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Strategies for Enhancing Teaching Group Effectiveness in the HBS MBA Program

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This document is an outgrowth of the Fall 2007 Faculty Colloquium on Teaching Groups. It represents a synthesis of successful strategies and practices employed by teaching groups at HBS. The document integrates ideas discussed at the Colloquium with findings from the Christensen Center's interviews, observations, and other research on teaching groups.

GENERAL DESIGN

Pre-term

1. Scheduling teaching group meetings
    a. Teaching groups often find it helpful to develop the entire schedule of meetings for the semester well in advance of the term to avoid conflicts and facilitate planning.
    b. When scheduling teaching group meetings, the following parameters usually contribute to a fair balance between discussion depth and resource efficiency:
        i. Length: one hour per class session (more for new or particularly complex cases and for midterm and final exam preparation)
        ii. Number of classes per meeting: 2-3 (varies)
        iii. Lead time: meetings should be held at least 24 hours (preferably at least 48 hours) before the relevant class session(s).
2. Discussing syllabus and teaching group norms. It is helpful to have a pre-term meeting for teaching group members to develop a shared understanding of the overall course architecture and to establish group norms. This meeting might cover:
    a. Syllabus overview, including module structure and learning objectives for each module (and preferably learning objectives for each class session), as well as highlights of changes from previous year.
    b. Expectations regarding teaching group meeting structure and process, attendance, preparation, sharing of teaching plans, degree of uniformity across faculty, and so on.
3. Course files
    a. Most groups create and maintain up-to-date centralized course files (paper and/or electronic), in order to increase efficiency and foster a learning organization perspective. At the very minimum, this allows members to have easy access to the same updated versions of teaching materials.
    b. These centralized files typically contain the most recent versions of assignment questions, cases, teaching notes, and supplemental materials. For cases taught in previous years, it is helpful for the centralized file also to include core teaching plans and reflections recorded after previous teaching sessions of the case (if available).
4. Continuous improvement
    a. Most groups actively pursue continuous improvement through:
        i. Consultation of multiple sources of feedback.
            1. Student and faculty polls on the learning impact of individual cases and class sessions.
            2. Qualitative and quantitative data on the course from course evaluations.
            3. Student focus groups and interviews with Ed Reps.

ii. Inclusion of teaching group members in syllabus (re)design. One or more meetings with the teaching group during the non-teaching semester to build consensus on changes.

b. In the pursuit of continuous course improvement, teaching groups often find that the process of case selection requires careful consideration of a variety of factors. It is important to be thoughtful about case selection, particularly in terms of:

    i. Possible tradeoffs between pedagogical considerations and the desire to "house" new or existing cases.
    ii. Repositioning cases designed for a specific module or sequence that has since been altered.
    iii. Personal attachment to existing cases that, while for some are interesting or "teach well," do not fit well in the course or are difficult for others to teach.

Prior to each meeting

1. Session-specific materials. Files containing the case, published teaching note, assignment questions and supplemental materials should be distributed well in advance of the meeting.
2. Teaching plans
    a. Most groups concentrate on one core teaching plan per case, although some distribute and discuss one or more alternative teaching plans (see Tension #1 below).
    b. There is a range of opinion regarding the desirable level of detail of teaching plans. Some groups seek to avoid pressuring presenters to craft overly elaborate plans.
    c. Some groups request that teaching plans be distributed prior to meetings (preferably several days in advance).
    d. Some groups use 1-page templates to aid in preparation and discussion (see attached).
3. Case updates. Given advance notice, Baker Library can provide updates on companies, protagonists, or industries.
4. Administrative activities. Efficiency can be significantly enhanced if before the meeting the course assistant takes care of handout preparation and copying, and arranges logistical details such as videos and polls.
5. Preparation. Efficiency and effectiveness tend to increase when there are strong norms about pre-meeting preparation including review of assignment questions, case, supplemental readings, published teaching note, key analyses, pre-distributed teaching plan(s) and, if available, reflections on previous experiences with teaching the case.

Within each meeting

1. Punctuality. Starting and ending on time is a strong concern in most groups.
2. Contextualization. The course head typically opens the discussion with a brief reminder about the purpose of the class within the module and its relationship/ linkages to other class sessions in the course and, potentially, classes in other RC courses.
3. Teaching plan presentation. Presentation norms vary across groups, but they usually include coverage of central learning objectives, major "fighting issues"/tensions, potential pitfalls, "ahas," lessons, and principal discussion pastures (including timing). Some groups institute a "no interrupt" rule to allow the presenter a fixed period of time (e.g. 10-20 minutes) to provide an overview of the plan before opening up the conversation to the group as a whole.
4. Discussion pacing. Course heads bear ultimate responsibility for keeping the meeting on track, but each member is responsible for thoughtfully managing his/her participation.
5. Real-time course feedback. Some groups set aside time during the meeting to debrief the previous class sessions and document recommended changes.

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING UNDERLYING TENSIONS

TENSION # 1: Desired Outcomes: Standardization vs. Self-Expression

How to achieve consistency in learning across RC sections, while allowing for individual differences in teaching approaches and style across instructors?

1. Standardization on key dimensions. Most groups expect members to pursue a common set of learning objectives for specific classes and modules across all sections. Other elements of standardization typically include having the same cases, readings, and assignment questions.
2. Flexibility in implementation. Teaching plans (including openings, discussion pastures, sequencing, timing, and closings) may not need to be standardized, but should be consistent at the level of core learning objectives.
3. Course policy on handouts. There should be agreed-upon course-wide policies for distributing or posting handouts/slides containing analysis, takeaways, or updates. Groups that allow handouts should clarify whether variation at the individual instructor level is acceptable. If so, most groups agree that such documents will be circulated among the group prior to distribution.
4. At least one default teaching plan. It is usually helpful to flesh out a standard plan in the meeting before exploring alternative teaching plans, especially if the teaching group includes rookies and/or if the case is new.

TENSION #2. Purpose: Short-term Efficiency vs. Faculty Development

How to balance short-term pressures to be efficient in the use of teaching group resources (particularly time) while attending to long-term faculty developmental needs?

1. Pre-term immersion program. Some units organize a 1-2 day "boot camp" for rookies in which they prepare and experience the first 2 weeks of classes (e.g., rookies discuss the cases without teaching notes or rookies teach the cases).
2. Safe and engaging environment.
   a. It is important to have leadership and norms that support mutual respect and inclusion for teaching group members at all levels of experience.
   b. Course head and experienced faculty should work to ensure a safe, welcoming environment for junior faculty participation in meetings. Some groups pair newer members with veterans for co-presentations of teaching plans and delay presentations by rookies until later in the term.
   c. Many groups incorporate light moments into teaching group meetings and include occasional social events outside the meetings to strengthen individual connections and foster cohesion within the teaching group and unit.
3. Time management. Skillful time management by the course head during meetings may allow for greater attention to faculty development without undue sacrifice of efficiency.
4. Buddy system. Some groups pair rookies with experienced instructors for one-on-one discussions outside teaching group meetings.
5. Class observations. Most groups encourage early and periodic class observations of teaching group members to identify best practices and generate developmental feedback. Such observations might include stand-alone or reciprocal visits by teaching group members and colleagues from within or outside the unit, as well as by the Christensen Center.

TENSION #3: Focus: Class Content vs. Class Process

How to balance the discussion of class content versus class process in teaching group meetings?

1. Grounding of content discussions in class purpose and student learning. Groups often experience a tension between discussions of content core to the class plan and debates irrelevant to the class session. To keep the discussion on track, they find it helpful to focus the content discussion on the identification of potential points of confusion for students, and how best to handle these.
2. Planning of the class process. In order to avoid over-choreographing the class process, some groups find it helpful to:
    a. Emphasize in the meeting core elements such as the instructor opening, major discussion pastures, questions (opening and transition), and the closing, as opposed to micro-level scripting of the class session.
    b. Identify areas of greatest challenge in the teaching plan and discuss strategies for navigating these moments in the classroom.
3. Application as part of content discussions. One way for the content discussion to include managerial applications is to encourage members of the teaching group to share outside knowledge derived from research, field visits, work experience, or prior teaching of the case. These elements can frequently enhance a case's impact and relevance to students.

Sample One-Page Template for Teaching Group Preparation and Discussion

Case: ______________________________ Date:__________

Principal Learning Objectives • • •	
Discussion Chunks and Approximate Time • • • • •	Key Tensions/Questions • • • • •
Analytical Pieces • • • •	Light Moment(s)/Sources of Enthusiasm • • • •
"Aha!"s • • •	Summary/Key Learnings • • •