

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22,1995

NEGOTIATING WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Lane Tracy, Ohio University

ABSTRACT

This paper describes and evaluates a method of involving students in classroom decision making by negotiating with them about the basic parameters of the course. After analysis of the feasibility and usefulness of the method, based on several years of experimentation by the author, the paper concludes with a general discussion of student participation in the process of continuous improvement of a course.

CLASSROOM GOVERNANCE

Many instructors assume that they must govern all aspects of the courses they teach. They see it as their responsibility to create learning objectives, set all assignments, establish rules of conduct in class, and determine the grading system. The responsibility of students is to conform to the requirements set by the instructor.

At the same time there is a substantial body of business research demonstrating the efficacy of employee participation in decision making (Miller & Monge, 1986; Cotton et al, 1988). The traditional assumption that managers must do all of the thinking and that operative employees simply carry out orders has been overturned. Getting employees involved in important workplace decisions has been found to be beneficial in many ways. For instance, better information is brought to bear on a problem by those who are directly involved in it, solutions are easier to implement, morale is improved, employee creativity is increased, and employees develop a better understanding of issues that must be decided by management (Plunkett, 1990).

College students aren't employees in the classroom, of course. Indeed, a good argument could be made for the proposition that instructors are employees of the students. All the more reason, then, that we should examine the possible benefits of getting students involved in decisions about the courses they take (Richter & Tjosvold, 1980). Students have a legitimate interest in the quality of instruction and the content of courses.

Most colleges and universities recognize the legitimacy of student concerns by instituting a student-evaluation-of-teacher-performance (SETP) system. Such a system is similar to the employee satisfaction surveys that are conducted in many firms. Yet **SETP** only measures performance after the fact. The feedback may benefit the

next lot of students who take the course, if the teacher acts upon it, but the only benefit derived by the evaluators is the satisfaction of expressing their opinions. The **SETP** system may even inhibit attempts at improving the course during the term, because instructors may anticipate a negative student reaction to change.

Under the leadership of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), continuous improvement (CI) has become a watchword among accredited business schools (AACSB, 1993). CI calls for constant monitoring of processes and implementation of refinements as quickly as possible. It has been applied successfully at many universities (Seymour, 1993), but seldom to the teaching function (Marchese, 1993).

If the SETP system is supposed to be part of the monitoring process for CI, it is too slow. Why should we wait until the instructional process is over before obtaining feedback about its effectiveness? Does such a process meet the tenets of CI? No, CI requires ongoing measurements of effectiveness and in-process corrections, wherever possible. And such corrections are certainly possible in a course that lasts for ten to fifteen weeks.

One method of obtaining earlier feedback from students about how a course meets their needs and expectations is to negotiate with them about the course. In formulating an agenda for negotiation and presenting their proposals, students reveal a lot about how the course fits their values and interests. Negotiation also gives the instructor an opportunity to make changes in order to better meet the students' needs.

DEVELOPING CLASSROOM NEGOTIATION

The author regularly teaches two courses in negotiation and conflict management, one for management majors and one for senior students from all over the campus. Each of these courses involves the students in a variety of mock negotiation exercises throughout the term. It seems a natural extension, therefore, to engage them in negotiations that have real consequences, namely bargaining about the course they are taking.

One of the aims of these courses is to introduce students to a style of negotiation different from the

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competitive or win-lose style to which most of them are accustomed. The instructor tries to demonstrate that negotiation can be a collaborative process in which interests are expressed and options are explored with the aim of coming to an agreement that provides increased mutual gain for all of the participants (Lax & Sebenius, 1986). Negotiation about the course seems ideal for this purpose. Competitive negotiation with the students would be ineffective, because the instructor possesses too much power. But collaborative negotiation doesn't depend on power. It depends on good preparation, understanding of one's own interests and those of the other party, and ability to create options to meet those interests.

Pattern of Classroom Negotiations

When I first decided to try negotiating with the class, I limited the issues to aspects of the grading system. I simply specified a set of activities that would be graded, but put no relative weights on them. The class was invited to negotiate about what the weights should be. In the course syllabus I expressed interests in fairness and in motivating the students to learn. In class these interests were reiterated and I mentioned additional interests such as providing a good learning environment and satisfying the students. The class members were asked to discuss their mutual interests before taking a position. This first bargaining session occurred during the second or third meeting of the class.

The class was given time to organize itself and to discuss how it wished to negotiate. I waited in the hallway, available to answer questions. Typically, the students discussed their interests and priorities for about thirty minutes before calling me back in and presenting me with a set of proposals. Often these proposals involved additional issues beyond the weights for the grading system. Other issues that tended to be brought up included reduction of the reading assignments, elimination or shortening of a paper, distribution of outlines or questions in advance of exams, allowance of unexcused absences, and shifting of the date for the final exam.

My response was generally to accept these additional issues as topics for negotiation, without promising any change. If no change was possible on an issue, because of university policy or the accountability of the instructor, I explained this to the class. I indicated that each proposal would be considered on its merits, and invited the class to present its rationale. Usually a chief spokesperson emerged to do so, with occasional comments from other class members. I asked questions to clarify what the students were proposing and why, withholding any evaluative comments until the

proposals were well understood.

To show good will, I usually accepted one or two of the items in the class proposal early in the negotiation, indicating why these items were acceptable. For instance, I might accept most or all of the proposed grading weights, explaining that the issue of weights was more important to the students than to me. However, the proposed weights had to be reasonable. A proposal to put fifty percent of the weight on attendance, for instance, would not be accepted. I often asked for something in return, such as a pledge from the class to do the assigned readings and be prepared to discuss them, or a requirement of professional dress for the final negotiation.

For items that were not accepted immediately, I sometimes suggested alternatives or explored options. This usually had the result of raising questions that the students hadn't considered among themselves. Negotiations were then recessed, perhaps until the next class period, so that the students could caucus and discuss the alternatives. It took from two to four bargaining sessions to establish agreement. I then typed up the terms of the agreement and distributed them as an addendum to the syllabus.

Extension and Improvement of the Process

I have been negotiating with classes for approximately five years. During that time the process has been extended and refined. It is now also used in a labor relations class in which the students later engage in mock labor negotiations. It was also tried in one organizational behavior course.

The syllabi for these courses have changed to express more general interests and fewer firm requirements. Time is explicitly set aside for the negotiations. I now suggest additional issues about which the class may wish to negotiate. In order to integrate the negotiations into the course, the process is discussed, analyzed, and related to the readings. Some of the improvements have come about through student comments during these debriefing sessions.

Although the agreement with the class is typed up and distributed, I explain to the students that negotiation is an ongoing process. The agreement is a living document that can be amended by mutual consent. On several occasions classes have raised additional issues and reopened negotiations later in the course. I usually permit this, especially on issues that were not covered by the original agreement. Special circumstances, such

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as a snow storm that closed the campus for a week, have also occasioned renegotiation.

EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS

Students generally appreciate the opportunity to negotiate about the course. They express satisfaction with the outcome at the conclusion of negotiations, even though they never get everything they have asked for. Comments on the SETP form also indicate general satisfaction with the process.

No hard evidence is available about improved learning. Usually mine is the only section of the course, so there is no opportunity for comparison. One outcome I have noticed, however, is improved attendance. Most classes negotiate to put 20-30 percent of the weight on attendance, arguing that the many in-class exercises require good attendance. Typically, more than half of the class members subsequently have perfect attendance.

Occasionally a student will complain that the instructor still has the predominance of power and controls the outcome. My policy is to admit the truth of this while pointing out that I nevertheless agreed to several of the proposals put forth by the class. I also emphasize that students do have sources of power, including the potential to act collectively or withdraw from the class.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the process is adhering scrupulously to the agreement once it is reached. On a couple of occasions I have inadvertently violated an agreement, thereby raising skepticism among the members of the class. The negotiation process seems to raise the level of student expectations of the instructor, so that any lapse in carrying out the agreement threatens the atmosphere of trust that has been built up. My response to these situations has been to admit the error and strive to correct it. If the means of correction isn't obvious, the class is consulted on the best way to do it.

In five years the only truly negative experience with teacher-class negotiations occurred when a couple of students insisted that I had said something, which I did not believe I had said. I reacted angrily to being challenged, and that destroyed some of the openness that had developed in the negotiations. I should instead have taken the opportunity to point out the importance of perceptions in negotiation, and the dangers of mis-communication. Teacher-class negotiations provide many excellent opportunities for learning; the instructor must always keep in mind that learning is the ultimate purpose of the exercise.

Practical Considerations

There are several practical considerations in deciding whether to negotiate with your students. The first is the appropriateness of the negotiation experience to the subject matter of the course. It is easy to justify spending time on such negotiation when the topic of the course is negotiation or conflict management or labor relations. Negotiation also involves issues that are prominent in courses on management, organizational behavior, marketing, and human resource management. In subject areas such as finance and accounting, however, negotiation about the course would probably not contribute directly to any learning objectives of the course.

Negotiation takes time. Some may question whether that much time can be spared from the class, even if negotiation presents learning opportunities that are relevant to the course. If that is a major concern, one suggestion is to have the class elect a negotiating team to bargain with the instructor outside of class. This would also be appropriate in a course that has nothing to do with negotiation. The process then would focus simply on obtaining an agreement acceptable to both sides, not on learning about negotiation.

Another major consideration is the instructor's expertise in negotiation. We all negotiate from time to time in our daily lives, but some of us are much more comfortable than others with the process. If you are not ready for the give and take with your students that negotiation entails, I would not recommend that you try it. Negotiation with students must not be a process in which the instructor tries to manipulate them to accept a preordained set of proposals. At a minimum the instructor must be willing to make some concessions. A better process would be for the instructor and students to work collaboratively toward an agreement that improves the course for everyone.

Lack of bargaining skills may not be the only problem. Some instructors may be too assertive for the sort of negotiation that is needed with students. If you are going to try to manipulate students to accept your own pre-ordained conditions for the course, it would be better simply to mandate them. To negotiate fairly about how much weight should be put on each exam and paper, for instance, you must be prepared to admit that there is legitimacy in the students' views on this matter. For my own part, I simply remember who is paying part of my salary and who will be evaluating my performance at the end to the course.

Finally, negotiation probably will not work in the large,

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lecture-style classes that are typical of introductory courses. It would require too much time and the level of participation would be low for most of the students. Also, first- and second-year students may not be sufficiently aware of what they want out of a course.

Negotiation and Continuous Improvement

Negotiation with students serves the purposes of continuous improvement very well. It opens up lines of communication and helps the students to feel comfortable in providing feedback about classroom processes. For instance, after the first examination my classes sometimes ask to renegotiate the structure of the remaining exams. I regard this as a legitimate expression of student interests and am quite willing to renegotiate. I do assert my own interests in obtaining a fair assessment of what they have learned, but there is certainly more than one good way to do that.

Students have also been very forthcoming in suggesting special topics and guest speakers, as well as contacting, inviting, and introducing the speakers. Such active participation in the design of the course, when properly guided should lead to improvement from almost any point of view.

If you do not feel comfortable negotiating with students, I would still recommend that you consult with them and obtain their assessment of the course before it is all over. This might be accomplished by meeting with a committee of class representatives, conducting a midcourse survey, collecting suggestions in a suggestion box, or simply expressing willingness to listen to comments and suggestions. When students see that you are willing to make changes in response to their feedback, their final assessment of the course is likely to be substantially better. And rightly so, because a course that is responsive to student interests and concerns really is better.

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