

SIMPLE BUT EFFECTIVE: REDISCOVERING THE CLASS DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers a simple yet effective approach to teaching business: the student-led class discussion. Student-led discussions force and encourage students to perform several tasks that are important in learning and acquiring business skills. Students learn to integrate and apply course topic material in an interesting fashion, to be more accountable for classroom material, and how to think on their feet when discussions fall flat or when material becomes confusing or unclear. Assignments are graded according to how well students integrate chapter material, article relevancy, and leadership effectiveness. As a result of this process, students develop self-confidence in their communication abilities.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to help teachers rediscover the importance of the class discussion through the use of a student assignment designed to help integrate chapter material. The exercise has three objectives: (1) to integrate classroom discussion in such a way that students learn to take ownership; (2) to provide a lively discussion whereby all class members participate; (3) and to provide a way for students to develop important communications skills and self-confidence through impromptu speaking. The exercise for each student lasts approximately the first 15 minutes of each class and sometimes longer depending on whether the students stay on topic.

Marketing and management are considered applied sciences and are therefore well suited for classroom discussion or interactive learning (Nicastro 1989). Taking ownership of work or holding students accountable for their contribution to the class is an important part of the interactive process. In team situations, Douglas (1996) contends that there are three distinct benefits in accountability and responsibility: it promotes self-learning; it promotes team learning; and it creates synergy. These benefits and others are discussed in this paper.

The value placed upon communication skills and the self-confidence to develop these skills is extremely important. According to Tucker and McCarthy's (2001) review, developing communication skills are key factors to effective job performance, career advancement, and organizational success. In one study, business students ranked self-confidence as the most important skill for effective communication (Reinsch and Shelby 1996). A study among MBA students indicates that open classroom discussion, along with real world examples, has the most positive influence on their learning (Tootoonchi and Lyons

2002). It is a simple fact, however, that some students avoid class participation because of such factors as being ridiculed by other students, large classrooms, or traditional classroom settings (Berdine 1986). In this exercise, I demonstrate how some of these problems can be overcome in creating an environment that is more conducive to the easy flow of class discussion.

PART 1: RANDOM SELECTION

Rather than give the students a chance to self-select the chapter or topic and hence the presentation time period, the students randomly select a piece of paper with a number on it that corresponds with a date in the semester on which they are to discuss. This prevents the students from selecting topics that fall at the end of the semester. Before I ask them for the dates they are assigned, students are allowed five minutes to negotiate swaps with their fellow classmates. Sometimes, if the class number is large enough, I assign two presentations per day. The random selection process indicates to the students that the process is completely objective and fair.

PART 2: THE SAMPLE PRESENTATION

Before the students set out to find an article, I give them a sample presentation. The purpose of the sample is to set the bar of expectations quite high by asking questions that are highly integrative, thought provoking, and, in many cases, ethically challenging. With a concrete example and high expectations, the students know that they have to achieve high standards. Page numbers are assigned where the chapter material was integrated from the text. I usually attempt to integrate the chapter material that is the most relevant to the test material that follows later in the semester. I attempt to get the most involved, yet interesting article possible in order to push students to acquire articles of the same quality. The sample article I use usually comes from ABI inform or some other scholarly business-related database on the Internet. I instruct the students to use the same databases. This exposes them to effective and useful websites and improves their research skills at the same time, which proves useful in helping them write the group paper that is due later in the semester. Here is a sample question integrating material from an article that addresses how marketers use wacky colors to appeal to children: "According to your book (p. 214), brand loyalty develops at an early age, thus it is no surprise that marketers begin to work quite early to develop loyalties. In what ways do you think Heinz is effective in establishing this strategy with

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their colored ketchups, and in what ways do you think they might be missing the boat?"

PART 3: THE GRADING

I ask each student to compose five thought-provoking, integrative questions, similar to the ones I used in the class example. Each student is required to type five questions and staple them to a copy of the article and provide the handout to each student the class prior to when they are scheduled to discuss the article. Late projects are deducted 10 points out of the 50, which encourages the students to submit the articles in a timely fashion. Giving the articles a class in advance gives the other students and instructor time to prepare their answers. At the beginning of the class period, the student who is assigned to lead the discussion for that day goes to the front of the class and begins the discussion with a summary of the article. The summary, as well as the discussion, is graded. Students in the audience are graded for their participation by simply getting marks for quality contributions. These marks are taken into consideration when calculating the participation grade at the end of the semester. The students in the audience are not required or encouraged to take extensive notes because it would hamper their ability to contribute to the discussion. Students are tested on the material, though, but only to the extent that the information can be found in the book, article, or ensuing lecture. I inform each student presenter that they are responsible for drawing the class into the discussion if the audience becomes nonresponsive. This forces the discussants to develop questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no response. After the student presenter gives the summary, he or she starts with the typed questions. If the students in the audience do not respond, the discussion leader is then responsible for elaborating on the question until the class begins to participate, forcing the student presenter to think on his or her feet in a somewhat impromptu fashion. Student discussants are informed, however, that they should come armed with a variety of questions and examples in order to build upon the original discussion points.

PART 4: THE RESULTS

While the assignment may appear to be taxing on the student presenter, given the amount of uncontrollability, the students in the audience usually participate in levels not typically seen in regular class discussion. It appears that each student realizes the fate given to his or her fellow student and gains a measure of empathy—what comes around goes around. In addition, because the discussion occurs at the beginning of the class period, the students in the audience are usually enthusiastic and willing to discuss the material for the full 15 minutes. They will realize, too, that the longer they can sustain the discussion, the less time they will have for lecture. In reality though the lecture material is being discussed, rehearsed, and integrated in a subtle but highly effective manner.

To ease the feeling of a sterile classroom environment, the instructor sits with the rest of the students and engages in the discussion as well, actively emphasizing important points or filling in the gaps the student presenter may have missed. The

instructor also serves as a backup in case the students in the audience fail to participate. However, lack of audience participation is usually not an issue, and if a few students begin to dominate the discussion, the instructor can step in and redirect the discussion to students who have withdrawn from the topic. In some cases, students hit on a topic that has more appeal than others, which usually results in more active and lively discussion. It has been my experience though that the student discussants will naturally gravitate toward topics and articles that they know will generate the most interest among their fellow classmates. In the event that a student actively attempts to encourage responses from a nonresponsive class and has well written questions, he or she is not penalized or graded negatively for the class not responding.

Even though the selection process is random, the students have the opportunity to trade their presentation dates with other students. Usually the better, more self-confident students opt to go first, which means that the better-written questions and discussions occur at the beginning of the process. As a result, the bar is set high and every presentation to follow is done in a manner consistent with the first, if not better, because the students to follow see what works. The students become competitive, and because the whole process is transparent, with the questions handed in advance, the student presenters take great pains to make sure their questions are thought provoking and relevant to the chapter material.

CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, I believe this assignment should be restricted to upper division classes. Students in the lower division classes may not have the communication skills, interest, and confidence to deliver effective discussions that can be used to help teach the material. In addition, the size of the classes should be limited to around 30 or fewer students. In my experience, accommodating more than 30 students severely limits the amount of time that can be devoted to lecture material. It also lessens the quality of the discussion and the number of people who actively participate because many students become inhibited in larger classroom settings.

On its face, this assignment is far from being innovative. Almost all educators offer opportunities for class discussions or student presentations. How this project motivates students to participate and integrate classroom material, however, are the true benefits. The discussion truly takes on a life of its own, with the normally reticent students actively taking part in the discussion. Instead of students regretting public speaking, they become more self-confident because self-awareness is often lost in the flow of the discussion. Another interesting byproduct of this assignment is that students in the audience often direct questions and comments at each other during the discussion, which leaves the student discussant more time to relax and regroup. This assignment may appear to be simple, but it has proven to be a highly effective icebreaker. It sets the stage for a lively class lecture to follow due to the fact that minds have already been actively and productively primed.

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