

# ADOPTION OF DISCUSSION-BASED TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reports the application of discussion-based teaching and assessment to the teaching of strategic management subject in the postgraduate programme in China. The method is seen as effective in teaching the subject of strategic management. The adoption of discussion-based teaching and assessment is preferred by students to lectures as well as tutorials. The in-class assessment is also preferred by participants to written assessment.*

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of verbal communication in the process of management has long been recognised

in studies of managers' work (Mintzberg, 1973, Kotter, 1999). To some extent, teaching and assessment methods do not always reflect the importance of such verbal communication and discussion skills. While Alexander, O'Neill, Snyder and Townsend's study of US BP / SM strategy professors (1986) finds class participation to be the most common means for evaluating student performance with over 94% of respondents using evaluations based upon class participation, within UK higher education such assessment, other than for formal presentations by students, appears to be little used. This is also true in China especially students tend to be passive. Therefore, the adoption of discussion-based teaching and assessment as the sole way of

teaching strategic management subjects was used in one of the postgraduate programmes jointly run by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the Zhejiang University.

## TEACHING METHOD

The common approach to teaching strategic management consists of lectures and tutorials. Usually, tutorial activity centred upon papers presented by individual students, addressing the academic literature and including the consideration of case situations.

The principle of discussion-based teaching and assessment was used to construct a teaching / learning /assessment strategy that replaced the lecture and tutorial. Normally, this takes the form of a weekly seminar (15-20 students) lasting two hours as the sole means of teaching the subject. But, the classes for this programme are held in 7-hours sessions for a period of two 3-days block of meeting. The method operated as follows:

First, a collection of articles and case studies, was adopted for all postgraduate students to use or have. Readings were preferred to a textbook in that they provide greater opportunity to gain in-depth of understanding and to confront the student with alternative perspectives, providing greater opportunity for discussion.

The students followed a programme in which for each three days there was a specific topic and readings for which all students were to prepare. Typically, for postgraduate

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students in this mode of study, this involved up to eight hours of class preparation.

Second, each class was based upon following a discussion sheet, a set of issues, questions and brief items of case material that added to the case material already made available beforehand. Discussion sheets were issued at the beginning of each session. The scope of the questions was designed to ensure coverage of the material that had been prepared.

Third, the first session was used to introduce the teaching / learning / assessment method to students, recognising that being assessed on the basis of contribution to class discussion, with all students having equal responsibility for preparation, was a new situation for the students that also changed the role of the lecturer.

All students were asked to provide a photo of her or him. Photos were intended to serve a purpose, to avoid confusion in assessing students through out the 3-days sessions.

Fourth, during each session the lecturer took the role of a facilitator, principally acting to open the topic of each session, link issues and close the class and to promote

discussion. The lecturer acted to encourage and enable student participation, as a class and as individuals.

The students experience in class was intense and consequently the progress of the class was designed to include opportunities for relaxation and variation in the activity taking place; for example by using video to provide case material, short episodes of group working to develop views on a case or issue and periods of individual reflection to develop input to the discussion.

Fifth, for each session the lecturer derived a mark for each student. These evaluations were based upon evidence of understanding, comprehension, analysis and drawing of conclusions from analysis, and the evaluation of concepts techniques and situations, criteria that had been stated in handouts for students. Students at any time, outside of the classroom session during these 3-days sessions, could ask for feedback on how they were progressing. The feedback information was given individually, providing opportunities to explore the student's view of the teaching situation, their behaviour and ability, as well as to review performance.

At the end of the semester the subject lecturer examined marks and recapped what had happened in the course.

TABLE 1  
BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS

| Benefits  | Problems  |
|---|---|
| Extensive student participation.+   | Existing group culture may involve discomfort for individuals who change their role by becoming participators (some of them are directors).*  |
| Increased class preparation.+   | Individuals may perceive themselves as not being able to contribute in a 'real-time' mode (self-perceptions of demonstrating nervousness, inability to express views, comparative slowness in responding).* |
| Maintains interest throughout preparation and in class.+  | Students may doubt accuracy of assessment, believing it reflects frequency rather than quality of contribution and may feel the situation is competitive.+  |
| Helps to develop depth of understanding.+   | Some students may prefer direct questioning to open discussion.+  |
| Encourages critical examination of concepts and situations.+                                    | Can involve too much preparation since they are part-time students.+  |
| Develops recognition that other students often hold differing views.+                           | A few students remain infrequent and reluctant contributors to discussion.+*  |
| Provides even timing of workload and assessment, saves time by not having written course work.+ |   |

Note: 1. + items derived from questionnaire, 21 students, were asked to participate in this new teaching method.  
2. \* items are based upon subject lecturer's own opinion.

## Benefits and Problems:

Student questionnaires together with class and individual discussion of the teaching method provide the following benefits and problems for the teaching method. Table 1 shows some of the benefits and problems and the results are similar to previous findings (Jennings 2001, Chang & Jennings 2003).

For the lecturer the teaching - learning method provides certain significant benefits in this study. The proportion of students participating in class discussion was considered to be greatly increased, as was the apparent student ownership of the course material. Experience of a lecture based approach often included episodes when students would aggressively question why attention was being given to certain authors and issues. Such incidents have not occurred with the new teaching method since lecturer no longer needs to act as presenters of academic material, being free to act as part of the discussion, development and questioning of material. The new method may enable the lecturer to present a better role model for student learning by increasing student exposure to the lecturer as a stimulus for questioning rather than a content provider.

Discussion-based teaching and assessment tend to provide a group experience in which academic staff and students interact in a face-to-face manner. The need to derive an assessment within the 3-day sessions requires greater attention by the lecturer to each individual student. New opportunities are provided to interact with students and to assist their development.

In addition, students in China have also made spontaneous comments affirming that the classes are

interesting, reward effort and that the process of discussion is relevant to 'real life' in business.

The problems presented by the teaching method can be avoided or their effect reduced. The difficulties presented by an existing group culture (particularly true in China), carried over from students' previous experiences of studying together, can be addressed by forming new groups. Reluctant contributors can be identified and an element of direct questioning introduced into the teaching session. Slowness in making a response can be addressed by introducing phases of individual or group reflection, providing the opportunity for preparation in meeting a pre-announced set of questions.

During individual feedback sessions many students have privately confessed to the belief that they are shy, that they project a nervous image and are poor at contributing to discussion. Often these comments have not been consistent with students' performance and represent a poor self-image of their own behaviour. The disparity between behaviour and self-image can be discussed with the individual student to help further development.

Overall, Chinese students see the discussion-based teaching and assessment method as effective in teaching the subject of strategic management. Table 2 shows that most of Chinese students preferred new method to lectures and tutorials and with in-class assessment to written assessment. Similar results were recorded in previous studies in 2001 by Jennings and in 2003 by Chang and Jennings. Nonetheless, larger percentages of students confirming their approval of new method were recorded compared with previous studies in Hong Kong (Chang & Jennings, 2003). Table 3 shows the previous study done in Hong Kong.

TABLE 2  
STUDENT COMPARISON OF TEACHING METHODS IN CHINA

|                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |                                   |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|-----------------------------------|
| Ineffective in teaching the subject | 2 | 1 | 4 | 6  | 35 | 46 | 6  | Effective in teaching the subject |
| Prefer lectures                     | 3 | 2 | 8 | 11 | 25 | 43 | 8  | Prefer new method                 |
| Prefer tutorials                    | 2 | 3 | 8 | 9  | 26 | 42 | 12 | Prefer new method                 |
| Prefer written assessment           | 0 | 5 | 7 | 23 | 25 | 30 | 10 | Prefer in-class assessment        |

Note: (% Questionnaire results, 1-7 Likert scale, 21 students, were asked to participate in this new teaching method)

TABLE 3  
STUDENT COMPARISON OF TEACHING METHODS IN HONG KONG

|                                     | 1 | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |                                   |
|-------------------------------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----------------------------------|
| Ineffective in teaching the subject | 0 | 2  | 5  | 8  | 38 | 45 | 2  | Effective in teaching the subject |
| Prefer lectures                     | 1 | 2  | 12 | 19 | 25 | 35 | 6  | Prefer new method                 |
| Prefer tutorials                    | 2 | 3  | 10 | 10 | 25 | 40 | 10 | Prefer new method                 |
| Prefer written assessment           | 2 | 10 | 7  | 23 | 25 | 25 | 8  | Prefer in-class assessment        |

(%, Questionnaire results, Likert scale, 34 students, were asked to participate in this new teaching method)

## CONCLUSION

The adoption of discussion-based teaching and assessment can enable students and academic faculty member to develop a questioning and participative relationship to the concepts, techniques and situations examined in a strategic management course in China. The new method stresses a key managerial skill, verbal communication, emphasising discussion in 'real time', and helping to develop students' perception of their communication abilities and thus once again provides a very special opportunity to train students to do that in China.

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