

How to use exemplars and rubrics to improve student outcomes

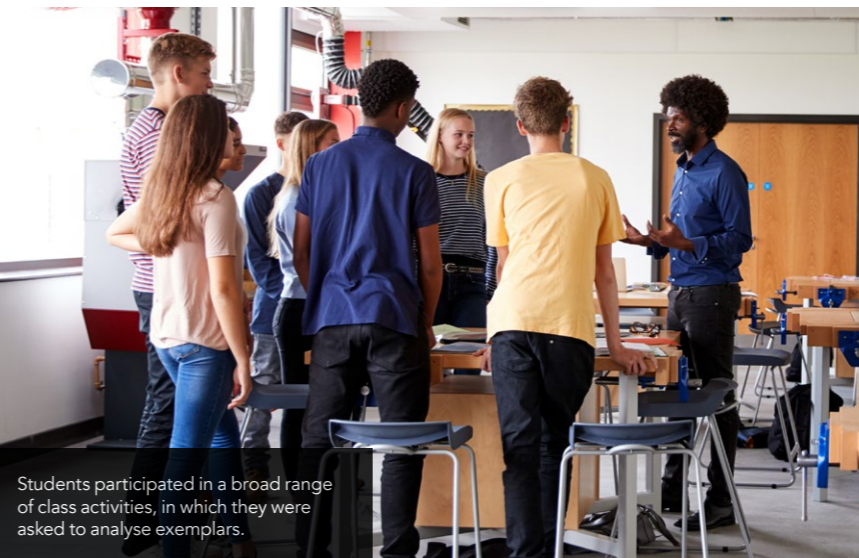
Associate Professors in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland, Eleanor Hawe and Helen Dixon, specialise in evaluating and improving learning assessments. Eleanor is interested in goal setting, feedback, and peer review. Helen focuses on teachers' beliefs and their effect on learning. In their study, 'Using rubrics and exemplars to develop students' evaluative and productive knowledge and skill', they spent time observing and interviewing students to see how they used exemplars and rubrics to improve their work.

Many students, at all levels of education, know the assessment outcome they want to attain but feel lost and confused about how to go about assessment tasks so they can successfully achieve the desired outcome. To address this, educators (lecturers, teachers) are making increasing use of exemplars and rubrics. These tools give students an idea of what constitutes quality in the task at hand. Hawe and Dixon are interested in analysing the value of exemplars and rubrics and, in particular, how they help students to make evaluative judgements, as well as how they can be used to encourage student self-monitoring, and how they can increase students' productive knowledge and skills.

THE VALUE OF RUBRICS AND EXEMPLARS

The argument underlying the use of rubrics and exemplars is that when they are used purposefully, they can help students understand the standard of work expected and as a result, students can work towards achieving the desired level of attainment. The use of these tools is becoming an increasingly common feature of teaching practice in universities. Associate Professors in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland, Eleanor Hawe and Helen Dixon, have explored, in a number of studies, why and how educators integrate rubrics and exemplars into their teaching practice and how students use these tools to support their learning and task achievement.

Previous research has suggested that rubrics are generally useful for students but they need to be used in context. Their most powerful impact on learning and achievement comes when they are used in association with exemplars. Fundamentally, students need to acquire the same complex knowledge that is possessed by their teachers and/or assessors of their work. This can be achieved through the productive and dialogic use of rubrics and exemplars. The latter are carefully selected samples of authentic student work from previous cohorts, chosen because they typify designated levels of quality. When students use rubrics to analyse examples of quality work from previous cohorts,



they become better at making wise and sound judgements about the quality of their work, monitoring their progress, and regulating their thinking and performance.

With these ends in mind, students should be given the chance to use rubrics as they analyse and discuss exemplars, and make decisions about their relative quality. This may involve assigning marks and grades to exemplars. Through lively classroom discussions, dialogue with peers and teachers, and through group presentations, students gradually become better at recognising the elements of quality work. In exploring how to get the most from rubrics and exemplars, Hawe and Dixon have sought, in a number of studies, to answer two questions. First, why and how do educators use rubrics and exemplars? And second, how do student teachers use rubrics and exemplars when working on their own tasks?

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

In their most recent project, Hawe and Dixon used an interpretive and qualitative research approach to address the ways in which teachers and students used these tools. The participants in this study were two teacher educators who agreed to take part in order to analyse the effectiveness of their use of rubrics and exemplars in the classroom. It also

involved students in three classes, in two different courses. The first was a second-year curriculum course, with a class of 57 students, taught by both educators. This class took place twice a week for ten weeks. The second was a third-year professional education course, with two classes of 39 and 35 students, each class taught by one of the teacher educators. This course also took place twice a week for ten weeks.

The researchers used in-class observations, the collection of artefacts (rubrics, exemplars and students' assignment work-in-progress) and semi-structured interviews with students.

To collect data, the researchers used in-class observations, the collection of artefacts (rubrics, exemplars, and students' assignment work-in-progress), and semi-structured interviews with students. The researchers began by simply observing to see how classes were structured. They then focused on observing sessions where rubrics and exemplars were utilised by the two course educators.

Interviews were then transcribed and analysed, along with the observation (field) notes, artefacts used during teaching (rubrics, exemplars) and artefacts gathered from the students (works-in-progress, completed assignments). The researchers used the constant comparative method to analyse these data. In the first instance, words and phrases were identified

in the data to generate open codes. Secondly, the open codes were grouped to create axial codes. These latter codes reflected relationships between the open codes, and were used to determine key themes. Analysis of the data revealed two important themes: teachers used a deliberate and scaffolded approach when using rubrics and exemplars; and students used these tools as points of reference when working on their assessment tasks.

KEY FINDINGS

In terms of the deliberate scaffolded use of rubrics and exemplars, the two educators implemented a range of structured whole class and small group activities with the purpose of familiarising students with task expectations and what counted as quality work. These activities included lecturer explanations of and student discussions around the meaning of rubric criteria and standards, modelling of how to apply the latter to student work (exemplars), questioning of students and summing up of group and class ideas. When working in small groups, students were able to discuss what they thought key words and phrases in the rubrics meant. For instance, one of the lecturers asked the class to talk

about the rubric term 'insightful comments'. One student thought that this required her to think deeply and critically, another thought it meant referencing theorists, while a third student suggested it meant reaching her own

conclusion. Together, through their discussion, the three students in this group built a shared and solid understanding of what the term meant and how it could be applied to their work. Students also participated in a range of in-class activities where they analysed exemplars, and discussed and made judgements about their strengths and weaknesses with reference to the criteria and standards contained in the rubrics.

Regarding students' use of rubrics and exemplars, Hawe and Dixon found these tools were used as points of reference when students were planning how to address the task and starting work on their assignment. Second, they were used as points of comparison when students were working on their task and making revisions.





Students were encouraged to compare their own work-in-progress to rubrics and exemplars.

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PLANNING AND REVIEWING WORK

When planning and constructing their work, students turned to rubrics and exemplars for guidance. They used these tools to give them ideas about how to start their piece of work, how to structure it and which literature was particularly useful. In addition, they referred to exemplars to help solve specific issues that arose as they were writing, for example, how to communicate understanding of a particular principle, how to make links between theory and practice and the amount of detail to include in a discussion.

When students had a reasonably complete piece of work, or a first draft, they then compared this work-in-progress to rubrics and exemplars, flicking back and forth between the two so they could check whether they had met requirements and how well their work measured up to specific levels of achievement on the rubric. Some students used separate browser tabs on their computers to support this process while others preferred to work with paper copies. This gave them the chance to critique and regulate their performance, allowing them to make the changes needed to improve their work. Students would often highlight sentences that didn't match the rubrics or the exemplar. For example, when this process of comparison indicated that an idea was too vague or not clearly explained, it was rewritten to bring it closer to what was expected.

LESSONS LEARNT

Hawe and Dixon's research has helped to fill a gap in our understanding about how educators can effectively use rubrics and exemplars in their teaching to stimulate student self-monitoring and self-regulation.

It reveals how a structured and thoughtful approach can enhance students' evaluative and productive knowledge and skills so they are in a position to make judgements about the quality of their work and as a result, make changes that result in high-quality pieces of work.

The deliberate and purposeful use of rubrics and exemplars by teachers helps students to build up a clear understanding

Exemplars and rubrics should be an integral part of the teaching process.

of what constitutes quality work, allowing them to gather the knowledge and utilise the strategies needed to complete a task to a high standard. Students, armed with evaluative knowledge similar to that of their teachers, are better able to understand how to successfully achieve an academic task. As a result of analysing



Rather than stifling creativity, exemplars should be seen as a source of inspiration, to kickstart the work of other students.

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and working with rubrics and exemplars, in whole class and small group situations, students are well positioned to critique their own work and make improvements before submitting their final version.

Hawe and Dixon note in their discussion that teachers are often reluctant to use exemplars because they may stifle creativity and prevent students from taking their own approach to a piece of work. However, they found that the educators counter this by using multiple exemplars, so students can see that there are many different ways to approach the same topic. Exemplars thus act as a form of inspiration, helping students to get started and to structure their work. It does not affect their ability to produce original, creative, and high-quality work – in fact exemplars can increase student self-efficacy and can give them the confidence to do better.

Exemplars and rubrics should be an integral part of the teaching process. This study by Hawe and Dixon has helped to further explain how valuable these tools can be. In particular, they foster students' ability to make evaluative judgements and to monitor their thinking and work-in-progress. A student's understanding of

what constitutes quality work evolves over time and requires dialogue with both their teacher and peers as together they work with rubrics and exemplars. Not only do exemplars and rubrics improve productive knowledge, they also help students to become independent and self-regulating learners.

Behind the Research



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Research Objectives

Eleanor Hawe and Helen Dixon examine how exemplars and rubrics are used by educators and students and explore their impact on student thinking and behaviour.

Detail

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Bio

Eleanor Hawe and Helen Dixon are Associate Professors in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland. Eleanor's research focuses on assessment for learning (including goal setting, feedback, peer review) with attention paid to the use of exemplars to develop students' evaluative and productive expertise across a range of educational contexts and teaching subjects. Helen's teaching and research are also focused on assessment for learning within the schooling sector and higher education. In addition she has an interest in teachers' beliefs, including their efficacy beliefs, and how these influence assessment practice.

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Collaborators

- Associate Professor Richard Hamilton (co-researcher from the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland)
- Sandra Chandler, Jill Murray (collaborators from the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland)

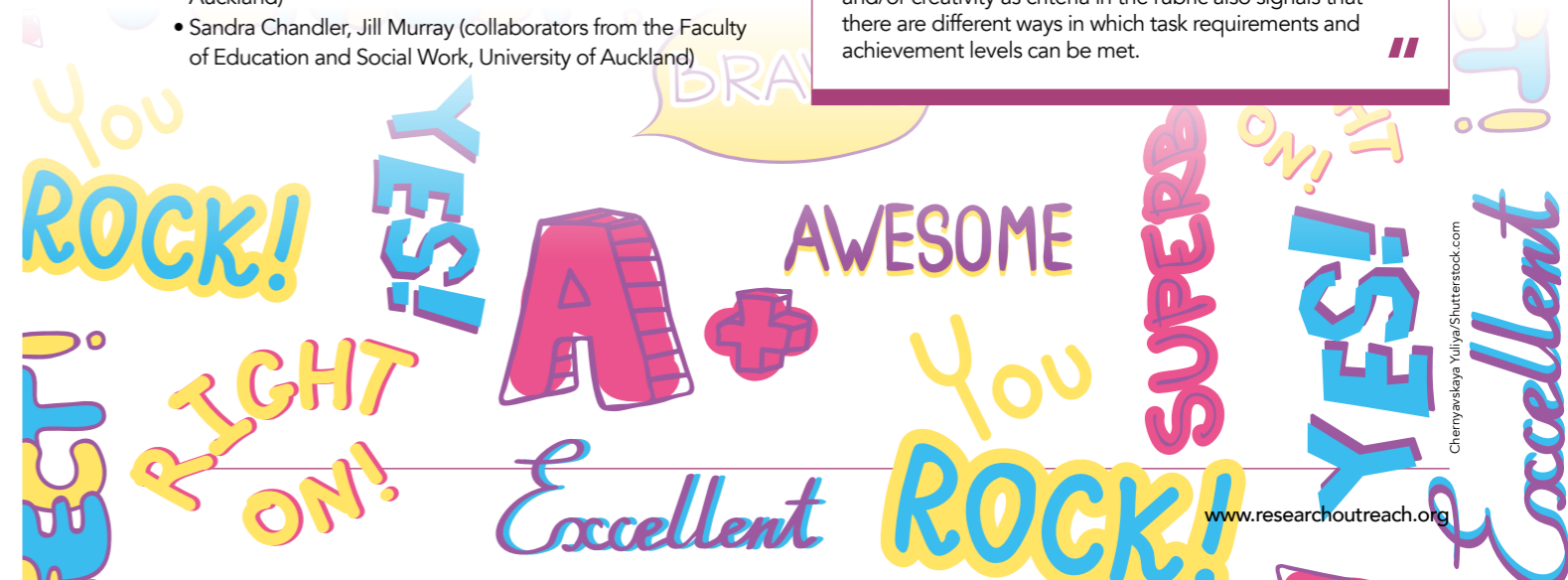
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Personal Response

How can students retain originality and creativity while also using exemplars as inspiration for their own work?

Firstly, educators should explain why they are using exemplars (eg, make requirements clear; show what quality work looks like; motivate students), indicating they are not to be copied. Students should be exposed to a range of exemplars (across the spectrum of achievement), so they can see the different ways in which previous cohorts have addressed requirements, solved problems, and attained particular levels of achievement. They can also talk about how to improve specific exemplars – this encourages students to think creatively and try different ways of addressing requirements. Including originality and/or creativity as criteria in the rubric also signals that there are different ways in which task requirements and achievement levels can be met.



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