EDITORIAL

Setting an example

During a recent heated discussion on the value and potential harm of providing model answers to students, the concern centred around how students could interpret and use such answers in developing their own responses to assessment. Providing a model answer to examination questions seemed a backwards step; first, it suggests that there could be just one particularly excellent answer which could earn a 100% mark and, second, it suggests that a tutor was capable of writing one which nonetheless took into account the students' level of understanding of the topic in relation to the learning outcomes and materials recommended for study, rather than the possibly larger resources available to the tutor.

Huxham (2007) suggests advantages for model answers, particularly when used to give feedback instead of individual student feedback comments, citing a saving of time and avoidance of personal negative feedback. However, model answers offer pitfalls: they can discourage students from developing their own approaches to a good question response, and foster mimicry or unthinking repetition of structures in the model answer regardless of the specifics of the question.

A better alternative involves the exemplar answer, where past students' authentic work is used to demonstrate high (or low) standards and response to key criteria. Sadler sees exemplars as "key examples chosen so as to be typical of designated levels of quality or competence" (Sadler, 1987, p. 200). The exemplar answer can suggest implicit standards and be used as an effective feedforward tool (Hendry, White, & Herbert, 2016), where tutor feedback is shared and discussed, or students themselves can mark and offer feedback against agreed criteria, possibly followed by further tutor comment. Such exemplars can be discussed at critical points in a course, allowing students early understanding of what may be required, but also offering a timely reminder once their own work is under way, demonstrating what is feasible rather than a perfect answer (Hounsell, 2008).

Interactive technologies suit this kind of exemplar modelling, where answers or extracts of assignments can be offered without comment for peer discussion, prior to joint working on the document by groups of students offering their own comment, and adaptive feedback release once students have offered their responses and possibly grades. The traditional feedback model or "one way telling" (Sadler, 2013, p. 56) leaves a lot to be desired. As Royce Sadler discusses, complex tasks require more than transmissive format feedback to enable learning. A much more comprehensive interactive approach to developing critical assessment skills is needed in which students are encouraged to develop their own sense of how to evaluate both the big picture and the detailed issues in a piece of writing, before they can do this for themselves in their own writing.

Examples and exemplars can both contribute to good learning. A specific route to the use of exemplars was advocated by Sadler (2013), in which students were initially asked to form judgments of quality without explicit criteria. Handley and Williams (2011) offered a variation by time-shifting feedback: posting exemplars together with tutor feedback comments in a virtual learning environment prior to assignment submission. Both aimed at developing students' tacit understanding of the underlying structures and standards which academics consider to be good. Yet these activities do not always lead to performance improvements, even though they are considered useful by the students. Part of the difficulty here is similar to that experienced with model answers – the inability of the academic tutor to think, write and explain from the student standpoint. This means that exemplars and written feedback can be taken at face value and assumed to be sufficient

and "right", when the intention was to develop critical evaluation and judgement rather than passive acceptance.

There is a sense in which setting an example offers a great deal to teachers and learners. First, in the simplest sense, teachers can demonstrate good practice, for example using the technology they advocate in class, showing how to deal with errors and downtime on servers, using technologies interactively in real time to engage students in constructing content and using technologies for learning rather than passive recording or undifferentiated searching. This requires teachers to accept perhaps a degree of vulnerability in front of learners, relinquishing a degree of control in order to help students to become able enquirers and critical thinkers (Greener, 2009).

Second, by setting an example, they can demonstrate the linguistic skills and standards of writing which they require of their students yet often fail to show or adequately explain. Rather than simply using slides with bullet points to summarise subject content, the teachers who also demonstrate and share good writing structures can help students to develop a tacit understanding of what constitutes the structural and linguistic conventions which they mark highly.

The papers in this issue include a range of examples of modelling and emulation in experiments and case studies of interactive learning. Their examples give us ways of continuing to develop as academics and researchers from which we can gain, no matter what the level, subject or geographic location of our own activities.

References

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