

*Finance Professors' Use of Case Discussion Leadership
at Harvard and Darden MBA Programs:
Qualities of a Successful Case Discussion Leader*

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Abstract

Although many MBA programs use the case method of instruction in their programs, a relatively small literature base exists to provide MBA professors with a philosophical explanation and guide for its use. This study builds on the theory of case discussion leadership, which is a leadership style and philosophy of teaching and learning while using cases, rather than simply a pedagogical methodology. The participants of the field-based case study were finance professors from Harvard Business School and the University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, two top-ranked MBA programs that have used case discussion leadership as their primary philosophy of teaching and learning for many years. This article provides specific findings regarding the qualities of a successful case discussion leader which can further the understanding and use of case discussion leadership in the classroom.

This study attempted to discover how finance professors in two top-ranked MBA programs describe and use case discussion leadership in the classroom. The participants of the study were finance professors from Harvard Business School and the University of Virginia's Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, two top-ranked MBA programs that have used case discussion leadership as their primary philosophy of teaching and learning for many years. The methodology employed was a qualitative field-based case study which utilized interviews of the finance professors, observations of case discussion courses, and analyses of relevant program documents. This article provides the findings related to the qualities of a successful case discussion leader, based on the interview responses and observations of faculty during case discussions. This article will address the twelve primary factors that Harvard and Darden MBA professors consider as vital for successful case discussion leaders. An effective case discussion leader must (a) listen; (b) create intellectual excitement; (c) be a performer; (d) learn from others but be yourself; (e) prepare; (f) establish rapport, respect, and relationships with students; (g) know the context of the class; (h) exhibit humble leadership; (i) value and believe in an emphasis on teaching and case discussion leadership; (j) emphasize simple language; (k) focus on student self-discovery – ask versus tell; and (l) relinquish control, accept ambiguity, and embrace the unknown. Each of these qualities will be described by integrating the insights gleaned from the interviews and observations of the case discussion leaders at Harvard Business School and the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration.

Listen

One of the factors described by the professors as vital for successful case discussion leaders is the ability to listen effectively. Matthew McBrady feels that “listening is the #1 most important factor” for a case discussion leader. Sherwood Frey clarified the type of listening as “hearing what people are saying versus filtering it by what you want them to say.” Mark Haskins stated regarding listening, “Don’t filter student’s comments based on your wants or expectations.” Peter Tufano feels that a case discussion leader cannot be successful without effective listening skills. He feels that this is similar to the need to be a good listener in order to be an effective conversationalist in everyday life. Listening in a case discussion allows the professor to follow-up on comments and clarify what students are saying. The observations revealed that the professors spend the majority of the class time listening to the students speak rather than speaking themselves. One of the HBS students commented to me that the reason why the class likes the observed professor is because he listens and understands what the students are saying and then encapsulates it.

Create Intellectual Excitement

Professors create intellectual excitement in students for the material in two ways. The first is by their own model of intellectual excitement for the material to students. Matthew McBrady stated that the professors must display “genuine intellectual curiosity for the subject and must really enjoy the learning process.” Yiorgos Allayannis also believes that you must sincerely enjoy what you are doing in order for the students to enjoy the experience. He feels that you must enjoy the process so that students will too. Ken Froot stated that you must “be passionate and interested in the material and new knowledge of the subject.”

The second way for a professor to create intellectual excitement is to proactively craft this type of learning experience for the students during the case discussions. Robert Bruner stated that the case discussion leader “must create intellectual excitement or sizzle for the material.” Sherwood Frey stated, “You must make the classroom a fun place – learning and fun go hand in hand. This allows students to be relaxed, open to new ideas, and ready to learn.” Yiorgos Allayannis feels that a case discussion leader must inspire his students to enjoy the learning process.

Be a Performer

Creating intellectual excitement for the material requires the case discussion leader to be a performer in the classroom. Sherwood Frey believes that it is often effective to either role-play or ask students to role-play as different individuals in the case. This allows the student to think from varying or opposing perspectives. The professor may also play the devil’s advocate if students are conforming to similar patterns of thinking. He stated that “teaching is showmanship.”

The observed professors made frequent use of humor throughout the case discussions. Matthew McBrady stated, “You must be a ham, a performer. You must frequently use humor.” Robert Bruner feels that case discussion leaders must take risks in expressing their ideas in order to stimulate intellectual excitement and interest in students. This may include “the use of humor, weird media, or unusual examples in class to create sizzle.” The use of humor was apparent in all of the class observations – however, the style of humor varied according to the individual professor. One professor made frequent use of humor through his contagious, hardy laugh and display of exuberant enthusiasm. Other professors used humor by subtly putting themselves down. As an

example, when the class encountered a confusing part of the case facts, the professor stated, “Perhaps we just have a dumb case writer,” in which the class knows that the case was written by himself. Another professor inserted preplanned but humorous comments into his discussion. For example, the case discussed was about Scott Toilet Paper and he stated, “I am a frequent user of the product under discussion” and later “According to analysts, paper is paper – but home consumers don’t get confused (between coated paper and toilet paper).” Another professor used a sarcastic style of humor. He stated when examining financial statement appendices, “Just pick the highest number – we’re doing high level finance here.” Another professor responded to student comments in a humorous manner. When a student was rambling on in search of the right answer he stated, “OK, I’ll signal right or wrong with my eyebrows.”

A case discussion leader effectively uses movement in the classroom to enhance the learning experience and increase student engagement. The professors frequently walked up and down the aisles which created visual stimulation, walked close to a student when they were expressing their views in order to give them their full and personal attention, and sometimes stood in the back of the classroom and just observed the students engage in a discussion – as if a silent observer of student learning and self-discovery. The professors never stood behind a podium and made infrequent references to their notes. They often used drama through the fluctuation of their voice inflection, volume, or intensity. They often used hand motions and gestures to express their views or reflect emotion. The professors exuded a significant level of emotional energy during the case discussion. At the end of class, it felt as if a performance had just concluded. In fact,

the students clapped at the end of every case discussion – as if clapping for a grand performance.

Learn From Others but Be Yourself

During the interviews, most of the faculty mentioned the need to find your own style as a case discussion leader. Yiorgos Allayannis stated, “You must find your own style, be yourself, don’t try to emulate others. You must figure out who you want to be in the classroom.” Mark Haskins stated, “You must find out what works for you.” He also stated that it is valuable to observe other experienced, master case discussion leaders and then filter and glean from these observations to create your own unique style. Ken Froot also emphasized the value of observing others teach in order to learn some of their tricks for case teaching and then, “You must be yourself, unique.” The professors explained that this emphasis on finding your own style allows the case discussion leader to enjoy themselves, feel comfortable in the classroom, and use their strengths which maximizes the learning experience for the students.

The observations revealed an interesting discovery regarding the unique nature of each professor. The observations of the eight different professors revealed varying styles. These included a practitioner, real world perspective; a more academic, theoretical style; a storytelling, humorous style; a style which placed heavy emphasis on using simple English and practical language for themselves and their students; an optimistic, encouraging, yet methodical style; a style which exuded energy and engagement; a style which allowed students to consider the case from a personal perspective and gave significant latitude in the discussion direction; and a style which integrated personal research and drew heavily on students’ practical experience. Each professor expressed

their own unique style, but all possessed the same core case discussion leadership qualities as described in this article.

Prepare

The interviews revealed the necessity for a case discussion leader to be thoroughly prepared in order to be effective. This preparation requires multiple layers and dimensions. The first level of preparation is mastery of the content or subject material, which in this study is in the area of finance. This includes both theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge of current events, research, and application of theory in the real-world. The professors stated during the interviews that a case discussion leader must “know the content” and have “command of the subject.”

The second layer of preparation requires knowing every detail of the case content. Yiorgos Allayannis stated, “You must know the case so well that you can go in different directions – like in a movie, an actor may change the lines to make it better.” Ron Wilcox stated, “Effective case discussion leadership begins with preparation – knowing the case inside and out and knowing common mistakes.”

The third level of preparation is in leading the case discussion process. Sherwood Frey stated that this level of preparation requires the professor to “anticipate students’ comments and all the deviant ways people can go.” Mark Haskins stated that through preparation, case discussion leaders can develop the “ability to anticipate wrong, blind, dead alleys that students will take.” He stated that this preparation for the case discussion process allows the professor to be “knowledgeable and confident about what students will do or say.” Matthew McBrady stated that an effective case discussion leader “must prepare enough to be confident.” Due to the multiple layers of preparation required for a

case discussion leader, Mark Haskins stated, “You must work harder preparing for a case class than a lecture class.” Willis Emmons discussed the two vital elements of preparation which include content and process. He stated, “Content knowledge by faculty is vital.” This content knowledge includes case knowledge, theoretical knowledge, and practical experience. He described process mastery as the ability to effectively lead the case discussion process in class. He stated that it is difficult for new professors because they are attempting to learn both content and process at the same time, as compared to a senior faculty member that has thorough content knowledge and can primarily focus on mastering the process of leadership in the classroom. He also stated that although content knowledge and practical experience may provide the case discussion leader with some additional credibility, the faculty member can still be a poor case discussion leader without process knowledge and practice.

The case discussion leader prepares and learns on an individual level and also through collaboration with others. This includes one-on-one collaboration with colleagues in the same discipline and through group collaboration via weekly, *teaching group* meetings. The one-on-one discussions are normally conducted on an informal basis between the professors as colleagues. These one on one discussions may be used to glean a new perspective or insight on teaching, feedback on class progress or group dynamics, research ideas, or to seek clarification of a technical or case issue. One of the professors expressed that this is done frequently on campus and that phone calls to other faculty colleagues are acceptable in the evening until 10:00 pm. These informal interactions aid the professor in effectively preparing for the case discussions.

The weekly teaching group meetings are scheduled, 3-hour sessions among the professors in that specific discipline and level, which in this study is MBA finance faculty. The observation of this teaching group meeting at HBS consisted of 7 finance faculty members and 2 finance teaching assistants on a Friday afternoon from 3:00-6:00 p.m. Three of the finance faculty members were senior faculty and 4 were junior faculty – 2 of whom had never taught the cases for the following week. Ken Froot, the chair of the first-year Finance Teaching Group, called FIN2, led the meeting. The meeting consisted of a review of the success of the case discussions from that week, ideas for improvement in all areas, and a thorough review of the following week's case discussions. The 2 teaching assistants, who lead optional weekly practice sessions, also provided feedback on the areas of student progress and struggles.

There are several outcomes and benefits of this weekly teaching group meeting based on the observations and interviews with the faculty members of the FIN2 teaching group. The first is that it prepares all faculty with an understanding of the case, an explanation of technical calculations, major themes and emphases for the following week's case discussion, suggestions on how to present the case, questions to ask students, appropriate responses to anticipated student responses, ideas for graphical presentation of the case discussion on the blackboard, and time expectations for each section of the case discussion. Individual preparation time is reduced to some extent because the course is centrally designed and discussed (Ken Froot). It also ensures uniformity of purpose, understanding, and vision for the goals of the case discussion among the faculty. It provides the teaching assistants with understanding of the case content, goals, and areas on which to focus the weekly practice sessions. It provides an opportunity for

experienced senior faculty to mentor and train junior faculty by providing them with personal perspectives and insights based on their previous case discussion experience including an explanation of questions that students may ask and challenges that may arise and how to handle them. It provides a formal opportunity for junior faculty to ask questions about process or case content. It also provides a venue for collaborating on the success of the previous week, ideas for improvement, evaluation of new ideas, and student progress in case discussions and quizzes. The discussion of the case during the teaching group meeting seemed to stimulate enthusiasm for the upcoming case discussion among the faculty members, based on their anticipation of the potential for deep learning and intellectual excitement by the students. Peter Tufano stated to the group, “This is a really fun case to teach. It gives the students confidence that they can understand and tackle this level of complexity and ambiguity and solve these problems.” The members of the FIN2 Teaching Group are there to help each other increase student learning, learn from each other, and improve the program. They each have common areas of expertise and skills, speak the same language, and share one focus and goal. It is evident that the faculty members have deep knowledge and respect for their students that is based on their description of the students’ anticipated responses, characteristics, needs, and the professors’ positive attitude when discussing their students. They seem to display an intense commitment to achieving maximum student learning through the pursuit of enhanced case discussion leadership, as evidenced by their participation in a 3-hour, collaborative teaching group meeting on Friday afternoon.

Establish Rapport, Respect, and Relationships with Students

Faculty interviews revealed the importance of developing relationships and rapport with students. Matthew McBrady stated that in order to develop rapport with the students a case discussion leader must, “Respect the value of the real world experience of the students and what these MBAs bring to the table.” He also stated that rapport and relationships with students are established by seeking to engage in effective interpersonal communication with the students with the primary emphasis on listening rather than speaking. Ken Eades stated that a case discussion leader will gain the respect of the students based on their qualifications and opinions. He stated that the relationship with students requires a balance in which the professor does not seek to be their friend, but is also not intimidating. Mark Haskins feels that an effective case discussion leader must develop mutual trust with their students. Yiorgos Allayannis and Ron Wilcox expressed the need to develop relationships with students. Nabil El-Hage stated, “It is vital to establish chemistry with the students.” He also revealed the importance of establishing the “trust and goodwill of the students.” Ken Froot feels that the case discussion leader will develop the respect of the students based on their content mastery. Robert Bruner emphasized the importance of establishing interpersonal rapport with the students which requires warmth and respect for students’ views.

The finance professors revealed several reasons and benefits of establishing rapport, respect, and relationships with students. Ron Wilcox and Nabil El-Hage both stated that a relationship with students is important, because if the students are not prepared, they will feel that they are failing you personally. Nabil El-Hage stated that establishing a relationship and the goodwill of students is important because the students “will be willing to work with you and cut you some slack, because you will need it.”

Specifically, this will be valuable when you want to take the students down a path that may initially be difficult for students to see the value in pursuing. He stated, “If you don’t have their goodwill, they will fight you, which is counterproductive. If you do have their goodwill, they will go with you and wait for the ‘aha’ and relevance.”

Professors show respect for the students by always concluding class on time, even if they feel there is a lingering issue to discuss. When this occurs, the professor tells the class that they will conclude this discussion at the beginning of the following class and sometimes give them an issue to reflect on until the next class. An effective case discussion leader gains knowledge of the students’ backgrounds, professional experiences, prior degrees, and current specialization emphasis. This can be accomplished by talking with students to learn more about them. Both schools have an open door policy in their offices for student interaction. HBS and Darden also provide the professors with cards that describe the pertinent background information for each student. This knowledge of the students allows the professors to weave in the students’ practical experiences by asking them to contribute their knowledge during the case discussion and by calling on certain students with relevant experience or knowledge to answer technical questions. Willis Emmons stated that knowledge of the students allows the case discussion leader to develop rapport with the students and draw on their experiences during the case discussions, according to their varied backgrounds.

The observations revealed a high level of student respect and rapport for the professor and a strong relationship between the professor and the students. When the professor walked to the front of the room to begin class, the students immediately became silent. The professors always wore a suit and tie during class which fostered a feeling of

professionalism and respect for the position of the professor. During class when one of the professors incorrectly wrote a calculation on the board, a student respectfully clarified the error for him. After class, there was always a group of students waiting to talk to the professor. These discussions included clarifying an issue they did not understand, providing additional insight into the case, asking a related question beyond the case content, or apologizing for not providing a strong answer to a question during the case discussion. The professors were patient and receptive to the students, referred to them by name, and obviously had a strong rapport and relationship with the students. There was never a display of disrespect, antagonism, or harshness displayed between students and professors. The professors were often seen talking with students in the hallways or around campus.

Know the Context of the Class

An effective case discussion leader understands the context of the class. This includes a knowledge of the unique personality and demographic of each class. It also requires the professor to maintain an awareness of the external influences on the changing dynamics of the class. Mark Haskins stated that an effective case discussion leader “has an awareness of where students’ heads and hearts are.” This includes struggles in the previous class session, other classes they are currently taking, and the current cultural environment of the school. Sherwood Frey stated that a case discussion leader must “start where the students’ heads are – either in the course or at the case level.” At the case level, a case discussion leader could ask students to take a vote on their recommendations for the case or ask one student to explain their position in order to

recognize their current perspectives. At the course level, the professor should be aware of the backgrounds, experiences, and interests of the students.

Peter Tufano stated that the case discussion leader “must have empathy for their students – to know them and where they are coming from. You will have a much better conversation or discussion if you know what they are about.” Robert Bruner expressed the need for a case discussion leader to display intuitive empathy in the classroom. This requires them to be sensitive to what is happening in the classroom. This could include the professor’s knowledge that students are often more tired after dinner or lunch. The professor should be cognizant of a significant controversial issue occurring in the school which is affecting the overall demeanor and morale of the class atmosphere. The professor should be aware when significant illness exists among the students in the class or that students often experience apathy at the end of their program or semester. They should recognize significant personal, relational, or emotional problems among specific students. The professors should be cognizant that evening students may feel fatigue after working all day before class or experience burnout at the end of a long class. This intuitive empathy for the classroom context can provide the case discussion leader with additional insight and understanding for the current class dynamics and may stimulate some adjustments in delivery, style, or motivation of the students. This knowledge of the class context also pertains to knowing the difference in types of student demographics. For example, significant differences exist between full-time students and part-time, executive students which a case discussion leader must recognize and subsequently make adjustments for in the classroom. This topic was discussed in further detail in a future

chapter of the study regarding the techniques for implementing case discussion leadership in varying settings and students.

Exhibit Humble Leadership

An effective case discussion leader displays humility in their leadership style. Ken Eades stated that the case discussion leader “must have a low ego. They must have the ability to say ‘I don’t know.’ They must acknowledge the experience and knowledge of the student. They must display vulnerability by admitting that they don’t know everything.” Ken also feels that the case discussion leader should be willing to honestly admit mistakes, personally or in the program, but in a firm manner which does not invite discontent. Sherwood Frey stated that the case discussion leader “doesn’t need to be perceived as the final authority.”

The classroom observations revealed an attitude of humility, rather than arrogance in the professors’ attitudes. The professors’ speech to their students was always kind. They treated their students as colleagues rather than students. They always thoughtfully considered and responded respectfully to students’ views. They did not act as the sage on the stage in which they were the source of all knowledge. It was evident through the observations and interviews that case discussion leaders act as co-learners with the students and seek to gain new knowledge during class; glean additional practical understanding and application of theory, based on students’ descriptions of their personal experiences; and often develop research topics, based on students’ questions. They displayed an attitude of desiring to jointly discover truth, rather than serving as an authoritarian. However, this attitude of humility did not diminish their rapport, respect, and leadership in the classroom. Conversely, students displayed a deep respect for the

professors as a result of the professors' relationship and respect for the students, approachability, content mastery, attitude of lifelong learning, and commitment to maximizing the students' learning experience.

Believe in the Value of Teaching and Case Discussion Leadership

Faculty interviews indicated the need for case discussion leaders to believe in the priority of teaching and thus place significant emphasis and time into developing teaching skills. This requires professors to judiciously allocate their time between research and teaching, rather than spending the majority of their time on researching. Mark Haskins stated, "Case discussion leaders should take certain semesters to just focus on being a better teacher versus researching." This could include reading about student learning and case discussion leadership methods, observing master case discussion leaders, trying new techniques, and self-reflection and analysis. During interviews, faculty expressed their belief in the value and superiority of using case discussions rather than passive methods of teaching in order to maximize student learning. Nabil El-Hage stated, "I truly believe that students always learn more with case discussions than lecture. Students retain more with cases." Willis Emmons explained that Harvard Business School only recruits faculty that possess a strong belief in the value of using case discussions versus passive methods. This ensures a unified culture and commitment in pursuing this active, student-centered style of learning. The observations revealed the professors belief and commitment to pursuing excellence in teaching. This was apparent in their level of preparation and time spent on case preparation, process knowledge and training, group teaching meetings, developing relationships with students, and case writing. This level of preparation is an indicator of their value and emphasis on teaching. This teaching

objective is pursued by the professors, despite the personal accolades and notoriety that are often garnished from a primary emphasis on producing research and writing.

Emphasize Simple Language

Faculty expressed the need to encourage students to use simple, practical language and to also use this approach themselves during case discussions. Yiorgos Allayannis stated, “We must force the use of simple language rather than theoretical jargon. It makes finance easier.” He feels that this helps even students without finance backgrounds to learn during case discussions. He feels this also allows students to communicate to all parts of the business such as marketing, operations, and sales when they reenter the corporate workplace. He also stated, “We must focus on the bottom line which would be addressed in the board room.” Sherwood Frey emphasized the need for students to be “numerically articulate” in quantitative classes, like finance. This requires the use of simple language to describe the calculations, formulas, and theories. He emphasized the need for students to use “plain English” in their explanations and discussions. He believes that students must be able to explain the numbers to their colleagues in any area of the business and produce understanding and relevance of the data in their minds. He also stated that “an outside observer of a case discussion class should reasonably be able to understand what is going on in your class.” Matthew McBrady emphasized the need for case discussion leaders to train students to “develop the ability to communicate in plain English.” Mark Haskins stated that students must develop the ability to “speak clearly” during case discussions. Peter Tufano stated that case discussion leaders must teach students to “use plain English.” He feels that it is important to prevent students from hiding behind technical language and instead

emphasize clarity and simple language. Case discussion leaders must model this in their own language by making the case discussions clear and easy to understand. This will encourage students to do the same.

The observations revealed a strong emphasis on forcing simple language in students and the use of simple language by the case discussion leaders. Yiorgos Allayannis stated to students during a case discussion, “Don’t go technical on me,” “Please restate that in plain English, rather than technical jargon,” “OK, now what does that mean?” and “Restate that in a couple of short sentences.” He used questions that were very clear, bottom line, simple to understand, practical, and to the point. His questions and language were often indicative of what a non-finance colleague would ask. For example, he stated, “I need money to finance this project, but I’m not so sure it is going to work. What rationale will you need to show the investment banker in order to get money?” Ken Eades used practical questions in simple English to keep the discussion focused on the vital issues and emphasized real-life decision making. He forced the students to bring the discussion down to simple language by stating, “Explain what you mean by market cap.” Matthew McBrady continually forced students to use simple language versus theoretical jargon. He stated, “Explain this. Don’t hide behind the language.” Matthew McBrady also used a practical example to simplify a difficult theoretical concept. For example, he compared a complex corporate valuation decision to buying a house. He stated, “How can you compare the value of one house to another?” The students derived the idea of “price per square foot” which McBrady then tied in to the theory of “multiples valuation.” Nabil El-Hage placed a strong emphasis on using clear, basic questions that were action-oriented, required critical thinking, and decision-

making without clear information. Ken Froot often asked students to clarify or explain what they were saying and to avoid ambiguous language. Peter Tufano used a conversational style of language, addressed the students as colleagues, and avoided the use of lofty language. He often asked the students to “explain that in plain English.” He modeled the same use of clear, simple language. For example, he stated when explaining the output from a complex financial model, “In plain English 10% means that once in a decade earnings will fall \$11.5M from projected earnings.” The observations of case discussion leaders unanimously revealed their emphasis on forcing the use of simple language in students and modeling the use of simple language during their case discussions with students.

Focus on Student Self-Discovery – Ask versus Tell

Students develop deep, lasting meaning and knowledge by discovering ideas and relationships themselves. Robert Bruner stated, “One learns best that which one teaches oneself.” He stated that rote memorization does not make meaning and that students will make meaning to the extent that they discover ideas themselves.” Matthew McBrady stated that he knows students are acquiring true learning when “I see students get it on their own.” Nabil El-Hage stated that an emphasis on student self-discovery requires the case discussion leader to “be willing to wait for the ‘aha’ in students.” Ken Eades stated that an effective case discussion leader will encourage student self-discovery by “stimulating students to ‘bubble up’ and offer insight.” He encourages the students to contribute and invites them to engage in the case discussion. Yiorgos Allayannis stated that when a student answers, “I don’t know,” the case discussion leader must keep asking them questions to help them understand the issue themselves.

Sherwood Frey feels it is important to encourage students in the class to challenge other students' views. He stated that although it may be humbling for a professor, students often learn more from other students than the professor. He will sometimes allow a student to continue in their discussion with a wrong analysis and then ask questions to help them understand their errors or let other students step in to challenge them on their views or assumptions. Frey also emphasized the need for the case discussion leader to "trust the [case discussion] process" and be patient to wait for student learning through self-discovery.

The case discussion observations revealed that the majority of the discussion dialogue or "airtime" was conducted by students rather than the professor. Students possess a high level of knowledge in the classroom and made many of the significant points. They often challenged other students or provided the professor or students with an additional perspective or alternate assumptions. The students were not just passive observers and absorbers of the professor's dissemination of information.

The learning model established in a case discussion school facilitates and develops students as active participants in their learning. The model begins with individual study by the student. This includes readings of theoretical material in textbooks, online tutorials, or technical notes provided by the schools and thorough reading and analysis of the case. The second stage of the model requires students to meet in study groups before class to test their opinions, thoughts, questions, and ideas in a small group before the in-class case discussion. The third stage of the model requires students to actively contribute to the in-class case discussion. The fourth stage requires students to reflect on, develop, and discover their own meaning and truth in the days

following the case discussion. This learning model is built on the premise that “students learn best, that which they teach themselves” and thus requires them to conduct a significant amount of learning outside of class, both individually and in a small group and then contribute to other students’ learning during the case discussion (Robert Bruner). This is compared to passive learning where students enter class as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge by the professor.

The professor encouraged the use of student self-discovery in class by asking questions rather than giving answers. This is a style of learning described as the Socratic method in which the teacher is a discussion leader or participant in the search for knowledge. According to this teaching style, the learning experience is active and is structured as a dialogue based on questions, rather than statements. Socrates stated that his greatest personal contribution was that “I taught men to question” (as cited by Bruner, 2003, p. 19). Mark Haskins stated that one of the important qualities of a case discussion leader is “the ability to make seamless transitions by knowing how to ask questions which take the students to the key topics.” Sherwood Frey stated that an effective case discussion leader “encourages and values articulate ‘questions’ rather than only articulate ‘answers’ by students.” He stated that students must recognize that “the key is in asking the right question” and then develop their ability to ask relevant questions. He also stated that case discussion leaders must be comfortable asking, rather than answering questions. He feels that students will still respect the professor’s knowledge and know that they are choosing not to participate. Nabil El-Hage stated that a case discussion leader “must ask enough leading questions without giving the answer. A subsequent chapter provides

additional understanding of how a case discussion leader should effectively use questions to increase student learning.

Relinquish Control, Accept Ambiguity, and Embrace the Unknown

An effective case discussion leader makes the decision to relinquish control, accept ambiguity, and embrace the unknown. The case discussion leader must be willing to let go of their need to control the direction of the discussion and tell others the truth they must believe. In contrast, they must be willing to allow them to discover it themselves. Mark Haskins stated that effective case discussion leaders “must let go of the need to control.” He feels that a case discussion leader must discern whether it is productive to allow a student to take a different direction with the discussion and then be effective at seamlessly bringing them back through the use of questions. Ron Wilcox stated that a case discussion leader must “know when to stay out of it versus saying no or giving their perspective of the answer” when a student makes a statement that seems incorrect. Some alternatives for a case discussion leader are to allow other students to challenge or correct the student, ask the student questions which cause them to recognize their errors, or sometimes the professor must simply recognize that the answer is not wrong, just different than they anticipated.

Sherwood Frey feels that a case discussion leader can use some directiveness, but “it shouldn’t be recognizable. It should be subtle guidance. You make things happen without the awareness of students.” Matthew McBrady stated that the case discussion leader must find equilibrium between covering the case material and allowing the findings to unfold naturally. Ken Froot stated that a case discussion leader should not be overly directive during the case discussions. However, there are varying degrees of low

directiveness and the case discussion leader should adapt their style to their personality and what feels comfortable to them. Peter Tufano feels that a case discussion leader should have a low need to control. However, the case discussion leader can provide subtle direction during the case discussion. He used an analogy linked to changing lanes on the highway, which can either be sudden and jarring or gentle. The case discussion leader should be gentle in guiding students through a case discussion. Robert Bruner stated that case discussion leaders should frequently remind themselves that “the case discussion classroom belongs to the students.”

A case discussion leader must be willing to accept that at the end of the case discussion, there may not be a right answer, but rather a preferred decision based on the assumptions made and levels of ambiguity in the case. Mark Haskins stated, “Case discussions and case facts are messy.” The outcomes are not always black and white because case discussions attempt to emulate real-life decision-making in which the direction is not always unquestionably clear. Nabil El-Hage stated, “A case discussion leader must have a high tolerance for ambiguity.”

The case discussion leader must accept that they do not know what direction the case discussion may take, where it will end up, and what types of learning may occur in the process. However, Yiorgos Allayannis stated that “the beauty of case discussions is that they are always different – different people, different sequencing of questions, different reactions of students, different ideas.” An effective case discussion leader is willing to take some of the unknown paths in pursuit of deeper learning. Robert Bruner stated that an effective case discussion leader exploits spontaneity by taking paths that seem to spark energy with the students. Nabil El-Hage stated that effective case

discussion leaders have the confidence to lead new avenues in pursuit of learning. He stated that this requires the case discussion leader to be able to think quickly.

Sherwood Frey stated that the case discussion leader must be flexible and willing to take new and different paths. Matthew McBrady stated that a case discussion leader must be able to think on their feet, consider new views, and synthesize ideas when dealing with the unknown. The observations of case discussion leaders at the two business schools revealed their minimal control of the case discussion direction and telling students what they must learn, acceptance of ambiguity by focusing on multiple perspectives and assumptions, and embracing the unknown by having the spontaneity and confidence to take paths that seemed relevant and sparked the energy of the students.

References

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Dr. Mark Haskins, Darden Graduate School of Business Administration

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Dr. Robert Bruner, Darden Graduate School of Business Administration