



ESCalate Developing Pedagogy and Practice 2009 Grant Project Final Report

Date submitted 10 January 2011

Project Title Exploring the Rules of Engagement via Exemplars: enhancing staff and student dialogue about assessment and learning practice

Project Leader Professor Kay Sambell

Institution Northumbria University

Partners 1. Sue Robson, School of Education, Roehampton University

Project Start date 1 January 2010

Project End date 31 December 2010

Exploring the Rules of Engagement via Exemplars: enhancing staff and student dialogue about assessment and learning practice.

Top-line summary

The Rules of Engagement project aimed to pilot and investigate an innovative teaching methodology for developing effective staff and student understandings of assessment at university. It focused on supporting tutors (who taught on a range of Education undergraduate programmes) to develop their own bank of concrete exemplars of student writing, which they subsequently used with their own students to stimulate staff-student dialogue about 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' approaches to writing for the purposes assessment.

The project's premise was that students need to actively engage with the assessment process in some way (Rust et al, 2005) as 'simply giving a model answer or a marking guide or criteria will not ensure common informed understanding.'

Staff and students' experiences of using exemplars, embedded in disciplinary teaching, were explored through collection of rich pluralistic data. Issues relating to students' development of self-assessment skills and dispositions, and their perceptions of the value of the insights they gained in terms of 'feedforward' which would help improve their approaches to assignment writing were a key focus. The research became the focus of a range of papers and workshops offered by members of the project team.

A workshop for staff (entitled 'Working with Exemplars') and an example of a specifically-prepared set of exemplars (entitled 'Illustrative Set of Exemplars') to use with students are available as outputs via the project website on ESCalate's pages.

Exploring the Rules of Engagement via Exemplars: enhancing staff and student dialogue about assessment and learning practice.

Final Report. Professor Kay Sambell, Northumbria University.

Overview

The Rules of Engagement project aimed to pilot and investigate an innovative teaching methodology for developing effective staff and student understandings of assessment at university. It focused on supporting tutors (who taught on a range of Education undergraduate programmes) to develop their own bank of concrete exemplars of student writing, which they subsequently used with their own students to stimulate staff-student dialogue about 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' approaches to writing for the purposes assessment.

The use of tangible examples of student work was key to embedding and contextualising issues about assessment, which previous research has shown reside tacitly in the discipline (O'Donovan et al, 2006; Bloxham, 2009). From these constructivist perspectives, standards and criteria are interpreted, situated and locally constructed and often tacitly communicated- becoming a matter of professional judgment, not simply a matter of fact. This means that attempts to communicate standards and criteria are tricky, as the business of making judgments is a local social construct which is contextual and negotiated between members of the assessment community. The premise here is, though, that students need to actively engage with the assessment process in some way (Rust et al, 2005) as 'simply giving a model answer or a marking guide or criteria will not ensure common informed understanding.'

Whilst prior research in some disciplines, such as Biology, has illuminated the benefits of involving students in in-depth dialogue about assessment matters (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 2002), the inter-disciplinary and eclectic nature of Education Studies presents interesting issues and challenges which this project explored and sought to address.

The project itself took place in two phases across the year.

Phase 1. Development of a staff workshop.

The initial phase of the project focused on the development and implementation of a staff workshop which might usefully engage Education staff in collecting or creating exemplars of student work derived from and located within the local discourses of their own teaching practices/modules.

To achieve this, the project specifically built on previous research, including the work of the Project Leads, exploring the benefits of stimulating dialogue between staff and students about assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; 2009; Sambell et al, 2006; McDowell et al, 2005). According to Blythman et al (2002), enabling staff to have time and space to discuss their different 'takes' and expectations on what is acceptable or unacceptable forms a highly effective staff development process. To this end, the project team decided to develop a workshop, aimed at encouraging Education lecturers, in their course teams, to share their thinking about the business of effective student assignment writing within Education.

Original ideas for the development of the workshop, a model for which is available via a Powerpoint presentation on the project's pages on the ESCalate website, were established during the initial project team meeting on 21st January 2010. This was hosted by Roehampton University and involved a two-day meeting between the Project Leads from each site (Northumbria University's Professor Kay Sambell & Dr Lynne McKenna and Roehampton University's Sue Robson & Dr Elise Alexander). This enabled project staff members from each course/partner site to meet, establish the project, develop resources and collaboratively develop the template for the workshop's process.

The next step involved trying out the workshop with members of staff in the host universities. The workshop was piloted via a series of events organised for c20 members of Education staff teaching modules within a raft of well-established and 'new' or 'emergent' programmes, including, for example, BA Hons degrees in Early Years, Early Childhood and Childhood Studies, which attract large numbers of

students looking for flexible pathways into teaching and education-related careers. It also importantly includes staff running a suite of ‘new’ undergraduate courses which have recently been designed to enable para-professionals already working in schools and settings to study at university in response to the Every Child Matters agenda and the Children's Workforce reform. They include, for instance, undergraduate programmes for Teaching Assistants and the BA Hons Learning in Families, Schools and Beyond. The workshop enabled experienced and relatively ‘new’ Education tutors to participate in collaborative, reflective dialogue about their tacit expectations and assumptions regarding Education students’ written work.

The staff workshop was also piloted, at the invitation of the conference organising committee, as a pre-conference workshop at the European First Year Experience conference, Antwerp, Belgium. The theme of our pre-conference workshop proved very popular, suggesting that the topic of student writing is a live issue for colleagues working in universities outside of the UK, as well as for colleagues from disciplines other than Education.

Phase 2. Development and use of bespoke exemplars for use in workshop activities with students.

Phase 2 of the project investigated the actual use of bespoke exemplars as a pedagogic resource suitable for use with early career Education students. Exemplars are ‘key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence. The exemplars are not standards themselves but are indicative of them. ..they specify standards implicitly’ (Sadler, 1989 cited in Price et al, 2007, p44). Offering students insight into standards and expectations for writing at university was regarded as important, as contemporary Education students are often being recruited from non-traditional backgrounds and may, indeed, be para-professionals with ample hands-on experience, which is not always matched by academic skills (Northedge, 2003). These students often need considerable support in adapting to the conventions of university study.

The project sought to enable first-year students to understand the often tacit ‘rules of engagement’ involved in effective assessment and learning at university. It

approached this by aiming to develop and enrich the quality of ‘formative interactions’ (Black & Wiliam, 2009) surrounding assessment and student writing with a view to:

- encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning
- helping to clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
- facilitating the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
- delivering high quality information to students about their learning

(Nicol, 2009)

To do this, we decided to focus on developing the use of module-specific exemplars. Exemplar-work was deemed particularly useful as many Education courses entail large-group teaching contexts, with groups of between 80 and 120 students on a module. The premise was, then, that working collaboratively on concrete exemplars would enable students to see and begin to evaluate authentic examples of student writing within the specific context of the material being studied and assessed. This would also provide them with space and time to discuss their own approaches to assessment and learning more generally, both with each other and with their lecturers.

Classroom activities focused on the use of exemplars were put into practice on a range of modules. In practice, exemplars can, as Handley et al (2008: 44) suggest, take a range of forms. According to these researchers, for instance, exemplars

- may be complete assignments or excerpts
- may be authentic pieces of student work, or may be (re)constructed by staff (so as to illustrate specific pedagogic points in as transparent manner as possible)
- may be annotated with feedback to
 - help students understand what tutors look for
 - help students build their self assessment skills

Different examples of exemplar materials were prepared or produced in the project. Some tutors chose to use actual examples of student written work (suitably de-

identified). Others specifically prepared their own exemplars, so as to highlight pedagogic points for their students. The exemplars were developed, shared, discussed and peer-reviewed before being used with groups of students.

An illustrative example of a specifically prepared set of exemplars, in this instance designed to enable focused discussion about a range of important points and to highlight a number of ‘mistakes’ novices commonly make with regard to subject-specific material, is included in a separate file on the project pages. It is derived from an introductory learning-to-learn module which aimed to introduce 140 first year Education students to the literature surrounding approaches to learning in higher education (Marton et al, 1997: Ramsden, 2003), with a view to improving their own study habits.

Exemplars were embedded in classroom practices in a variety of ways. For instance, in one first year group with over 100 students, exemplars were used as the basis for a whole-group teaching session, which took place in a tiered lecture theatre. Before the session, students were asked to prepare a short piece of writing explaining a key concept (not more than 1 side A4), which they were required to bring to the session. In the session, students were issued with 4 exemplars, each demonstrating different student approaches to explaining this key concept.

Students were asked to work in small groups, reading and discussing the exemplars and collectively trying to place them in rank order, applying assessment criteria which had been discussed and agreed. These related specifically to the module’s learning outcomes, so the focus was on ‘ways of thinking and practising’ (Meyer & Land, 2006) within the subject context, rather than generic ‘study skills.’ After a lengthy plenary discussion of tutors’ views of the rankings they would award, students were asked to generate feedback which would help the student of each exemplar to improve their work further. Finally, students were advised to reflect on how they would improve their own writing, in the light of the session, generating feedback for themselves, which they could take forward as they prepared material for a summative assignment.

Overall, over 260 Education students benefitted directly from working with the Project materials.

The Rules of Engagement project research programme.

The project aimed to systematically research staff and student perspectives of the products and processes involved in developing and using the 'rules of engagement' exemplar materials in Education courses designed to widen participation in university. The research focus was: How far and in what ways might the use of exemplars of student writing accelerate staff and student understandings of the tacit 'rules' of assessment and learning and contribute to students' success in Education courses?

The methodology involved accessing the developing perceptions of both staff and students through collection of rich pluralistic data. Qualitative in-depth interviews were carried out with staff during the project in order to establish their views about their involvement in the process. Detailed semi-structured interviews with selected students also investigated the effectiveness of the exemplars in accelerating their understandings of the 'rules of engagement' of assessment at university. The research focused on highlighting the ways in which students experienced the exemplars-focused activities. Issues relating to the development of self-assessment skills and dispositions, and their perceptions of the value of the insights they gained in terms of 'feedforward' which would help improve their approaches to assignment writing were a key focus. Issues such as students' understandings of, say, appropriate citation and plagiarism were also a focus, given that much prior research indicates that poor academic practice might result in unintentional plagiarism (Stefani and Carrol, 2001; Ashworth et al, 1997).

Evaluative interviews with selected members of staff and participant observations were conducted by the project's Research Director, Dr. Catherine Montgomery, of Northumbria University's Learning & Teaching Academy, to gain insight into participants' assumptions about student writing and their views of issues and challenges in using exemplars.

A snapshot of our findings: student perspectives.

Students were keen to try and develop insight into assessment requirements and standards. They often felt they were unclear about what was being expected, especially as they embarked on their degrees:

I didn't even know what style they want, I was going in blind.

We need to know what level we're writing at because we're going to keep writing at that level unless we know it's wrong.

Many claimed that simply seeing different people's approaches to writing in the subject area were useful:

Like, we could see different people, how different people can put across the point, and ways you can do it.

Often students felt it was helpful to discuss concrete examples, rather than receive abstract advice and guidance:

I think seeing it just makes you understand it more. Like, someone can stand there and say, 'You shouldn't do this and that' but until you've actually seen it then you don't know what that looks like.

The process of being required to make qualitative judgments and having access to diverse responses was deemed effective:

Having it in front of you and being able to compare the different ones is good.

Listening to lecturers talk more fully about their 'real' requirements was seen as useful:

It helped you see, maybe things that the lecturers, the people who are marking it, don't view as being that great, and I think when you read someone else's work, like

that, rather than just judging your own, it's easier to sort of pick out the points that are good and are bad. Just to get an idea of what's good and bad.

Many were surprised by their teachers' verdicts, which drove students to re-read an exemplar they initially thought was 'good,' but which their teachers didn't prize so highly. This helped them focus more deeply on salient features from the marker's viewpoint, in time to adjust their understanding of effective writing within the context of the subject area, if necessary:

Once you'd looked at the criteria and read it again you could see why they thought it was better or worse.

Noticeable gaps between staff and student understandings of effective student writing emerged, which the exemplar discussions began to make visible and address. Most notably, in interview, it became clear that essay-writing 'advice' that students had experienced prior to attending university appeared to exert a strong influence on students' understandings of teachers' requirements. This encouraged them to look for generic normative textual features in the exemplars, rather than seeing assessment as the vehicle via which to perform the high order skills of the discipline (Sadler, 2009). *"In A levels, we were always told not to put bullet points in."* From this viewpoint the conceptual quality of the explanation was ignored, which helped explain the gaps between staff and student perspectives.

The transition to writing at university level was experienced by many as a profound 'culture shock' (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). It was this lack of familiarity with alien writing conventions and practices appeared to focus students' attention primarily on 'study skills' issues, such as citation. At first, this distracted them from a focus on sense-making and the development of an argument. However, after lengthy discussion of exemplars students began to change their minds about what tutors were really looking for:

'At the start we liked that one, but then, when they [the tutors] talked about them all, we realised it wasn't as good as we thought. Actually, it hadn't answered the question, but had rambled on about something else.'

With this in mind, it was particularly useful for students to see exemplars which had failed to address the specific module's learning outcomes, rather than only seeing 'good' examples of work. Whilst at a technical level these responses were competent, at a conceptual level they showed inadequacy. This meant staff were prone to mark them down, in comparison with more accomplished explanations of complex conceptual territory. The process of trying to the exemplars as teachers saw them pushed some students into consciously looking for understanding and matters pertaining to the subject area, rather than 'just' surface signifiers of 'good' writing (such as technically correct citation techniques, spelling, grammar and so on).

Variation in terms of the exemplars, then, was extremely important, as it helped students begin to refine their understandings of the assessment process as viewed by their teachers.

Project dissemination.

The project had a number of conference papers and workshops accepted at local, national and international conferences. These included:

Sambell, K & McKenna, L. Using exemplars to promote dialogue about effective approaches to assessment: the rules of engagement project. March 30th, 2010. North East Universities (3 Rivers Consortium) Third regional Learning & Teaching Conference: What does diversity mean to you?

Sambell, K. Enhancing staff-student dialogue about assessment and learning practice, European First Year Experience conference, Planitijn Hogeschool, Antwerp, Belgium, May 2010.

Sambell, K. Enhancing students' involvement in the assessment process via exemplars. Higher Education Academy Annual Conference, University of Hertfordshire June 2010

Sambell, K & Montgomery, C. 'At first I didn't know what they wanted. I was going in blind.' Students' experiences of pedagogic practices designed to illuminate the 'rules of engagement' in assignment-writing. Writing Development in Higher Education, Sustainable writing development: approaches and challenges. Royal College of Physicians, London. 28-30 June, 2010.

Sambell, K. Enhancing students' appreciation of academic literacy via exemplars. Northumbria Learning & Teaching conference, September 8th, 2010.

Sambell, K. Crossing the Rubicon or Toeing the Line? Students' experiences of a social-constructivist approach designed to develop their understanding of assessment processes in higher education. Northumbria/EARLI Assessment conference, Slaley Hall, September 2010.

Sambell, K. Enhancing students' involvement in assessment via exemplars. International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning, ISSOTL10 conference: 'Global theories and practices: institutional, disciplinary and cultural variations.' Liverpool, 19 - 22 October 2010.

Further conference papers and workshops are currently under review. A paper focusing on the development of students' assessment literacy is in preparation, which will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal.

The project dissemination strategy will culminate in a session at the third *Assessment in Higher Education Conference*, 6th July 2011, Cumbria Study of Higher Education Network in collaboration with Northumbria University Centre for Excellence in Assessment for Learning and BERA Higher Education SIG on Wednesday 6th July 2011, University of Cumbria, Carlisle.

(<http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/Services/CDEPP/Events/CDEPPEvents.aspx>)

A journal article on developing students' assessment literacy, based on findings from the project, is also in preparation.

The Rules of Engagement project team.

Professor Kay Sambell led the Rules of Engagement project and is the main contact for anyone interested in the project. She can be contacted at kay.sambell@northumbria.ac.uk.

Kay is Professor of Learning & Teaching in Childhood Studies. She teaches and conducts research in the academic area of Children, Families and Communities in the School of Health, Education and Community Studies at Northumbria University. She took a strategic lead in Northumbria University's Centre for Excellence in Assessment for Learning, as Director for AfL Enhancement. Kay is well-known for her contributions to the research and development of higher education assessment practice. She was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2002.

Dr Lynne McKenna is Principal Lecturer in the academic area of Children, Families and Communities in the School of Health, Education and Community Studies at Northumbria University. The academic area is responsible for delivering a range of programmes which respond to the needs of the developing workforce for children and young people, families and communities. She is Programme Manager for the Wider Workforce.

Sue Robson is a Principal Lecturer in Education at Roehampton University, and is Subject Coordinator for Early Childhood Studies. She works on the BA and MA Early Childhood Studies programmes, and the Primary PGCE programme, and on a range of professional development activities. Sue is a National Teaching Fellow, and a Roehampton University Teaching Fellow.

Dr Elise Alexander is principal lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Roehampton University. She currently teaches on the BA in Early Childhood Studies and contributes to the MA and PhD programmes.

Dr Catherine Montgomery acted as research director on the Rules of Engagement project. She works in the Learning & Teaching Academy at Northumbria University, is a University Teaching Fellow, and was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship during the course of this project.

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