

Half-baked essays: the embedded use of writing exemplars to encourage active learning for radiography students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implementation of exemplar essays within an undergraduate first-year diagnostic radiography module to encourage active learning and the development of academic literacies. Nine essays (~400 words each) were provided over six sessions, using lecturer-guided discussion to explore the academic virtues and pitfalls demonstrated alongside assessment criteria. Exemplars were based upon a fictitious baking profession to illicit student interest and eliminate the risk of imitation or plagiarism. The quality of essays varied, with overt examples of common mistakes in spelling, essay structure and selection of appropriate literature. Upon completion of the sessions, and prior to summative assessment, students were surveyed with regard to their opinion of the teaching intervention. Feedback was obtained from 65% of the cohort (n=31/48), who reported an improvement in essay writing confidence. Students found the marking of the essays in class useful and the baking analogy was well received. Not all students found the classroom activities engaging though, with some wishing greater interactivity due to boredom and repetition. Furthermore, there was a slight reduction in pass rates and average marks across the cohort when compared to the previous module delivery. Nevertheless, there was a substantial increase in students attaining marks of 80% or more. This study highlights exemplar essays as a low-tech, low-cost option to increase assessment literacy but accepts the wide diversity in student learning preferences and experience. The efficacy of exemplar essays cannot be guaranteed, and teaching staff must be cognisant of individual student learning needs.

Keywords: writing skills; student confidence; active learning; transition; exemplar essays.

Introduction

This study examines the implementation of exemplar essays within a diagnostic radiography undergraduate module (level 4) to foster writing skills and awareness of common academic conventions. The embedding of exemplars sought to not only improve assessment literacy in essay writing, but also encourage active learning through in-class discussion. The provision of study skill support in higher education has seen strong criticism as a bolt-on option for students which perpetuates a deficit model approach (Wingate, 2006; Richards and Pilcher, 2023). Students are typically directed to centralised services to help with time management, exam preparation, note taking and essay writing. As argued by the abovementioned authors, such services may be perceived as low-value, superficial remedies by students seeking tips, tricks and strategies for passing assessments rather than learning or development. An embedded approach is advocated within curriculum design, whereby study skills are taught in the context of the discipline and aligned to the students' assessments (Dampier et al., 2019). Indeed, librarians and learning developers should be used in partnership wherever possible, drawing upon their skills and knowledge for a holistic approach (Gravett and Winstone, 2019; Greenwood, 2023). This teaching intervention was novel due to the use of overt academic faux pas in the context of a fictitious baking-themed profession. The preposterous content aimed to illicit student interest whilst also eliminating the risk of imitation or plagiarism.

The transition into higher education may be challenging, with expectations from some students for greater feedback and support rather than independent learning (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). Furthermore, factors including student age, previous learning and qualification types have been shown to impact the success and attrition rates within diagnostic radiography education (McAnulla et al., 2020). For example, one student transitioning from BTEC assignments (a vocational qualification in the United Kingdom) to Level 4 essays described it as a 'massive shock' (McAnulla et al., 2018, p.201). To complicate matters, the teaching of common academic conventions such as essay formatting, selection of suitable sources of information and referencing/citing have been deemed boring in the past (Azadbakht, 2019). In a state of self-perpetuation, the mere anticipation of boredom in lectures may exacerbate negative student opinions and therefore impact engagement with the learning (Tam et al., 2023). As a method to

counteract this, humour may be used to increase student engagement and has been highlighted as one of the essential traits of an effective teacher within radiography (Hendry, 2013). Humour may improve learning by attracting and maintaining attention as well as establishing immediacy in the classroom climate (Beckett et al., 2016). Although it was not the primary focus of the teaching intervention, I (the module leader) pondered whether using a pseudo baking profession to frame the exemplars might decrease boredom and increase student engagement.

This teaching intervention was conceived and implemented in response to student feedback, prior academic outcomes and observations of common essay misconceptions. The module was taught at a post-1992 institution in the South of England, and sought to explain the roles, duties, and expectations of a regulated healthcare profession. Placed within the first semester at level 4, it was considered a critical component of professional identification for new students joining diagnostic radiography. In tandem, the module offered a structured opportunity for personal academic development for students transitioning into higher education. The summative assessment comprised a reflective essay, to include personal and professional resilience, alongside an awareness of the Standards of Proficiency as outlined by the Health and Care Professions Council (2022). In terms of research methodology, this was an observational study with teacher participation, primarily using qualitative feedback through deployment of a survey. With regards to an underpinning theoretical approach, the intervention aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism and was focused on class discussion for active learning.

Literature review

Exemplars have been defined as 'carefully chosen samples of student work which are used to illustrate dimensions of quality and clarify assessment expectations' (Carless and Chan, 2016, p.1). Notable research into exemplars includes the systematic review by To et al. (2022), which identified 40 studies that met their inclusion criteria for empirical evidence, with a proliferation in the last decade. Notably, none involved diagnostic radiography students, though nursing education was represented (Carter et al., 2019) and can be found published elsewhere (see Bowman and Addyman, 2014). The findings of the

review indicated improved student performance and self-regulated learning when using exemplars in teaching, although the authors advise caution due to the variability in evaluation methodologies. Research concerning undergraduate education in radiography is commonly focused on clinical practice learning, during which students gain clinical experience and skills. Examples are plentiful, with a focus on professionalism (Lundvall et al., 2021), simulated learning (O'Connor et al., 2021; Partner et al., 2022), and the impact of Covid-19 on education quality (Ng, 2022; Hinds and Lockwood, 2023). In stark contrast, pedagogic strategies to improve study skills (including essay writing) are lacking within radiography research.

Different approaches to exemplar essays include offering in-class delivery or online provision, a range of representative marks (low to high), teacher annotations, and aligning the content directly with the module assessment or with broad discipline topics. For instance, Hawe et al. (2019) used exemplars within Level 4 Business Studies over a series of sessions with in-class discussion. Multiple examples, each restricted to a single paragraph, were provided on each occasion, including annotations linking to the marking rubric. Surveys and interviews indicated improvements in student motivation and understanding of the assessment. Handley and Williams (2011) also provided annotated examples for a research module (Level 5) but as an online resource with no in-class discussion. As highlighted by the authors, engagement with their online discussion forum was non-existent (which they theorised as being due to the fear of social stigmatisation); however, feedback remained positive. Academic performance remained unchanged, but students praised the opportunity to visualise the expected essay structure and layout. Finally, Smyth and Carless (2021) describe the efforts of 12 teachers providing English for Academic Purposes. Aside from similar student feedback to that described above, the variability in their implementation of the exemplar warrants mention. Word counts of the exemplars ranged from mere sentences to 2,000 words, either written by a staff member, taken from anonymised student work or extracted from published peer-reviewed literature. Depending upon the content and delivery of the exemplars, students either used them as a prescriptive model (summative-specific), general learning resource (non-specific), or as materials for peer discussion. In short, there is wide variability in exemplar usage, notably their content, length and expectations for student engagement.

This paper addresses the lack of research on the use of exemplar essays within radiography education, by adding to the evidence base and presenting student opinion for an under-represented discipline. The intervention also appears to be unique through the blending of an assessment-specific topic (i.e. healthcare professionalism) with fabricated and fanciful exemplars for in-class discussion.

Methodology

Creation of the exemplars

Nine exemplar essays were created by the module leader, each of approximately 400 words in length and based upon a fictitious baking-themed pseudo-profession. Although seemingly unrelated to the discipline of diagnostic radiography, essays were created to demonstrate the range of blunders and pitfalls exhibited by prior students. Furthermore, the content had an emphasis upon professional attitudes, therefore aligning to the module learning outcomes, and were subject to the same assessment brief instructions (Table 1). Each essay was tailored to illustrate different assessment criteria across six teaching sessions, as shown in Table 2. All supporting literature within the essays was fictitious and was 'authored' by well-known public figures or fictional characters to illicit humour. The humour may be classified using terms stated by Beckett et al. (2016) as planned (i.e. non-spontaneous), unrelated to the subject and often disparaging of the authors, with blatant writing errors bordering upon the ridiculous. Suitable essay titles were selected for each teaching session (Table 3), with two or three exemplars created per session to demonstrate either low, middle or high-quality submissions as per the marking criteria. An example essay is shown in Figure 1. Note the inconsistent writing style, formatting, and the distorted image in the appendix.

Table 1. Common assessment brief instructions.

Criteria	Description
Word count	400 words +10% leeway (to account for citation burden)

	10% penalty for going over maximum allowance (i.e. 440 words)
Literature	Minimum of four references From high quality sources of information
Referencing	Adheres to Harvard (Cite Them Right) Reference list in alphabetical order (not numbered)
Formatting	1.5 line spacing throughout Arial or Calibri font, size 12 Page numbers (x of y) Left aligned text
Writing style	Written in the third person (unless a reflective essay)

Table 2. Assessment criteria topics per session.

Session	Content	Description
1	Coherence and organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adherence to the guidelines of the assessment brief – Presented in a clear manner with logical sub-headings – Logically flow from one concept to the next
2	Clarity of expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Formal language, accurate to discipline – Concise and objective language, avoiding colloquialisms or slang words – Correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation – Logical paragraph construction
3	Adherence to the purpose of the assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Meets the specifications of the assessment brief and learning outcomes of the module
4	Adherence to Harvard Cite Them Right referencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Contains all elements necessary – Formatted correctly – Accurate correlation between citations and reference list

		– Effectively supports discussion, concept or point within essay
5	Content and range of knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Detailed and in-depth – Adequate use of theoretical models and empirical research where appropriate – Recognises the provisional nature of knowledge
6	Evidence of reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not purely descriptive or self-deprecating – Critical thinking and assessment of the wider picture – Supported by relevant literature

Table 3. Exemplar titles, quantity and usage in sessions.

Associated session	Essay title or activity description	Number of essays
1	Title: Describe the two most common types of doughnuts in bakeries. Explain the benefits of each and the potential for future baking practice	3
2	Title: Using relevant scientific research, discuss the classification of Jaffa Cakes as biscuits or cakes	2
3	Title: Compare professional and amateur pancake baking practice with specific reference to legislation, representation and training standards	2
4	Activity: Assess the exemplar essays for their adherence to Harvard Cite Them Right	All prior exemplars
5	Activity: Search for appropriate literature using terminology, definitions, theories/concepts and academic evidence	All prior exemplars
6	Title: Reflect upon an occasion when your baking practice may have been considered unprofessional. Explain why and include actions to avoid the same mistake in the future.	2

Figure 1. Example of exemplar with spoof baking profession demonstrating low quality essay submission (session 1).

Doughnut essay - Mary Berry

Word count 392 (excluding references)

Introduction

Doughnuts come in a variety of shapes and sizes depending on what people want. Some people like them to be big and round, others like to have jam in them. I like to have ones with sprinkles on top because it makes them look pretty too. The inconsistencies in modern confectionary doughnut production has brought forth a wide assortment of morphological discrepancies thought to benefit the general populace (Miller, 1990). When looking in modern baking shops you will have all sorts of different donuts to buy, mostly costing between £0.50 – £2.50. (Donut.com, n.d.) Smith (2015) says the most common types of types of doughnut the you can buy are ring doughnuts and ones that are filled with jame or custard. Smith (2015).

Discussion

Some doughnuts are better than others, depending on what customers want. Some want their doughnuts to have jam inside them, but ring donuts don't have jam at all because they have a hole in the middle that cannot have any jame. You can have sprinkles on both types of doughnut. Or icing or chocolate. I think the benefit of different types of doughnuts comes from the wide choices that you can make. A preponderance of donut glazing characteristics affords a welcome opportunity for impulse-driven customers (Miller, 1990). Uniform doughnut production is a mandated requirement under the Doughnut Production Act 2016 (www.legislation.com Accessed: 14.10.2020). When bakers have the choice of doughnut types it is extremely good for everyone who likes doughnuts, especially the customers. A (Brooks, 2018) article stated that "ring donuts are commonly enjoyed by the police enforcement community across the United States of America. It is thought that the cylindrical form of the ring donut provides enhanced gripping potential and faster consumption speeds." (Brooks, 2018).

Conclusion

I think baking practice may benefit from different types of doughnuts because it will give customers better choice when they are buying them at the shop. In the futre maybe there could be more different types of doughnuts such as flat ones or maybe very large ones. The eloquent use of baking typologies may offer yet more niche styles yet unseen within common baking practice (Miller 1990). This has shown me the different types of doughnuts and the way they have been made.

Appendix



Doughnuts come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

References

Smith, T., 2015. An overview of doughnut development in the 21st century. *ROYAL JOURNAL OF BRITISH BAKERS*, 23(2), pp.25-31.

donut.com. n.d. *What Do Donuts Cost?*. [online] Available at: <<http://donut.com>> [Accessed 14 October 2020].

Miller, B., 1990. Topological differences in doughnut morphology. *The Baker's Lancet*, thirty(2), p.700.

Smith

www.legislation.com

Delivery of the exemplars

During the module delivery, students attended six academic development sessions to explain, explore and apply common assessment criteria used in higher education (i.e. Table 2). Students were provided with printed copies of two to three exemplar essays within each session to illustrate specific criteria whilst also highlighting issues regarding professionalism and/or reflection. Over the duration of 1.5 hours, active engagement was encouraged through several stages: reading of the essay, individual student annotation on the printed paper, and teacher-facilitated group discussion. During group discussions, students were guided through each essay, highlighting both positive and negative components with an overall mark decided by the students (non-numerical; low, middle, high). A nominated student took control of the digital document (being presented on the projector) and collated student annotations as they were voiced by the cohort. These annotated versions were then shared alongside the module learning resources.

Data collection and ethical approval

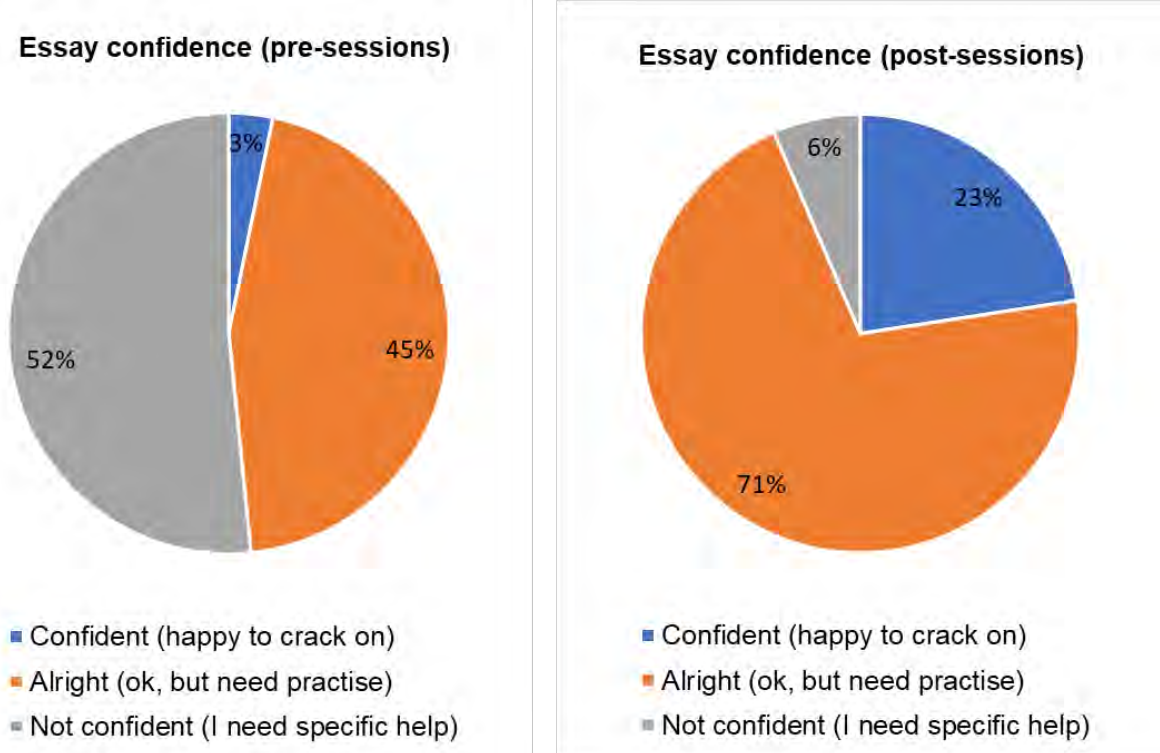
As part of the module evaluation, students were asked to provide feedback on the effectiveness and appropriateness of essays via an anonymous Mentimeter survey delivered in class to maximise response rates. In keeping with the light-hearted approach, informal language was used to ascertain their opinions about their confidence (with essay writing), suitability of a baking theme, and methods of engagement in class. A simplified Likert scale was used with three options for students to indicate their position, plus a free-text response option. Results were analysed with simple descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of the free-text responses. Institutional ethical approval was obtained to analyse the student feedback, and students were informed regarding the use of the data (reference ETH2223-0327).

Results

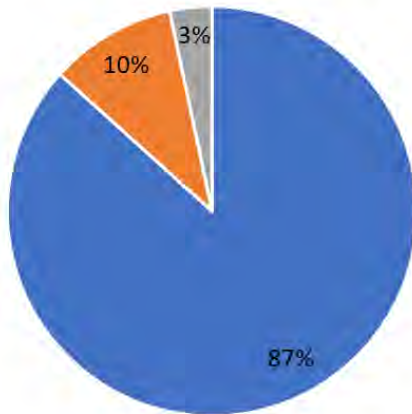
A total of 31/48 students provided feedback, representing 65% of the cohort. Figure 2 presents a range of student opinions regarding the teaching intervention. Of which, confidence in essay writing greatly improved, the baking analogy was well received, and most students did not mind having baking-related exemplar essays instead of radiography

topics. The majority (77%) of students found marking essays in class useful, with 96% of students finding the sessions either helpful or sometimes helpful overall. The free-text responses were largely positive, praising the development of essay writing skills generally rather than the use of the baking analogy. Negative feedback occurred, with some students wanting more activities within the sessions and viewing exemplar essay marking as 'boring'. Neutral feedback also occurred, with no direct relevance to pedagogy, but rather students writing baking recipes or favourite baking products. In comparison to the previous delivery of the module, the pass rate decreased (92% to 83%), as did the average mark for the summative assessment (61% to 60%). However, the number of students obtaining 80% or more increased significantly (+7 from zero).

Figure 2. Student feedback.

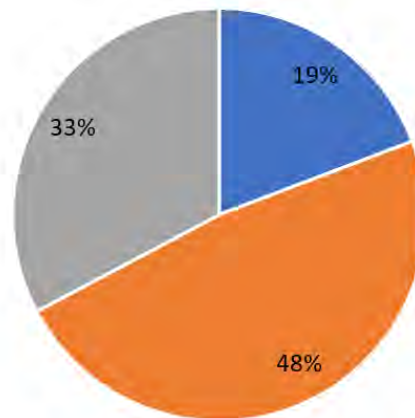


Do you like the baking analogy?



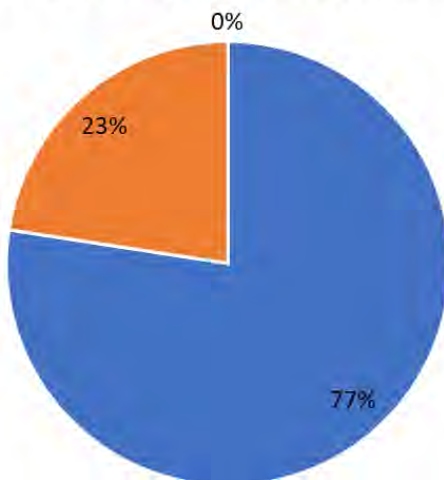
- Yes (I like the light-hearted approach)
- Sort of (they aren't funny, but I don't mind)
- No (they are annoying or irrelevant)

Would you prefer radiography essays?



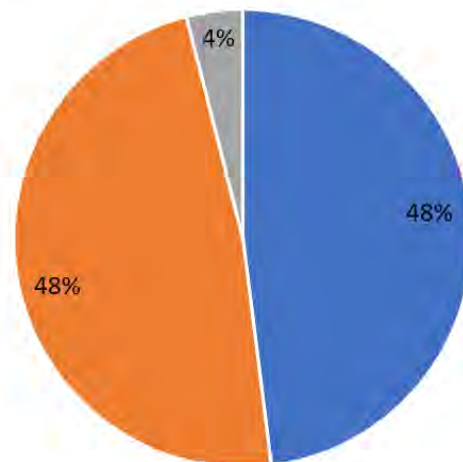
- No (I like reading about baking)
- Don't mind (baking or radiography)
- Yes (I want radiography topics)

Was 'marking' of the essays helpful?



- Yes (I found this useful)
- Sort of (it was ok, but not entirely necessary)
- No (this was not helpful to my development)

Have the sessions been helpful?



- Yes (I've developed as a result)
- Sometimes (Some were good, others less so)
- No (They were not useful to me)

Table 4. Sample of free-text responses.

Positive

'Being able to go over essay skills has been a great reminder on what markers are looking for.'

'Very helpful cause we got to see how we should write nice essays.'

'Love the bread activities. Helpful with essay writing structure wise and referencing.'

Negative

'They were helpful in learning but not in practising.'

'Could have been more interactive, I got bored.'

'Unhelpful - sometimes a little repetitive.'

Neutral

'110g dark chocolate, broken into pieces, 1tbsp instant coffee mixed with 50ml boiling water, 110g margarine at room temperature, 110g light brown soft sugar, 110g caster sugar, 1tsp vanilla extract, 210g plain flour...'

Discussion

Assessment literacy involves the knowledge and skills required to succeed within an assessment. It spans all levels of education and impacts teachers' pedagogic approach and students' learning (Popham, 2009). Assessments can be multi-faceted and typically involve adherence to a specific format, structure, and content, often tailored to the teacher's own preferences. As such, students often need to demonstrate an understanding of the topic, use of suitable literature and an ability to conform to the formatting expectations set out in an assessment brief. Within the literature concerning exemplars, this has been referred to as tacit knowledge which is difficult to put into words or otherwise communicate. As Handley and Williams' (2011) study shows, students are provided with an assessment brief and marking criteria but struggle to understand essay expectations. To avoid a deficit approach, the embedding of study skill teaching within the curriculum has been widely recommended rather than directing struggling students to central

university services (Lea and Street, 1998; Wingate, 2006; Dampier et al. 2019; Richards and Pilcher, 2023), with numerous examples of success (Minogue et al., 2018; Macnaught et al., 2022). Exemplars, therefore, provide one such method of embedding study skill teaching to improve assessment literacy and make tacit knowledge explicit. Indeed, the students' levels of confidence in essay writing increased according to the results of this study, with positive free-text feedback and higher proportions of high-scoring work when compared to the previous delivery. Of interest was the slight drop in average marks (-1%) and pass rate across the cohort despite the intervention. This may relate to the heterogenous nature of students' experience, academic ability and engagement, meaning that it is not possible to directly compare student cohorts. In any case, the results align with To et al.'s (2022) finding that exemplar use does not always equate to a positive shift in academic performance. As Hawe et al. (2019) eloquently explain, exemplars are not a guarantee of improved academic outcome, but at the very least stimulate self-monitoring.

In keeping with teaching theory, students benefited from active (not passive) participation in class through discussion and marking of exemplar essays. This has been supported by numerous studies with attestation from students (To and Carless, 2016; Hawe et al., 2019) or advocated by authors who provided exemplars as passive learning resources (Handley and Williams, 2011; Bell et al., 2013). Using the terminology of Biggs and Tang (2011), active discussion and interrogation of the exemplars encourage high levels of engagement with the application of knowledge and theorising. This in turn facilitates higher order thinking within the revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001), ranging from simple recollection (of academic conventions) to the evaluation of the exemplar essays.

Progression onto *creation*, where students design, construct and develop their own essay would be evidenced within the summative assessment. A proactive approach could involve students bringing in their own (draft) work to reinforce self-regulatory learning, as recommended by Dixon et al. (2020) and To et al. (2022). From the perspective of session planning and reducing risk, this would assume that students complete a draft and are prepared to undergo peer-review. Perhaps a hybrid approach would be necessary, with the availability of pre-prepared exemplars to offset any shortfalls.

Although a crude assessment of engagement, the radiography students were largely in support of marking the exemplars; however, some students requested more interactivity

and opportunity for essay writing practice (in-class). The 'repetitive' nature of the exemplars aimed to reinforce teaching points but could likewise increase experiences of boredom if the student decided not to engage. Indeed, a considerable amount of time was devoted to the exemplars, and those without sufficient buy-in may have found themselves wanting alternative activities. It is not possible to determine the academic outcomes of these individuals, and it would be imprudent to suggest that they account for the drop in average marks. Nevertheless, the benefits of exemplar essays can be further considered with the concepts of self-regulation, self-efficacy and self-control (Hawe et al., 2019). The ability to analyse exemplars allows students to benchmark their work against it (self-regulation), examples of successful work may reinforce a belief in their own ability to achieve the same (self-efficacy), and observing structure and content clarifies perceptions of effort required (self-control). A practical counterargument can be made though, as the precise guidance often associated with exemplars may encourage surface learning, harking back to tips, tricks and techniques within generic study skills. A formulaic or model essay approach does not encourage deeper learning with critical analysis. The exemplar essays within this intervention were certainly not model submissions, did not emulate the module summative assessment, and contained irrelevant reference material. Instead, the development of academic literacy was sought rather than subject-specific knowledge.

A final consideration should be the opportunity for reflective practice by the author. Assessment literacy is not solely for students and should be based upon a partnership in learning with the teacher (Xu and Brown, 2016). As highlighted by To et al. (2022), there are multiple approaches to integrating exemplars and not all have resulted in improved academic performance. At face value, the outcome of this teaching intervention was poor when considering the decline in both pass rates and average marks. A proportion of students stated they found the exemplars boring or repetitive and 48% (n=15) said the sessions were only 'sometimes' helpful. Nonetheless, the experience of generating, implementing, and evaluating this teaching intervention has significantly influenced the author's awareness and perspective of study skills in teaching. Rather paradoxically, although humour has been suggested as a method to avoid instructor burnout (Azadbakht, 2019), creating convincing exemplar essays for a range of writing styles was exceedingly difficult and time consuming! As a teaching intervention, printed exemplar essays were a

low-tech, low-cost option for active learning with the added benefit of group interaction and discussion. Whilst the radiography students liked the baking analogy, preference for subject specific content (i.e. radiography) was also reported and factored into future deliveries of the module.

The two main limitations of this study include the generalisation of results across diagnostic radiography students and the potential for social desirability bias due to a teacher-student power relationship. The data collection had an absence of participant demographic information (age, gender, primary language), educational background and relevant prior experiences concerning academic conventions and essay writing. Because of this, the results of this study may only serve as an indication of learning preference for diagnostic radiography students. The second limitation highlights the potential for researcher bias, as the intervention was conceived, implemented and advocated by the module leader during the duration of the module. It is reasonable to expect some level of influence on students as a result. A passing remark must also be made about the use of humour within the exemplars, which has seen scant research in diagnostic radiography pedagogic research. Data collection did not seek to assess student perception of the humour and how it affected their engagement. In truth, raucous laughter was not encountered during the delivery of the exemplars, only the occasional wry smile.

Conclusion

In conclusion, exemplar essays may increase confidence in essay writing when combined with active student discussion in structured sessions. In keeping with recommendations from pre-existing research, the integration of exemplars in class (as opposed to an online resource) allows greater student/teacher interaction and exploration of assessment criteria. The novelty of this study was the use of exemplars based on a baking pseudo-profession with overt errors. From a teacher perspective, the creation of convincing exemplar essays, even of a fictitious nature, was time consuming and challenging. One solution would be using student draft work in place of exemplars, to increase relevancy and engagement. In the opinion of this author, the use of draft work is both optimal and yet

optimistic, as contingencies will be required if students either neglect to create or to present their work for peer review.

Boredom, around study skills teaching or indeed lectures entirely, appears to be a perennial issue, and some radiography students stated as much in their feedback. This could relate to the heterogeneity of students as a whole, with varying levels of experience or academic ability and perhaps learning preferences. Unfortunately, essay structure, referencing and writing style are sometimes not perceived as critical knowledge by students when compared to subject-specific content. As evidenced by this teaching intervention, a positive influence upon academic performance is not guaranteed when using exemplars. However, using a broader appreciation of pedagogy, it is difficult to compare student cohorts directly and teachers should be mindful of individual students' needs. Finally, there is limited research concerning active learning within diagnostic radiography education, in the context of purely academic skills. This research highlights exemplar essays as a low-tech and low-cost option with relatively easy implementation and positive student impact.

Placing the findings of this research within learning development practice broadly, educators may consider the integration of exemplars as learning activities to support students transitioning into higher education. Students appear to appreciate relevant module (or discipline) specific content; however, this may increase the risk of imitation or may be perceived as prescriptive essay templates if model submissions are provided. Using student draft work as an alternative and progressive form of exemplar usage, would encourage greater engagement and demonstrate the highest level of Bloom's (revised) taxonomy, that is, creation. The practicalities of doing so would require sufficient teacher planning and student commitment.

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The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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