



Does the use of annotated exemplars by nursing students predict academic performance? A cohort study



Rebekah Carter^{a,*}, Elizabeth Halcomb^b, Lucie M. Ramjan^{a,c}, Nathan J. Wilson^{a,c}, Paul Glew^{a,c}, Yenna Salamonsen^{a,c}

^a University of Western Sydney, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith, NSW 2751, Australia

^b School of Nursing, Faculty of Science, Medicine & Health, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

^c Centre for Applied Nursing Research (CANR), Ingham Institute for Applied Medical Research, Australia

A B S T R A C T

Aims: To examine the usefulness of the annotated exemplar as an academic support strategy, and explore the characteristics of students who were more likely to engage with this academic support tool. Additionally, to identify if there was any influence on the academic performance in the assessment activity among those who engaged with the annotated exemplar.

Background: Annotated exemplars have the potential to target students *en masse* and provide meaningful, task specific comments that guide students prior to assessment submission. Effective strategies to support student learning are needed as nursing students are increasingly entering tertiary studies from non-traditional backgrounds.

Design: A cohort study was used to collect administrative data, academic grades and annotated exemplar usage statistics.

Setting: A large multi-campus university in NSW, Australia during Spring semester 2016.

Participants: Second year undergraduate students enrolled in a single unit in the Bachelor of Nursing Program.

Methods: Quantitative data related to marks, grades and usage information; and demographic data and contact details were extracted from the online learning management system and student electronic records.

Results: Of the 1120 students enrolled in the unit, 49.5% of students engaged with the annotated exemplar. Students more likely to engage with the tool were older, female, born outside of Australia and had higher hit rates on the online learning management site. Of those who engaged with the annotated exemplar, there was no demonstrated increase in assessment mark.

Conclusion: To improve student performance it is essential that feedback is engaging and effective. While, in this study, use of the annotated exemplar was not reflected in student marks, it is unclear how students may have performed without access to the exemplar. Further research is required to explore the reasons why students did not engage with the annotated exemplar and, for those who did, why the intervention did not impact on assessment mark.

1. Introduction

Feedback is a critical component to improve student learning (Crimmins et al., 2016) and is viewed by some as an essential indicator of teaching effectiveness (Wygall et al., 2014; Zhang and Zheng, 2018). Nevertheless, assessment feedback has consistently received criticism from students in higher education (Agius and Wilkinson, 2014). In addition to the poor quality of assessment feedback (Hendry et al., 2016; Pitt and Norton, 2017; Scoles et al., 2012), other reasons students provide for their low ratings include timeliness of feedback (Li and De Luca, 2014) and paucity of suggestions for improvement (feed-forward) that can be applied to subsequent assessments (Vardi, 2013). Not surprisingly, students often undervalue the written comments provided by the assessors, instead only focusing on the marks received (Robinson

et al., 2013).

For feedback to effectively promote learning, it is vital that students engage and act on comments and suggestions provided by assessors (Boud and Molloy, 2013). This will not only improve the quality of future assessment tasks but also develop their professional practice following graduation (McKevitt, 2015; Pitt and Norton, 2017; Sadler, 2010). In the era of cost containment and budgetary constraints in higher education, academics are often restricted by a lack of time to provide individualised, targeted assessment feedback (Carless et al., 2011; Robson et al., 2012). Furthermore, higher education is increasingly reliant on sessional staff who are often less experienced in providing quality, constructive and consistent written assessment feedback (Andrew et al., 2010; Grainger et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2011). One approach to address this is to design a ‘front-end’ support strategy that

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: rebekah.carter@westernsydney.edu.au (R. Carter), ehalcomb@uow.edu.au (E. Halcomb), l.ramjan@westernsydney.edu.au (L.M. Ramjan), n.wilson@westernsydney.edu.au (N.J. Wilson), p.glew@westernsydney.edu.au (P. Glew), y.salamonsen@westernsydney.edu.au (Y. Salamonsen).

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would meet the needs of students (Scoles et al., 2012).

2. Background

Annotated exemplars are tools that have the potential to provide students with quality feedback, increase student engagement and promote student learning (To and Carless, 2015; Wygal et al., 2014; Yucel et al., 2014). Handley and Williams (2011) define exemplars as previous assignments or examples of the completed assessment task that are annotated with feedback. Annotating exemplars with comments allows students to make sense of the exemplar and identify how these comments can be applied to correctly structure their own written assessment task using the mock example provided (Quinton and Smallbone, 2010). The intention is to guide students on how to use feedback received from one assessment and to transfer these skills to future assessment tasks (Hendry et al., 2016). Additionally, the student is prompted to construct the assessment task correctly the first time by applying learning derived from exemplars. This strategy has been labelled a ‘feed-forward’ approach (Scoles et al., 2012).

Annotated exemplars allow students to receive meaningful and task-specific comments related to the assessment task at hand. The provision of online exemplars facilitates access to this information by large cohorts of geographically dispersed students (Handley and Williams, 2011) at any time (Baker and Zuvella, 2013) and caters for student groups with different entry levels (Yucel et al., 2014). There are also benefits for academic staff and students, such as reduced workload (Smyth et al., 2012), scaffolding student learning (Carter et al., 2018) and improved student performance (Hendry and Jukic, 2014; Wimshurst and Manning, 2012; Yucel et al., 2014).

As the student population enrolled in higher education continues to diversify (Bradley, 2008), effective strategies to support learning will need to evolve and embrace this diversity (Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2010). Thus, feed-forward in addition to feedback processes need to be designed to engage diverse students and support their various learning needs. An annotated exemplar (AE) may have the potential to influence learning in this way as it is a feed-forward strategy with several benefits not limited to reducing misinterpretation and increasing understanding of assessment expectations. Students often have difficulty understanding and responding to assessment requirements (To and Carless, 2015) and exemplars provide an illustration of how to answer an assessment question. Model answers, such as exemplars, have proven to be effective in increasing marks in summative assessment (Hendry and Jukic, 2014; Li and De Luca, 2014; Newlyn and Spencer, 2010; Wimshurst and Manning, 2012).

Socio-demographic factors have been recognised to influence student engagement in higher education. Gender, age, country of birth and grade point average (GPA), have proven to be significant predictors of engagement and academic performance in several studies (Kenny et al., 2011; Rubin et al., 2018; Salamonson et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2014). Female students outperform male students in university courses in general (Conger and Long, 2010). The issues for older students are multi-factorial. Mature age students are more likely to have limited academic skills; be concerned about their lack of critical background knowledge (Buultjens and Robinson, 2011) and have limited information technology skills (Kenny et al., 2011). Students born in a country other than that which they are studying are more likely to underperform (Zheng et al., 2014). Lastly, students with a higher GPA are likely to be more engaged learners (Owston et al., 2013) and perform better than others for a variety of reasons including having better study skills, superior time management and being more motivated and committed learners (Sheard, 2009).

However, little is known as to whether there is a relationship between student characteristics and the utility of using AE's. This information is crucial to evaluate the effectiveness of this assessment support strategy and whether it meets the needs of ‘the changing face’ of student diversity in higher education. With increased emphasis on

blended and online learning approaches there is less face-to-face interaction between students and nursing academics. Therefore the need for a feed-forward approach is even more important for undergraduate nursing students (Croft et al., 2010; Sweeney et al., 2016). While AE's have been utilised across various disciplines in the undergraduate setting with some success (Hendry and Anderson, 2013; Hendry et al., 2012; Hendry et al., 2016; Wimshurst and Manning, 2012) and this strategy has been advocated for use in nursing (Carless, 2006), there is little evaluation of its use in nursing education to date (Carter et al., 2018).

The aim of this paper is to report the usefulness of AE's in a large, multi-campus cohort by: i) examining the relationship between uptake and engagement with an AE and student's socio-demographic profile and; ii) determining if use of the AE has a positive impact upon academic performance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Study design

This prospective follow-up study was the first phase of a sequential mixed methods study. Within this phase administrative data and grade information as well as use of the AE was collected. A second phase collected qualitative data from students and teaching staff about the experiences of using the approach. Due to the volume of data these qualitative data is reported separately (Authors own).

3.2. Population and setting

Participants were second year undergraduate students enrolled in a single subject in the Bachelor of Nursing Program at a large university in NSW, Australia during Spring semester 2016. This subject focused on disability and chronicity in health and wellbeing, with students exploring case scenarios across the lifespan related to disability (e.g. Down syndrome) and chronic illness (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy, asthma or thyroid dysfunction). The subject had approximately 1100 students enrolled across multiple campuses. Two summative assessments were required to complete the subject; one 1500 word essay and a final written examination. Each assessment was worth half of the total marks available for the subject. To achieve an overall pass grade for the subject a student had to achieve an aggregate mark of 50%.

3.3. Educational intervention

The AE was uploaded to the subject site on the online learning management system (LMS) by the Subject Coordinator. The AE was a full version of the assessment essay, addressing the same essay question. However, while the assessment task required students to write an essay response about a man with Down Syndrome and diabetes, the AE was related to chronic heart failure in a man with an acquired brain injury. The exemplar was written by two academic staff, modelling the expected structure and content for the essay, before being annotated with comments by a linguistics expert.

Students were alerted three times by email and via the LMS that the resource was available. Learning activities using the AE were embedded within tutorial classes. These learning activities required students to access the AE, explained how it could be used, provided practice using the exemplar to write an essay paragraph and afforded the opportunity for tutors to respond to student enquiries. Once students had engaged with the AE they were requested to undertake a 10 item multiple choice quiz about the accessibility and ease of use of the AE. These quiz results were used to record student engagement with the AE.

3.4. Data collection

Quantitative data including demographic information such as

1. Student progress rates in units and courses
2. Unit grade distributions, for example:
 - collection of student work
 - assessment feedback
3. Demographic data gathered at enrolment, for example:
 - Language spoken at home, low socio-economic status,
 - First in family status, basis of admission (current school leaver; non-current school leaver categories such as TAFE articulation),
 - recognition of prior learning both in Australia and overseas and HSC performance in specific subjects.

Fig. 1. Institutional data.

student identification number, age, gender, country of birth and grade point average (GPA) were extracted from student records. Student marks, attempts at AE quiz and LMS usage information (hit rates on the online eLearning platform) were collected about students by downloading from the LMS site (Blackboard Learn 9.1 Q2 2018 CU1) (Fig. 1) (Blackboard.com, 2018). This information was extracted to identify the degree to which students engaged with the AE (attempted AE quiz); identify the characteristics of students who engaged with the AE (gender, age, GPA, previous study, overseas born) and to determine if there was an improvement in essay mark (mark > 54%).

3.5. Ethical considerations

Approval was granted by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to contacting the students or retrieving study data (Approval No. H10803). An opt-out approach was employed for participant recruitment. At the commencement of the semester, students were contacted via their student email account and informed of the study. They were advised that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. They were also provided a copy of the participant information sheet and an 'opt out' email link if they wished to withdraw from the study. Despite these interventions, no student opted out of this research. As all data were aggregated and no individual student was able to be identified within any data arising from the project.

3.6. Data analysis

Data were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 for analysis (IBM, 2013) and matched using the student number as a unique identifier. Data were then checked manually for accuracy and completeness before being analysed using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics (Nagelkerke's R^2 and Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test) (Menard, 2018).

To answer the research questions five dichotomous variables were entered and measured using a logistic regression model. These variables were: a) grade point average (7 point GPA) (≥ 4 or < 4); b) cumulative hits on the LMS (> 4 h or < 4 h); c) age (< 27 years or ≥ 27 years); d) gender; and e) country of birth (Australian born or born outside Australia). The median was used as a measure for all variables except country of birth. Similarly, the essay mark was also dichotomised at the median score (up to 54% or $> 54\%$). A median split has been found to be just as effective as a continuous variable and may be preferred as it may have a narrower margin (Iacobucci et al., 2015). Using country of birth as a split demonstrates the diversity of the cohort and is a suitable variable to measure as students born outside of Australia underperform academically compared to Australian born students (Salamonson et al., 2012).

Following variable recoding, a combination of descriptive and

inferential statistical analyses was then undertaken. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, and mean, median and interquartile range for continuous variables) were used to describe the demographic and academic characteristics. Logistic regression analyses were used to determine the demographic and academic predictors of: i) completion of the annotated exemplar quiz; and ii) high academic performance in the essay assessment. The results were presented as adjusted odds ratio with 95% confidence intervals (CI). Additionally, Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2 was computed to explain the total logistic model variance, and Hosmer-Lemeshow test to assess the model's goodness-of-fit.

4. Results

Most of the 1120 enrolled students ($n = 929$; 82.9%) were female and their median age was 28.5 years (IQR: 21.9–33.0; range: 19–63 years) (Table 1). Two thirds of students ($n = 750$; 67.0%) were born outside Australia, with 51.1% ($n = 572$) speaking a language other than English at home. Just under half of the students ($n = 554$; 49.5%) attempted the AE quiz. The median for the cumulative duration of time spent on the LMS subject site was 4 h (IQR: 1.8–7.7; range: 0–47.95). The median GPA of students prior to this subject was 4 (IQR: 3.4–5.0; range 0–7). The median essay mark was 54% (IQR: 40.0–64.0; range 0%–96%).

Table 1
Demographic and academic characteristics.

Variable	
Age, mean [median] (IQR) years (range: 19 to 63 years)	28.5 [27.0] (21.9–33.0)
Sex, n (%)	
Male	191 (17.1)
Female	929 (82.9)
Country of birth, n (%)	
Australia	370 (33.0)
Born outside Australia	750 (67.0)
Language spoken at home, n (%)	
English only	548 (48.9)
Other than English	572 (51.1)
Enrolment category, n (%)	
International student	322 (28.8)
Domestic student	798 (71.3)
Annotated exemplar quiz attempts, n (%)	
Attempted quiz	554 (49.5)
Did not attempt quiz	566 (50.5)
Grade point average (GPA) at the beginning of current semester, mean [median] (IQR) (range: 0 to 7)	4.2 [4.0] (3.4–5.0)
Essay mark (/100), mean [median] (IQR) (range: 0 to 96)	51.6 [54.0] (40.0–64.0)
Course activity cumulative hits LMS, hours, mean [median] (IQR) (range: 0 to 47.9 h)	5.6 [4.0] (1.8–7.7)

Table 2
Academic and demographic predictors of engagement in annotated exemplar.

Variables	Coefficient (B)	Standard error	Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI)	p value
High GPA (≥ 4)	-0.02	0.13	0.98 (0.76–1.28)	0.892
Cumulative hit on LMS (> 4 h)	0.45	0.13	1.57 (1.22–2.03)	0.001*
Age median: > 27 years	0.62	0.13	1.87 (1.44–2.41)	< 0.001*
Gender: female	0.67	0.17	1.96 (1.40–2.75)	< 0.001*
Country of birth: overseas-born	1.04	0.14	2.81 (2.13–3.72)	< 0.001*

* denotes p value is < 0.05

4.1. Predictors of engagement with AE

Five variables were included in the logistic regression model to examine for predictors of engagement with the AE. The four significant predictors of high engagement were: i) those born outside Australia (OR: 2.81, 95% CI: 2.13–3.72); ii) female gender (OR: 1.96, 95% CI: 1.40 to 2.75); iii) those older than 27 years (OR: 1.87, 95% CI: 1.44 to 2.41); and iv) those with high (> 4 h) cumulative hit rates on LMS (OR: 1.57, 95% CI: 1.22 to 2.03). The chi-square statistic of the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test was 8.424, 8 df ($p = 0.393$) indicating adequate fit. The full logistic regression model is shown in Table 2.

4.2. Predictors of a high essay mark

To examine differences in performance in the essay assessment, six variables were included in the logistic regression model. The three significant predictors of high (> 54%) essay mark were: i) high GPA (OR: 3.45 95% CI: 2.64 to 4.51); ii) cumulative hit rates on LMS (OR: 1.52, 95% CI: 1.17 to 1.97); and iii) being Australian-born (OR: 1.67, 95% CI: 1.26 to 2.21). Students' attempts of the AE exemplar quiz, gender and age did not emerge as a significant predictor of high essay mark. The Nagelkerke's R^2 value was 0.150, the chi-square statistic of the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test was 14.906, 8 df ($p = 0.061$) (Table 3).

5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of AE as an academic feed-forward support strategy for nursing students. In addition, this study also sought to examine if specific student demographic groups were more likely to engage with the AE and investigate its impact upon academic performance. Only approximately half (49.5%) of the student cohort engaged with the exemplar, which was surprisingly low. Although reasons for a lack of engagement were not collected from students in this study, possible explanations could be a lack of student motivation which has previously been reported (Scoles et al., 2012). Furthermore, the impersonal nature of this online support and the lack of interactivity in the online AE resource could have also contributed to the lack of student engagement (Croft et al., 2010).

Although only slightly less than half of the student cohort engaged with the AE, those who used this learning tool were also more likely to engage with the subject online LMS, were older, female and born outside Australia. Predictably, higher subject online LMS engagement was

positively associated with AE quiz attempt, which was not unexpected as high online LMS engagement would increase the likelihood of students locating the exemplar and completing the AE quiz. Conversely, possible explanations as to why students did not engage with the AE could be due to the design in the LMS. Ability to navigate the LMS may have reduced the likelihood of students with limited computer literacy stumbling on the AE resource. Some students may have lacked motivation or the time required to engage with the AE in the LMS due to other competing priorities such as other subject of study and undertaking clinical placement (Tomas et al., 2015).

Compared to younger students, those who were older were more likely to use AE. Factors which could have contributed to this finding include a recognition of their personal learning needs as this group of students were more likely to be less confident with their academic abilities (Stone, 2008). For instance, many mature-age students are less confident with their study skills and have been reported to invest more study time in higher education (Kenny et al., 2011).

Female nursing students in this study were more likely to use AE, which was not unexpected as females have been identified to adapt more easily to the contemporary higher education's discourses (Sheard, 2009), and consequently are more likely to outperform their male counterpart (Severiens and Ten Dam, 2012; Wan Chik et al., 2012). Female students have also been reported to have the added advantage of having better non-cognitive skills, such as organisation, self-discipline, attentiveness, dependability and help-seeking behaviour (Conger and Long, 2010; Wan Chik et al., 2012). It has been suggested that women are also more motivated towards and readily engage with academic goals and activities (Sheard, 2009). The findings of this study support the idea that different support strategies may be required for male and female students. This study also showed that nursing students born outside of Australia were more likely to use and engage with the AE, which was perhaps a reflection of cultural norms, values, and beliefs of a sizeable proportion of those born overseas (Di Domenico et al., 2015).

It was anticipated that greater engagement with the AE would be related to an improvement in academic performance. However, the results of this study demonstrated that those who used the AE did not perform better than those who did not use the AE and may be attributed to the increased use of a blended and online learning approach. Other researchers report similar findings, Yucel et al. (2014) who found there was no demonstrated improvement in final mark and with Hendry and Anderson (2013) where students had a positive view of the exemplar, demonstrated no improvement in performance. In contrast, Newlyn and

Table 3
Academic and demographic predictors of high (> 54%) essay mark.

Variables	Coefficient (B)	Standard error	Adjusted odds ratio (95% CI)	p value
Attempted AE Quiz: yes	0.05	0.14	1.05 (0.80–1.37)	0.727
High GPA (≥ 4)	1.24	0.13	3.45 (2.64–4.51)	< 0.001*
Cumulative hit on LMS (> 4 h)	0.42	0.13	1.52 (1.17–1.97)	0.002*
Age: > 27 years	0.06	0.14	1.06 (0.81–1.39)	0.665
Gender: female	0.30	0.17	1.34 (0.96–1.89)	0.090
Country of birth: locally-born	0.51	0.15	1.67 (1.26–2.21)	0.001*

* denotes p value is < 0.05

Spencer (2010) reported an improvement in the mean marks for all students exposed to exemplars compared to those who were not. Although this remains open to conjecture, possible reasons why that may have impacted upon essay performance were that the essay was due early in the semester (week 4) and the participants were preparing for a four week clinical placement and had little time to prepare.

Although engagement with the AE was not a predictor of high essay mark, a myriad of key factors were shown to contribute to essay performance, which included previous GPA and high engagement with the subject online LMS. Another consideration is that while there was no demonstrated improvement in marks, the study did not predict underperformance or identify students who did not receive adequate support. With the massification of higher education, identifying those students who do require support may be missed (Vardi, 2013). This study shows that feed-forward interventions, such as AE's, provide additional learning support by delivering detailed evidence of what is required before submission (Scoles et al., 2012). Further investigation is needed to explore innovative approaches for the delivery of AE as a feed-forward strategy using the LMS.

6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study was undertaken using a single assessment task within one subject of study and did not include a control group. It is acknowledged and therefore possible that some students may have attempted the AE quiz but not engaged with the AE while other students may have used the AE, but not attempted the quiz resulting in greater engagement than that recorded. We were unable to determine if students who did achieve a higher essay mark would have done so if they had not engaged with the AE. Lastly, to ascertain that students were not just copying from the AE, we would need to test this using another assessment task without AEs.

7. Conclusion

Quality feedback is essential for learning. Student dissatisfaction, lack of engagement with traditional approaches to feedback and growing numbers of nursing students entering programs via non-traditional pathways mean that it is essential that strategies are developed and implemented that are both engaging and effective. Just under 50% of the students enrolled in the subject used the AE. Those more likely to engage with the AE were more engaged with the LMS, female, older, and born outside Australia. However, the benefits of the exemplar were not reflected in the student's essay marks. It remains unknown, however, that if the AE had not been provided, would students have performed as well in the essay. Consideration needs to be given to strategies that will increase visibility of resources and engagement with AEs. Further investigation is required to determine why the uptake and engagement with the AE was so limited and why there was no demonstrated improvement in essay marks. This study highlights the need for a qualitative study to explore the reasons related to student engagement with the AE and students' experiences using this tool.

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Ethics approval

Granted by Western Sydney University. Approval number H10803.

Declaration of Competing Interest

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

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