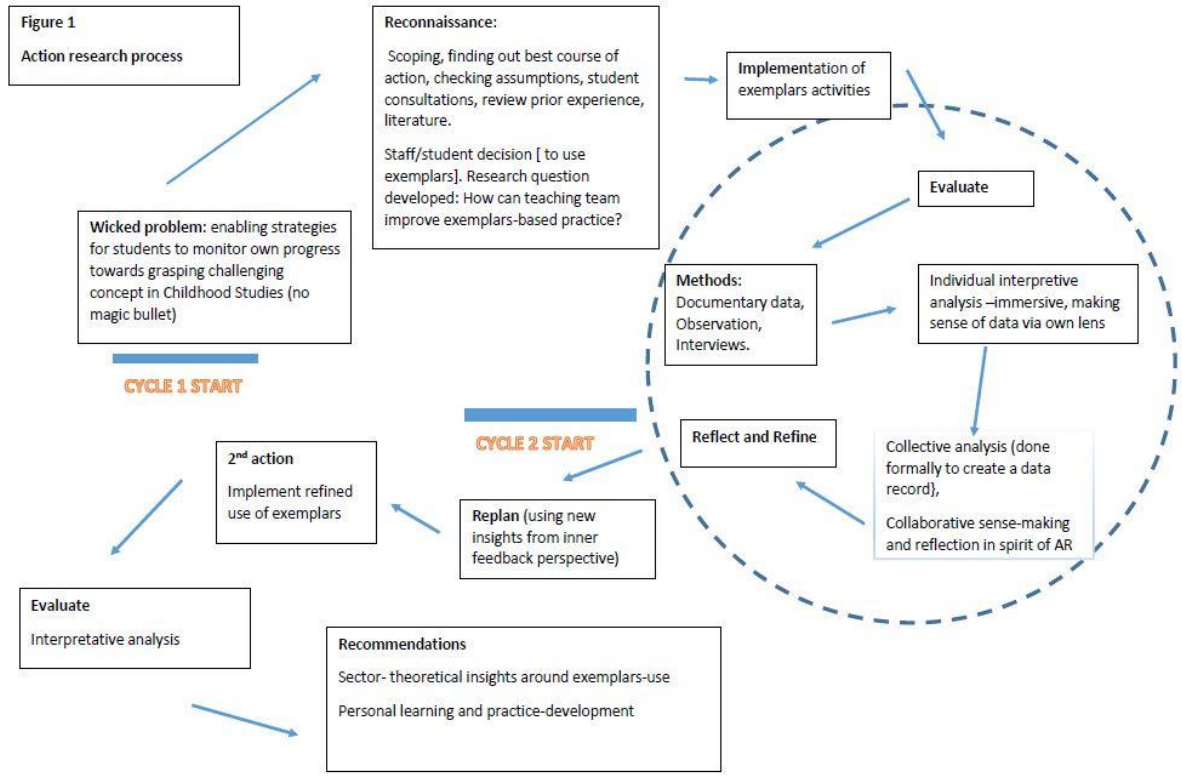

Figure 1. Action research process.

Our reconnaissance phase involved an initial meeting of the whole teaching team to discuss how to find out the best course of action. Thereafter, scoping included: engaging in informal discussions with current first and second year students; analysis of previous module evaluations; and reviews of previous projects which the team had undertaken with a focus on improving the quality of students' learning in their first-year transitions, for instance, by using enquiry-based learning approaches (e.g. Sambell, 2010). The intervention which was most positively received by students, and which seemed most feasible in terms of the teachers' workload, was to implement exemplars-based activities as the basis for the action.

Following a literature review, the team designed a two-hour student workshop based on using exemplars. The actual activities, and the underpinning theoretical rationale, will be illuminated later

in the paper, but are represented as the implementation stage in Fig. 1. In brief, students were asked to undertake a brief formative homework task and bring it to a two-hour workshop in which three short-text exemplars were selected and adapted to use with a relatively large student cohort (c100 students per annum). The exemplars, together with associated learning activities, were designed to perform an important role, enabling students to examine their own progress towards grasping an extremely challenging key concept in the very early stages of their degree.

The next stage was the evaluative element of the research cycle. This stage is represented in Figure 1 bounded by a dotted line, as it encompassed a number of related interim steps. These included a collaboratively agreed approach to the collection and interpretation of data, based on the core principles of pedagogic action research and in keeping with its spirit (Arnold and Norton, 2018). This led to the 'reflect and refine' phase and, eventually, to the re-planning stage in cycle 2, where a markedly different pedagogic approach was taken, in light of the discoveries made. In the following academic year the full cycle ran again. This time, the redesigned workshop formed the 2nd action phase in Fig. 1, based on the refined use of exemplars in this context.

The remainder of our paper focuses attention on how, why and to what effect the exemplars-based activities were refined by the research team over time in the light of iteratively gathered data about students' analysis of the three exemplars as the activities unfolded during the workshop. Emergent issues and theoretical insights developed by the team will be highlighted, with accompanying illustrative data.

It is important at this point to emphasise that, given the research question (which focused on how to improve the teaching team's pedagogic management of exemplars in order to enhance students' self-regulatory capacities) the action research process was as much about reflecting on the transformation of *practitioners'* viewpoints and practices as it was about the transformation of their students. Hence the action research process, which involved investigating student use of the exemplars in practice, transformed the ways in which we managed exemplars in order to better support the development of students' evaluative judgments. In this sense, then, the paper presented below does not follow the format of an experimental design, which seeks to prove a finding or design a product that 'works,' laid out in a traditional reporting format. Instead -and strongly in line with the reflexive turn of pedagogic action research - we have broadly structured our paper as a narrative which follows the timeline of the two-year action research cycles represented in Figure 1, in order to document and highlight our own transformational reflective journey and the fresh understandings, theoretical insights and practices we collectively developed via the process of data gathering and ongoing reflexive deliberation throughout the two cycles.

Using exemplars in higher education

Practitioner-based literature on the value of exemplars in tertiary education is now burgeoning. It is becoming widely accepted that the use of exemplars can be highly beneficial in higher education settings (Boud and Carless, 2018). Exemplars are gaining widespread popularity across some universities as a means of enhancing the student experience of assessment (Arnold and Headley, 2019). Exemplars are tangible rather than abstract, so they are often viewed by students as a useful way of clarifying teachers' expectations (Hendry et al, 2014) especially when upcoming summative task types or assessment genres are unfamiliar (Winstone and Carless, 2019). Furthermore, exemplars of student work usefully offer concrete representations of work at different levels of performance and thereby have the potential to illustrate how quality is achieved in a way that lists of criteria, rubrics and teacher-telling cannot (Sadler, 2002).

In one sense, then, it is unsurprising that students are typically extremely positive about the opportunity to access exemplars (Hendry, Armstrong & Bromberger, 2012; Sambell, 2011). However,

practitioner-based research has also started to highlight that teachers' management of exemplars is far from straightforward. Different teachers' values, attitudes and assumptions, as well as different practical activities associated with exemplars, have an important part to play in students' responses to exemplars and the inferences students may draw from them (Hendry et al, 2012, Smyth, 2019).

An examination of the literature also reveals that exemplars have been used in a range of ways in small-scale practitioner studies. These typically closely associate exemplars-based activity with some form of preparation for summative assessment. Examples include, for instance, interventions focussed predominantly, but not exclusively on

- guiding students to see ways of tackling summative assessment when they are facing new assignment genres (e.g. Hendry et al, 2014; Bell et al, 2013);
- guiding students' preparation in advance of a summative assignment (Hendry, 2016; Scoles et al, 2014);
- inducting students into assessment literacy, embedded within social constructivist approaches targeted at raising student appreciation of the (often implicit) meanings staff attach to goals, standards and criteria in disciplinary settings (Rust et al, 2005);
- helping learners to feel more confident with assessment matters in university contexts (Arnold and Headley, 2019);
- helping students appreciate and learn to improve their academic writing approaches (Carter et al, 2018);
- enabling students to make better sense of their teachers' feedback comments, by helping learners better understand teachers' expectations (To and Carless, 2016);
- honing students' self-regulatory skills (Hawe et al., 2019).

Moreover, the literature on exemplars illuminates some recurring key principles for managing exemplars productively. The role that discussion can play in supporting students to form a sense of the nature of high-quality work is commonly foregrounded (Carless and Chan, 2017). Interactivity, discussion and guided analysis are generally regarded as valuable approaches, as opposed to simply making a range of examples available for students to access (Handley and Williams, 2011). The opportunity for extended dialogues (To and Carless, 2016) around the examples is typically regarded as key, holding the potential to make teachers' expectations and assumptions, which are often tacitly held, more visible, helping students learn to notice what experts notice. As such, discussion about exemplars is frequently regarded as a useful element in the lecturer's toolkit, because exemplars can convey important, complex and multivalent messages to students about quality and standards in relation to complex works like little else can (Sadler, 2013).

The development of students' self-evaluative skills is a frequently-cited rationale for using exemplars in higher education (Boud and Carless, 2019). To this end, the process of having students *produce* accounts of the strengths, weaknesses and possible improvements which could be made to a given exemplar actively involves learners in gaining vital experience of *making*, rather than passively receiving, academic judgments about the quality of work (Sadler, 2013).

The seminal work of Sadler (1989) is often used as a theoretical basis for using exemplars. Sadler importantly positions exemplars in the context of formative assessment, as a means of helping students to:

- see learning goals and start to develop a concept of quality roughly similar to that held by the teachers;
- monitor continuously the quality of what is being produced during the act of production itself;

- develop a repertoire of alternative moves or strategies from which to draw to close the gap between current performance and desired outcomes, if necessary.

The provision of high standard examples, which enable to students to recognise high quality work, is a recurring theme in most studies. However, only some of the practice-based studies cited above recognise the value of providing a range, although qualms are routinely raised about the problems which potentially flow from students confusing a high-quality exemplar with a 'model answer.' Concerns about the potentially deleterious impact of exemplars on students' approaches to learning include, for instance, concerns about copying (Handley and Williams, 2011); concerns that seeing exemplars will stifle some students' creativity and inhibit them from taking divergent and adventurous approaches to the production of their own complex works; and concerns that students will be schooled into 'criteria compliance' (Torrance, 2007).

Our methodological approach to action research on exemplars

The research reported here took the form of pedagogic action research broadly in line with Norton's (2018) definition:

"Pedagogical action research involves using a reflective lens through which to look at some pedagogical issue or problem and methodically working out a series of steps to take action to deal with that issue. The fundamental purpose of pedagogical action research is to systematically investigate our own teaching/learning facilitation practice with the dual aim of modifying practice and contributing to theoretical knowledge." (p.1.)

We viewed action research as particularly valuable for our purposes because, after Arnold and Norton (2017), it is a type of inquiry that is:

- *practical* (because it involves making changes to our practice);
- *theoretical* (because it is informed by theory and can generate new insights);
- *collaborative* (because it encourages engagement with students in the process);
- *reflexive* (as it requires us to keep our own knowledge, values and professional activities under review);
- *contextual* (as it acknowledges the local, institutional and disciplinary influences that are brought to bear on our practices).

It is important to acknowledge the extent to which members of our teaching team had been longstanding champions of the formative use of exemplars in developing students' approaches to assessment (Sambell, Miller & Gibson, 2005; Sambell, 2011). But while our own students' desire to see exemplars was a core theme to emerge in the reconnaissance stage of the action research reported in this current paper, as a teaching team we were also extremely keen to rigorously investigate and reflect more critically on the ways in which their use might positively impact on student learning.

Most notably, we were conscious, from our prior involvement in a university-led research project (which involved an external researcher undertaking participant observation during one of our exemplars-based workshops), that students' interpretations of the exemplars and sense-making around the activities took remarkably diverse forms. The researcher had uncovered, for instance, a strongly divergent set of individual student opinions about the relative strengths and areas for development of some exemplars during a student small-group discussion as workshop activities were underway. The participant observation process had also revealed that while some of these students were shocked and disquieted to discover their views of particular exemplars were not aligned with

those of the teachers, they masked this from their teachers. Without the researcher's presence, the teachers would have had no way of realizing the extent of the difficulties some students were encountering in analysing the exemplars.

This all meant, then, that as a teaching team, we were already alert to the challenges, as well as the affordances of exemplars-use, and hence were keen to explore our own pedagogic practices around them further. Our research question thus focussed on how might the teaching team improve their own professional practice around the use of exemplars to promote the students' self-evaluative capabilities and deepen learners' insights into the quality of the formative work they had produced prior to the workshop ?

We were, above all, eager to work in partnership with students, to try and better understand how we might enhance our exemplars-based practices by building a better picture of the challenges and issues all students experienced when working on them. The intervention ran as a mainstream workshop which was part of the normal whole-group delivery pattern (rather than an optional extra). Like all the whole-group weekly teaching on the module, it took place in a tiered lecture theatre with a student group of c100 students.

In the spirit of action research, we consciously sought to mitigate the impact that our enthusiasm for using exemplars might have on the research. We worked with a small group of second-year students to design a log-book to gather data which would enable us to carefully and systematically review what was actually going on as *all* students, not just a select few, analysed them during the workshop. Our ethical position involved explaining to first-year students attending the session that we hoped to gather anonymised documentary data from them during the workshop in order to help us better understand their viewpoints to improve our practices. We also offered assurances that anyone who wished to opt out of the research was free to do so and could simply take part in the pedagogic activities. Moreover, we provided a research information sheet explaining, in full, the ethical protocols that had been developed as part of the ethical approval process for the project.

Agreed methods for data collection included:

- The development of anonymised log-books in which students completed their exemplars-based activities during each workshop;
- Student-completed survey, with qualitative comments, at the end of each workshop;
- Semi-structured interviews with student volunteers;
- Audio-recordings of team discussions.

Action research importantly involves reflexivity, but importantly differs from simple reflection. It involves the systematic collection, use and analysis of data, plus a public dimension which is open to peer scrutiny, whereby the process of disseminating, discussing and collaboratively refining ideas is central (Tripp, 2005). Methodological rigour in evaluating the intervention was associated with

1) The gathering of quantitative data from the whole population, which built a clear picture of the rank order in which students placed the exemplars in each workshop;
2) The opportunity to systematically review all students' initial analyses of the exemplars;
3) An exit survey identifying all students' key learning points;
4) Observation notes kept by the teaching team during the workshop.

These sources of data were used as the basis for interpretive analysis by individual members of the team. Immediately after the workshop, the log-books were grouped according to how far each student's rankings were aligned or misaligned with teachers' ranking. This process built a holistic

picture of the overall student response to the evaluative environment the exemplars-based activities had provided. Individual members of the research team then reviewed the feedback comments generated by each group, classifying their interpretations of emergent themes and relationships. These individual interpretations and meanings were then used as the basis for the next stage of collective interpretive analysis. These joint discussions focused in on students' comments about the weakest and the strongest exemplar. They were audio-recorded and transcribed so that they, too, could be analysed. Excerpts are included below as illustrative data illuminating the conceptual shifts made by practitioners.

By making and watching change in this systematic way (Cousin, 2009) the action research process revealed some of the unintended outcomes and unexpected difficulties that emerge from change in naturalistic settings, in a genuine attempt to generate fresh insights, understandings and practices, based on a cyclical process of exploration for the generation of practical outcomes. These led to transformative shifts in the team's thinking and approaches to exemplars-use which are broadly indicated below.

Cycle 1: using exemplars to develop self-assessment

The implementation in cycle one was based on our efforts to use exemplars to involve students as partners in assessment and feedback processes. We viewed the exemplars as a locus for collaborative and emancipatory discussions around concrete illustrations of authentic student work which would help students gain new insights (Sadler, 2013) into the quality of the formative writing task they had been asked to undertake prior to the session. They were asked to bring along a 500-word response to a task which asked them to explain the core concept they had been studying. In short, we anticipated that giving students access to works of varying quality - and, even more importantly, encouraging them to make evaluative judgments and discuss these with others, including the tutors - would develop their assessment literacy (Rust et al, 2005) and hone their self-regulatory skills (Hawe et al., 2019).

As stated earlier, our use of concrete exemplars aligned with previous students' desire to see authentic examples of student writing produced in the disciplinary area. Theoretically, though, our team importantly located the workshop in the context of formative assessment and the development of disciplinary knowledge. Based on our prior knowledge of the problems novices often encounter with getting to grips with the idea that childhood can be viewed as a social construction, not simply a natural phenomenon, hence prior to the workshop we had invited all students to undertake a short formative writing task explaining the social construction of childhood. This task mirrored just one aspect of what would ultimately be needed for their graded assessment (Carless, 2007: 179), which focused on analysing data they gathered from local community settings. An important aim was to help pre-empt common difficulties or partial understandings which interfere with students' approaches to studying childhood and analysing their data.

The teaching team's collective assumption was that for students to be able to improve, they must develop the capacity to monitor their own work during its actual production, based on the premise that unless this inner capacity is developed, students are not well-placed to use external information about how successfully something is being done in order to close any gap between current and desired performance (Sadler, 1989). The first workshop was thus designed to engage students to analyse the range of exemplars in order to help students develop their self-assessment skills (Sambell, McDowell and Montgomery, 2013) by undertaking simulated 'marking' activities. In the first cycle, though, while students were encouraged to bring their own piece of work, they were not overtly invited to reflect on the quality of their own task until the end of the workshop. In the first instance, they were supported to analyse tutor-provided exemplars of previous students' attempts at the same formative task as a springboard for self-evaluation. The students were advised that the focus of the workshop

was on enabling learners to step into the shoes of an assessor, and the activities were structured to help them make qualitative judgments about the three examples so they could develop their capacity to make judgements about the quality of a range of work on the task they had tackled. The proposal to students was that this process would help them develop insights which they would, at the end of the session, use to review their own work by creating an action plan to improve the quality of their own work or their learning strategies in future.

In the workshop all students were presented with three carefully-prepared examples in an activity log-book. While the log book was one method of data-collection for the research, it also simultaneously acted as the mechanism for active learning, student reflection, discussion and analysis during the session. The log book had space for them to indicate the rank order in which they would place the three examples, and, most importantly, space to generate feedback on each sample in order to help the author improve it, and their learning strategies, further. Students worked individually on their log books in the first instance.

The three examples had been carefully chosen, with permission, from former students' responses to the same task. The samples were thus authentic pieces of work and representative of students at that stage in the programme. The three pieces of formative writing had been selected by the teaching team to represent:

- A high quality, sophisticated response to the 500-word formative task;
- A basic, sound standard response;
- A confused response which had missed the point and mistaken the concept for another similar sounding one. This example clearly did not meet the expected threshold standard for a pass.

The teaching team were keen to include the latter example in order to help students avoid this common mistake in this subject area. We knew, from several years' experience in teaching the topic and assessing students' assignments, that novices commonly confused two similar-sounding but importantly different concepts. We also knew from prior experience that simply telling students about this common mistake did not help them pre-empt it.

Recognising that learning is most likely to be effective when students are motivated to acknowledge that they need input in the domain of study, we felt it was important to help students become aware of any gap between the required knowledge and their current level (Sadler, 1989) at a relatively early stage in the module. Thus the formative task we set, and the subsequent analysis of exemplars, aimed to create a need for student learning by indicating, where necessary, to learners that their knowledge of the given domain may be erroneous, or incomplete. The 'fail' sample was, then included to represent the common mistake that newcomers often make, to alert students to potential difficulties in time to do something about them, if necessary, before they cause problems in summative assignments.

At the start of the workshop two lecturers briefly indicated three task-related criteria and explained the university's assessment grading-bands. The criteria were presented in terms of 'what we are looking for' in the samples, with relatively scant exposition of what a good answer would contain as opposed to a less effective one. Here we had been influenced by Sadler's views that providing students with detailed rubrics in advance of the task may not help them develop a fully-rounded sense of quality (Sadler, 2015). Next, students were asked to place the three samples in rank order of relative merit. Students were then invited, in their log-book, to generate feedback for each sample, comprising comments which were designed to help the (imaginary) author of each exemplar to make the most important changes necessary to improve their work. Next, the two lecturers revealed their views of

the rank order of the samples and discussed, at length, their views of the most useful feedback to improve each sample. In the light of this discussion, students were subsequently invited, in a plenary role-play situation, to collectively compose feedback for each sample author, with the 'author' (role-played by one of the lecturers) asking for clarification, explaining the processes and assumptions which had led them to produce their piece of work in that way, and, on occasions, offering rebuttals to some of the advice being offered. Finally, students were encouraged to review their own work in the light of the session and create an action plan to improve their work or future learning strategies.

Cycle 1: Evaluation

At the end of the workshop all students were surveyed about how far different aspects of the workshop had been helpful. The survey showed high levels of satisfaction with the session and several students stated it was 'one of the most eye-opening and useful sessions we've had on the programme so far.'

However, the subsequent analysis phase revealed unexpected results.

The quantitative data indicated that 52 percent of the 112 participating students had not been able to identify the example which represented the clear fail, and the ranking order they assigned (regardless of the grade they awarded) was, in over half of the students, considerably out of alignment with tutors' views.

The extent of the misaligned group was a surprise to the teaching team, especially given the tendency for students not to 'admit' during the workshop that they were finding the task difficult:

> But there wasn't anything at the time to suggest that any [students] were out of kilter with our reviews of the three samples… There wasn't a flicker when we talked about our views of the three samples- they were all nodding….

Individual interpretative analysis of the feedback comments that students generated on each sample resulted in two key themes which all members of the team noted in relation to the misaligned students' responses. First:

> many were utterly oblivious to what seemed to us as the glaring errors of the weak sample.

Secondly, all noted the emphasis that misaligned students were placing on procedural evaluative criteria, whilst ignoring the super-ordinate criterion:

> Most were focussing attention on …. relatively superficial details of grammar, citation and simple presentational issues (fixating on the use of the first person, or bullet points), rather than pointing out the conceptual confusion of the weakest work……
>
> They seem to be seeing it as a writing task, not a learning one. Somehow we're not managing to get them to see the point!

Analysis of the survey data revealed that a commonly-recurring theme in the qualitative comments about the value of the workshop lay, from the misaligned students' point of view, with a realisation of the need to 'answer the question,' as follows:

> I discovered that no matter how well you write it if you don't answer the question asked you can't get good marks."

By contrast, teachers noticed that the aligned students "tended to value the opportunity to see how they were doing in relation to the excellent exemplar."

Much of the collective analysis phase focused on further analysis of the broad patterns to emerge from the initial analysis. The team collectively revisited examples of aligned and misaligned students' analyses of the 'fail' exemplar in order to better empathise with the difficulties students were encountering. The following illustrative extract from the recording indicates the illuminative and transformational impact the data was having on the team. They are reflexively discussing the log-book of a misaligned student who now planned to 'answer the question':

> A: So, while this is useful up to a point, it hasn't helped her really engage with the task requirements, or the concept, in any more depth.
> B: We did want them to recognise the mistake, so at least that's good.
> C: Mnnn. But the worry is they weren't taking away the messages [we hoped] from that session… Instead of looking at the high-quality example, they're going back to look again at the weakest one, just to try and make sense of what we were saying about it. Although that's …useful in one way, they're missing out…
>
> A: … not getting the full picture, so to speak…
> B: What is it they're not seeing?
> C: They seem to be seeing it as simply being about writing- while we see it as being about learning... even despite all our preamble about the way we hope it'll help… so they're not fully registering what we think the task is all about.

Collaborative interpretative analysis was an extremely important aspect of our methodological approach to action research. Focusing systematically on identifying patterns in the data served to better appreciate the difficulties many students were experiencing, and unsettled our existing pedagogic assumptions and associated practices. Yet while this gave us the important impetus to rethink our exemplars-based practices, and acted as a useful disruption which signalled the need for change, at that point we were not able to pinpoint what else to do instead in the refinement stage of exemplars-use. With that cohort we decided to redirect our energies to discussion-based teaching activities which might help students recognize the difference between the concepts they found confusing.

Refinement and replanning: towards an inner feedback perspective

Before module planning recommenced in cycle 2, one of the teaching team serendipitously attended a talk by David Nicol, on the topic of inner feedback. Nicol's keynote, although it focused on feedback, suddenly seemed particularly pertinent for our action research project. It resonated because of the emphasis he placed on the issue that was vexing our exemplars- based work, namely, that 'weaker students produce poor quality inner feedback and hence are less able to self regulate. If students are generating inner feedback all the time why not focus on improving this?' We suddenly saw this offered a potentially helpful way of theorising and refining our approach, giving us new lenses and approaches to reframe and hone our intervention.

Inner feedback underpins Nicol's (2019) 'new perspective' on feedback. Nicol argues we should spend less of our energy and time providing teacher-feedback and focus, instead, on improving students' inner feedback. According to Nicol:

> All feedback is internally generated and is the result of a complex set of comparative processes…. Inner feedback is the feedback that students generate when they *compare* their current knowledge (or competence) against a reference value. It's the raw material they use to

> regulate their own learning and they are producing it all the time, although some are more conscious and capable than others.

Nicol (2018) advocates helping students to develop their inner feedback via involving them in peer review processes. These follow a typical sequence, including:

1. Students produce work-in-progress
2. Students review peers' works (often randomly allocated)
3. Students receive peer reviews (which they can use to improve their own work)

What makes peer review unique, though, according to Nicol (2019) is that *before* reviewing the work of peers, the student will have spent considerable time and effort in producing their own response to the same tasks themselves, so reviewing harnesses an inherent reflective process whereby students compare their own work with the work they're reviewing. This provided new insights that the teaching team were looking for.

Adopting this sequence could have led to jettisoning the use of exemplars and initially the team suggested replacing the intervention with student peer-review of each others' work. There were, however, reservations amongst the team:

> We did used to do this. But we found students mistrusted their peer feedback. And actually, felt very vulnerable, really reluctant, at this stage, in showing someone else their own work. But perhaps we can avoid that by using exemplars, as, kind of, simulations to compare, so it's… vicarious peer review.
>
> …. another problem as I see it with real peer review, is where students' work is allocated randomly amongst the group- is how to ensure that students gain access to a range of exemplars? We don't have that problem either with our current system - the exemplars give everyone a range.

The key question thus became how to redesign the exemplars-based workshop so that the exemplars became reference information to trigger "'real reflection" in reviewing, so that the peer's work [exemplar] acts as a mirror or a lens against which students compare, re-envisage and re-evaluate their own work" (Nicol, 2019:75).

The team identified two key features of the peer-review process as especially salient to harness the process of comparison-making much more strongly. The first involved ensuring that students had spent time and effort on producing work. This was done by:

a) getting them to start their written formative task in class during a fifteen-minute thinking-writing activity

b) next, involving students in co-designing a rubric they could use to evaluate the formative task. Here students were given the same 3 teacher-criteria as before, but then working, in groups, to compile the grade descriptors for each criterion. The rubrics they created were then combined to make a master rubric for them to use in the peer review workshop.

These two related processes elicited extended discussions with tutors about task goals and task specification prior to the exemplars-based activities, and ensured that all students had their own work to bring along.

Workshop in cycle 2

The refined workshop engaged students in the same activities as the initial cycle, although this time the workbook also had a space where they placed and reviewed their own work. First, they placed the 3 samples plus their own in rank order, and generated feedback on each. This meant that the feedback they offered to their own work was undertaken in comparison with the three exemplars. Similarly, after the teacher 'reveal,' students were invited to write action plans to improve own work. However, this time they were overtly encouraged to do so by comparing their own work with all the exemplars.

Evaluation in cycle 2

This time the findings revealed that most students were in alignment with the teacher rankings of the exemplars.

95% ranked 'the fail' as weakest of the 3 samples.

Moreover, the feedback they generated on the three exemplars was noticeably more focused on the salient concept. Two-thirds (60/91) generated feedback comments to the 'fail' exemplar about understanding and advancing knowledge:

- What you have written doesn't really relate to the social construction of childhood
- You've got some rather random references thrown into this

This contrasted markedly with cycle 1, when a high proportion remained silent about conceptual difficulties or shortcomings of the 'fail'. We inferred from this that students were in a better position to notice the problems with the common misconception the weakest sample was intended to flag up.

Moreover, the students' action plans and inferences were also much more productive. 62/91 students mentioned developing understanding and/or advancing their own knowledge of the concept as a result of the workshop:

- Will need to sit down and spend many hours getting relevant research for my work
- I'm in 50s, so I will need to read more and understand and learn from the best example
- I need to develop my knowledge by reading
- Read more, read thoroughly and make notes of what I read so that I understand what I'm reading
- Re-read until I fully understand

In the next two weeks there were 820 hits on the online reading list, making it the 6th most used list in the whole university, indicating that students realised, and were acting on, the need to read more widely and critically to enhance their appreciation of the key concept following the exemplars-based activities.

Follow-up interviews further explored students' experiences of the workshop. They were active interviews, in that they were reflective conversations, which did not seek a correct answer, but encouraged students to discuss their views of the exemplars-based workshop.

The most dominant theme to emerge was the value of comparison-making. Making structured comparisons helped learners to see new things about their own current performance:

> When we discussed this task in class I realised that what I had written didn't focus on the question, and I had looked more at socialisation rather than social construction. It was this that made me read around the subject more.

and gain new insights into relative strengths and weaknesses:

> Having to comment on someone else's paper makes you think a lot more, made you more aware…by looking at other people's work you were seeing what you're good at and what you need to improve on…
>
> It sort of gave you more ways to be able to look at your own work without just looking and thinking: Have I done the question? 'Cos when you're reading through your own work, you can also be quite proud and think: Oh, I've done really well here. And you will miss certain things.

Further, the high-quality exemplar helped some to generate external feedback, again, through a process of comparison:

> To write the feedback I looked at the good one to help me do the feedback for the others, to give them advice.

Discussion and conclusions

The action research process had transformative effects on teachers' assumptions, conceptualisations and, thus, their practices. The process of 'unsettling' their assumptions about the value of the activities they had designed was extremely productive, as it resulted in a search for fresh ways forward. As one of the co-researchers claimed: "In one sense, we've discovered more about ourselves and our practices than we have about the students…. This data is suggesting we need to do something differently- we need to change what *we're* doing."

Our research, moreover, illustrates the value of adopting an inner feedback perspective in this particular context. The insights thus add significantly to the burgeoning body of practitioner-based research around exemplars-based studies. The shift made by the teaching team embodies a move towards Sadler's (2013) encouragement to adopt a 'produce and review' approach to foster student learning and develop a learner's capacity to see afresh. Furthermore, by using exemplars as carefully selected referents as the basis for simulated peer-review, we demonstrated the possibilities for working productively in large-group contexts when using this approach.

We also learned the importance and value, in this context, of encouraging students to produce their own work before accessing the exemplars, in order to unlock the potential for developing inner feedback via accentuating crucial comparative processes. Our work also drew attention to the importance of helping novice learners understand appropriate learning goals. Cycle 1 showed clearly that "if a student misinterprets a task and or adopts inappropriate goals it is likely that sub-optimal tactics will be adopted and also likely that internal feedback generated during monitoring will neither provide adequate information about their task performance nor point them towards tactics or strategies which adequately redress difficulties" (Winstone and Carless, 2019: 119).

Theoretically, our work usefully repositions exemplars-based activity as a valuable means of triggering, but also scaffolding, the learning benefits of benchmarking one's own work by making comparative judgements via carefully simulated, rather than real, peer review in the early stages of a degree. Further, our pedagogic focus, on using exemplars as a springboard for pre-emptive formative assessment (Carless, 2007) of the extent to which key curriculum concepts have been grasped, is a particular hallmark of the approach we have developed. This holds potential for alternative approaches to engaging students with important subject content. Our focus on using exemplars for actively learning subject matter via the process of produce and review, rather than study and learn, contrasts markedly with approaches which position exemplars workshops more explicitly in direct support of summative task production.

Moreover, and finally, by focusing as much on the transformation of *teachers* as students, our research also adds to the sector's growing understanding of the relational and dialogic qualities of the pedagogic practices surrounding the use of exemplars to enhance the student experience of feedback processes, while highlighting the value of staff-student partnership approaches and approaches to transition pedagogies more generally.

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