

Appraising Classroom Teaching in Higher Education

An Alternative Approach

John C. Adams

Staff appraisal, in a variety of forms, is now increasingly common in further and higher education. The manner in which the appraisal is undertaken has taken a number of forms and the response of staff has varied. The most commonly met examples of appraisal in the context of higher education involve “upward” appraisal of lecturing staff by students, and a “line management” approach involving immediate superiors. In many cases the former has become almost routine, involving end of course assessments, questionnaires and the like, and has been readily accepted by staff (Redman and McElwee, 1993, p. 22), while the latter has been more controversial, taken a variety of forms, and met with greater resistance (Gold, 1993, p. 32).

The extent to which the appraisal of staff, by staff, has involved teaching observation and assessment has also varied, although the need for some system of appraisal at the point of delivery is now increasingly recognized as having a role to play in higher education. The impetus to appraise teaching delivery (and by implication learning experience) comes both from the external pressure of audit and assessment and also from a growing unease within institutions that the rapid growth in student numbers has placed severe strains on teaching quality.

In an earlier edition of this journal, Hanson reported on an appraisal scheme operated by staff at the University of Bournemouth. As reported, that scheme, while having many desirable features, was essentially “managerial” in nature. At the forefront of the scheme were heads and associate heads of departments and the opinions of these “line managers” were fed back into the annual staff appraisal system (Hanson, 1993, p. 26).

One problem which may be encountered in generalizing this approach to a large number of universities in the United Kingdom could be the resistance of staff to inspection at the point of delivery by line managers. An alternative, undertaken at the University of Hertfordshire, has been the “buddy-buddy” system of appraisal.

The buddy-buddy system was introduced in the Division of Statistics, Operational Research and Economics in the Winter of 1993 and completed at the end of the first semester of that academic year. The impetus for its introduction was, as already noted, both the push from external agencies such as the Higher Education Quality Council and the Quality Assessment Committee, and the pull from within the staffing body of a belief that, given the very considerable expansion in staff/student ratios, colleagues need to be convinced that the quality of teaching delivery and, thus, the learning experience, has not suffered.

One example among many of this increased focus on teaching is contained in the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) report *Teaching Standards and Excellence in Higher Education* which notes that the expansion of higher education from an élite to a mass system may “be counter-motivational to good teaching”, while the “desire of universities for high standards and even excellence in teaching has so far been expressed more strongly in rhetoric than in practice” (Elton and Partington, 1993, p. 11). In a sense the introduction of the system was an affirmation of the view of staff concerned that teaching is their prime responsibility and the most important job that they do.

The intention was to add to the existing appraisal mix of student questionnaire and an annual staff appraisal by head of division, and a number of possible models were considered:

- (1) The use of an expert to view the work of all staff.
- (2) The line manager approach, in this case the head of division, to play the expert role, in other words to undertake the appraisal him/herself.
- (3) The buddy-buddy system.

The first two were rejected on practical grounds. In the first case, there was the difficulty of finding an expert and the cost associated with employing someone to view the teaching of 33 members of staff. The line manager approach was rejected for a number of reasons. First, the workload would clearly be too great for any individual and would have to be subdivided. Second, and more importantly, the use of heads of sections/divisions, etc., implies these colleagues are themselves the arbiters of good teaching practice, whereas it might be argued that such colleagues may well, through seniority, have become somewhat distanced from the classroom. Finally, however, the most important reason for rejecting the managerial approach was the need for the system to gain universal acceptance by the staff. It was felt that this could only be done by staff feeling an ownership of the process rather than feeling as if they were submitting to yet another management intrusion. Given that there was no previous history of appraisal at the point of delivery within the institution, it was felt necessary to have a cautious and consultative approach and, thus, the buddy-buddy system was adopted.

The Process

The implementation of the system involved a number of stages:

- (1) A training day was held for all colleagues led by a colleague from the university's School of Education. That meeting rejected the idea of a checklist approach to quality issues given both the diversity of teaching activity which would be involved (lectures, seminars, tutorial, laboratory, workshops, etc.) and also the well-recognized variety of learning styles. A more fruitful approach was felt to be a discussion by each pair of "buddies" prior to the teaching observation, of what they themselves recognized as contributing to a high quality performance in teaching.
- (2) Gourlay's Algorithm. The process of actually choosing a buddy was facilitated by a colleague using the problem of mutually interdependent choice making for live data on

a test of Gourlay's Algorithm (Gourlay, 1976). Each member of staff was asked to rank each other member in terms of their suitability as a partner (the "buddability quotient"). These data were then used to construct a choice matrix for all 33 members of the division (with individual names being removed and the order randomized). As a consequence each colleague was then informed (privately) of the names of those mutually most desirable as appraiser/appraisee.

The purpose of this statistical exercise was to stimulate quite overtly the buddying process. Apart from injecting a little humour into the whole exercise, the idea of collecting data of this type was readily accepted within a group of staff which included operational researchers. It had the additional virtue that staff recognized a genuine research related academic activity taking place, albeit as a by-product of the appraisal system. The use of the Algorithm was, therefore, not only to provide the names of partners but also, once again, to stress the ownership of the process within the staffing body. As a result there was virtually no resistance or obstruction, either to the process or to the concept of appraisal that it embodies.

- (3) Each pair then organized a pre-appraisal meeting where they agreed a timetable for observations and the significant issues which would be addressed.
- (4) Each colleague then viewed at least one teaching event undertaken by their partner.
- (5) Each pair then held a de-briefing session where they discussed their partner's teaching and itemized salient features, strengths, weaknesses, etc.
- (6) Following stage 5, any member of staff who felt that he/she required staff development in teaching skills as a result of the appraisal then approached the head of the division with a view to some training activity. This was the only stage at which the line manager was formally involved (although he did, most importantly, take the part of a buddy in the appraisal itself.)
- (7) Finally, the partners each retained a copy (as did no one else) of each other's assessments which will be used as the basis for the round of appraisals in the following academic session.

Implications and Conclusions

Clearly the system is very new. It will be the focus of discussion at an annual divisional

“retreat” held in the summer term and the views of staff will be clearer at that time. However, a number of points can be made:

- (1) It was clear (and the staff were aware) that the system was one of appraisal rather than mere observation. Judgements were being made and passed on, development implications were noted and the annual reassessment implied some review of enhanced performance.
- (2) The buddy-buddy system was just one element of an appraisal mix (although, in the view of some, the most useful) but was only formally linked to the other elements of appraisal if the appraisee so wished.
- (3) The acceptability and credibility of the system crucially depended on the fact that the appraisee had an input (but not the only say) in the choice of the appraiser.
- (4) The overwhelming virtue of the activity has been to focus attention on the question of teaching delivery at a time when teaching and learning strategies are being devised which often simply assume that they will work or place excessive faith in the value of student feedback questionnaires. The buddy-buddy system is non-threatening, is not seen as an unwarranted managerial intrusion into the classroom, and addresses the question which, for many colleagues, is the single most

important one, namely, how successful are we in helping our students to learn?

□

References

- Elton, L. and Partington, P.A. (1993), *Teaching Standards and Excellence in Higher Education*, Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals Staff Development Unit, October.
- Gold, J. (1993), “Academic Staff Appraisal: Do-it-Yourself”, *Education + Training*, Vol. 35 No. 2.
- Gourlay, A.R. (1976), “An Algorithm for Reducing the Moment of Inertia of a System Interaction Matrix”, *Applied Mathematical Modelling*, Vol. 1, December.
- Hansen, J. (1993), “Observing Classroom Teaching in Higher Education”, *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 26-30.
- Redman, T. and McElwee, G. (1993), “Upward Appraisal of Lecturers: Lessons from Industry”, *Education + Training*, Vol. 35 No. 2.

John C. Adams is Head of Statistics, Operational Research and Economics and Associate Dean in the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire, UK.
