

Personal Development Planning (PDP) really happens at work

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Abstract

There can never be one approach to personal planning, and what is effective for one person probably will not work for the next. Additionally, very few students see the connection between planning whilst at university and the planning processes used in the workplace. The project reported below was an HE Academy GEES Subject Centre small grant funding project, and this paper reflects on University of Leeds (University) student responses to materials designed to help them to develop a clearer understanding of the role of PDP in the workplace and to gain an insight into the longer term benefits of personal planning and reflection. Student responses (*in italics*) to each activity are used to highlight some of the learning benefits.

Background

Lumsden (2005) makes the point that 'introducing and embedding PDP is not something that comes naturally' and Kneale (2004) has highlighted that many students are not especially keen to participate. As Peters (2006) stated '...experienced practitioners consistently report a wide variety of responses, ranging from creative engagement, through compliance, to active resistance' amongst their students. Whichever model of curriculum and institutional embedding (Jackson and Ward, 2004) is chosen, a student needs to know that the process has relevance and benefits. This is especially true where the planning process is extra curricula, and 'not for credit'.

The Materials

To obtain information on PDP procedures in the workplace, interviews were undertaken with an employee from each of three very different organisations—a charity, a local authority, and a private company. These organisations have their own PDP internal processes. The interviews explored the employees' views on the benefits and drawbacks of the processes and the procedures adopted. The interview transcripts were used as the basis for a set of four activities that can be run with students in tutorials and workshops. These materials are available at: <http://www.geog.leeds.ac.uk/courses/other/performance/pdpindex.html>.

Student responses to staff development in business

The most straightforward activity simply asks students to discuss the three interviews focussing on one of the following three themes. 1) How the interviews fit with your understanding of the role of PDP. What is new? What is unexpected? 2) Given this insight into workplace use of PDPs, how would you re-design your University / Department / School PDP to make it work better for you? Or 3) How could your own PDP practice develop as a result of your knowledge of the business schemes?

Many students expressed surprise that ongoing training and development exists in the workplace. There was a feeling that you studied at university and then became employable based on what you had learnt. The idea of continuing to learn on the job and through going on courses was a revelation. A second theme

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focused around the statements that being made to fill out forms can cause frustration. By the end of the session there was a clearer understanding that the form is not the vital part of PDP. *It is the process itself that is important, the conversations that you have with your manager. The form is just the starting point.*

Creating a PDP for a small business

Working in small groups, students used the interviews and copies of PDP forms from a number of organisations to create a PDP process for a small business. The aim was to give them an insight into how the PDP process can be designed and structured.

The responses showed students beginning to appreciate the importance of the PDP process, commenting that they thought it gave the company a chance to develop its workforce and provided the employee with the support they need to progress in their career. Some students engaged with the concept of enlightened self-interest, the idea that if the employee is happy and satisfied then they will be more efficient thus benefiting the company.

There was a general feeling that a variety of issues would need to be considered by the company to make the process as useful as possible and that different types of company would benefit from different approaches. The PDP process is definitely not a 'one-size fits all' concept.

This is helpful because reflecting after the workshop, some students could see ways to adapt their own practices. *"Would probably be a good idea to have a weekly plan of what I want to achieve and how I am going to plan my time to ensure work done on time."* And *"I will try to plan more clearly and in distinct sessions, so that when I have done a section I feel like I have reached a goal."*

While these comments feel a little like New Year's resolutions, there is a raising of awareness through the process.

Exploring personal experiences of PDP in the workplace

Working in groups of three, two people interviewed a student who has had previous experience of the PDP process, either in vacation/gap year work or full time employment. The interviewers sought to understand the practical and personal application, impact and outcomes of the PDP process for the interviewee. The interviewers then created a mini presentation highlighting the main processes, benefits and disadvantages that their colleague had outlined.

The students felt that this activity emphasised the value of PDP in terms of providing employees with structure and direction. *We gained an appreciation of how there are very different approaches to PDP in different businesses.*

It also provided participants with useful experience of interviews from both sides of the desk. Students realised that being able to frame pertinent questions is a valuable skill and that sometimes it is easier to answer questions than to ask them and that interviews lead in unexpected directions: *Questions we asked didn't get neat answers - the answer spilled over into other topics.* The benefits of effective communication and listening skills were also highlighted by the participants.

Summative assessment can link research and teaching here

Students were challenged to find a colleague, relative or friend who is using PDP at work. The students used the interviews as a background to develop their own questions to research that person's understanding and use of reflection and planning in their own workplace.

Few students had realised that the use of PDP was so widespread. Everyone found someone to interview. They expressed surprise that nearly everyone they asked had had some experience of PDP (*You don't realise that this happens*), that people were keen to talk about it, and that the people interviewed were generally viewing the process as a positive thing.

Students were definitely engaging with the concept that PDP does exist in real life, is very much embedded in the workplace and is here to stay. *When we first talked about it our group agreed you just made it up and that is kind of what happens at school and here. You do it just for the teacher. Talking to Elle, you could see her line manager is the person she works with all day and talks to every day, so making it up isn't an option. And she was really positive about it helping with doing a better job.* Reflection and planning were seen as normal and useful.

Evaluation

The responses highlighted above were made either during the feedback sessions or in students' reflective logs. In addition, student responses to the activities were recorded by an independent evaluator who observed the first workshops. The diversity of response is encapsulated in these two statements *It didn't help me at all, didn't enjoy it, couldn't see how it was benefiting me;* and *In my experience I have seen people using it to advance their career.*

The evaluator observed how students worked on the activities and reported that all participants worked with enthusiasm and that energy levels were high. All groups paid attention to the instructions they were given and quickly got to grips with the tasks. There were high levels of engagement with all members of a group appearing to be involved and equal levels of engagement from both sexes.

Individual students were asked to give their 'gut' response during and towards the end of the session by thinking of a word or phrase that best summed up the session for them. The results were diverse: *Inspirational; Fun; Useful; Highlights importance of teamwork; Difficult; Confusing; Captures your imagination; Makes you think on your feet; Disorganised; Made me think about something I'd never considered before.*

A focus group was held by the independent evaluator two weeks after the workshop. Eight students, four women and four men, discussed the activities generally and focussed on

- What does PDP mean to you?/How has the session changed what PDP means to you?/What does it mean to you now?
- What will you do differently as a result of the session?
- What would you change to improve the workshop?

A significant outcome of the focus group was that participants' views of PDP and the session seemed to relate directly to their experience of personal planning. Those that had little exposure to PDP or the workplace were generally 'reluctant participants' who couldn't see the point of PDP. They viewed it as just learning what the employer wanted to hear. These students were also the least likely to have found the session easy and struggled to relate PDP to their current circumstances.

In contrast, those that had experience of workplace PDP processes were much more able to engage with the benefits of PDP and were ready to take it seriously.

The former group can be described as 'postponers': For them PDP was a long way off, not relevant to their current life situation, something *not to be bothered by, until I get a real job.* Interestingly, participating in the review session enabled these students to hear other more positive reactions to PDP, possibly the most powerful way of challenging their beliefs.

It seemed that most people had altered their thinking on PDP, if only in as much as they had begun to think about it at all. Those people who thought that there might be something in PDP for them spoke of the practical outcomes of the session; that they now had more knowledge of the process, they could see how a PDP might be formulated, that their interview skills had developed and how they might use PDP to advance their career. Even those participants who felt that *the importance of PDP is exaggerated* still believed that *the session had been beneficial.*

The students who had engaged most with PDP were ready to make changes in their own personal planning as they wanted to develop themselves now and push the boundaries. They felt that it was worthwhile to put a lot of effort into personal planning.

More cautious participants confirmed that they had *learnt a great deal from the session* and that it had opened their minds to the concept of PDP. They might not be about to change their own behaviour in the short term but felt that once in employment they would be *actively find out about the employer's human resources and planning policies.*

Even the most reluctant 'postponers' felt, on reflection, slightly more positive about PDP through the experience of hearing their peers' views challenge their own evaluations – getting the message from their peers being more powerful than from the lecturer.

The students' approach to and understanding of the relevance of the planning process before these workshops was very mixed. This is not a 'magic bullet' set of materials. However, raising issues around PDP use with Level 2 students, has the potential to re-invigorate understanding and application. Some students could see new reasons to engage with the process and some could see that the University planner was not the only format. Raising awareness of alternative processes and proformas gives people

the opportunity to find new ways to reflect. As one commented: [The] whole session emphasised [PDP's] importance. Before I thought it was a waste of time, but now it may be worth putting the effort in. This quote nicely encapsulates how making the workplace common can change the student attitudes to PDP.

References

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