B+? C-? A? D?

A+? F? B? C+?

Problems and Progress in Appraising Student Performance

Appraising students is a difficult task, but some consciousness of the elements involved can help you better evaluate performance.

By Joseph A. Scarcella and Patrick N. Foster

INACCURATE appraisal of performance is perhaps one of the leading factors related to attrition in education and in the workplace. Industry executives and educators have experienced many calls for improved performance appraisal. This is beginning to cause leaders in industry and education to rethink performance evaluation techniques and to prescribe methods for counseling students for successful careers.

In an attempt to shed light on performance appraisal techniques and methods, we will explore what educators need to know when evaluating students. We will focus on several problems associated with appraising students and some techniques for avoiding common pitfalls.

What is performance appraisal?

Performance appraisal is that part of personnel or student evaluation that concerns job or task performance. It may concentrate on the psychomotor accomplishment of one task or be related to job performance as a whole.

Bryan (1985) suggested that performance appraisal can increase personnel satisfaction, creativity, personal and professional development, morale, confidence, and self-esteem (p. 7). Almost any individual, when viewed in high regard, will become more productive. It should be remembered, however, that the converse is also true—that students

Joseph A. Scarcella and Patrick N. Foster are lecturers and doctoral students in Technology and Industry Education, University of Missouri—Columbia.

viewed in low regard may perform poorly.

Similarly, Dawson (1983) noted that if employees feel their efforts are recognized—instilling a sense of belonging, teamwork, and pride within the organization—then low production, low morale, high turnover, and poor performance are less likely to occur.

What is the current vocational landscape?

The need for proven techniques in performance appraisal is related to the current climate in education and in industry. Most experts agree that all students need timely career education and development that goes beyond traditional career counseling. Furthermore, many educators believe that it is important to supplement traditional classroom practice with meaningful experiences in actual workplace environments in such arrangements as "internships, cooperative education programs, and youth apprenticeship" (General Accounting Office 1993). In addition, school programs such as portfolio assessment and tech prep are often recommended.

Literature further suggests that graduating high school students are not receiving adequate preparation for finding, maintaining, and succeeding in a job. An analysis performed by the federal General Accounting Office in 1993 determined that despite the fact that most U.S. high school resources are directed toward college-preparatory programs, most students, after graduation, "wander between different educational and employment experiences, many seemingly ill prepared for the workplace" (p. 55).

It is well known that yesterday's workplace-literacy level is not appropriate today. Skills required of workers have clearly changed, and employers are expecting employees to be able to perform more tasks with less support (Dawson 1993).

So how can we prepare students for this workplace? One tool available to educators is performance appraisal. Used properly, it can motivate students and give them a clearer understanding of employers' goals by increasing their knowledge of workplace standards (Sarkees & Scott 1985). Unfortunately, several mistakes are commonly made in appraising students, often resulting in inaccurate appraisals.

What are the problems of performance appraisal?

Measuring personnel performance in any setting can be an extremely difficult, demanding, and challenging responsibility. Most educators realize that performance appraisal has not reached a high level of sophistication and recognize it as a subjective and potentially inaccurate process (Finch & McGough 1982).

In fact, because each person is unique, the evaluation of students is more emotional than analytical. This situation is made worse when the appraiser has not clearly defined the objectives (Erickson & Wentling 1988). Some examples of the variables that can significantly hinder an educator's objectivity in performance appraisal are listed here. They are synthesized from current literature on the subject and from information from broadcasts of Mind Extension University. ▶

Specify objectives. Before you send your students to the library, make up a procedure sheet regarding your objectives. Let the student know ahead of time what you are looking for and your grading policy.

Example. Find an article relating to technology. This article can be in any area (robotics, computers, medicine, and so on). Write a bibliographic entry for the article. Address the following in your report:

1. A summary of the article.
2. How it relates to today's technology.
3. A critique of the article—whether it was good, interesting, valid, and so on.

You have now spelled out for the students exactly what you want. To make sure there are no questions, make a handout with this information available to all students.

Developing skills. By giving this assignment, you have accomplished quite a few goals. The students have learned to follow specific instruction. They have researched a particular technical area, which might be of interest to them. They share their new knowledge with other students, and they learn how to write a technical paper.

You have also assigned the students tasks that they will see on a college entrance exam, although the question (or reading) on the exam may have nothing to do with technology. You have worked on improving their writing skills. You have also expressed, through your grading policy, the importance of grammar and vocabulary. All of these goals are a part of good test-taking skills.

It is also helpful if you can work with an English teacher on this project. That wall between academics and technology can come down from both sides.

Incentive. This is only one idea for a paper. I'm sure you can come up with many different areas and techniques that will help your students with writing better papers. You might even provide an incentive, such as a school-based technical publication. Students develop self-esteem when their peers are impressed with their work. Here, once again, you can ask for assistance from your English department.

It is not difficult to institute these strategies for improving your students' math and verbal skills. The idea is that you shouldn't teach only your technical area but help students in math, in research, and in finding their own interests. If you take these extra steps, you'll see a lot of happy faces, not only on your students, but on parents, math and English instructors, and administrators, who will notice an increase in math and verbal scores on college entrance exams. And when students score well on such exams, it's a reflection of the dedication and work habits they developed from your class. **TJ**

"Aside from all this theoretical stuff, I'd really like to make a *meaningful* contribution in applied physics—preferably as a champion boxer."