Using the Debate as a Teaching Tool in the Online Classroom

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Launched in 1994, Athabasca University's online Executive MBA program is now Canada's largest executive MBA with specialized MBAs in Project Management and Information Technology Management. Delivered via a Lotus Notes® learning platform, the rich, collaborative learning environment fosters a high level of interaction among students and academic coaches, and facilitates discussion that is thoughtful, reasoned, and reflective.

Because we believe our students learn best when they interact with their peers and when they are asked to apply their learning, we make extensive use of asynchronous group discussion exercises and group case studies. The case method of teaching allows students to apply analytical skills, tools, and techniques to a variety of organizations, to analyze situations from different perspectives, and to develop pragmatic action plans (Thompson & Strickland, 2003).

In one of our specialized MBAs, the MBA in Project Management, course evaluations indicated that some students were tiring of case studies. Further, some of our coaches had pedagogical concerns with the use of the case study method throughout the program. In response to the student and pedagogical concerns, we decided to include a debate in the last two courses of the program (at which point, students have a basic understanding of key concepts and are in good position to critically analyze controversial issues).

This paper presents our interdisciplinary course team's experiences in incorporating a debate as an innovation in our online classroom. The course team consists of an editor, a coach, and an academic course manager.

Merits of a debate

"Although the use of opposing positions for discussion is as old as Socrates, the technique has not been a typical educational strategy in some course subjects" (Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 2004).

We chose to use a debate format because debates help students go beyond the typical discussion that results from a case study or a discussion question (and which can lead to group think and joint problem resolution). Debates have the following benefits:

- They encourage students to think critically.
- They encourage respect for different viewpoints.
- They draw out differences and similarities in viewpoints more clearly than a case study.
- They ask students to support positions that they might not normally defend.
- They encourage students to delve into discussions that the textbooks and other course materials may not cover (Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 1997).

Our challenge was to structure the debate for effective delivery in our eight-week online Lotus Notes® classroom.

The great debate: designing the debate format for online delivery

Learning objectives

Our learning objectives for the debate were to help students do the following:

- "See the relationship between the course concepts and controversial issues" (Dushkin/McGraw Hill, 1997, p. 8).
- Use critical thinking and constructive arguments to support and defend their positions.
- Explore personal biases in opinions.
- Develop skills in arguing different viewpoints.

We paid specific attention to developing clear and detailed instructions for "The Great Debate" so that students would be able to interact freely with minimal coaching intervention. This also allowed our academic coach to follow the interactions without biasing the process.

However, the academic coach did take an active role in initiating and guiding the debate. He selected a debate topic, ensured that the debate stayed "on track," and posted questions to foster further discussion and critical thinking.

Forced-sides approach

We chose a forced-sides debate format. Two groups of five students were assigned to argue either "for" or "against" a resolution. We intentionally developed resolution topics that were current and controversial. For example, one debate resolution was "Be it resolved that project team-related issues (such as performance and disciplinary matters) are the sole responsibility of the functional manager to whom the team members report, and not the project manager's responsibility."

A five-step approach

The debate process consisted of five steps.

1. *Develop group code of conduct:* Each group prepared a code of conduct to guide the group work. Groups were asked to include group rules of engagement and

processes for effective decision making and conflict resolution in the code of conduct.

2. *Develop a position statement:* In a private Lotus Notes® database accessible only to group members, each group developed a formal 1,000-word position statement based on the readings and course material. Students were encouraged to develop up to five convincing arguments for their side. Each group then posted its position in a database accessible to both groups.

3. *Develop a rebuttal to other side's position statement:* Each group then studied the position statement posted by the other group and developed a formal 1,000-word rebuttal to it. The rebuttal involved developing clear and logical points that identified and addressed weaknesses in the opposing group's position statement.

4. *General discussion:* Once the rebuttals were posted, all members of both groups engaged in a final general discussion on the debate.

5. *Peer evaluation:* The students were asked to evaluate the participation of the members of their groups in the debate process.

Steps 1 and 5 are used in all our MBA programs. Both steps are consistently rated as best practices; the group code of conduct allows students to work out roles and responsibilities, and the peer evaluation empowers them to address problematic team dynamics.

Grading

The debate was worth 20 percent of the course grade. Although students were assigned a group mark for the debate, the academic coach could adjust an individual's grade on the debate based on the peer evaluation.

In marking the position statements and rebuttals, the academic coach focused on how well these submissions:
- used arguments based on logical and relevant material, not simply opinions
- focused on key issues
- challenged flaws in the opposition's arguments and research
- used constructive criticism and rationale
- avoided faulty generalizations, distorted information, or over simplifying issues.

The academic coach was also looking for submissions that were clear, interesting, relevant, well organized, and engaging.

Polling feature

Our academic coach used an innovative way of gathering individual viewpoints on the topic. Following the position statements and rebuttals, the coach was curious as to what students really thought about the resolution, despite the fact that for the debate, they had to argue a specific side. He asked students to anonymously answer two questions in a survey he placed at http://www.surveymonkey.com:
1. Which side do you personally support?
2. What is your main reason for supporting this side?

While the debate structure forced five students to argue "for" the resolution and five students to argue "against" the resolution, the poll indicated that seven out of the ten students did not support the side they were assigned.

The poll was repeated after students had engaged in the general discussion with additional questions designed to highlight changes of opinion and the related rationale.
1. Now that you have engaged in a broader discussion on the topic, have you changed your opinion on the debate?
2. If you answered "yes" to the last question, can you outline the main reasons for changing your opinion?

In this second poll, two students indicated that they had significantly changed their minds due to the general discussion. Through the discussion, they were made aware of some points that they had not previously considered, nor been aware of.

While in the course discussed here, the coach used a poll after the debate was over, some of the management-education literature we have read since suggests that a pre-debate opinion poll might also be useful. In particular, Dushkin/McGraw Hill (1997, p. 7) suggests that "students … have to be aware of their own biases when analyzing arguments. One way to reduce a possible 'sympathetic effect' when considering an argument is to test students on their opinions…before they are discussed.…[This] may well reduce the effects of unconsciously held preconceptions." Dushkin/McGraw Hill goes on to describe how the University of Maryland uses an Opinion-Assessment Pretest in which students have to indicate their opinions on the issues before the debate starts.

Student feedback

We gathered student feedback

through the discussion databases and through a formal course evaluation. In general, students indicated that they liked the variety the debate format introduced into the course structure. They found it to be a good complement to the case work, and some noted that they enjoyed the theoretical exercise in what is usually a practically-based program. Many noted that the debate allowed for a more open and honest discussion than they had experienced before. They also indicated that they found the debate more thought-provoking than the typical case study. Further, they liked the novelty of being challenged to argue a side that they would not normally support—this helped them learn about the merits of an opposing view and think critically about both sides. Students indicated that they liked the poll because it helped them see visually and quantitatively how everyone voted and why. Overall, the debate and the poll seem to have increased the sensitivity of students for certain aspects and details that might have otherwise been lost. As one student put it, "had the argument been phrased differently, I would have voted differently."

What did we learn?

1. It is even more important to pace the debate in an online format than in a classroom. In an asynchronous online format, it is crucial to give adequate time for each step.
2. While it is important for the academic coach to clarify points along the way, it is also important for the academic coach to allow students to work out issues on their own (to minimize introducing bias into the process).
3. A simple debate format works well in the online environment. Clear instructions upfront are crucial.
4. The online debate format was very well-received by students. Student evaluations indicated that it was a welcome change from case analysis and added an element of "fun" and competition to the class.
5. Although the use of the online polls was a last minute addition, we were very impressed with how well it worked to provide closure. Student evaluations indicated that the poll helped them to reflect on their opinions and values.

What would we change?

In future courses, we plan to expand the role of the polling feature. In addition to the two polls discussed in this article, we are thinking of adding a pre-debate opinion poll. We may also adapt the debate format such that the students prepare both a position statement for "their" side and a list of answers to possible "objections" by the other side. This would help them better anticipate opposing arguments (Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 1997). In addition, we are working on a more detailed marking rubric. We have also been discussing whether we can adapt the debate format into a panel format whereby members of a group are assigned a role on the panel (e.g. CEO, project manager, project sponsor, and customer).

Summary

Forcing advanced students to take one side created innovative arguments and new insights for both the students and the academic coach. Polling the students added another level of reflective thinking to our teaching approach. We definitely plan to use the format again in our project management courses. Based on the student feedback, the debate format appears to be a welcome change from case studies. We look forward to hearing from other readers on the use of debates in an online format.

References

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