



Teaching, assessing and modelling appropriate performance-appraisal behaviours

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Introduction

The performance appraisal initiative described here is designed to immerse students in performance appraisal development, implementation and feedback processes. The initiative uses multiple learning opportunities including real world examples of workplace practice to enhance work readiness. The initiative also creates opportunities for educators to gather information about teaching and learning practice. In so doing, it provides a practical example of tertiary teaching excellence where student learning is scaffolded through all stages of a performance appraisal. Overall, the initiative provides opportunities for students and staff to engender a pedagogy of learning and discovery (Tennant, McMullen & Kaczynski, 2010:173). The intention of this work is to develop a learning climate (Biggs, 2003:64) that enhances student motivation (Biggs, 2003:61) and higher-order thinking (Wang & Wang, 2011).



The context for the initiative is a third-year undergraduate Human Resource Management course, which is offered in the Waikato Management School at The University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. Using an action research methodology, we have developed this initiative over three iterations of the paper. The initiative was developed to provide students with insights into the many facets of the performance appraisal process. For the most recent iterations, which are reported here, there were 66 and 22 students enrolled in the 2011 and 2012 classes respectively. As a rule, this class is the students' first introduction to the study of Human Resource Management in a tertiary institution. The initiative mirrors the use of a performance-appraisal process in industry.

One of Linda's goals, as course convenor of an undergraduate Human Resource Management paper, is to maintain a focus on the human dimension of HRM studies; something akin to social sustainability as described by Dyllick and Hockerts (2002). In doing so, Linda works to enhance students' understandings



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of the nuances of interpersonal power relationships by sharing power with them. Linda believes that power and control are central to such analysis and that their subtleties are difficult to teach. She works to model the power of agreement (Habermas, 2001) by sharing power, while maintaining control as an ethically responsible academic (Twine & Harris, 2012), and to give students opportunities to develop their interpersonal skills through group work. The sharing of power is also modelled in her relationship with her co-facilitator Trudy. Together they communicate to the class the professionalism they have in sharing power around potentially contentious PA issues. In doing so Trudy and Linda are not afraid to take opposing views in the class discussion and in doing so demonstrate respectful communication practices.

Linda and Trudy are able to maintain an overview on how well the initiative is progressing, through the collection of feedback from the students. Feedback is collected at different points during the performance-appraisal initiative. For example:

- during the initial stages of development and refinement of the performance-appraisal instrument, from comments written on their instruments
- during their classroom discussion and email regarding appropriate feedback of findings from performance appraisal
- during the students' written reflections on the importance and role of performance appraisal
- during the students' post-initiative evaluation of the performance-appraisal process collected through focus groups.

At the beginning of the processes, we explore the use of performance appraisal through student evaluations, within the context of the students' university environment. We engage the students in a two-way discussion, where the students explore processes and identify various stakeholders and their requirements. At this stage, the majority of students do not (fully) understand the implications and importance of student appraisals. Discussion forms the background to the initiative, where we asked the students to develop a performance appraisal of their lecturer (Linda). Our initiative takes students through a range of processes. Students decide what key performance indicator (KPI) they feel should be measured and how. Their instrument is administered, and their data is shared with them and discussed during class. Together Linda and Trudy encourage students to critique the university's (official) student appraisal (performance appraisal) and the one that they produced. Students discuss components of the two approaches from a range of perspectives (Harris & Twine, 2012).

The process is split into a number of stages, which are integrated into the Human Resource Management paper over a number of weeks, as outlined below.

Stage One

In stage one, students take the role of researchers, engaging with themselves as clients to identify a range of factors that make up quality teaching. Students are asked to consider (individually and/or in groups of up to five students) the factors that they "feel should be measured in a performance appraisal of lecturers", and the factors that they "value/do not value in lecturer behaviour". We asked them to write their ideas on Post-it notes, providing a different concept per note (Cunningham, 2001:52).

Next, students post their notes on a whiteboard, and then the full class is invited to sort their notes into five to seven KPIs, that make up quality teaching.



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The KPIs identified by the 2011 cohort of students were:

- preparation/ organisation
- content
- delivery
- assessment (appropriate and workload)
- approachability

The KPIs identified by the 2012 cohort of students were:

- technology
- knowledge
- personality
- availability
- organisation
- clarity in delivery.

This stage of the process is intentionally dynamic and lively. Many of the students are not accustomed to being at 'the front of the room'. As their confidence grows, they discuss Post-it note items to further clarify meanings and performance appraisal (PA) processes, as follows:

Breaking things down into separate categories was useful; then under the Post-it notes, dividing into categories. (Focus group 2012A)

Stage Two

In stage two students take the role of Performance Appraisal Managers. The class is divided into groups. We assign each KPI, and relevant Post-it notes, to a group of students, who are then asked to develop appropriate questions and scales that reflect their 'client's' language. It should be noted that students may not have knowledge of research methods. Therefore, we recommend provision of a brief overview of instrument development and a range of potentially appropriate examples of 'typical' survey outputs (both qualitative and quantitative) for them to consider using/applying/modifying for their purposes. The instruments that they produce are later used to assess the performance of their lecturer as an employee of the institution.

Between stages two and three, the students' performance-appraisal questions are processed into one document by the teachers. At this point, we also offer some written suggestions using 'comment boxes' to note possible problems with data collection around individual items (e.g. Is this the best scale for this question? This question seems to be very similar to the above). The following are some comments our students have made regarding this stage:

For this particular performance appraisal, we had to decide on what we thought was needed to be included in the appraisal, come up with the questions and also come up with how to measure each question. This was then evaluated by classmates and lecturers. Then more changes were needed before the final performance appraisal was produced. We also had to complete the performance appraisal for Linda. From the performance appraisal that was designed by the class, I think it is more specific and is what we, as students, want from a lecturer. There could still be some changes made to



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make this appraisal better, but I think the one that has been designed [by us] is better than the current university performance appraisal. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

I think if comment boxes were placed after certain questions, this is where constructive feedback could be given. If comment boxes were given throughout the appraisal, students can fill it in straight away, as they may forget, or cannot be bothered, to complete it at the end. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

It was really detailed and in-depth, especially trying to get the scale right for the questions. Pretty much no matter what system you try, there are going to be faults. There's no such thing as a perfect appraisal system. (Focus group 2012A)

Stage Three

In stage three, students take the role of the student client again, where they critique their overall instrument. For this session, we recommend distribution of printed copies of the students' draft performance appraisal. We invite our students to note any suggestions or comments on the printed pages. We also invite class discussion. Thus, we provide a range of opportunities for the students to refine their performance-appraisal instrument.

The students become engaged in the process of critiquing the instrument. This partnership provided an opportunity for us to engage with our students on the same level, removing the power relationships that generally exist in a teacher-student environment. Through the power of agreement, we simultaneously and equally engaged on a range of levels: lecturer (Linda), unbiased observer (Trudy), Performance Appraisal Manager, clients, students, and external stakeholders (all roles taken by the students). This enabled us to engage in frank and open discussions around the items to be included in the instrument and the use of the data that they intend to generate. The following are some comments our students made regarding this stage:

I would rate the performance-appraisal tool that our collective class put together as an effective measure, as it was evaluating specific competencies e.g. technological ability, organisational skills etc. From the process the class took to determine the areas that needed to be evaluated, it highlighted competencies that we feel are important for lecturers to be competent or effective within their roles. At the time in which we conducted that process within the class, I participated in the process without any review of the textbook. However, now that I have reviewed the textbook, it highlights to me what an excellent process we have participated in. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

I found reviewing the rating scales in the class very useful to gain an understanding of how they can impact on the appraisals. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

Stage Four

In stage four, we revert to our respective roles. In response to the students' feedback, the instrument is finalised and presented to the students in class for completion at the following lecture. At that time, we also asked the students to complete the university's 'official' performance appraisal. The following are some comments our students have made regarding this stage:



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The data from the evaluation instrument designed and prescribed by the class suggests that the majority of students are able to accurately comment on the performance of their teachers. For a vast majority of the questions, the data was clearly centred around one area on the scale, with a minimal amount of outlying data. Due to the data being so similar for many of the questions, it could be argued that students share the same opinions, which provides some level of validity... (Reflective assessment 2012A)

Stage Five

In stage five, we strive to appropriately model feedback from the PA process. Analysis of the qualitative and quantitative responses is undertaken by Trudy and provided to Linda. The quantitative data is posted by Linda for the students to view on the university's intranet system. At the following lecture, which both Trudy and Linda facilitate, the quantitative data are discussed and qualitative items are read out for class discussion.

For every iteration of this initiative, we find the students identify and focus on different dimensions of the classroom experience. During this class, we explain how student performance appraisal data is provided to lecturers. Linda provides an outline of the process she goes through to read and consider student appraisal data. We also discuss some of the choices lecturers make when faced with less favourable student evaluations, and we provide students with opportunities to practise providing feedback to a staff member. The following are some comments our students have made regarding this stage:

I believe students can provide the most accurate feedback as they are actually experiencing the class. This means the student will provide an accurate answer on the actual teaching (delivery, use of technology, punctual, etc.). (Reflective assessment 2012A)

Teachers and lecturers should think that feedback from students is very important constructive criticism and should feel that it is very important to recognise the weak points of their performance. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

Linda [and a guest tutor] demonstrated that there is quite an emotional side to being appraised. Both parties felt receiving their appraisals and reading the comments was something that needed to be done in private, hidden away from colleges... I also believe that the lecturer should be encouraged to share their results with the students to receive further feedback on areas that could be improved. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

Receiving the feedback was really good – just seeing where you could improve, where you went wrong. Even when we did the first appraisal of Linda [the university appraisal], that was amazing. I'd never seen the process working... I hadn't thought about how lecturers get the feedback and how it makes them feel. You just want to fill in the form and get out of there so you just say what you say and leave, [previously I had assumed] nobody does anything about it. (Focus group 2012A)

Now, I think I am more conscious of how people will respond. (Focus group 2012A)

It was interesting to see how she took things; some she took negatively but we'd intended positively. (Focus group 2012A)



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Stage Six

Again, in our respective roles, the students are asked to consider the overall teaching initiative that we describe here and write a piece of reflective assessment, which is assessed by their lecturer. Students discussed their perspectives on the current 'official' university performance-appraisal system, the importance of student evaluations, what they felt should happen to the data from student evaluations (e.g. who should see it? What decisions should be based upon it?), and how qualified they felt students are to *comment* upon their university lecturers' capacity to teach. Our students are fully engaged in this initiative. They develop their skills and insights on many levels as they develop, and critique, their own performance-appraisal instrument, as follows:

I believe the current student appraisals, which have the standard rating scale and two or three open questions [the official university rating instruments], does not sufficiently measure the true essence of what students are seeking in a lecturer... (Reflective assessment 2012A)

The openness [was satisfying] because she [Linda] shared all that information that some would see as personal. She was willing to put it out there, for us to see in black and white. All the written comments, the positive and the negative aspects. No-one wants to say 'this is what I'm crap at' but she did. If we'd put a comment like 'the workshop times', she was able to explain why the workshops are when they are. As soon as she said it was aimed at workers, I don't mind now, whereas before it just seemed irritating. (Focus group 2012A)

Stage Seven

To conclude the initiative, it is important to get feedback on students' views of experiential learning. The following information was gathered through the use of a focus group, with six students, run by a third party to ensure anonymity.

It's an ongoing process of discussing performance with employees, around all facets of their job. It can't be a once-a-year thing; it's a continuous process that's done throughout the year so issues can be brought to their attention, and they can be told when they're doing well. (Focus group 2012A)

It's continuous development for the people getting appraised, for career development. (Focus group 2012A)

Maybe setting some goals for the future, having some targets to achieve. (Focus group 2012A)

And it's not only negative; lots of times you look at performance appraisals, not just the negatives, it's also about the positives. It could also be encouraging, not just a critique. (Focus group 2012A)

Through our performance appraisal initiative our students gained a range of insights. Their depth of learning regarding instrument design can be seen in the previous quotations. The following quotations show some of the insights they gained regarding the performance-appraisal process itself.

The performance appraisal work we did during this semester was an excellent insight into not only performance appraisal in human resources, but specifically an in-depth exposure to the system that The University of Waikato uses... Now that I have a better understanding of the [student] evaluations, I feel that they are important... (Reflective assessment 2012A)



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I feel more informed now on the performance-appraisal process and feel that the insight we have received will definitely be useful for us as HR professionals in the future. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

The performance-appraisal process that we went through was very insightful. It was interesting to get a chance to see how these appraisals are used within the university system. Before learning a little more about the system, I had many misconceptions about the entire evaluation process. (Reflective assessment 2012A)

We are impressed with the instruments our students have developed, the data they produce and their ability to engage with very complex and sensitive performance appraisal material. The information gathered has enhanced Linda's teaching through deeper understanding of student needs or wants and provided students with real world examples of a workplace practice to enhance work readiness. It also provides research opportunities. We invite others to try our initiative and to make contact with us to discuss potential collaborative work.



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