

# The Use of Formal Discussant Teams to Enhance Classroom Discussion of Assigned Case Studies

Thomas J. Liesz, University of Nevada – Reno, Nevada, USA  
Kathy L. Pettit-O'Malley, University of Idaho, Idaho, USA

## ABSTRACT

Problem-based learning, which includes the use of cases, simulations, and games in the classroom, has long been considered a useful and effective technique. According to McKeachie (2002), “problem-based education is based upon assumptions that human beings evolved as individuals who are motivated to solve problems, and that problem solvers will seek and learn whatever knowledge is needed for successful problem solving.” However, a critical key to the success of problem-based learning is student participation. As educators, we know that the culture and make-up of each of our classes can vary widely and, thus, while there might be rich and informative discussions in one class, the next class might be quite the opposite and the instructor literally has to “pull teeth” to engender much discussion at all.

Reasons why students might choose not to participate include, but are not limited to, fear of criticism or of looking stupid, habits of passivity in the classroom, being unprepared, and failure to see the value of discussion. In the Problems in Managerial Finance course (a case-based class) one of the authors has been experimenting with the use of official “discussant” teams (analogous to the use of discussants at professional meetings) to enhance and ensure valuable discussion for all cases.

**Keywords:** problem-based learning, class discussion, case studies, discussant teams

## INTRODUCTION

Educators by nature enjoy talking and place a high value on intelligent discourse that broadens the educational experience of their students in the classroom. Class discussions help accomplish at least three important objectives: 1) problem solving, 2) integrating course content with personal experience, and 3) exploring the basis for feelings and opinions about particular topics or actions (Kramer & Korn, 1996). One might add to this list the importance of gaining self-confidence by speaking in front of others and learning to frame arguments in a way to make them both convincing and compelling.

In a case-based course class discussion is crucial to the learning environment. Case classes are intrinsically heuristic in nature, that is, the learning is largely self-directed and the case discussions “depend upon the active, effective participation of the students” (Shapiro, 2014, p. 2). The belief that each student’s learning is best facilitated by regularly participating in discussions is widely held among instructors of such courses. Thus, getting students to take ownership of the discussions is a paramount goal of instructors.

In one study students reported that they associate several important benefits to a well-run class discussion. These include: 1) making learning more active, 2) gaining deeper understanding of the material, and 3) promoting the importance of thinking about and taking a perspective (Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, & Vandlen, 2010). Active learning may be of particular importance to the Millennial Generation of students currently populating college campuses. These students are known for their low tolerance for boredom (Johnson & Lopes, 2008) and the need to have near-constant stimulation to remain focused. They have also been shown to prefer small-group over large-class discussion settings (Hamann, Pollock & Wilson, 2012), but enjoy team collaboration (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008).

## THE CLASS SETTING AND PROBLEM

The Problems in Managerial Finance course is designed as a team-based course wherein students self-select into teams of two to four students and each team is required to analyze in depth, and formally present, one case. All teams are expected to read and prepare at least a cursory analysis for each case. Four case “briefs” are required to be

turned in during the semester. The students are all senior-level Finance majors and the course is considered the “capstone” course for the major.

The first semester the course was taught the case discussions were very uneven. One week there might be a very strong discussion with lively debate, with nearly all the students participating. The next week it could be virtually the opposite, with both the students and the instructor feeling uncomfortable with the lack of dialogue between the presenting team and the rest of the class. In addition, there is evidence that when an instructor leads the discussion, his/her implicit or explicit disclosure of a point-of-view can reduce student participation in the discussion (Hess, 2009). What, if anything, could be done to help ensure that there was a good discussion for each case?

## **THE NEW APPROACH**

Calling upon experiences the authors had at professional academic meetings, the idea arose for creating a formal “discussant team” to provide an immediate response to the presenting team’s case analysis and begin the broader class discussion of the case. Many academic meetings assign discussants to each paper that is presented. This ensures that there is feedback to the paper’s author(s) and often elicits further discussion among the other attendees.

“The role of the discussant is to raise a few debating points about the paper to get the discussion started. The discussant’s role is not to hammer a paper, nor is it to overly praise a paper (Avison, Kautz, Sigala, Whitley & Winter, 2005).” As stated by Davidson, “Discussants are charged with an important responsibility, bridging the gap between presenter and audience, offering (ideally) new insights, and so stimulating the audience (Davidson, 2003, p. 129). The advantages of using a discussant(s) to help engage an audience at academic meetings have been noted by numerous researchers (c.f., Coff and Zhou, 1999; Hamermesh, 1993; Weick, 1999). Weick (1999) suggests that it is extremely helpful to the audience if the discussant(s) can identify issues of a paper, attempt an enthusiastic analysis, and make a reasonable attempt to improve the work previously presented.

A search of class discussions of cases turned up only one similar approach being used in a strategic management course at the University of Southern California. In this course the professor utilized “Challenge Teams” that prepared questions for the presenting team, based upon their own independent analysis of the case (El-Haddid, 2011). The challenge teams lead the case discussions and are able to create spontaneous questions during the presenting team’s delivery, as well as use questions they had prepared in advance.

A somewhat similar approach was reported by Bellman (2004), in which cases in an Entrepreneurship course were assigned to student “case leaders,” who were tasked with leading the discussions. But in this instance the case leaders were only asked to answer three to five case-related questions, rather than critique the work and analysis of another set of students.

In the current finance case class, the discussant team is required to prepare the case as if it was their own to present. The presenting team must provide the discussant team with as close to a final draft of their report as is possible, at least 36 hours prior to the presentation. It should contain all calculations and analysis which will be presented. The role of the discussant team is to compare their analysis of the case to the presenting team’s analysis, and then create a formal discussion of the presenter’s work. The discussants’ comments include everything from development of a problem statement to the conclusion, as well as relative to the case protagonists’ recommendations as to what should be done. Any differences in analysis or opinion are noted and explained. At the conclusion of the discussant team’s analysis the presenting team returns to the front of the class to face a general Q&A session from the entire class.

## **PRELIMINARY STUDY**

In two recent Fall semesters there was a total of nineteen teams of students (two to four students per team) and each was randomly assigned one case to present and one case to discuss. The only “swapping” of cases allowed was for proven time schedule conflicts. Thus, the student teams were often out of their comfort zone on topics to present and/or discuss.

In order to ensure civility in the discussions, students were given guidelines for delivering critiques during the preliminary part of the course. An example of a critique was modeled by the instructor and the importance of being courteous was stressed. At the conclusion of the semester the students were administered a brief survey that

captured their satisfaction with the discussant-team method, along with measuring how effective they thought the method was overall, as well as in comparison with other courses in which cases were used.

**The Survey Instrument.** The survey instrument consisted of three parts. In the first section students were asked if they had been in any other courses that required the discussion of cases in class. If they responded “yes”, they were asked whether those courses used instructor-led versus student-led discussions and whether the discussions were “structured” (the instructor called on students, students were required to present cases, a formal format for discussing cases was followed) or “open” (the instructor relied upon voluntary student discussion or responses to questions posed and no particular format for discussing cases was used). The students were then asked if they had developed a preference for instructor-led, student-led, structured, or open case discussions.

The second section of the survey consisted of a set of five bi-polar adjectives (e.g., Ineffective versus Effective) or descriptive statements (e.g., “Was Interesting to Do” vs. “Was Uninteresting to Do”) about the use of official discussant teams on a 5-point semantic differential scale. The third section of the survey was an open-ended invitation to give any additional comments or suggestions about the use of official discussant teams in class.

## RESULTS

Since the more- or less-favorable poles of some of the scales were reversed, they were adjusted before analyzing the data, such that a higher value on a scale was always more favorable. From the student perspective, anecdotal evidence suggests students strongly support the use of official student discussant teams, as can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1: Student Evaluations of Use of Discussant Teams in Case Analyses**

Scale	Mean*	n	t (test value = 3.0)	Significance
(In)Effective	4.11	44	11.284	p < .001
Detracted from (Enhanced) Discussion	4.24	51	12.957	p < .001
(Un)Interesting to Do	4.18	51	11.785	p < .001
Should Be Eliminated (Kept)	4.25	51	9.588	p < .001
Had No Impact on (Enhanced) Learning	4.35	51	12.548	p < .001

\*5-point semantic differential scale, with 5 = favorable, and 1 = unfavorable.

Since we did not have similar measures for instructor-led discussions, we tested each mean against the point of neutrality (3.0) on each scale. All five dependent variables were significantly more favorable than neutral (p < .001), indicating that use of the student-lead discussant method was very favorably viewed by the finance students.

With overwhelmingly positive evaluations of the case analyses employing student-team discussants, we wanted to determine if responses to other questions related to the degree of favor of the student-led cases. As a preliminary step, we factor analyzed the five semantic differential variables, to determine if more than one factor was present in the data. Results of the Factor Analysis are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Factor Analysis of Semantic-Differential Variables**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.954	59.080	59.080	2.954	59.080	59.080
2	.734	14.684	73.764			
3	.624	12.473	86.237			
4	.427	8.534	94.771			
5	.261	5.229	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Employing a standard cutoff of Eigenvalue  $\geq 1.0$ , there was only a single factor identified (Eigenvalue = 2.954), which accounted for 59.08% of the variance. Thus, respondents saw various *potential* aspects of merit of student case discussants (i.e., overall effectiveness, enhancement of discussion, interest, maintenance of method, and enhancement of learning) *as a single dimension*.

Further analyses suggested that differences in previous use of cases affected current student preferences. First, those who had been exposed previously to an *unstructured* case method significantly preferred an *instructor-led* case presentation and discussion ( $t_{26} = 4.228$ ;  $p < .001$ ). However, those who had experienced previous instructor-led case discussions were more appreciative of student-led cases, with a student discussant team, than those who had not been previously exposed to them ( $t_{31} = 2.183$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, those who had previous experience with structured case discussions showed an aversion to instructor-led case discussions ( $r = -.223$ ,  $t_{26} = 2.126$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Rather, the structured case-experienced students had a significant preference for student-led cases employing a discussant team ( $t_{31} = 3.215$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

## CONTENT ANALYSIS OF OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

The final analysis was a content analysis of the student responses to the open-ended question in the third section of the survey. Approximately two-thirds (64.5%) of the students entered comments to the question, “If you have any additional comments or suggestions, please add those here.” The majority of the responses (87.5%) indicated satisfaction with the use of a structured discussion approach with an official student discussant team for each case. Sample comments included:

- Discussant teams provided very insightful perspectives versus the presenting teams.
- Hearing two perspectives of the same information and problems, plus how to solve them, enhanced my critical thinking.
- The structured format for discussions led to more understanding about concepts covered in each case.
- The formal discussant team approach showed that there are many ways to look at the same situation.

One very good suggestion from several students was to allow the presenting team to have time for an official “rebuttal” to the discussant team’s critique of their case solution. We will implement rebuttals the next time the course is offered.

## DISCUSSION

During each semester, discussions began somewhat instructor-led, but quickly became almost entirely student-led with the official discussant team leading the way. By the end of the semester the instructor only added summary information or corrected any potential misleading statements made during discussions. The atmosphere in the classroom was more relaxed than during instructor-led sessions. A relaxed classroom atmosphere has been found to be preferable to Millennials, and leads to more participation (Bracy, Beville, & Roach, 2010).

From the instructor point of view, the authors can report that the use of discussant teams greatly improved the overall quality and quantity of class discussion of cases. The problem of the unevenness of discussion over the course of the semester was virtually eliminated. And, a very worthwhile unintended consequence was a noticeable improvement in the students' ability to both offer and receive criticism about theirs and other students' work. In each semester the students created a culture of respect for each other's opinions, and critiques were done in more of a gentle, developmental manner than sometimes happens at professional finance conferences!

In addition, it appears that the students found value and satisfaction with the approach. These results are likely to be found in other class settings using case studies, regardless of discipline. Any activity that has the potential of improving students' understanding of concepts, and enhancement of their critical thinking skills, is certainly worthwhile to try.

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