

## Working with Student Exemplars: Staff Reflections at the Calgary Science School

*By Shelley Robinson*

### Abstract

Staff members at Calgary Science School investigated the use of exemplars as part of their professional development for AISI Cycle 4. They discovered that many teachers kept only very good or excellent exemplars; collectively, the staff had few examples of work that was rated as average, or insufficient, or limited, or poor. In addition, teachers found that some exemplars for technology-related projects were not appropriate for grade level, did not adequately attend to curriculum outcomes, and were often the result of many extra hours of student, parent and teacher commitment. Accordingly, Calgary Science School staff members have developed five questions to guide their work with exemplars, and begun the process of gathering exemplars for all levels of student work.

### Introduction

One of the goals in our AISI Cycle 4 work at the Calgary Science School is that “teachers will find and develop student exemplars that demonstrate the expectations of the program while considering and then clarifying the standards and scope and sequence of the graded programs” (CSS AISI Report, 2010 at <http://www.calgaryscienceschool.com/publications/default.asp>). However, when teachers came together to work with some grade 4 - 9 student writing exemplars at a professional development day in 2010, with the intention of grading these using a common rubric, some interesting conversation ensued (see <http://calgaryscienceschool.blogspot.com/2010/11/assessment-discussions-at-css.html>).

Like some teachers in AISI Cycle 3 (Townsend, Adams & White, 2010), our teachers seemed curious to better understand how to gather exemplars, to standardize these exemplars to best represent the curriculum expectations, and determine what constitutes valid indicators of success when considering grade level standards.

We had similar conversations during a second professional development day when we examined some student iMovie exemplars. Our intentions were to grade them by looking at them first holistically, then normatively and, finally, with criteria-referenced rubrics. We found in both professional development sessions, with both types of learning outcomes, that when we started exploring the matter of exemplars, things were not quite so straightforward as we had expected. Questions emerged as we entered each phase of our professional development work together.

### The Matter of Exemplars

In dealing with student exemplars, we found we had a paucity of teacher exemplars representing “poor”, or “satisfactory” work. Teachers have shown a tendency to save the “very good” examples of their student work, and lose the other examples along the way. In fact, we discovered that some teachers often saved only their “outstanding” examples of students’ work.

In our work in individual classrooms, we have noticed how well students respond when they are exposed to a full range of standards of product and performance (insufficient, poor, limited, satisfactory, proficient and excellent). They often identify with a specific exemplar standard and can then strive to achieve or exceed it. If students only see examples of excellence, most of them are not aware of the discreet ladder of success that they must climb if they want their work to be rated as exceptional for their grade level.

Teachers also found that some of the student exemplars they did save were far above provincial grade level expectations. When we looked at all of the student exemplars as a full staff (an activity that also served as an informal exercise in cross-graded and curricular scope and sequencing), we found some discrepancies in what we were expecting from our students. For example, with certain Grade 5 iMovies, when students were given numerous hours and opportunities to complete a representation of their curricular understanding, the work far exceeded what might have been a reasonable curricular expectation for a Grade 5 student. In fact, in some cases, a few of the iMovies were closer to Grade 7 or 8 standards.

We debated among ourselves whether or not it was fair to hold, say, a Grade 7 standard up as a model of a Grade 5 achievement of “excellence”? Might it not be better, we reasoned, to suggest that the above grade level exemplar is what might be achieved with an exceptional amount of time and dedication, but the grade level exemplar is a more appropriate target to share with students?

These discussions led to the question of how much time we should give students to complete an assignment or project to demonstrate core understandings and competencies in a subject area? If we offer students exemplars from projects in which an excessive amount of time is given for an assignment, do these models serve as accurate targets for students to achieve in a reasonable length of time, on their own, with a normal amount of teacher and parental support?

What we concluded in our post-activity discussion was that, in some cases, the uses of media or technology were superfluous to the curriculum expectations. Some extensive, multi-media projects did not help students to develop new knowledge; nor did they enrich the learning experience. Some of them were elaborate time-fillers; others were primarily exercises in the mastery of software that took multiple hours away from other valuable curriculum outcomes in students’ programs. We concluded that assignments and, in particular, larger projects, required more careful planning and monitoring by teachers to ensure that they support, are relevant to, and align with particular subject curriculum outcomes.

We determined as a staff that, when working with student exemplars, we need to be more vigilant. It is important that we set students up to succeed within each assignment. We need to help students create products that we can, in turn, hold up as examples for future generations of students doing similar work.

We agreed that the following questions could help guide such decisions:

- 1) What are the curriculum outcomes that these types of assignments will demonstrate?
- 2) What will be the criteria by which we assess those outcomes?
- 3) How will we communicate and collaborate with students about the language of the curriculum and representational media/technology (ICT) outcomes?
- 4) What varying standards of success will we use to encourage students to understand and accept the challenges of their own ladders of academic success?
- 5) How will we update our exemplars in light of ongoing student collaboration in any given project?

### **Conclusion**

We all agreed that using student exemplars is a powerful way of assisting students to better understand how to represent their understanding in various forms and, again, this is consistent with the findings in other schools across the province (Townsend, et al, 2010). However, poorly chosen or inadequately developed exemplars have the potential to mislead, and misrepresent how students should best engage with their school programs. Accordingly, we now purposefully harvest more student exemplars that respond carefully to these fundamental questions about the use of exemplars in all curriculum areas. In the process, we are showing progress in the achievement of an important goal for our AISI Cycle 4 project.

### **Reference**

Townsend, D., Adams, P., & White, R. (2010). Successful assessment for learning projects from AISI cycle 3. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education.