

When the Student Becomes the Teacher

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, OCT 15 2013

In a business school environment like the one here at CEFAM students become used to doing presentations in class. Whether it is an explanation of their semester on an investment simulation like StockTrak in finance class, a breakdown of a marketing strategy, or a long presentation for a corporate client in our MBA program, CEFAM students quickly get used to presenting material to their peers, their professors and invited guests.

In my classes, though, I sometimes request that students take on the role of teacher. For one 90 minute lesson I hand over control of the room to students and request that they teach their peers. This, to my mind, is very different to asking them to complete a 90 minute presentation. Instead of simply serving up material for the audience to digest or boring the audience with a 90 minute PowerPoint the students are required to teach.

The difference is far from semantic.

Presentations in a business context are generally about imparting information, explaining a perspective or making a point. Rarely do they involve interaction with the audience beyond anything superficial. A presentation is planned, timed and delivered safe in the knowledge that, in most circumstances, the work will be judged but the presenter will not be interrupted. Of course there are exceptions to this courtesy – and depending on the company or industry culture this courtesy may not even be extended at all – but generally a student giving a presentation is free to speak for the allotted time and the audience must remain silent.

Teaching, though, is a different kettle of fish altogether. A classroom where real learning is required needs to be interactive. The leader of the class – whether student or professor – needs to work with the audience to assure that learning is taking place; mere imparting of information is not enough. Where a student giving a presentation in another class might feel safe from interruption, save perhaps from an inquisitive professor, a student seeking to teach a class knows that questions and comments, critiques and 'left field' thinking is always something that is just a moment away.

More than that, unlike a presentation where a very specific question is being answered, a student who is tasked with teaching about a particular theme – say 'Nuclear Weapons', 'The Environment' or 'Russian Power Politics' – is first tasked with narrowing their subject to something manageable. The student is tasked with making the sorts of decisions that professors face: what can I fit into 90 minutes of class? what pre-existing knowledge do students have? how can I connect this topic to previous work? and how do I justify what is included and excluded?

In my experience, students tend to take their role as teacher more seriously than they do a presentation. I am not sure why this is the case but I would guess it has something to do with the responsibility involved. A student completing a presentation on a subject needs only prove to the professor that they understand the subject of their presentation to the level that the expert professor demands. Teaching, though, is a different skill and requires students to demonstrate mastery of a subject as well as the ability to pass on that subject knowledge effectively to a group of non-experts in a manner that will allow that audience to recall the key information and, perhaps, apply it in their future research papers and exams.

There is certainly a trade off when a professor gives away valuable class time to non-expert students to take the

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class perhaps in a direction other than that preferred by the professor. There is also the ever present danger of a 'train wreck' class where the student, despite the aid and advice of the professor, fails to deliver the sorts of outcomes expected. In recent years this has only happened once where a 90 minute class ended up running just a shade over 30 minutes and I had to step in to 'fill in the gap', so to speak. Yet despite the risks, handing over control of the classroom to students and demanding that they teach their peers instead of just presenting information to them seems to me to be a useful way of developing a necessary skill – teaching – while also helping business students spark a passion, if only temporarily, for a topic in international relations.

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Read more from Dylan Kissane in his e-IR blog [Political Business](#)

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