IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER EVALUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of performance in experiential exercises and simulation games has been the topic of many ABSEL papers. Despite the frequent coverage, the evaluation of student performance, and especially group performance, remains one of the topics most discussed at ABSEL conferences. The authors propose a workshop devoted to the topic of peer evaluations. The workshop will take a three-prong approach: 1. an interactive exercise dealing with peer evaluations, 2. the results of research conducted by the authors at 4 different institutions, and 3. an open forum component that will allow the participants to share their expertise with peer evaluations.

The evaluation of performance in experiential exercises and simulation games has been the topic of many ABSEL papers (an incomplete list includes Anderson and Lawton 1988; Burns 1990; Butler 1981; Butler and Parasuraman 1977; Chiesl 1998; Hsu 1998; Huston, d'Ourville, and Willis 1982; Mallinger 1988; Markulis et al. 1994; Richardson, Summey, and Raveed 1988; Scott 1974; Schibrowsky and Peltier 1992; Summers, Parker, and Boyd 1985; Teach 1992; Wheatley et al. 1991; Wheatley and Platt 1993; Wilson 1974; Wolfe and Byrne 1977; Wolfe and Roberts 1992; Yahr 1995). Despite the frequent coverage and the fact that the topic was raised at the first conference by Scott (1974) and Wilson (1974), the evaluation of student performance, and especially group performance, remains one of the topics most discussed at ABSEL conferences.

Most instructors realize the fallacy of assuming that group performance is the result of equal contributions by all group members. The range of deviancies from the egalitarian ideal includes the underachiever free rider (Ingham et al. 1974; Joyce 1999; Latane, Williams, and Harkings 1979) tagging on to other group members' coattails to the dominant personality (Johnson and Johnson 1984-5) who is unwilling to share responsibilities or, at times, even to listen to the opinions of others. Burns (1990) and Schibrowsky and Peltier (1992) make clear the need for peer evaluations; and Schibrowsky and Peltier (1992, p. 222) make the succinct statement, "The easiest way to evaluate the amount of participation by each student is to use confidential peer evaluations using some sort of summated ratings."

The authors propose a workshop devoted to the topic of peer evaluations. The objective of the session will be to develop a better understanding of the peer evaluation process. The workshop will take a three-prong approach: 1. an interactive exercise demonstrating some of the aspects of peer evaluations, 2. the results of research conducted by the authors at four different institutions, which looked at both group evaluations themselves and students' attitudes toward the peer evaluation process, and 3. an open forum component that will allow the participants to share their expertise with peer evaluations. Through the medium of an interactive exercise the presenters will identify key issues that researchers in this field will recognize. These

issues will be further examined by reference to recent research carried out by the presenters and by involving all participants in a structured discussion of peer evaluations.

While confidential peer ratings have become the standard means of assessing individual contributions to the group performances, several aspects surrounding their use continue to be debated. Are students fair and objective when they rate their peers? What do students think about having to rate their peers? Can the faculty member rely on them as an accurate evaluation method? Or should they be considered an assessment tool only? Do students respond differently depending on the impact their ratings have on the final grade? Does having the ability to "fire" a member of the group play a role in the process? Are there characteristics of the students that make them better (or worse) evaluators? This workshop will address the rationale for evaluating group performance in experiential activities and the problems associated with it.

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