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Building self-evaluation skills through criterion-referenced assessment in public relations

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Abstract

Although technical skills in public relations are essential to practice, skills in self-evaluation, critical thinking, and problem solving are required when new practitioners move to management roles (Van Leuven, 1999). Public relations courses integrate specialist subject knowledge with graduate skill sets and capabilities in non-technical areas (Butcher & Stefani, 1995). Given that autonomy in learning is a skill valued by employers (Clifford, 1999) and advocated by accrediting professional bodies (Anderson, 1999), this study explores how public relations students build skills in and perceive the practice of self-evaluation.

Currently, the public relations education literature presents a limited treatment of self-evaluation. Therefore, this study is guided mostly by the education literature and uses criterion-referenced assessment to determine how more than 150 students understand assessment requirements, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and interpret the differences between their self and their tutor's judgement of performance. The results indicate strong support for student understanding of assessment requirements and self-evaluation techniques but lower than expected support for understanding the differences between their self and tutor judgements. These findings are significant to educators, practitioners and professional bodies as they have implications for lifelong learning for public relations professionals.

Keywords: public relations, higher education, self-evaluation

Introduction

Skills and attributes that increase the employability of public relations students are an important part of university courses (Anderson, 1999; Holt & Sheenan, 2004). Universities are also mandated to provide personal learning opportunities that extend beyond discipline-based knowledge. The two primary goals of the higher education experience are for students to develop their "capabilities to the highest potential levels" and to become life long learners (Stefani, 1998, p. 349). From an Australian perspective, the Australian Council of Educational Research believes that universities value skills in communication, problem solving, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, ethics, commitment to lifelong learning, and familiarity with technology (Trapper, 2000).

Supporting the call for educators to prepare students for lifetime careers, Turk (1989) encourages the incorporation of management skills into public relations courses. This suggestion was extended by Badaracco (2002) who argued that pre-professional curricula should use industry standards to evaluate class content and student performance. Practitioners' views are an integral part of education and most public relations courses offered by universities are accredited by professional bodies such as the Public Relations Institute of Australia.

However, the public relations literature presents little treatment of non-technical skills such as self-evaluation, critical thinking and problem solving beyond this framework. Gregory, Yeomans and Powell (2003) explored the use of peer assessment in group assignments within a public relations module at Leeds Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. The task required students to assess each other on a range of criteria that measured individual contribution (Gregory et al., 2003). They found the process encouraged student ownership and increased student responsibility for learning outcomes (Gregory et al., 2003)

We extend the work of Gregory et al. (2003) to look at self-evaluation in public relations education. The education literature frames self-evaluation as a reflective practice where students actively monitor their progress and devise strategies to achieve personal learning outcomes (Klenowski, 1995). This study describes the process of self-evaluation as part of criterion-referenced assessment before presenting the student perspective on self-evaluation.

Literature review

As one of the key non-technical skills developed at university, self-evaluation is defined as judgement and dialogue between the student and teacher (Klenowski, 1995). Self-evaluation is not a traditional assessment measure. In most higher education settings, performance is judged not by the student themselves but by tutors or lecturers. A number of authors believe that traditional models of assessor as powerful are flawed because they do not allow for engagement or participation of the learner or consider assessor bias (Carless, 2006; Reynolds & Trehan, 2000).

Dialogue between students and teachers is encouraged through assessment and feedback, both of which are critical to learning and the student experience (Taras, 2002). Appropriate feedback requires student and lecturer knowledge of particular standards, comparison of these standards to the student's work, and the taking of action to close the gap between these two (Taras, 2002; Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2005). Without appropriate feedback, student learning outcomes are limited.

With its focus on judgement and dialogue, self-evaluation incorporates a range of self monitoring activities including diaries, learning logs, group work, self evaluation or assessment, and questioning techniques (Klenowski, 1995; Sullivan & Hall, 1997). This study is primarily concerned by the practice of self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is defined as the judgement of one's own performance by identifying one's strengths and weaknesses with a view to improving learning outcomes (Klenowski, 1995). Self-evaluation encourages dialogue between the student and teacher.

Self-evaluation involves “a high level of self-awareness and the ability to monitor one’s own learning and performance” (Cassidy, 2006, p. 170). Despite being aware of the benefits of reflective learning, students are reluctant to self assess (Evans, McKenna & Oliver, 2005; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Orsmond, Merry & Reiling, 1997; Sullivan & Hall, 1997). This reluctance stems from the pressures of over or under scoring in comparison to tutor evaluations (Orsmond et al., 1997; Sullivan & Hall, 1997) and the difficulties associated with becoming objective about their own work (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001).

Despite this reluctance, research has also showed that self-evaluation enhances the student’s understanding of their personal learning habits (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001), the effectiveness of these strategies (Orsmond et al., 1997), the extent of their learning as well as an awareness of the learning strategies required in the future (Mok, Lung, Cheng, Cheung & Ng, 2006). Through self-evaluation, Klenowski (1995) identified that students gain further ideas and insight into their teacher’s tacit knowledge as well as build their own understanding of quality performance. Further, self-evaluation reinforced student understanding of marking standards (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001).

However, before self-evaluation can occur learners “must first develop the capacity for self assessment or self evaluation” (Stefani, 1998, p. 345). Teachers play an important role in equipping students with the skills and information required for self-evaluation. In a study of junior high school students’ use of rubrics and self-evaluation, Andrade and Boulay (2003) found that meaningful improvements in student work required the integration of a range of learning strategies.

Using criterion-referenced assessment to build self-evaluation skills

According to Klenowski (1995), self-evaluation requires three steps: 1) the identification of criteria upon which to conduct a self-evaluation, 2) the opportunity for interactive dialogue, 3) and the determination of the grade. Following from Klenowski’s (1995) recommendations about the processes of self-evaluation, this study adopted criterion-referenced assessment (CRA) as a means of establishing criteria for assessment, encouraging interaction, and determining a grade. Unlike normative approaches where one student’s performance is relative to peers’ performance (Carlson et al., 2000), CRA is a participative process that holds student and lecturer negotiation and understanding of assessment requirements as central to successful learning outcomes (Abbiss & Hay, 1992; Carlson et al., 2000; Neil et al., 1999). A social constructivist approach to assessment overcomes judgment problems found in norm-based systems (Rust et al., 2005).

An introductory public relations subject was chosen for study. After designing assessment tasks in line with subject goals and identifying skills to be demonstrated within assessment tasks (Carlson et al., 2000), four criteria were identified as relevant to the subject – problem identification, research and decision making, application and evaluation, and communication and interpersonal skills. These criteria were mapped to the two major assignments for the unit: a proposal for an issue brief on a contemporary business issue and a fully developed issue brief including significant media analysis. Each criterion was weighted based on its importance to the task. Students were graded on a 1 to 7 scale with 7 representing a high distinction and 1 representing a fail. Descriptive performance standards for each of the criteria at each possible grade were

written and presented as an assessment rubric. Following Norton (2004), this study conceptualised CRA as learning criteria that encouraged “meaningful learning and active engagement” between students and teachers (p. 689).

Several learning and teaching activities were designed to encourage dialogue between students and teachers and embed both CRA and self-evaluation into the public relations subject. This embedding strategy facilitated the transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge through shared understanding of expectations (Nonaka, 1991). An assessment package was prepared to explain the new assessment paradigm to students, describe the principles of CRA, outline the requirements of each assessment item, and present the rubrics. The assessment processes and rubrics were discussed with students first by the lecturer and then by each of the tutors.

In order to build familiarity with these criteria, a tutorial exercise was designed to build student skills in grading through the use of an exemplar or sample paper. Students then discussed their grading structure in the tutorial session and the tutors showed the students the assessor’s grades and explained any differences that appeared. Exemplars offer students practical experiences in critique which builds student skills in evaluation that can be transferred to the practice of self-evaluation (Stefani, 1998; Klenowski, 1995). Student involvement in marking sample exercises has improved results in students’ subsequent work (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2003). Sadler (1987) suggests the combination of verbal descriptors and exemplars helps assessors and students overcome the inherent imprecision of verbal descriptors and also helps the students acquire strong evaluation skills.

Methodology

Following the introduction of CRA into an introductory undergraduate public relations unit, self-evaluation activities were designed to encourage student skills in non-technical areas. Students were asked to self assess their assignments prior to submission. These self-evaluations were submitted with assignments and tracked by the assessors to identify where students had over or underestimated their performance. Assessors graded each assignment using the assessment rubric and this was returned to the students. A follow-up tutorial session discussed students’ performance on the first piece of assessment and students had the opportunity to meet with their tutors to get a more detailed explanation of the grading process.

A questionnaire was designed to capture student perspectives on the use of CRA in the unit and its impact on their learning strategies. The questionnaire allowed students to identify how they had understood assessment requirements, used criteria to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their assignment, and interpreted the differences between their self and their tutor’s judgement of performance. Likert scales were used to allow the students to demonstrate their strength of agreement or disagreement with particular statements. The questionnaire also captured key demographic information and any prior experience with CRA.

The questionnaire was administered in a lecture session towards the end of the semester. All students enrolled in the unit were eligible to complete the questionnaire. The unit included full and part time public relations students as well as students from other disciplines who were taking the unit as an elective. In line with the university’s

profile, the students were both domestic and international and represented both school leavers and more mature age students returning to university after a period of absence from formal education. All students studied on campus. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous and optional in line with the University's ethics approval for research on current students.

The questionnaires were completed and the data analysed using SPSS. Frequency counts and descriptive statistics were calculated for relevant variables with chi-square analyses and t-tests conducted where appropriate.

Results

Nearly two-thirds of the students enrolled in the introductory public relations unit completed the survey. Of the 264 students enrolled in the unit, 158 completed and returned the questionnaire. The majority of the responding sample were female (n=128) which is consistent with a strong female skew across enrolments in public relations internationally (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000). Of the sample, 47 percent of students were in their first semester of university study and 24 percent were in their final year with 67 percent identifying some prior experience with CRA.

Level of student understanding of assessment requirements

A major part of effective self-evaluation is student understanding of assessment requirements (Klenowski, 1995; Stefani, 1998). Almost 70 percent of students indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that they understood what was required for the assignment by reviewing criteria and performance standards. Approximately 65 percent of students indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that using the matrix in tutorials helped them understand how to match the performance standards specified (see Table 1 for full details). Almost one-third of the students provided a neutral response to this same question. Anecdotal feedback from students during and after enrolment in the subject indicated support for the self assessment activity as a way to understand what skills are being assessed and as an opportunity to review and present their best work.

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Understanding of assignment requirements was enhanced by reviewing criteria	2	1.3	16	10.1	31	19.6	84	53.2	25	15.8	158	100.0
Use of matrix in tutorials helped me understand how to match performance standards	3	1.9	6	3.8	45	28.7	90	57.3	13	8.3	157	100.0

Table 1: Student understanding of assessment requirements

Level of self-evaluation

Critical reflection is an integral self-learning mechanism for students. Through CRA, students were able to engage with their own learning practices by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Approximately 69 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that they understood how to improve their performance by seeing how the assessor had graded their assessment on each of the criteria using the specific performance levels (see Table 2 for full details). More than 70 percent of students said they could now identify their strengths and 67.9 percent of students their weaknesses in performance.

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Understands how to improve	3	1.9	10	6.4	24	15.3	88	56.7	25	16.0	156	100.0
Can identify strengths	2	1.3	11	7.1	31	19.9	87	55.8	25	16.0	156	100.0
Can identify weaknesses	3	1.9	6	3.9	29	18.6	94	59.6	13	8.3	157	100.0

Table 2: Student reflections on performance

Evaluation of self-evaluation against tutor assessment

Although the majority of students agreed that self-evaluation activities were beneficial, only 54 percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that the self-evaluation process helped them understand where their personal performance interpretation differed from their tutor's assessment (see Table 3). An additional analysis showed significant correlation between student perception that self-evaluation activity helped them understand the difference between personal and tutor performance judgement and understanding of assessment requirements ($r = .303$, $N = 146$, $p < .0001$ (two-tailed)).

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Self-evaluation activity helped me understand where my interpretation was different to the assessor	0	0	12	8.2	55	37.7	37	45.9	12	8.2	146	100.0

Table 3: Student reflections on self versus tutor assessment of performance

Further analysis of the data showed a significant correlation between student perception that self-evaluation activity helped them understand the difference between personal and tutor performance judgement and the identification of weaknesses ($r = .17$, $N = 145$, $p = .041$ (two-tailed)) and understanding of how to improve ($r = .26$, $N = 146$, $p = .001$ (two-tailed)).

Discussion

In order to be effective self evaluators, the literature identifies the importance of guidance from teachers (Klenowski, 1995). The strong embedding strategy used in this

study built a shared understanding of learning criteria, the assessment requirements, and experience in evaluation through exemplars. As this study is part of a longitudinal research project, the authors will continue to collect data about student self-evaluation and compare findings.

Within the framework of CRA, the majority of undergraduate public relations students who responded to the survey built skills in self-evaluation. These skills were achieved through the capacity of students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement in their performance. Approximately 10 percent of the responding sample suggested they did not fully understand assessment or use assessment to identify strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement and approximately 20 percent indicated a neutral position.

In a recent study, Cassidy (2006) identified that students with particular learning styles showed a greater affinity for self-evaluation. Of the deep, surface, strategic and apathetic learning approaches categorised in an earlier study (see Cassidy, 2004), Cassidy (2006) found the strongest correlation between a deep learning style and skill in self-evaluation. Future research should consider the relationship between learning styles and self-evaluation skills and pre-test students to help identify their preferred learning approach. This understanding will help educators identify subsequent support services needed to enhance student learning outcomes.

More than half the sample indicated that they understood how their interpretation of performance was different to their tutor's judgement. Although the authors hoped for a higher level of agreement, these findings could be explained by a number of factors including the possibility of students inflating perceptions of their own efficacy, the nature of the qualitative feedback provided by the tutor, and the timing of the questionnaire. Because the questionnaire was administered several weeks after the tutors returned the marked assessment, students' perceptions of their performance may have changed.

Future research could investigate the validity of this study's findings in relation to student-versus-tutor judgements. One way to understand the similarities and differences between student self-evaluation and tutor evaluation of performance is to compare their marking of the exemplar. To complement students' perspective, research from the tutors' perspectives will be collected in future to understand the perceived contribution of self-evaluation to student learning outcomes.

Perceived differences between students' and tutors' judgements of student performance may have a strong impact on students' future learning. According to Orsmond et al., (1997), an assumption that the tutor mark is always correct is false. One way to overcome this impact is to incorporate student or peer performance judgements into the student's final grade. Undergraduate units could follow the work of Stefani (1998) who integrated student self-evaluation scores into final grades.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on public relations education and assessment. They demonstrate the importance of learning criteria to student understanding of assessment requirements. This finding builds on the work of Gregory et al. (2003) and provides evidence to support the importance of criteria to educators whose programs do not include assessment plans or procedures for assessing learning outcomes (see Rybacki & Lattimore, 1999; Stacks et al., 1999).

This study has provided insight into the self-evaluation activities of an introductory public relations unit. As students progress into the final years of their public relations education, additional opportunities for self-evaluation must be created to enhance their evaluation abilities and critical thinking skills. More work can also be done to transition students into work. Translating the practice of self-evaluation from university assessment to the real world requires dialogue amongst the students/graduates, employers and educators. Students who recognise that their work environment may not provide a clear set of criteria to guide their self-evaluation processes are likely to find the transition to work easier. Therefore, we encourage public relations educators to provide students with the opportunity to develop criteria or standards for their own work within university settings.

Self-evaluation is one of the skills and attributes that complements discipline-based knowledge. Public relations educators should extend beyond traditional learning and teaching activities to encourage and continue to build student capacity for lifelong learning in our profession.

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