

## Can Forced Ranking be Used as a Pedagogical Tool?

### Conference Track:

Reflective reinvention might easily be a synonym for forced ranking. When done appropriately (and with administration's backing) reflection and development of feedback skills occur in the high-stress assessment that is forced ranking. Students reinvent themselves and their capacity to provide and receive feedback. This pushing the boundaries is centered around MOBTS's heritage of pushing (reshaping) management education.

### Abstract:

The era of forced ranking (FR) as a means of assessment in industry appears to have ended at the turn of the millennium. Does that mean it does not belong in classroom settings? Come join us and discuss the tragedy that befell one of the author's courses yet was successful in the other's.

Help us answer the questions:

1. Does FR have a place in the classroom?
2. What outcomes could FR benefit and negate?
3. What else besides FR needs to occur?
4. How does one "sell" FR to participants and administration?

Help a lost member! Join us!

### Keywords:

Forced ranking, peer assessment, developing feedback

### Literature:

*To build such a culture, managers and management teachers must understand the natural human reaction to evaluation, the merely human side of enterprise. Organizations must evaluate, and people have perceptual biases, most importantly a natural tendency to consider themselves above average. No one feels comfortable at the bottom of the barrel, but a bottom there must be. We will always feel discomfort during evaluation. And where better to learn this difficult lesson than in the classroom before careers are at stake? (Putzel, 2006, p. 341)*

During the fall term of 2017 forced ranking was implemented in an introduction to management course for dietetics students at Montana State University. This is my first semester at this institution. The course was set up for the use with the chair and coordinator understanding what was going to occur and what issues may happen in the course of utilizing forced ranking. Forced ranking was to impact the gradebook and extra credit was offered to minimize the impact on grades.

After the first time forced ranking had been used, I was told, in a casual meeting with my dean, that "If I can smell smoke, then you might consider how you are doing stuff in your course." Forced ranking was eliminated (along with the extra credit that correlated with it) and I launched into better understanding whether it can be an effective, and hopefully efficient, tool for an

introduction to management course (and the only required management course) for dietetics students.

After reviewing several academic and industry articles, I am really beginning to have some questions of its purpose and wonder whether this purpose, as it pertains to practicing management techniques in the classroom, can be much more clearly defined. Before launching into some discussion, I want to point out Peiperl's email response to Roger Putzel that I agree with (and think most of us would).

By the way, you really can't compare students in a classroom setting with a place where people are in (relatively) permanent employment (p. 18). The social questions are completely different, even when you use an organizational approach to the course (as Michael Abelson does).

(R. Putzel, personal communication, October 24, 2017)

I find myself asking "What the heck are we doing to our students?" Is it fair to ask them to force rank and does this behavior inhibit the class's or organization's opportunities to become high-performing? Of all the iterations using forced ranking I've worked with, I can think of only one that has hit high-performing as an organization. I've had two approaching it and I've had several subsystems within class's/organizations operationalize high-performing late in the semester.

### **Forced Ranking:**

Forced ranking methods were prevalent and originally came about at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Deloitte, 2014). They were typically utilized to measure performance of those within manufacturing versus those in multi-skill knowledge-intensive positions (Deloitte, 2014). Performance appraisal methods centered around forced ranking are best known due to the work of Jack Welch while at General Electric (GE) during the 1980s (Assad, 2015; Deloitte, 2014; Olson, 2013; Pfeffer, 2006).

Putzel (2006) defines forced ranking in classroom settings more thoroughly than anything else I have found. He essentially asserts that ranking is a method for students to clearly define peer work as better than others when looking at multiple iterations of the same assignment. This definition may come from specific standards such as a rubric or from a subjective opinion based on personal experiences or anything the peer selects. Putzel's reasoning for including forced ranking were primarily based on the inability of peers to assess without inflating scores received on work (2006). Pierperl (1999) discussed similar issues in the workplace. In my own experience it comes across as the "everyone gets an A" scoring. Further, the uncomfortable situation associated with forced ranking required the giver develop their feedback skills and to do so based on performance or product versus emotion (this must be learned by some). Putzel (2006) states this clearly: "No technique by itself will accomplish evaluation's two purposes, administration and development" (p. 341). Assad (2015) discusses the same issue asserting that managers do not like giving negative feedback and they dislike making difficult decisions based on someone's performance.

The opposing views associated with forced ranking is clearly stated by Lawler (2003): Forced ranking impacts organizations by creating dysfunction and an intense competitive culture within an organization. Assad (2015) emphasizes this by stating that organizations using forced ranking inhibit collaboration and there may be dissent between peers. Schwartz, Collins, Stockton, Wagner, & Walsh (2017) equates this to the "Old School" thinking of performance appraisal as

does Zeng (2016). Both Schwartz et al. (2017) and Zeng (2016) suggest forced ranking is no longer effective and should be replaced with forms of ongoing coaching, setting clear work objectives, and effectively training those who are executing performance appraisals.

### **Developing the Feedback Skill in the classroom:**

Pfeffer & Sutton (2006) state:

When people are overly influenced by ideology, they often fail to question whether a practice will work – it fits so well with what they know about what makes people and organizations tick. (p. 2)

I think this is/was my attitude toward using forced ranking at the beginning – it's worked for others, so it will work for me and I really never questioned it, I just went along with it because others had proven that it works. Now I wonder where that proof is? I wonder what the cause-effect would look like if we were to do a qualitative study on all the C, D, & F receivers in courses that implemented forced ranking and asked them to explain what they thought and how forced ranking impacted them?

Pfeffer and Sutton also state that: "Situation(s) confronting the practitioner must be framed as an answerable question" (2006, p. 4). Maybe my issue is that I am finding it difficult to frame the appropriate question? In looking at what I could find on forced ranking in pedagogy (nothing – anybody got anything?) I have chosen to look at business. Business articles, too, have thrown forced ranking into negative connotations. Everyone discusses GE, yet not another article discusses the fact that GE also determines whether that "A" player does help colleagues and doesn't "engage in dysfunctional internal competition" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006, p. 5). In other words, GE didn't rely solely on forced ranking. They included other measures specifically focused on supporting their organizational culture and peers in the completion of responsibilities.

Hazels and Sasse (2008) state that "forced ranking demands differentiation among performers" (p. 35). That, it seems, is the principle purpose. Beyond this, what is the purpose and what are the benefits? Contextually, in business it seems the benefits surround forced ranking's abilities to:

1. Require users to be more honest with those they rank? - How does one make this objective?
2. Evaluate based on performance? - How does one make this objective?
3. Defend against potential discrimination? - How can we be certain this is objective?
4. It helps the organization maintain a specific culture? - What kind of culture does it create?

These same positives (concerns?) are present in Heathfield's 2007 piece as well as Pfeffer and Sutton (2006). The parts of the discussion that concern me the most in the use of forced ranking are that we know where each individual is from best to worst yet we have a difficult time understanding and communicating how far the spread is from 1 to 2 to 3 to 4 and on.

Understanding that spread might be more important to allocate resources to reduce it.

Unfortunately, in a class or organization of < 29, how does one determine this? Bass (1989) finds using forced ranking to find correlations to be more inaccurate versus other methods when comparing two specific items. How do we do this in a classroom or pedagogical context?

At this point I'm left asking myself whether Pfeffer and Sutton's statement is relevant to the purpose behind forced ranking: "The situation confronting the practitioner must be framed as an answerable question" (2006, p.4).

1. Is forced ranking the best way to go?
2. How do I defend forced ranking if the answer is yes?
3. Is there something as effective or better that can effectively replace the danger of the “3rd rail” and help with the perceptions of social inequality?

In a discussion with David Bright (personal communication, October 17, 2017) and Liz Turesky (personal communication, October 12, 2017), it seems their belief is that forced ranking is an item that, inherently, negates the ability for students to grow and develop as productive citizens as well as inhibits “psychological safety and some degree of trust.” I find myself asking: when the goal is *authentic feedback*, what methods are available that allow for the development of this skill that do not contain the negative connotations of forced ranking yet are as efficient and effective at participants creating and practicing skills associated with feedback?

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