

Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

USING A CASE AS THE BASIS FOR A MODIFIED DEBATE

R. Bruce McAfee, Lawrence Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how student participation in case discussions can be increased and how class sessions can be enlivened by using a "four-way modified debate" with a case serving as the basis for the debate. It describes how the debating and judging teams are established and what procedures are followed when conducting the debate. A case that has been used successfully as the basis for a debate is presented. The results found when using this approach are described, as are possible modifications to it. Suggestions as to how to conduct modified debates are given.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has used the case approach has undoubtedly observed that class discussion is all too often dominated by just a few students. This is particularly true at the beginning of the semester or quarter when many students are reluctant to express their opinions on a case. In addition to this problem, a second difficulty often encountered by case users is that students may become bored as the result of the case approach being used time after time. Not surprisingly, repetition can take its toll. This can happen even though the cases themselves and the instructor may be excellent.

In an attempt to overcome both of these problems, I have utilized, in a Personnel Administration course as well as in several other courses, what I call a "four-way modified debate." A case serves as the basis for the debate.

ESTABLISHING THE TEAMS

The basic procedure followed is to ask every student to answer in writing one specific question which appears at the end of a highly controversial case and to bring his or her assignment to class. As each student enters the classroom I quickly read his or her answer and assign him or her to a debating team consisting of students who answered the question in a similar manner. Each team consists of no more than five students. If more than five students hold the same opinion on a case, the excess students are assigned to a team of judges. By following this procedure, four debating teams can usually be established as are one or more teams of judges (depending on class size).

After all the debating teams have been formed, I explain to the teams that a four-way debate is going to be held and that they were put on the team they were because they hold similar opinions on the case. I ask them to present and defend their opinion during the debate, and allow them to go out into the ball or adjacent rooms to organize, while I talk to the judges.

The judges are told that their role in the debate is to "search for the truth." They are to listen to all of the different sides presented during the debate and then, after the debate is over, to tell the class what they believe is the "correct" solution to the case.

The judges are told that they need not agree with any of the opinions expressed by the debating teams. By the same token, they can agree with one or more of the debating teams if they feel it is appropriate. The judges are specifically instructed that the debate is not a contest of debating skills and that their job is not to pick the "winner" of the debate.

CONDUCTING THE DEBATE

In conducting the debate, all debaters are told that the debate will consist of two short rounds with a recess in between. The purpose of round one is for each team to learn the position on the case of the other debating teams. Hence, each team is asked to explain their position on the case, as comprehensively as possible, to both the judges and the other three debating teams. At the conclusion of this round, I ask everyone if they understand the position of all four debating teams. If they do not, I call upon the debating team whose position is not clear to the others to explain their position a second time. This procedure continues until everyone in the class understands every team's position.

As soon as round one is complete, the debating teams are told to prepare their criticisms of each of the other three teams for round two, and are given 10 minutes to prepare for it. During this period the judges are told to discuss what they have just heard and to begin to determine the "correct" solution to the case.

In round two, each debating team criticizes the position of each of the other teams. Team One criticizes the position of Team Two, Team Three, and Team Four. Team Two then criticizes the position of Team One, Team Three, and Team Four, etc. The group being criticized is told that, unlike a traditional debate, they are not allowed to rebutt the criticisms made by other teams. They must simply listen to them: This is done primarily to meet time constraints (50 minute class) but also to ensure that the debate doesn't degenerate into a shouting match which can occur when so many debaters are present. Round two, and the debate, ends when Team Four has finished criticizing the position of the other three teams.

After the debate has ended, the judges are told to discuss the case among themselves and to arrive at a consensus, if possible, as to what the most reasonable solution to the case is. After their deliberations are complete (usually 5-10 minutes), the judging team or teams stand(s) up and explain(s) to the debaters their solution. A short debriefing period then follows.

It should be stated that during the debate, all debaters are required to stand up in front and/or along the side of the classroom. Only the judges are allowed to sit down. Debating teams are further told that each member of the team must say something during the debate.

Insights into Experiential Pedagogy, Volume 6, 1979

EXAMPLE

Appendix A depicts an example of a case which I have used successfully as the basis for a debate. This case raises the issue of how much of a pay increase, if any, a group of bank tellers should receive. I have found that students have vastly different opinions on this case and as a result four debating teams are always easy to form. Typically, one group of students will argue that the tellers should not receive any raises whatsoever because they are overpaid. A second group will take the position that the tellers should receive all or part of the merit increase but not the general increase. A third will argue that all or part of the general increase is appropriate but not the merit increase. A fourth may state that both raises should be granted, at least in part, because the tellers are expecting them soon.

DISCUSSION

I have found a modified four-way debate to be a highly effective way in use a case. By requiring that every student play an active role as either a judge or a debater, student participation is necessarily high. I have found that as a result of the debate, student participation in subsequent case discussions improves noticeably. Instead of having the discussion dominated by two or three students, many students now are willing to contribute in class. I have also found the modified debate to be effective in breaking up the monotony that can occur when a large number of cases are discussed in s class. It serves as a lively change of pace.

In building s debate around s case, an instructor could, of course, modify the approach described here. In fact, I have done so myself. An instructor may, for example, want to set up the debate during the class session prior to the actual debate. This has the benefit of allowing students more time to prepare for the debate and allows more time for the debate itself, the judges' presentation, and/or the debriefing. It does, of course, consume more class time. An instructor also might want to increase the number of rounds in the debate or allow for more rebuttal during the debate. While both of these changes have their advantages, they do take more time, and one must be careful that the debate does not get out of control.

Although many changes to the modified debate procedure can be made quite easily and successfully, there are several changes which I do not recommend. First, asking the debaters to stand up during the debate appears to be quite helpful. It not only permits each team to clearly see and communicate to their adversaries, but it also helps the student to become more familiar with other members of the class and to feel more a part of the class. Ultimately, this results in reducing the student's reluctance to speak up in subsequent case discussions. Secondly, requiring each student to speak sometime during the debate appears to accomplish these same results and to heighten student interest in the debate.

Finally, one could surmise that it is important for judges not to be instructed to pick the "winner" of the debate. One of the major

educational objectives of debating a case is to help students develop their analytical and problem solving abilities. By the end of the debate, students usually realize that the case being debated is far more complex than they first thought and that one must consider a large number of factors when analyzing a case. Declaring a winner detracts from accomplishing this goal.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that in using a case as the basis for a debate, there is one major pitfall instructors should avoid. In selecting the case to be used, it is best to choose a highly controversial one, one in which four debating teams, each representing a different opinion, will emerge. Otherwise student participation and interest in the debate will be low, and the purposes served by having a debate will not be met.

APPENDIX A

THE OVERPAID BANK TELLERS

The Commercial Bank is located in a town of about 50,000 people and employs about 20 tellers. There are four other banks in town, all about the same size as the Commercial Bank. For the past five years, the bank has followed the policy of granting its employees two types of raises: (1) merit increases and (2) general cost of living increases. Both of these increases are granted on March 1 of each year. In the past, merit increases have been granted to tellers on an individual basis and have ranged from 1% to 9% (average = 5%) depending on the employee. Cost of living increases have averaged 4% a year.

On February 1, 1978 another bank in town conducted a wage survey to determine the average compensation of bank employees throughout the city. The management of the Commercial Bank was shocked to learn that its tellers as a group were being paid an average of 55 cents an hour more than were tellers of equal seniority and job performance at other banks. The survey also showed that the other employees of the Commercial Bank were being paid wages similar to those paid by other banks.

After receiving the report, the Personnel Committee of the bank met to determine what should be done regarding the tellers' raises. They knew that although none of the tellers had been told they would be receiving raises within the next few weeks, they were all expecting them. They also realized that if other employees found out that the tellers were being overpaid, friction could develop and morale might suffer. They knew that it was costing the bank over \$25,000 extra to pay the tellers. Finally, they knew that, as a group, the bank's tellers were highly competent, and they did not want to lose any of them.

Instructions

Assuming you are a member of the Personnel Committee, what action would you take with regard to raises for the tellers? Explain your answer thoroughly.