

ISSUES IN CASE METHOD INSTRUCTION: CLASS DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP

Andrew K. Hoh, Creighton University
ahoh@creighton.edu

John R. Wingender Jr., Creighton University
jwings@creighton.edu

ABSTRACT

Many issues are critical in the successful implementation of the case method approach in business education. This method of pedagogy is widely used in the undergraduate business capstone courses, as well as graduate courses. Of the many issues that have been discussed in the literature, a topic rarely mentioned but of great interest to us, is how to involve all students in class participation. Instructors use many techniques to encourage class participation. In this paper we engage in a review of these techniques, citing observations about their strengths and weaknesses, and invite our colleagues to join in a dialogue with us sharing their best and most successful practices. This paper reports preliminary findings on our instrument designed to improve class participation.

PREMISES OF THE CASE METHOD

The foundations of the case method are based in several educational philosophies. In 1888 Joseph Octave Mauffett, the founder of the College of St. Joseph in Quebec, Canada, argued the following: "Our education goal is not to stuff pupils' heads with facts of doubtful utility that they will likely forget as soon as they come out of college, but rather to instill practical knowledge and, above all, to allow them to grow into the habit of logical and correct reasoning in every subject." (See Mauffett-Leenders, Erskine, and Leenders, 1997, p. v.) Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994) state that education should focus on developing qualities of the mind (curiosity, judgment, and wisdom), qualities of the person (character, sensitivity, integrity, and responsibility), and the ability to apply general concepts and knowledge to specific situations. The goals of strategic management/business policy courses used as capstone courses for business schools are structured to support many educational purposes: for example, developing strategic thinking processes, applying strategic analysis decision-making techniques, illustrating real world situations, and integrating the functional areas of business (Jennings 1996).

To this end, the case method has been developed and widely used as a primary pedagogy in strategic management courses. Students are exposed through cases

to a variety of industrial, organizational, and strategic issues. They learn managers' roles and responsibilities in guiding a business. They build their skills by identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis). They get valuable experience in formulating practical strategies. Students develop confidence in dealing with ambiguities and uncertainties.

Christensen (1991a) suggests that a case study class must be conducted on the fundamental principle of partnership in which students and instructor share the responsibilities and power of teaching. The collection of individuals in a class must evolve into a learning community with shared values and common goals. Students sort out relevant facts, develop logical conclusions, and explain and defend them. They assume the role of managers in the case and reflect realistic perspectives. The instructor shapes and molds the discussion flow by asking "why," offering alternative views, playing the devil's advocate, requesting to clarify assumptions, and exploring alternative solutions (Thompson and Strickland 1998). The instructor manages both content and process of class discussion so as to make certain that critical case issues are covered in a disciplined way. The instructor is required to master the artistry of managing uncertainty and spontaneity (Christensen 1991a).

CHALLENGES AND ISSUES OF CASE DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP

Christensen (1991b) explains that an instructor of a case studies class needs three skills: questioning, listening, and responding. These three skills are like the panels of a triptych. In other words, the instructor must have a command of the facts and of the analysis of case. The instructor must also control the process of case discussion in class and in this effort the students must join in collaboration with the instructor. But the primary case method issue we are considering in this paper is the approach that is best at facilitating this collaboration between the instructor and the students.

According to Mauffette-Leenders, Eskine and Leenders (1997) the instructor encounters the following difficulties in handling ineffective student involvement.

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1. How to deal with a student who simply repeats case facts as opposed to using them to re-emphasize or build on an analysis?
2. How to deal with a student who repeats someone else's comments?
3. How to deal with a student who digresses in the form of irrelevant, off-topic or out-of-place comments?
4. How to deal with a student who monopolizes the discussion?
5. How to deal with a student who attacks, ridicules, or puts down fellow students?
6. How to deal with a student who is disengaged in discussion (reading a newspaper, doing homework for other classes, sleeping)?

As the facilitator of case discussion, Christensen (1991b) points out that the instructor faces many subtle issues.

1. How to choose one student to answer a question or make comments when many others raise their hands for recognition?
2. Whether or not to respond personally to a student's comment, ignore it, or refer it to another student for comment?
3. Whether to call on students or wait for volunteers to initiate discussion or to answer questions?
4. How to correct, or to call into public question, errors of facts, or of judgment without humiliating or embarrassing the student?
5. How to offer a supportive response to a quiet student when he/she makes a comment of marginal quality?
6. How to balance the immediate interests of the class with the need to cover the instructional program of the day?
7. Whether to open case discussion with action steps or factual questions, or with specifics, or with general open-ended questions?

The instructor may err in leading case discussion in many different ways. Leonard (1997) explains three "pathological listening patterns."

1. The Teacher's Express. The instructor drives the class through a preordained discussion. Students feel they are merely being asked to fill in the blanks, not to be creative.
2. Hiding the Ball. The instructor has in mind a preferred answer to the questions he asks. Students feel they are just being asked to guess what the instructor is thinking.
3. Everything Goes. The instructor approves each comment as intelligent, interesting, and insightful. Students feel more at ease, but they also feel that there is not anything worth listening to.

Napell (1994) describes six common behaviors that are dysfunctional in case discussion.

1. Insufficient Wait-Time. "Wait-time" is the amount of time after the initial question has been asked before the instructor answers it himself/herself, repeats or rephrases the question, or adds further information to the question. When it is insufficient, students do not have a

chance to think over what is being asked, formulate intelligent responses, or ask for clarification.

2. The Rapid-Reward. Rapid acceptance of a correct answer from the first respondent terminates further creative thinking prematurely.
3. The Programmed Answer. Steering students toward the answer the instructor expects, the instructor limits a variety of possible ideas and inadvertently shows he/she is not interested in their ideas.
4. Non-Specific Feedback Questions. Asking students "Are there any questions? Do you all understand?" fails to solicit feedback.
5. The Teacher Ego-Stroking and Classroom Climate. Feeling compelled to comment on each student idea, interrupting, intimidating, and deciding the final conclusions prevents students from engaging in the discussion.
6. Fixation at a Low Level of Questioning. The instructor asks questions only to recall bits and pieces of rote-memorized data without moving upward to comprehension, analysis, synthesis and evaluation stage of learning.

Calling on students in the order in which they raise their hands or in the alphabetical order of their last names can be efficient and orderly. But this approach does not call for debate of the comments or a valid exchange of the ideas. Each comment is independent, thus there is no opportunity to build on each other's insights (Leonard 1997).

At the heart of these issues on class discussion/participation is another perennial challenge to the instructor. It is how to motivate student involvement in case discussion. It is very common to reward student participation as part of his/her grade. A seating chart may be imposed to enable the instructor to make check marks for students who talked and to count how many times comments were made (even with a scheme for assessing the quality of the comments). The instructor must be diligent to make check marks on the sitting chart as students talk. It can cause a disruption in his/her train of thought. On the other hand, students are very sensitive to whether or not the instructor records their discussion entry on the sitting chart. They become annoyed when check marks are not made (Roberts and Peach 1997).

HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS AND EXPERIMENTS

Case method teaching is a social art. It is an alliance of an instructor and students. They share the responsibilities and privileges of teaching and learning together. It takes a delicate balance of guiding and controlling class discussion. It requires the instructor's spontaneous judgment of what questions or responses would be most appropriate at what time as the class discussion goes on. It just can not be pre-programmed. Further, the relationship and pattern of case discussion can be influenced by many variables, such as the class size, the physical facilities, the time of the year, the

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type of case, the place in the sequence of classes, and the like.

To deal with the host of uncertainties and challenges, an instructor must have the right frame of mind (the principle of partnership with students) and develop discussion facilitation skills. An understanding of the issues and pitfalls of case discussion leadership is the first step toward the development of helpful skills. To practice the skills, Mauffette-Leenders, Eskine, and Leenders (1997) present a repertoire of statements that can be very useful. Some examples of the statements are as follows:

- “We should start by”
- “We need to spend more (less) time on”
- “We should next talk about”
- “We need some more explanations of”
- “We should get back on topic”
- “We need to resolve this difference of opinions before we can move on.”

Likewise, Christensen (1991b) suggests a typology of questions that are helpful in leading case discussion:

- Open-ended questions (“What are your reactions to the case?”)
- Diagnostic questions (“What is your analysis of the problem?”)
- Information-seeking questions (“What is the company’s target market?”)
- Challenge (testing) questions (“What evidence supports your conclusion?”)
- Action questions (“What actions would you take in this situation?”)
- Questions on priority (“What should be the first step to take?”)
- Prediction questions (“If you implement your decision, what would be the competitors’ reactions?”)
- Hypothetical questions (“What would have happened to the company if?”)
- Questions of extension (“What are the implications of your conclusions for the managers?”)
- Questions of generalization (“What do you consider to be the major forces that cause the industry deterioration?”)

Ronstadt (1988) recommends several ideas to enrich case discussion by listing various roles a discussion leader may play. The leader may integrate his/her relevant personal experiences into the case discussion, provoke the class to look at the situation from totally different perspectives, bring ethical consideration into the discussion, or share in-depth knowledge of the case issues.

To help measure student participation more objectively, Roberts and Peach (1997) developed a simple technique. Students are asked to write down on 3x5 cards comments they make during each class. The cards are

collected after class. The instructor then evaluates the quantity and quality of the comments. The cards are returned back to students with scores as feedback, which enhances further student discussion.

OUR EXPERIMENT

The authors have experimented with a tool, called “Planning for Participation in Case Discussion” form, to help students listen more carefully to a student team’s case analysis presentation and to prepare them better for active participation in class discussion afterward. It asks students to write down the following reflections during and/or after a team presentation:

1. Additional evidences I would like to suggest in support of the team’s analysis.
2. Challenges I would like to make to the team on their assumptions.
3. Ideas I would like to add to the team’s analysis (i.e., additional SWOT analysis, different alternatives, new pros and cons of alternative evaluation).
4. Other contributions I would like to make (i.e., personal experiences relevant to the case, relationships to previous cases, outside research).

Students check off the points they bring out in class discussion. In a relatively large class, students may not have opportunities to contribute any or all of their planned ideas. The class discussion may take unexpected directions and students may find that their planned contributions are not appropriate to be presented in the class. Still, the instructor, when reviewing the points after class, can detect the level of students’ grasp of the facts of the case, their level of preparation done before the class, and their motivation to participate in the discussion. This approach may become a base to award to students class participation points even though they may not have talked much in class.

During the last class of the semester, the students were asked to evaluate the helpfulness of the instrument. More specifically, they were asked to respond on a Likert scale of “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “no opinion,” “agree,” and “strongly agree” to the following questions:

1. “The form helped me pay close attention to group presentations.”
2. “The form increased my enthusiasm for my class discussion participation.”
3. “The form helped me better prepare for my class discussion participation.”
4. “The form helped me improve my class discussion participation.”
5. “I would recommend the form to the instructors who teach in the case method.”

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All 34 undergraduate students in two sections (19 and 16 in separate classes) responded. The results are as follows:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
Statement #1 "listen "		5	2	23	5
Statement #2 "enthusiasm"		5	6	21	3
Statement #3 "prepare"		3	3	21	8
Statement #4 "improve"		8	5	19	3
Statement #5 "recommend"		2	3	22	8

REFERENCES

The number of students who found the form helpful in four different aspects ranged from the lowest 22 (62.9%) for "improvement" to the highest 29 (82.9%) for "preparation." While the form seemed to help more students listen to the presentations and prepare for class discussion participation, it seemed less effective in increasing enthusiasm or actual participation in class discussion. However, strong support for the instrument is indicated by the number of students who would recommend it to other case method classes, 30 (85.7%).

This report is very much a work-in-progress. We are actively experimenting with different approaches to enhance the quality and quantity of student participation in case study class discussions. Our plan is to use the "Planning for Participation in Case Discussion" form in one of two sections of a strategic management course taught by the same instructor. All other instructional approaches will be the same, except for the use of the form. We will statistically compare observations on the performance of the students to the use of the form to see if the form is effective in improving class participation.

CONCLUSION

The case method can be very exciting and stimulating. It can be very effective in learning and also entertaining. To a large extent, its success or failure depends on the instructor's skills of leading class discussion. As there are no right answers to case analysis, there can not be any set rules or procedures of case discussion leadership. Ideas are continuously experiencing change by the "scholars in teaching" for refinement and innovations of discussion leadership skills. There are also formal programs to share the ideas like ABSEL conferences and the Harvard's Seminars on Case Method Teaching. What we are trying to find are methods that elicit enthusiastic class participation and motivate quality class discussion.

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