

# Bottom up! establishing a university wide community of practice for exemplars and exploration of its affect in enhancing the quality of student assessment

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**Abstract**

This paper reflects upon the development of the Harper Adams University Community of Practice for Exemplars (CoPfe). The University's aspiration for greater use of formative feedback was the catalyst for the creation of the CoPfe. Through informal monthly sessions members share experience, expertise and findings from their use of exemplars. Results from CoPfe members' investigations on the impact on students have been overwhelmingly positive, with students identifying growth in confidence in their academic skills and gaining a clearer understanding of the requirements of assessment. Results of a staff survey showed exemplars were mainly being used with assignments, and most commonly with first years. Staff noted both students' understanding of quality increased and they had greater transparency of staff expectations. Facilitators and members of the CoPfe promote the use of exemplars throughout the institution and seek opportunities for dissemination through conferences and published papers. This paper shares the process of establishing a Community of Practice (CoP) to encourage others to consider this bottom up approach.

**Key words**

Community of Practice; Exemplars; Network.

**Introduction**

This paper will describe the creation and development of the Harper Adams University (HAU) Community of Practice for Exemplars (CoPfe) and share methods of gathering student feedback and example responses. The paper will also present staff survey data to illustrate how exemplars are used across departments at the University.

**Communities of Practice (CoP)**

The use of CoPs in Educational Development is growing. The Society of Educational Developers (SEDA) reflected on its own characteristics as a CoP described by a member as "a 'grass roots' organisation inspired by a passion to make teaching and learning really work" (Nixon and Brown, 2013).

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) define CoPs as "... groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p.1). They identify the community as a place for discussion with activities and information shared amongst supportive practitioners. Working together, a communal body of knowledge is built and sustained from experiences (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). The community is "organic, spontaneous and informal" in nature (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p.140) involving those who have chosen to join and who share a desire to learn more. Liverpool Hope University recently developed a network of CoPs in learning and teaching that work across the institution. Involving both staff and students, participation is voluntary and the ethos is collaborative. The QAA review of 2015 noted these were considered "an effective platform for identifying, developing and sharing good practice to enhance L&T" and in 2018 this work

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was recognised with a Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) by Advance HE (Liverpool Hope University, 2019).

### **Exemplars**

Exemplars have been described as specific examples of assessment presented to students as being typical of various levels of achievement mapped against the assessment criteria (Newlyn, 2014). They provide an important tool to assist students in clarifying expected standards of assessment (Sadler, 2009; Handley and Williams, 2011; Hendry *et al.*, 2016) and assist with pedagogic feed-forward mechanisms and student engagement (Handley and Williams, 2011). Studies have previously reported the use of exemplars for different assessment tasks including examinations (Scoles *et al.*, 2012; Hendry and Jukic, 2014), essays (Hendry and Anderson, 2013), letters (Hendry *et al.*, 2012) critical reviews (Hendry *et al.*, 2016) and case studies (Wimshurst and Manning, 2012).

Previous studies have evidenced that students report using exemplars to help them improve the structure of their work (Hendry *et al.*, 2012; Wimshurst and Manning, 2012; Hendry and Anderson, 2013; Hendry and Jukic, 2014; Li and De Luca, 2014; Hendry *et al.*, 2016) and to gain a clearer understanding of the topic (Hendry *et al.*, 2016). When delivered with peer discussion and tutor explanation exemplars enable students to gain a better awareness of expected standards of work and to benefit from other students work (Handley and Williams, 2011; Wimshurst and Manning, 2012; Bell *et al.*, 2013; Hendry and Anderson, 2013; Hendry *et al.*, 2016; To and Carless, 2016; Grainger *et al.*, 2018).

### **Harper Adams University CoPfe Creation and Development**

The catalyst for creation of the CoPfe was the University's desire to encourage staff to use more formative feedback, but transferring this aspiration into a practical application lacked a mechanism. The original facilitator of the CoPfe had experience working in action learning sets where staff reflected on pedagogic issues and discussed alternative ideas for resolving these. Building on this experience, and informed by wider reading, a CoP appeared to offer a practitioner led environment to facilitate wider use of exemplars to support formative feedback.

The University offers funding for small scale action research projects and supported the development of the idea to form the community. Whilst senior managers were happy to back the idea the project has been staff-led. A core group of volunteers was gathered through informal discussions with the original facilitator and the plan to found the group was communicated more widely through the University newsletter and at the in-house learning and teaching conference.

Eight staff members attended the first meeting in November 2016, sharing initial project ideas and agreeing meeting frequency. The group agreed to explore the use of exemplars by sharing practice regarding delivery of exemplar sessions, reporting back student feedback from these and outcomes of student assessment. The CoPfe now meets monthly during term time and 24 staff have engaged across the five academic departments, English language support and educational development teams. The timing of meetings has become more formalised with a set date each month now adopted but the meetings remain a supportive space for sharing.

### **The Evolving CoPfe**

The informal meetings provide a relaxed forum for attendees to discuss their use of exemplars, seek support and advice regarding delivery of exemplars and share findings from their practice. There is no agenda for meetings and attendees share and explore according to their needs and experience. Ambitions for the group are driven by the individual attendees' objectives and practice and collaborations evolve as the needs of the group are supported. Academics and support staff from all departments are encouraged to attend. The informal nature of the meetings enables staff members

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to attend on an ad hoc basis when able and drop in and out according to their workload. A founding member of the CoPFE described their experience:

Being a member of the CoPFE gave me a central pool of literature with which to start, critical friends to review methods, assistance to deliver focus groups, advice on data analysis, support in direction, professional development opportunities, a pool of likeminded researchers with which to look at co-authoring future publications, a critical mass of similar projects by which we might bring about change and collegial relationships and new friends I would not have previously worked with” Member 1.

One of the aims of the group is to encourage staff to seek student feedback on their experience of the exemplar sessions run by community members in their teaching. To assist with this the community developed a bank of shared questions available to members; some of these were derived from questions shared in academic journals (To and Carless, 2016; Handley and Williams, 2011). Example questions are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Example CoPFE shared questions.

Question	Response method
How useful did you find the exemplar discussion?	Scale 0-10
How useful was it to have a range of student work, including not so good examples?	Scale 0-10
Where else would you find exemplars useful?	Open text
Do you think using real student work was better or less good than using a staff written ‘ideal answer’?	Open text
Would you allow your work to be seen anonymously by future students in a similar exercise?	Yes / No

CoPFE members commenting about the provision of shared questions said:

Saved time as shared survey questions were available, so less overwhelming. Possible to do the projects in less time as a result. Also, demonstrates that we care about students learning!  
(Member 2).

It was good to know what colleagues were doing so the core of our efforts had consistency / were informed from each other’s work  
(Member 3).

I would have shelved this as a ‘nice to do’ if I hadn’t been a member of the CoPFE – so whilst the activities (videos, exemplars, etc) have always existed – I have never measured their value before. This will mean that my input next year will be upgraded according to the very rich qualitative data offered by those who completed the feedback survey  
(Member 4).

**Approach to the use of exemplars**

Exemplars are used in a variety of ways by members of the CoPFE across the five academic departments; animal production, welfare and veterinary sciences; crop and environment sciences; engineering; food science and agri-food supply chain management; land, farm and agri-business management (see Figure 2). Figure 2 illustrates the kinds of exemplars under consideration in the study and their teaching contexts. There is no single pedagogic method prescribed and

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exemplars are used in formative approaches in as broad a range and contexts as possible. Staff are encouraged to try different approaches that suit the need of the students and the subject. The exploratory nature of the CoPFE allows freedom of approach. Collection of student feedback is encouraged as close to the exemplar sessions as possible to capture their immediate reactions on the value of the activity. It does not exist to provide a rigorous research base but a place for collaboration and innovation.

**Table 2.** Use of exemplars by CoPFE members.

Type of exemplar	Format of exemplar	Availability	Delivery method
Assignment	Short extracts	Paper copy to take away	Students mark against a rubric
Assignment	Short extracts	Powerpoint in class	Presentation to students showing feedback comments
Assignment	Full answer	Available on the VLE	Signposted to students with annotated comments
Assignment	Full answer	Paper copy to take away	Exemplar discussed – grade bracket given
Exam	Short answers	Presented on a PowerPoint	Students suggest improvements and then give grade
Exam	Long answers	Paper copy taken away	Exemplar discussed – precise mark not given or grade bracket given
Exam	Long answers	Paper copy not taken away	Students asked to rank the exemplars
E-Portfolio assignment	Whole assignment minus the reference list	Available on the VLE (time-limited)	Students asked for their comments and then tutor feedback given

### Student responses towards exemplars

Several members of the CoPFE have carried out research seeking feedback from their student groups. This has been gathered over three years with a range of students studying different subjects across academic levels. Students have been overwhelmingly positive about exemplars identifying their growing confidence and a clearer understanding of the requirements from the experience. For some students the exemplar session provides motivation to begin their own work, making the task appear more achievable. For others the exemplar provides reassurance that their work is at the right level and the spur to complete the work with the knowledge that what they are doing is appropriate:

I found this very useful and gave me the confidence to go away and finish my assignment independently.

Students commented favourably on the availability of staff feedback on exemplars. This commentary on the work allows the student to be judgemental on the content and encourages them to question the relevance of the work and focuses their attention on the more nuanced aspects of this:

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I think it's more helpful to see good work with the added comments from the teacher on the side, they were super helpful.

Exemplars can expand the requirements of the work by illustrating a range of approaches and facilitating discussion with the tutor. This can clarify 'housekeeping' questions about structure, presentation, writing style and word count of sections. Students feel this improves their work and enables them to achieve better grades:

This will enable me to understand the assignment brief in clearer detail along with helping me to receive a better grade.

Some students also recognise their ability to be detached from the work and adopt the mindset of a marker. In reviewing exemplars students have learnt to see what they often refer to as the 'good' and the 'bad' and are confident to apply this learnt judgement to their own work. Students linking exemplars to the marking criteria enables them to understand more clearly why marks are awarded and then critique their own work considering this:

Very helpful, very useful to get into the mindset of a marker and then apply those ideas to my own work.

After marking the two examples, I felt detached from my work so it was easier to find the mistakes.

### Staff survey

In 2018 a mapping exercise involving a survey of 120 HAU academic staff was conducted to gather information on staff use of exemplars in their teaching practice. The survey aimed to gain an understanding of academic staff usage of exemplars across departments, the method of delivery, why staff chose to use exemplars and to understand staff reasons for choosing not to use exemplars. Ethical approval for the survey was granted by HAU.

Forty-four members of academic staff (29% of total) across all departments completed the staff survey. There was a near even split between those staff who use exemplars (52.3%) and those who do not (47.7%). The non-users were then asked if they would be interested in using exemplars in their teaching practice in the future. Fourteen (66.7%) of these respondents noted they would be interested in using them in the future.

Staff primarily used exemplars to improve student understanding although a wider range of rationales were reported. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Respondents reasons for using exemplars.

Reason for using exemplars	Number of respondents
To aid student's understanding of the assessment	16
To improve learning and teaching	5
To encourage students to aspire	4
To remove housekeeping questions	3
To share good practice	3
To enable students to see different levels of work	3
To allow discussion on how to improve work	3
To reduce student anxiety	2
To help students to get started	2

The users reported 77% of exemplar use was with assignments and 23% with exams. Respondents used exemplars through levels 3 to 7 with the most use at level 4 and the least at level 3. Exemplar users were asked to describe how they use them with students, particularly thinking about whether they use short extracts or the whole work, whether students are able to take the exemplar away and if they tell the students the grade. Short extracts and complete assignments were used equally and annotated examples were also popular. The results were themed and are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** How staff survey respondents use exemplars.

How respondents use exemplars	Number of respondents
Complete assignment (without reference list)	14
Short extracts to benchmark or emphasise	13
Annotated exemplar available on the learning hub	11
Allowed to take away	9
Grade band given	8
Not allowed to take away	5
Bring own work in to critique	3
Mark not given	2

Those who use exemplars were asked if they had seen any benefit from their use. Staff noted both students' understanding of quality increased and students had greater transparency of staff expectations. The results are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Respondents reported benefits of using exemplars.

Benefits of using exemplars	Number of respondents	Example comment
Better understanding of assignment requirements	7	"The students' are more able to engage with the assignment if they can visualise the output submission"
Improvement in student work	6	"Students are aware of the poor practice that the exemplar is highlighting and more likely to submit a better standard of work"
Positive feedback	5	"Informally always positive feedback but surveyed responses are extremely positive"
Save staff time	4	"It cuts down the level of input needed for students"
Improved student confidence	4	"It gives students the confidence to work out how to do the assignment themselves without constant recourse to tutor to ask whether it is right"
Improved student engagement	2	"They are very effective - students refused to take their break during this"

A small number of respondents reported reservations with using exemplars. There were concerns with the concept of exemplar literacy. One respondent suggested that individual student's background (e.g. culture, first language, whether they are an international student) and experience

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(e.g. previous education, previous exposure to exemplars) might mean they struggle with the function of exemplars:

In my work with Chinese students I have found that they can have an over reliance on the exemplar which can result in mimicry.

On a similar theme the Learner Support staff supporting students with some level of autism noted the challenges of paraphrasing once a form of words has been read.

Some members of staff felt that exemplars can set a stylistic precedence which may limit creativity. Students follow the structure and style of the exemplars rather than tackling the assignment brief from their own point of view:

I strongly believe that students, especially at university, should not be constrained to a formulaic approach to education. Exemplars stifle students' creativity.

Notably, whilst reflecting that exemplars have been useful members of staff also commented that student grades have not improved:

Students seems happier, but coursework marks and exam marks haven't improved.

### **CoPfe visibility**

Members of the CoPfe engage with those studying for their PgCert in Higher Education to deliver a practical exemplar session and invite attendees to join the CoPfe. Other internal opportunities to raise awareness have included academic department team meetings and in-house teaching forums. The monthly meetings are also advertised in the University diary. Informally CoPfe members promote the use of exemplars through both corridor conversations and discussion in the staff common room. Members are approached by colleagues to discuss how they might incorporate exemplars in their teaching and explore methods of doing this.

On several occasions at the annual University wide Learning and Teaching Conference, members have presented their research findings and elaborated on how the CoPfe has supported their work. The facilitators of the CoPfe shared the creation and development of the community at the 2019 Assessment in Higher Education Conference to encourage others to consider this bottom up approach.

### **Conclusion**

The formation of the HAU CoPfe has enabled staff members to meet in a practitioner led environment to facilitate wider use of exemplars to support formative feedback. Staff research has resulted in the award of an MRes reflecting on the use of exemplars to develop students' critical thinking. Arnold and Headley (2019) published a paper collating ideas from the CoPfe and further opportunities for dissemination are being explored. A departmental CoP for Feedback has been established in the current academic year and a CoP for Inclusive Practice is planned. Inspired by Liverpool Hope University, there is an ambition to cultivate a network of CoPs.

Whilst others may prefer to label this as a special interest group this is not the most important question. The purpose of the group is to bring colleagues together in a collaborative environment to share experience, offer support, gain confidence and to deepen their shared understanding about how exemplars support student learning.

Angela Rhead, Teaching Fellow and Learning Developer at Keele University attended a recent CoPfe and summarised her experience of the community by saying:



the collegiate and non-hierarchical nature of this group benefits from being both practitioner-led and practitioner-focused. This enthusiastic group creates a place where both the experienced and uninitiated can discuss their work on an equal footing, with no dominant force or voice (December 2018).

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