

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

AN EXPERIMENT IN TEACHING PRINCIPLES COURSES: THE MINI DEBATE FORMULA

Han X. Vo, Winthrop College

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with an experimental teaching device involving the use of a discussion/debate technique, intended as a supplement to the traditional lecture- assignment-test Format. The core of the experiment consists of assigning a debate topic to groups of students in class, to be followed by intra-group discussion and inter-group debate. The idea is that the students may learn new concepts and principles better by working together in small groups and debating with the other groups. Although there are limitations, the experiment has produced promising results.

INTRODUCTION

It is not an uncommon practice in business courses such as Marketing or Management for an instructor to ask his or her class to work on a project involving small groups of several students. The appeal of the group assignment or group report concept in modern business education may come from many sources, yet the fundamental rationale for this practice lies in the very nature of the assignment. In assignments where exchanges of ideas or approaches are essential and formulation of strategies or policies is called for, collective effort is more productive than individual effort. This is perhaps the main reason why group assignment is a popular method in many simulation exercises involving a marketing or management problem.

Actual application of the group assignment approach can take many forms; yet the common denominator involves some form of intra-group cooperation, followed by individual group reports either to the instructor or to the class. However, in many instances, it is desirable to allow or even encourage overt interaction between groups. This interaction is particularly useful in situations in which the assigned problem or project can benefit from intensive cross-examination and multi-approach analysis.

This paper deals with an experiment in pedagogic technique conducted with Economics Principles classes. The experiment was designed as a supplement to the traditional teaching format that relies on lectures, reading and homework assignments, and examinations. The new approach is based upon the notion that, in issue-oriented and analytical subjects such as Economics, a balanced mixture of intra-group working and inter-group action can help improve effectiveness in teaching new concepts and applications. In some respects, it departs from the standard practice of group assignment by focusing as much attention on the interactive/competitive aspect as on the collaborative aspect. *Faute de mieux*, this can be called an experimentation with the mini debate formula.

The core of the experiment consists of intra-group "brainstorming", inter-group competition, and, finally, student self-evaluation. Basically, brainstorming and competition are accomplished by discussion and debate. As

an additional incentive, the students are also given an opportunity to evaluate their performances by their peers. That, in effect, is the essence of self-evaluation.

THE RATIONALE

At the principles or introduction level, perhaps the main teaching objective ought to be to help students understand new concepts and analytical principles as well as to show students how to use them reasonably well. The twin objectives are ordinarily handled by the lecture-assignment-test format. The group assignment practice is probably not very popular with principles courses as with upper-level courses; but even *if* it is used in teaching principles classes, the interactive aspect is often neglected. Thus, the mini debate formula (hereafter, the formula) is meant to combine the benefits derived from both the collaborative and interactive aspects of group assignment.

First, the formula contributes to reiterative learning in that intra-group discussions provide the opportunity and the incentive to review new concepts and principles. In addition, these "brainstorming" sessions can also help students strengthen their understanding and suggest ways to apply their new knowledge. The reiterative process continues through the time of the debate, when the learned materials are being used again and again.

It is also expected that the formula will help stimulate their thinking by creating a challenging atmosphere. A smooth and well-focused debate is a practical way to achieve that purpose. In fact, the preparation for the debate, which takes place before and during intra-group discussions, provides another stimulus for serious thinking and individual initiatives. In the lecture format, little class time is left for students to assemble formally and discuss what they have just learned in class.

There is a limit to the extent to which an instructor can challenge his/her students either to think individually or collectively. While many skillful instructors succeed in this by simply using the classic lecture-assignment-test format, others are not so lucky. In such cases especially, the formula may bring some relief. Well organized, a discussion/debate session can create the kind of class ambiance conducive to serious thinking and learning.

On a more fundamental level, the experiment was designed as a way of bringing real life into the classroom. The assigned topic was chosen so that the students can relate principles and theories to facts. During the group discussions and debates, they have a chance to appreciate the value of abstract theories in explaining real world phenomena. A competent lecturer is often capable of "breathing life" into what might have otherwise been a set of dry abstractions. Individual assignments in reading supplementary materials or problems are also helpful in

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

this respect. Nevertheless, as a complementary tool, the discussion/debate approach can make students more aware of the significance of theories in analyzing concrete issues.

Finally, because of the greater student awareness, the formula can serve as a starting point in the long-term goal of helping students develop their critical faculties and acquire an analytical habit. The debate can also heighten student awareness of the need for conceptualizing a problem, as well as the logic or rationale of a solution. This becomes clear as they set about presenting their arguments and defending their position.

PREPARATION

Early in the academic session, a principles class (Economics in this case) is divided up into three or four small groups (teams). The number of debates per session varies according to the length of the session, but a reasonable number is four or five of these mini debates scheduled at fairly regular intervals. A week or so before each discussion/debate session, a specific topic is assigned to the whole class, so that all teams receive the same assignment.

Once this is done, each team, working separately, has about ten days to prepare for the presentations and debate which are to follow. The major aim of the preparation is to enable the students to work on the assignment both individually and collectively as a team. The class is told unambiguously what will be expected of it during the presentations and the debate. That is, each team will make a presentation or analysis of the problem, propose solution(s) or make recommendation(s). A short debate is to take place between the teams immediately after the presentations.

During preparation, therefore, each team member should work on the project, and the team as a whole is expected to meet to discuss progress and exchange ideas. Members of all the teams, i.e., the whole class, are advised to review the relevant materials from the reading assignments and lectures and try to analyze the problem based on those materials. They are also encouraged to engage in further reading/research on the topic as needed. These preparations once over, a specific class period is then chosen and set aside for the purpose of the discussion/debate which lasts the whole period.

TOPIC SELECTION

The most important requirement for a debate topic is that it must be synchronized with the subject matter being taught. That is, it must be relevant to the materials covered in class, so that students can relate the principles they are learning to the subject that they are asked to tackle. It is essential that they see the opportunity to apply their new knowledge in a concrete manner. In addition, the chosen topic must present solid analytical interests. This is necessary because the major objective of the discussion/debate is to challenge students to analyze an issue using the tools that they are learning.

Finally, for the assignment to be manageable, the chosen topic must be limited in scope and precise in nature. For the purpose of the experiment, topics have been or will be drawn from the areas of demand and supply analyses, anti-trust

policies, public regulation of monopolies, the energy crunch, incidence of the tax, deregulation of industry, tax cut, defense spending, supply-side economics, and so on. Headlines or articles from the news media and serious publications can provide interesting inspirations.

THE PRESENTATIONS

The debate itself, which is the climax of the whole session, always takes place last. At the beginning, about 10-15 minutes are reserved for a last minute get-together of each team. Now is the last chance for each team to prepare for the presentations and the debate. Members can engage in further discussion, formulate their conclusion(s), and plot their strategy. For the purpose of this in-group deliberation, seating can be rearranged so that members of each team sit close together in circles.

During this time, the instructor does not intervene except to help when needed and to remind each group to reach a consensus and come up with a concrete plan of attack and specific proposals. As group discussion draws to a close, each group proceeds to elect a spokesperson who will represent the group in the presentations and debate.

During the presentations, each spokesperson is allowed 5-10 minutes to express his or her group's viewpoint(s), finding(s), conclusion(s) and/or recommendation(s). These presentations go on with the student representatives taking the instructor's place, at the desk or blackboard. No questions or comments from the audience are allowed at this time. The debate follows immediately after the presentations.

THE DEBATE

First, opponent teams are allowed to question or rebut the other teams. Representatives are given priority in speaking. At this point, the floor is open to encourage the rest of the class to participate in the debate. During the debate period, which usually lasts 15-20 minutes depending on how long the class period meets, the instructor acts as a moderator, making sure that the debate runs on course, smoothly, and productively.

Open participation gives those who have been following the presentations and debate passively a chance to get involved in supporting his or her side and rejecting the opponents. This is the time for defense, comment, or criticism on the strength(s) or weakness(es) of the arguments. It is also a chance upon which different viewpoints may be heard and reacted. Performance evaluation concludes the debate.

EVALUATION

As in evaluating the performance of a subjective test, the evaluation of a discussion/debate is a rather tricky business. In as much as there are objectives associated with evaluation, there are different ways of evaluating or grading. That is to say, none of them is perfect.

There is little doubt that evaluating a debate performance is a fairly subjective task, no matter who

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

does the evaluating. Yet, some compromise has to be made, and the procedure that promises the maximum likelihood of achieving a favored objective is preferred.

I favor the view that evaluation should reflect the basic philosophy behind the mini debate formula, namely the emphasis should be more on encouraging participation and less on measuring standard. To accomplish this, students are informed that the total debate scores will count 10-20% towards their course grade. Of course 10% or 20%, or any other number for that matter, is an arbitrary choice. The guidelines are that such a weight should be high enough to engage student attention, but not high enough to cause distraction from their other course obligations, or, as sometimes happens, cause counterproductive rival behavior. Especially when the debate performance is evaluated by peers, a procedure described below, destructive rivalry may develop from knowing that too much is at stake in the debate sessions.

One favorite method can be described as a peer-grading system. According to this procedure, the performance of one team is graded by the remaining teams, and an average grade is taken for that team. For example, if there are three teams (A, B, and C), team A's grade would be the average of the two grades assigned by team B and team C, and so on. And the grade assigned by any one team, say B, is normally arrived at by consensus from all the participating members of team B (or this grade may be computed as a simple average of all the grades assigned by team B's members).

Ordinarily, before grading begins, the instructor makes a brief summation of the arguments and offers his own interpretation and conclusions. This gives the students a standard by which to judge the performance of peer groups. This evaluation system is rather attractive in that it tends to stimulate participation, and provides some semblance of objectivity or fairness, provided all the students participate conscientiously. One possible drawback is that if the stake is set too high, as in the case where too much weight is attached to the debates, the students may take the grade all too seriously. This attitude can lead to disruptive rivalry which tends to destroy objectivity and discourage participation.

Naturally, there are many other evaluation procedures that can be used with good results. One variation of the peer-grading approach is to combine the student-assigned grades with the instructor assigned grades and take some sort of average of the two. Or, in the extreme, only the instructor-assigned grades are used.

One feature that all of these methods have in common is that all the members of each team receive the same grade. This may be objectionable on the ground that some members who contribute little or nothing to the team effort get a "free ride". This development was a legitimate concern, as confirmed by my own experience. Nevertheless, something may be gained by that practice, namely, it tends to encourage team work and inter-group competition, which generally exerted a favorable effect on class participation.

On the other hand, one method that emphasizes individual performance is to ask each team to grade its own members. In that case, the team as a whole has to determine the contribution that each member has made. One possible

problem is that it is usually psychologically difficult for the membership to make that kind of decision. Although this approach may increase individual efforts, resistance to such practice may harm esprit de corps that is essential for inter-group competition.

THE RESULTS

The long-term effects of the experiment are very difficult or even impossible to measure. However, judging by the majority response, one seems safe in concluding that the formula has brought generally favorable, if limited, results.

Student reactions vary from a nonchalant "OK", to a more enthusiastic "very helpful", "great", etc. Some, when asked, expressed an interest in continuation of the experiment; others volunteered the opinion that the sessions help them learn the concepts and principles better.

Understandably the students were reluctant to openly criticize the formula; still, no student appeared to object to it on the ground that it is a thoroughly unproductive exercise. Most of the objections were centered on the organizational aspect rather than on the basic philosophy behind the experiment.

Still, it is difficult to determine to what extent the debate format helped the students improve their handling of analytical tools, hence getting better grades. Nevertheless, it appears that some better students did take the debates quite seriously. To them, the discussion/debate sessions did provide a needed opportunity to improve their analytical as well as expository and oratorical skills.

Other salutary effects have also been observed. For instance, the format provided an effective forum in which different opinions and approaches were presented. This helped broaden the perspective for all the participants, including the instructor, of course. Part-time students, who hold jobs in business or government, had a chance to share their experience with their younger fellow students.

On a psychological level, the debate sessions provided a welcome change, even relief, from the monotony inherent in the traditional format. Furthermore, the formula seemed to be quite compatible with the lecture format; they complemented each other well. An added bonus of the debate format is its convenience in application. The regular classroom is simply turned into a forum, and no special scheduling considerations are needed because the debates take place at the regular class meetings.

LIMITATIONS-CONCLUSION

Clearly, the most serious problem is student apathy, which leads to a lack of adequate preparation and participation. A student who comes to a session reluctantly or unprepared has nothing to contribute; or worse still, he can become a distraction. Again, the criticism about students getting a "free ride" should not be taken lightly.

Class size as well as the length of the class period can also present problems. First, the formula does not work satisfactorily with a too small or too big size class. It seems that a size between 20 and 40

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 9, 1982

students is ideal; however, it should work with a size as small as 10, up to as large as 60 students. But outside of that range, the debate format becomes impractical, if not downright impossible. Secondly, a class period that meets longer, e.g., 75 minutes, would be better for the debates than a shorter class period, e.g., 50 minutes. Longer meeting time permits thorough, un-rushed presentations and debates.

For courses in Statistics, Accounting, and the like, the debate formula has no place. This formula probably works best in courses that are analytical and issue-oriented like Economics, Law, Political Science, as well as business courses in the marketing and management areas.

Last but not least, the instructor himself must be willing and prepared to guide the discussions and debates. He must keep looking for appropriate debate topics, and above all, must be ready to assist the students all the way from start to finish. During the debate, he must be prepared to explain or help whenever a snag or difficulty develops, and to provide the momentum when the debate runs out of steam. Simply put, more work for the instructor.

In short, in spite of its shortcomings, the experiment suggests that the mini debate formula can provide a rewarding experience for teacher and students alike. Well planned, the formula represents a potentially powerful teaching device. Variations of the formula are possible, even desirable, under different conditions. Only the instructor himself can decide which variation serves his purpose best.

Further, although the experiment has been conducted with reasonable success in Economics classes, its field of application may very well extend beyond the boundary of that discipline. Also, there is no valid reason why the formula cannot be effectively used in upper-level undergraduate courses. So, for those who have not, and are now tempted to try, let it be said ... "Bravo".