Can We Discuss This? - Student Led Discussions in the University Business Classroom

Peter R. Woods [1]

In the right context, student led discussions offer a feasible teaching and assessment method for university business students. This paper reviews relevant research and theories to develop guidelines for the teaching and assessment of student led discussions in the university business classroom. To effectively deploy student led discussions as an assessment item, faculty must teach specific methods of creating a healthy discussion atmosphere and content. Accepting silence, effective questioning and contribution management are necessary training areas for students. The "good" discussion leader is one who incorporates a democratic style and laissez faire typology of leadership. For student led discussions to be effective, discussion group members must be given an element of freedom, so that ideas and opinions can be optimally explored. Student discussion leaders should be assessed against three main criteria; facilitation ability (guiding, not dominating), exhibiting support to members and being creative in discussion structure. Assessment rubrics are provided to guide this process.

Field of Research: Business Education, Business Communication

1. Introduction

From the days of Socrates and Confucius, teachers have effectively taught their students using discussion as a medium of instruction. In modern university business classrooms, however, effective discussion seems relatively rare (Caspi, Chajut, & Saporta, 2008; Fassinger, 1995; Fischer & Grant, 1983; Nunn, 1996). At the same time, businesses are calling for an improvement in the oral communication skills, particularly active listening skills, of business and management graduates (Gray, 2010; Jackson 2009). The problem, therefore, is that University classroom may not be preparing students to effectively lead discussions in the workplace. This paper explores how to redress this problem by training and assessing students as discussion leaders. The paper then further explores the standards, principles, and methods of teaching and assessing student led discussions. First, the characteristics of the ideal, or "good" discussion leader in the current classroom context are reviewed. Second, the paper examines the issue of assessing student leaders, and provides sample rubrics for discussion leaders and discussion participants. Third, the specific areas of training for student discussion leaders are reviewed.

2. Literature Review

As a teaching and assessment method, discussion in the classroom presents opportunities that are not available through standard teaching methods. Discussion provides students with a wider perspective on the range of interpretations possible in an area of intellectual inquiry. Overall, however, classroom discussion appears to be poorly implemented in many university classrooms. In line with a number of research studies (Caspi, et al., 2008;

1. Dr. Peter R. Woods, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, Australia. Email: p.woods@griffith.edu.au

Fassinger, 1995; Fischer & Grant, 1983), Nunn (1996) found in observing 20 faculty teaching in a large US university, that only 25% of students participated in classroom discussion with other students remaining quiet. Student led, discussion in small groups, however, appears to hold greater promise for encouraging participation (Goodney Lea & Byrd, 2009), particularly with international students (Woods et.al., 2006).

The structural and procedural success of discussion groups largely hinges on discussion leaders, whose primary role is to mediate, synthesise and give direction to a group of numerous thought patterns and personalities (Nunn, 1996). In examining student-led discussions in the University classroom, Sorrano (2010) separates the roles of leading the discussion process (which she calls 'student facilitation') with the 'discussion leader' who guides both the process and the content of the discussion. She argues that students often feel poorly equipped to lead the discussion content in University classrooms, as it is somewhat unrealistic to expect students to have a deep knowledge of the discussion topic (discussion content). This paper will extend the concept of student facilitator further to outline a rubric for assessing student discussion facilitation.

Bretcher (1994) categorises discussion groups in two typologies; "open" and "closed". "Open" groups refer to 'one-off' groups that change membership and contexts from meeting to meeting. "Closed" groups on the other hand, meet over a long time with a stable membership base. Unlike "open" groups, "closed" groups usually have a definitive structure, expectations and procedural standards. "Closed" groups need a formal leader who can be active in all aspects of operations, which include clarifying expectations and the limitations of the group's contract (Bretcher, 1994). Student led discussions in the classroom usually follow the "open" method due to the short-term, semester based nature of most university courses (Sorrano, 2010).

Though the predominance of literature on discussion leadership assumes that teachers or lecturers lead discussions, we can, nevertheless, derive important principles that apply to student-led discussions. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) argue that learners find it much harder to reject contrary views expressed by their peers, compared to information in texts or given in lectures. This is based on the assumption that the exposure to peers' views initiates a process of reanalysing personal thought processes. We can expect, however, students to meet with problems that teachers commonly come across, plus some unique obstacles of student-led discussions.

3. Methodology

This conceptual paper reviews previous research and theories relevant to developing guidelines for teaching and assessing student-led discussion in the university classroom.

4. Discussion

The Good Discussion Leader

What style of leadership?
Before assessing the specific techniques and structure of discussion leading, it is important to consider what exactly constitutes a good discussion leader. However, to assume the existence of one, common, ideal leadership style is somewhat outdated. Modern day research and group dynamics suggest that effective leadership measures differ according

to the context. White and Lippitt (1968) distinguished three distinct typologies of discussion leadership styles; authoritarian, democratic and *laissez faire* (Bormann, 1990). General studies have revealed that the democratic style of leadership is superior to the remaining two types, in terms of favourability and fairness. However, authoritarian and *laissez faire* discussion leadership is favoured occasionally, albeit to a lesser extent. This indicates that although democratic styles of leadership can be most safely applied across the majority of social contexts, we must nonetheless consider its suitability on a case-by-case basis. In saying that, student-led discussions pose an interesting criterion for leadership. The authoritarian style can be disregarded, as it directly contradicts the discussion's aims of encouraging participation and inviting critical analysis by students. *Laissez faire* seems a partial fit, as it encourages freedom of thought, speech and participation. However, given the normal limits of discussion time and resources, the leader must also keep close attention to fair and equal contributions from all members. With consideration to these contextual assumptions, the "ideal" student discussion leader should be one who encourages freedom within the group, whilst structuring equal contributions from all members.

The importance of "listening"
Since the core strength of conducting discussion groups is the opportunity to relay multiple ideas between members, it is of foremost importance that leaders create an attentive atmosphere. Christensen et al. (1991) defines the "good discussion leader" as one who displays effective "listening" skills. Discussions are defined by the constant receiving and sending of messages. An effective discussion is one that allows ideas to be expanded, criticised and sharpened according to their merits. For such an optimal exchange to occur, all members of the discussion group (but one) must be engaged in listening, to ensure that no idea goes unnoticed or abandoned. It is thus the discussion leader's specific responsibility to make it clear, through direct communication and role modelling, that being thoroughly attentive and listening critically is fundamental to the functioning of group discussion (Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991).

Although active listening is a fundamental communication quality, applicable not only to group discussions but also to everyday life, it can rarely be achieved without conscious effort. This is because classical teaching environments in the past have not supported the act of closely attending and listening to peers. Instead, students have largely been taught to closely listen to lecturers and instructors, so that they do not miss vital information. Christensen et al. (1991, p. 137) argues that "Starting a real classroom discussion requires a major transformation of the sociology of the classroom", that is students and teachers together require a conscious effort to open their ranges of hearing to capture a broader range of signals. This is because classroom discussions receive minimal content input but significant process input from lecturers/tutors. It is important, therefore, that discussion leaders are very obvious in communicating a desire to "listen".

The absorbent leader
To enable ideas to flourish under critical discussion, the "good" discussion leader must be one who carries few assumptions to the classroom. At the heart of discussion is the assumption of open and unpredictable creation of meaning, through collaborative efforts. Hence, discussion leaders cannot dishonestly provide a predetermined solution (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). The absorbing of information is intertwined with attentive listening abilities, but also requires a conscious mindset to clear previous formations of opinions and conclusions. Barton (1995) outlines that this is often a difficult task for lecturers and

teachers, as facts and knowledge have long been embedded in their thought processes. This mindset may be easier for students to achieve, as they are often focussed on coming to terms with the discussion topic that may be new to them (Barton, 1995). However, the previously mentioned issue of students not accustomed to listening to fellow students (Christensen, et al., 1991) could negatively affect students' willingness to reconsider and incorporate each other's opinions.

Synthesising information
Synthesising and integrating the group's information comprises an important aspect of discussion group leadership. However, one must be constantly aware of the unconscious thought processes that may blur group members' expression of thoughts. This is particularly the case with leadership figures, because leaders are associated with exercising a certain amount of "influence" on the group (Bormann, 1990). Discussion leaders are expected to have a standard of control and influence over the group, but only in the form of mediating topics and controlling overall processes. The danger this expectation carries is that leaders can consciously or subconsciously affect the direction of discussion. Hence, the "good" discussion leader is one who synthesises the groups' opinions in their purest forms. Bormann (1990) argues that ideally, the leader has minimal involvement in shaping the direction of the group, and that group members should influence the leader and each other.

Assessing Discussion Leaders

Assessing the performance of the discussion leader is a difficult and complicated process, because a variety of qualities must be considered; of which most are subtle in appearance. Table 1 incorporates assessments of the 'good' discussion leader described in the previous section, and includes an assessment of discussion leading skills outlined in this section. The rubric format is ideal for assessing qualitative measures, especially when dealing with vague concepts, such as leadership qualities. The main focus of the sample rubric is on facilitating and encouraging the participation of group members. A fair assessment of a discussion leader, however, must also account for participants who are either unprepared or unwilling to participate. To address this, I have included a sample rubric for assessing discussion participants. Ideally, these rubrics are used in combination, so that both discussion leaders and discussion participants are assessed at the same time. The following section addresses a number of the assessment criteria of discussion leadership.

Guiding, but not dominating
Assessors of discussion leaders must be especially careful in detecting instances of dominating, rather than merely guiding a discussion. As mentioned previously, leaders are often tempted to guide discussions subtly to suit their own personal views. Bormann (1990) refers to this typology of leadership as the "manipulator". The manipulator attempts to exploit the group for their own purposes using two distinct methods. First, the *direct* type is seen to blatantly express their desire to lead a group in a specific manner, using direct confrontation, persuasion and strong arguments. Second, the *indirect* type utilise a more subtle approach which is often problematic, as their characteristics somewhat overlap with those of a "good" discussion leader. The *indirect manipulators* portray an image of congeniality, receptiveness and acceptance. However, using subtly directed questions and paraphrasing techniques, they indiscreetly guide a conversation according to personal preference (Bormann, 1990). Tutors and supervisors must be aware of these two

typologies, especially *indirect manipulators*, and be alert to the use of inaccurate paraphrasing and leading questions.

Table 1
Discussion Leader Rubric

	Good	**Adequate**	**Needs Improvement**
Preparation	Provides evidence of extensive preparation and background research on topic	Provides evidence of adequate preparation and comprehends the topic	Little or no evidence of topic preparation
Facilitation	Able to absorb ideas from group members, guides the group without dominating	Guides the group but sometimes dominates and/or does not absorb ideas from group members	Fails to guide the group and/or dominates group
Exhibit Support	Effectively demonstrates active listening skills and provides visible support for group members	Sometimes demonstrates active listening skills and shows some support for group members	Little or no evidence of active listening skills and/or support for group members
Time	Provides a comprehensive answer acknowledging group members within time period	Provides a partially complete answer in the time period	Cannot answer the question in the time period
Creativity	Demonstrates use of effective questioning techniques, able to synthesize information from group members	Synthesizes information from some group members and uses some questioning techniques	Does not use effective questioning techniques and/or unable to synthesize information from group members

Supporting group members
Expressing visible support for group members comprises an important process to encourage all-round participation and give life to the discussion. Techniques such as nodding, paraphrasing and positively acknowledging contributions can make students feel comfortable about freely sharing their thoughts and ideas (Bretcher, 1994). Wilen (1990) posits that students are constantly anticipating teachers' responses to their remarks during

classroom discussions; hence, a great deal of caution is applied to avoiding embarrassment and disapproval. Although student leader figures are assumed to have lesser affect their group members, a certain amount of caution can be anticipated. Thus, leaders must exercise positive responsive behaviours. Obviously, direct, negative words such as "poor" and "incorrect" must be avoided as they signal the inadequacy of students, which can discourage participation. Further, even subtle responses such as "you're almost right" and "does anyone have a better answer?" can also have damaging effects.

At the same however, leaders cannot be depicted as conveying false affirmation as a default response. That is, approving of each comment and observation without critical analysis. This is a problem because if there is little variation in responses by the discussion leader, members will not be compelled to listen and think actively. This pattern of behaviours occurs commonly within groups, as it can be a comfortable and pleasing experience. However, it ultimately lacks purpose does not utilise opportunities to learn effectively. Ideally, the instructor should set an atmosphere that encourages the examination of all ideas. Surfacing incorrect suggestions may be useful because other students may have similar 'incorrect' ideas (Christensen, et al., 1991).

Being creative
Discussion leaders must have control over the time and topic management; however must also be creative in eliciting responses. Christensen et al. (1991) discuss a common problem, "teacher's express", which is the act of merely replicating the content of a lecturer without exploration and creativity. Discussions must not be simple question-and-answer format, where students are merely expected to "fill in the gaps", but should aim at extracting new ideas, personal opinions and a variety of viewpoints. Assessment of this criterion should be based on the discussion leaders' use of effective questioning techniques; these are mentioned below.

Table 2
Discussion Participant Rubric

	Good	**Adequate**	**Needs Improvement**
Preparation	Provides evidence of extensive preparation and background research on topic	Provides evidence of adequate preparation and comprehends the topic	Little or no evidence of preparation for topic
Participation	Demonstrates effective active listening skills and actively contributes reasonable ideas to discussion	Responds appropriately to discussion leader when invited	Either dominates or offers few or no ideas

Teaching Students to be Effective Discussion Leaders

Becoming an effective discussion leader is a process not achieved through simply drawing upon common sense or adopting certain mindsets. Drawing from the commonalities of problems experienced by teachers, there is an obvious need to provide student leaders with training in specific areas. Considering Brookfield and colleagues' (2005) description of common problem areas encountered by teachers, it is important to firstly tone down any unrealistic expectations of a "successful" discussion by students. The "successful" discussion is usually imagined as one that never falls silent, is always on course with the topic and elicits great listening and respect among members (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). In contrast, real-life discussions feature problems that require constant attention by the discussion leader.

Do not fear silence
Fundamental to leading discussions is dealing with the discomfort and fear associated with the so-called "silent" classrooms. Discussion leaders often panic at the beginnings of discussions when students fail to produce immediate and precise responses. To avert creating a discomforting atmosphere, leaders often rely on frequent contributors, or present vague and open questions (such as, "who wants to start us off?"). Faculty must teach discussion leaders that silence in the classroom is not necessarily a bad thing; in that students may simply be choosing not to voice their opinion, or they may be in the process of gathering their thoughts before vocalising. Discussion leaders should allow extended periods of time to allow group members to express themselves. If the leader caves into the pressure and presents his or her answer to the topic, it sends a message to students that they can rely on the leader's answers henceforth (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

Effective questioning
Effective questioning ability can induce critical thinking among members and thus enlighten the discussion content and atmosphere. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) list a number of types of questions which are useful in drawing out conversation; such as questioning for evidence, asking for clarification, open questions and linking or extension questions. Hansen (1983) also adds that "follow-up" questions can be used to encourage students to think within themselves and move beyond superficial answers. Discussion leaders should be encouraged to clarify students' ideas and to also add content depth to the topics. Some examples of "follow-up" questions for a case or article focussed discussion based on Hansen (1983) are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3
Sample Discussion Follow-up Questions based on Hansen (1983)

Clarify	What do you mean? Could you rephrase what you said? Could you explain that further?
Support	Where did you find that in the case/article? Is there any theory that would support your point?
Involve Others	Ask one participant to take up another participant's response by replying: A, would you care to add to what B just said? A, do you agree with B's interpretation of the case/article?
Maintain Focus	We still haven't answered our basic question, which is.....? How does your comment relate to the case/article?

Time- and contribution management
Given the limited amount of time available to each discussion session, students must be taught methods to effectively and fairly manage the content of this period. There are usually small clusters of students who tend to contribute unfairly large amounts during the discussion, thus preventing others from participating. This can occur for various reasons; for example, the remaining majority of students could be unresponsive and lack involvement in the discussion. It is important that discussion leaders must be capable of assessing the standard of "speaking too much" by a single member. To do this, discussion leaders should be instructed to be alert to speakers who cut-off others, students who raise their hands but are interrupted, the emergence of side-conversations unrelated to the topic, or visual dissatisfaction between members (indicated by rolling of eyes, shaking of heads etc.) (Wilen, 1990). Under these circumstances, student leaders should exercise greater control by addressing specific students for their responses.

Seeking equal participation in discussions is often difficult in modern universities, given the common reluctance of international students' to speak publicly. Teachers and lecturers often perceive minority-groups as non-participative, quiet and unmotivated students (Wilen, 1990). Discussion leaders must be aware that contrarily to these beliefs, the sources of preferred silence in discussions by these individuals are often influenced by cultural factors. Take for example the influence of traditional teaching methods commonly ascribed to Confucian heritage education systems (Nguyen, Terlouw & Pilot, 2006). Graduates from these educational systems are accustomed to being quiet in classrooms as an indication of respect for the teacher or lecturer, not out of unwillingness to learn or participate. Research has demonstrated that these students respond best to discussion in small peer-led groups of three to six students, rather than large classroom groups (Woods et al., 2006). In larger groups, student leaders might be required to take a proactive stance in controlling the classroom and seeking responses from specifically reluctant individuals.

5. Conclusion

This paper responds to calls for improving the communication skills of business graduates by recommending strategies to teach, practice and assess student led discussions. The paper is conceptual and is limited as a review of conceptual and empirical research of discussion leadership in the University classroom. The review does, however, suggest that the "good" discussion leader can be defined as one who incorporates a democratic style and *laissez faire* typology of leadership. Discussion group members must be given an element of freedom in practice, so that ideas and opinions can be optimally explored. Simultaneously, equal contributions must be derived from all participants, as time limitations apply to discussions. Further, student leaders should be assessed against three main criteria; facilitation ability (guiding, not dominating), exhibiting support to members and being creative in discussion structure. Finally, student leaders need to be taught specific methods of creating a healthy discussion atmosphere and content. Accepting silence, effective questioning and contribution management were identified as necessary training areas for students.

6. References

Barton, J. 1995, 'Conducting effective classroom discussions', *Journal of Reading*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 346-50.

Bormann, E. G. 1990, *Small Group Communication: Theory and Practice*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York.

Bretcher, H. J. 1994, *Group Participation: Techniques*, Sage Publications, London.

Brookfield, S. D. & Preskill, S. 2005, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Caspi, A., Chajut, E. & Saporta, K. 2008, 'Participation in class and in online discussions: Gender differences', *Computers & Education*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 718-24.

Christensen, C. R., Garvin, D. A. & Sweet, A. 1991, *Education for Judgement*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston.

Fassinger, P. A. 1995, 'Professors' and students' perceptions of why students participate in class', *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 24, pp. 25-33.

Fischer, C. G. & Grant, G. E. 1983, 'Intellectual levels in college classrooms', in C.L. Ellner and C.P. Barnes (Eds), *Studies of College Teaching*, D.C. Heath, Lexington, pp. 47-60.

Goodney Lea, S. & Byrd, J. 2009, 'Student-Centred Discussion Strategies for the 21st Century Classroom', in *IF White Papers*, Interactivity Foundation, Parkersburg, WV.

Gray, E. 2010, 'Specific Oral Communication Skills Desired in New Accountancy Graduates', *Business Communication Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 1, pp. 40-67.

Hansen, L. 1983, 'Improving classroom discussion in economics courses', *The Journal of Economic Education*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 40-9.

Jackson, D. 2009, 'Undergraduate management education: Its place, purpose and efforts to bridge the skills gap', *Journal of Management and Organization*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 206-224.

Nunn, C. E. 1996, 'Discussion in the College Classroom: Triangulating Observational and Survey Results', *The Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 67, no. 3, pp. 243-66.

Nguyen, P., Terlouw, C., & Pilot, A. 2006, 'Culturally appropriate pedagogy: The case of group learning in a Confucian Heritage Culture context', *Intercultural Education*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 1-19.

Sorrano, P. 2010, 'Improving student discussions in graduate and undergraduate courses: Transforming the discussion leader', *Journal of Natural Resources & Life Sciences Education*, vol. 39, pp. 84-91.

White, R., & Lippitt, R. 1968, 'Leader behavior and member reaction in three social climates', in D. Cartwright & A. Zander (Eds.), *Group Dynamics,* Harper & Row, New York, pp. 318-385.

Wilen, W. W. 1990, Teaching and Learning Through Discussion: *The Theory, Research and Practice of the Discussion Method,* Charles C. Thomas, Illinois.

Woods, P.R., Jordan, P.J., Loudon, R., Troth, A., & Kerr, D. 2006, 'Effective tutoring in the multicultural business classroom', *The Journal of Teaching in International Business*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 27-48.