The Art of Discussion Leadership

James Corner *
Patricia Corner **

* Department of Management Systems
** Department of Strategic Management & Leadership
Waikato Management School
University of Waikato
Hamilton, New Zealand

2000-01

February, 2000

Telephone: +64 (7) 838-4563
Fax: +64 (7) 838-4270
E-mail: jcorner@waikato.ac.nz
WWW Home page: http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/depts/mnss/jim

This paper is circulated for discussion purposes and its contents should be considered preliminary and confidential. No reference to material contained herein may be made without the consent of the authors.
Research Report

The Art of Discussion Leadership

James Corner *
Patricia Corner **

* Department of Management Systems
** Department of Strategic Management & Leadership
Waikato Management School
University of Waikato
Hamilton, New Zealand
ABSTRACT

The “Case Method” is a popular and well-applied technique for teaching students about certain management principles. The philosophy of this approach, relative to other teaching and learning approaches, requires students to take some control of their own learning. However, there are many different ways to teach using cases. In this paper, we discuss a well-tried approach which uses cases, and emphasize the teacher’s role as one of leading discussions. The “art” of discussion leadership is presented in this paper as a tutorial.
“Learning rarely, if ever, occurs passively.”


INTRODUCTION

The use of cases in teaching has grown to be an acceptable and widespread practice in management education (Masoner, 1988), since its first appearance in the Harvard Law School in 1870 (Weaver, et al., 1994). Its underlying philosophy calls for students to learn about basic management principles through the digestion and discussion of cases that illustrate the points in action. However, a traditional application of this teaching and learning technique emphasizes the role of teaching by the teacher. The teacher typically will have a highly structured lesson plan designed to lead the group through discussion to discover the learning principles as thought out by the teacher. This is often aided by some published case supplementary material (overheads, lesson plan, etc).

However, there are alternatives to this style of teaching and learning, while still using cases (Fox, 1973; Masoner, 1988). Discussion leadership lies at one end of the spectrum of styles and this method will be discussed in this paper as a tutorial on the approach. This technique is structured differently from traditional case teaching methods, and it calls for little, if any, formal lecturing and guidance by the teacher. While numerous authors have outlined this approach in detail (Barnes, et al, 1994; Christensen, et al, 1991), the method is still under-used, as judged from our casual empiricism of colleagues around the globe. It is hoped that exposure to this method in this journal will help teachers to develop an interest in the technique.
The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We first introduce the basic style of the approach, then go into more detail about its underlying philosophy and goals. Next, we present the nuts and bolts of discussion leadership. We discuss its unique method of assessment, in order to showcase the importance of classroom discussion when using the method. We next give several methods for starting each class, discuss various types of questioning to be used in each case discussion, and outline some appropriate discussion leader behavior for class. We then present some ideas about ending each class session, and subsequently offer some conclusions.

**STYLE OF THE APPROACH**

The style of this approach is one of discussion leadership, not case teaching. The idea is that *direction* is provided in class by the discussion leader (abbreviated now to just leader), and *control* and/or *chaos* in class should not occur. The skills needed by the leader for this include questioning, listening, and responding to students, as they mostly dictate that which is said in class. However, it is acknowledged that the leader may at times resort to mini-lectures to clear up points that lack clarity. Thus, the teaching style should largely be individualized to suit the strengths of the leader and emerging needs of the class, while keeping the energy of the class high and discussions dynamic.

More specifically, cases are used as vehicles for induced learning, although news articles, videos, even short stories may be used to stimulate class discussion. These usually are supplemented with a prescribed course text. The text is used as background reading, to provide necessary theory, and reference to this theory occurs in class only as necessary to remind students of this theory, if needed. The cases are chosen to provide a
setting for seeing how the theory might be applied. Furthermore, these cases allow the students to start their discussions off on an equal footing, given that the students usually have no direct personal experience with the cases. However, if some students do have inside knowledge or experience with the cases, they may serve as valuable resources and teaching “assistants” during the discussion. Thus, the life of the class centers around how students engage the material, each other, and the leader, rather on merely digesting concepts presented to them unilaterally by a lecturer.

THE PHILOSOPHY AND GOALS OF DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP

The philosophical approach taken in discussion is one of inductive, autonomous, active, cooperative learning for the student. Students spend most of their class time in interactive discussion of cases, which they read and prepare for discussion before class. Learning is induced since formal lectures by the leader seldom occur. That is, learning principles associated with each case are ‘discovered” and reflected upon by the students, by way of discussion, and what is learned might be different across students. (See Eggan and Kauchak, 1988, or Orlich, et al., 1990, for more on inductive and deductive approaches to learning.) The lack of formal, structured lecturing allows students to learn not just course principles, but a few other valuable lessons as well. They learn skills needed for structuring, presenting, and sustaining arguments, as well as the idea that there are not necessarily “right” answers. The learning is autonomous since the pace and direction of discussion for each class is largely determined by the students, not the leader. In this way, the approach is thought to cover in class more of the six levels of Bloom’s (Bloom, et al., 1956) taxonomy of cognitive behaviors (knowledge, comprehension,
application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation), compared with more traditional
approaches to teaching and learning (see Orlich, et al., 1990, for an expanded discussion).

This style of “teaching” appears to cover more of the formal steps in learning
found in the Kolb/Lewian learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), as compared with more traditional
styles of teaching. Their theory of learning is presented in Figure 1 below. Here,
learning is thought to occur through a sequence of 4 steps in the learning process or
cycle: abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, concrete experience, and
reflective observation. The cycle can be entered at any point.

**FIGURE 1. A Theory of Learning**
(Kolb, 1984)

Traditional lecturing methods seem to spend class time mostly in abstract
conceptualization of theory, as concepts are presented for student digestion. The other
steps in the learning process occur outside of class, in theory. Students experiment with
and gain experience through the application of course concepts by doing homework, or other work outside of class, then the teacher observes these efforts and gives feedback on them. Alternatively, leading discussions of cases tries to use all the steps in Kolb’s theory of learning. By structuring, presenting, and sustaining arguments, students present ideas upon which other students experiment by relating them to their own ideas. Collective and personal observation is then forthcoming. This advances the learning cycle in class.

**NUTS AND BOLTS**

This section presents some specifics of discussion leadership. Topics covered include assessment, starting the class, questioning, discussion leader behavior, and wrapping up the class.

**Assessment**

To make such a relatively unstructured environment fruitful for the students, and tolerable for the leader, the up front contractual relationship they mutually establish, or, rules of engagement, are of prime importance. Rules for such things as who speaks, and when, how to handle tardiness, and assessment, etc, must be agreed upon before the first case is discussed.

Assessment typically breaks down into two main areas of concern, classroom contribution, and an exam, and these usually are equally weighted. Note that the term *contribution* is used here, not participation. Students are expected to contribute to class discussions, not merely participate in them. Contribution here means not just providing the “answer” to the case. Indeed, there usually is not just one answer to a good case, but
several. Contribution means several things: the ability to surface issues and prioritize them, the ability to provide and sustain an argument, the ability to address ‘what to do next’ questions, etc. It does not mean the ability to hold the floor all class period, or dominate the discussion. Good contribution may come in the form of a well-timed question, or a concise, to-the-point response to another’s question, “right” or “wrong”.

Weighting half the class assessment on classroom contribution usually will cause some concern for many students. Therefore, the leader needs to ensure that the subjective judgement used to evaluate student contribution is well documented. To do this, a seating chart is useful, and students in larger classes should sit in the same seat for each class period. Double-sided name tags are necessary so that students and the leader across the room, as well as students behind the student, can identify that student. Photos of each student in the class are a good idea for matching names to faces after the class is over. After each session, a 3-2-1 marking scheme, accompanied with short, identifying notes, is helpful for assessing each student’s contribution. Periodic feedback to each student is necessary, and a short note to those who talk too little, as well as a similar note to those who talk too much, is helpful as the course evolves.

The exam, held at the end of the course, is usually a case. Students’ written responses are required, and the basis for assessing classroom contribution mentioned above is a good basis for assessing the exam, in general. However, exam assessment is usually done on the basis of grading criteria set up for that particular case, involving both diagnostic and action aspects of the case. The exam can be either taken cold by the student, or as a take-home exercise. If taken home, small group discussions may be allowed to occur, but with individual case assessment write-ups.
Starting the Class

There are at least two ways to start each class session. The first way is to merely call on a student (perhaps randomly), asking that student to start off the discussion. The leader usually will start with an open-ended question, or just ask the student to start anywhere. The student is jolted into action, but usually is free to begin as that student pleases. The student may start off with a case summary, a case “solution”, a presentation of a major or minor issue, or anything else.

Alternatively, the leader may specify or request a student to begin the discussion, and at the same time request a second student to respond or add to the statements made by the first student. However, the leader can delay the start of the student’s response by perhaps summarizing the case, or discussing some course administrative issue, which allows some time for student preparation before having to begin the discussion. Alternatively, the second student may be allowed to be picked by the first person, but preferably before the first person starts speaking.

For classes which begin early in the day, or those that have been identified not to generate too much discussion early in the session, the leader might like to break the class into several smaller sub-groups for free-form discussion before starting the full-group discussion. This seems to get everyone involved quickly into the class discussion.
Questioning

Questioning by the leader of the students lies at the heart of this style of teaching and learning. It is an art usually developed best by preparation and practice. While there is no formal “best” way to go about questioning, there are some useful tips for getting the most out of your students’ responses. Here is a sampling (see Kasulis, 1984, King, 1984, Orlich, *et al*, 1990, and Hansen, 1994 for more on this topic):

- use diagnostic questions to follow up open-ended questions,
- to bring up issues you feel are important, use questions like, “What about…?” and “What do you think about this…?”,
- play devil’s advocate, but without taking ownership of the position. Use questions like, “Here is another hypothesis…”,
- use characters from the case to attribute ownership,
- ask questions to get the facts out,
- periodically, ask questions which relate to the text,
- ask questions to resolve the problem, as well as questions related to how they got into this predicament in the first place, and
- don’t forget to ask about what to do next.

A list of different types of questions is found in Table 1 below. Try to use as many of these as possible and learn when best to use each type. Stylize usage to your own taste.
TABLE 1. Different Types of Questioning
(Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet, 1991, pp.153-172)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Question</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open Ended Questions</td>
<td>What is going on? What do you make of this situation? Casting question nets to see what comes in. Listening for entry and emphasis points. What is going on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Questions</td>
<td>How do you interpret and explain… How do you weave these points into some sort of understanding of what else is going on…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking for Information</td>
<td>Where…When…Who…What…? Facts and Opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge Questions</td>
<td>Why do you say that? How would you explain… Where is the evidence for what you say? Is that all? That’s the opposite of what Student X said. Can you persuade him/her?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension Questions</td>
<td>Exploring the issues. What else? Can you take us further? Keep going… Therefore?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination Questions</td>
<td>How would you relate your points to those mentioned by Student X or to something else you said?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority Questions</td>
<td>Which issues do you consider most important? Where do you start? How would you rank these?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Questions</td>
<td>What would you do in Person X’s shoes? How? And how would you do that? (Keep asking HOW.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction Questions</td>
<td>What do you think would happen if we followed Student Z’s action plan? Give us a forecast of your expectations. How will he/she react to your thinking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalizing and</td>
<td>What inferences can we make from this discussion and case? What generalizations would you make? How would you summarize the three most critical Issues that we have discussed? Can you summarize the high points of the discussion thus far?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing Questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion Leader Behavior

The leader needs to get to know the details of each case thoroughly, inside and out, in order to prepare for almost any possible discussion direction. It is advisable to be prepared with a variety of plans for each case. A given plan consists of lists of questions and identified issues, along with possible solutions to the case. However, it is important for a lively discussion and open learning environment that any such plan is not imposed onto the students. Let discussions progress naturally. Aim for a shared direction, self-regulated and determined partly by the class, with a keen sense of your own timing in an effort to cover each of the case’s major issues. However, try to manage but not dictate the direction through the use of questions. Leading questions are taboo.

It is important that the leader’s beliefs do not influence others. Therefore, watch not to pass judgement at any time. Building in some controversy for students to wrestle with is advisable, but the leader should generally keep his/her personal opinions out of the discussion. However, when such opinions might seem helpful, give them later rather than earlier, and clearly label them as personal opinions and not “answers.”

Attempt to draw in the apparently disinterested student by asking direct questions, keeping in mind that such a student may be very reluctant to speak. The leader might never use the chalkboard when he/she is not presenting material for student digestion, but using it in short mini-lectures might occur over time.

It is advisable to put up with a bit of overly talkative students, since it can lead to spontaneous discussions. However, it is best that the class deal with such a student, as they almost invariably will. If needed, a good way to deal with such a student is to request that the student re-phrase his/her comments in the form of questions for other
students. In this way, the student may be persuaded to help stimulate further the class’
discussion. Additionally, in most cases, it is wise not to publically praise an individual
student for “good” contribution. Praise the entire class for a good discussion, not
individuals. Individual praise occurs when one mentions the student’s ideas later on
during discussion, or privately “off line” to the student concerned.

Wrapping up the Class

There is no all-purpose way of ending every class. With a few minutes left at the
end of class, it generally is useful to take the time to summarize the case, and possibly the
overall discussion. A student might be asked to do this, or it might already have been
done earlier by students. The leader might even end the session with a new set of
unaddressed questions. However, it is advisable not to give what you think is “the”
answer to the case, and not to pass judgement on what might have been ‘good” case
resolutions as discussed by the students. Remember, as said by By Barnes, one of the
proponents of this method, “the things we do not reach closure on are often the things we
remember the longest” (Barnes, 1999).

CONCLUSION

It can take many classes for a leader to develop his/her way of teaching using this
collective set of approaches, and one could argue that one never really perfects them.
However, when used roughly as presented in this paper, the teaching experience can be
exciting and enlightening for the teacher, as the discussion can take off in directions not
previously anticipated. This approach to discussion leadership requires leaders to be flexible, adaptive, inquisitive, and withholding of judgement and opinion – skills and traits that may need to be developed over time.

Of course this teaching and learning approach may not work in all courses and with all content material. For instance, quantitative subjects, whose cases may seek a single analytically correct answer, may have a difficult time generating discussion on that single track. However, the teacher/leader may be surprised about the number of interesting approaches taken by students in such cases, and the potential for discussion beyond the “answer” may be greater than perhaps realized initially. Furthermore, assuming the class reaches a form of consensus on a “best” case “answer”, the discussion can turn to implementation issues, so often overlooked when teaching quantitative subjects.

In general, this approach is targeted at upper-level undergraduates and graduate level students (MBA, especially). It requires students who are mature enough to form and express opinions that they do not mind sharing in an open forum. However, after getting over the initial shock of such high assessment on doing just that, their classroom learning experience is often as valuable to them as any other possible classroom learning approach. Give it a try.

**Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Professor Louis “By” Barnes from Harvard University, whose efforts form the foundations of this paper. We also thank Jeff Mullin from Harvard Business School Publishing and By for their seminar on “The Art & Craft of Discussion Leadership”, where many of our ideas were developed and adapted. This paper was written while the authors were on leave at Arizona State University, USA.
REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01.</td>
<td>The Art of Discussion Leadership</td>
<td>James Corner and Patricia Corner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>