

Research on the Role Orientation of Teachers in Case Method Teaching

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Abstract

The appropriate role orientation of a teacher is indispensable to effective teaching by the case method in business management subjects. In the successful case method teaching, the teacher serves as a host, a spokesman, a director, a catalyst, and other different roles. To define the exact orientation and play proper roles, the teacher should focus on teaching steps and techniques including before-class preparation, in-class teaching techniques, and after-class conclusion and evaluation, etc.

Keywords

Case Teaching; Teacher; Role.

1. Instruction

Case method teaching is a self-experiencing teaching method initiated and promoted by Harvard University in the US. This teaching method takes cases as teaching materials. With the guidance and support of the teacher, case method teaching enables students to get into a specific business management context and find solutions through independent thinking and collective communication. The main form of class activities under the case method teaching is collective discussion and free speech. It emphasizes students' self-governance and mutual communication, or in other words, self-learning and mutual learning. Compared with the lecture method of teaching, the teacher must have better abilities to adapt to the case method teaching. Also, the appropriate role orientation of a teacher is indispensable to effective teaching by the case method. The case method classes unfold with an unfixed structure and teachers may have personal teaching styles and possess different levels of knowledge, which lead to diversified roles served by the teacher. In practice, the teacher serves as various roles in successful case method teaching.

2. Teacher's Roles in Case Method Teaching

2.1. Host

At the beginning of the case method teaching, the teacher serves as a host to first outline the key points and clues of the relevant theories, introducing to the student the intellectual framework of the associated theories. Teachers help students identify teaching goals and understand the learning process, standards, and operative methods. They also need to guide students to get into the specific context of the case and then promote students to think and seek the answer with the help of a theoretical framework. An effective case discussion cannot process without an ordered class atmosphere. Serving as a host, teachers can master time and control the discussion pace and learning process. They will ensure the discussion sticks to one topic or is carried out within a specific scope so as to create an active and ordered atmosphere. After the discussion, teachers shall summarize the solutions proposed by students and the whole process of the discussion, which are also included in the process of serving as a host.

2.2. Spokesman

In the practice of case method teaching, teachers take the function of “controlling” by serving as spokesmen. This kind of “controlling” function is extremely different from that of the lecture method teaching. In a lecture, teachers can by themselves determine the course content, the course volume, and the course form, without considering students’ thoughts. However, the spokesman in the case method teaching is a representative who is on behalf of a group of people. In other words, teachers’ statements should include thoughts and ideas from all the students, manifesting their collective opinions. Certainly, the spokesman should not take down all the opinions without sorting or arbitrarily deserting any ideas, but modify and simplify students’ thoughts. Teachers have to summarize and generalize students’ statements and sometimes modify their words to convey the ideas more exactly.

2.3. Director

Although students are the subject of the discussion in the case method teaching, it does not mean the class is completely out of control. The class is closely and silently supervised and guided by the teacher. Similar to the role of a director, the teacher does not appear on the stage but is everywhere around the class, making potential influences. As a director, the teacher guides students to know when to make their statements and when to comment on others’ opinions and imperceptibly stipulates who to make statements and who to express more. In this sense, the teacher affects both the class lineage and the personal performance. It is quite flexible and difficult for teachers to be a director in case method teaching, which requires a lot in teachers’ ability to interact and improvise.

2.4. Catalyst

Catalyst refers to the medium which helps and accelerates the material transformation in chemical reactions. Although the catalyst does not change in itself, it is essential to the material transformation. Teachers are the same as the catalyst, who promote discussion and learning among students. Without teachers’ promotion, students may fail to have in-depth learning and achieve expected goals. Serving as the catalyst, teachers would raise a series of questions to challenge students, continuously triggering their thoughts and inspiring students to explore questions under the surface so as to find solutions. Besides, teachers play the role as a catalyst in boosting students’ mutual communication. During student’s discussions, teachers should serve as a bridge to narrow the gap, allowing the impact and integration of different thoughts to enrich the course content.

3. Measures to Improve Teachers’ Roles in Case Method Teaching

Compared with teachers’ roles in traditional teaching methods, teachers in case method teaching transform from an “indoctrinator of foresight” to a “guide of inspiration”, taking their roles backstage instead of on-screen. Successful case method teaching requires teachers to devote more efforts, guide students with more patience, and give students appropriate inspiration. Thus, teachers need to shoulder more responsibilities and pressures. Practice shows that teachers have to pay attention to the following teaching steps and techniques if they want to define the exact orientation and perform appropriate functions.

3.1. Make Sufficient Before-Class Preparations

The effectiveness of the case method teaching depends on whether or not the teacher has made sufficient before-class preparations. Before the class, teachers can focus on the following aspects to make preparations.

3.1.1. Choose Suitable Cases

The quality of the case directly influences the result of the case method teaching. First of all, teachers should choose cases that conform to teaching purposes, and consider the association between the case and the theory involved in the course to enable students to grasp the real cases from the view of theory. Secondly, cases should involve hot, difficult, or focused issues in reality, because these issues can attract more attention from students, motivating them to participate in the discussion. Thirdly, the selected cases should be typical and targeted. The research and discussion of these cases can provide some references in terms of students' present or future works and resonate with students.

3.1.2. Analyze Cases and Formulate Teaching Syllabuses

A teaching syllabus includes the case outline, the teaching purpose, problems prepared for students, the teacher's understanding of the case, literature references on the case and so on. On the before-class analysis of the case, teachers should: meticulously figure out issues underlying the case, draw a clear distinction between the primary and secondary issues, identify reasons behind these issues, propose and list various possible solutions, analyze and weigh the alternate solutions, and finally determine the time and method of the action. When preparing the syllabus, teachers need to stand on the point of students, considering students' reactions to the case and the class form for the proposed questions (get the answer independently or through group discussions).

3.1.3. Learn about Students

Teachers need to learn about each student's experience and personality; from which teachers can predict who will actively participate in the class presentation, who will join in such activities after motivation, and even figure out which student will be the first to make a presentation. Meanwhile, teachers can anticipate students' interest points and the focus of class discussions. In addition, learning more about students helps teachers design the span and the extent of questions based on students' knowledge structures and case backgrounds. Generally, the proposed questions should not be too broad but specific and detailed at first, and then gradually transmit into inclusive ones, otherwise, students may feel lost about the solution.

3.2. Emphasize Teaching Techniques

Appropriate cases require great performance and proper understanding. Emphasizing teaching techniques liberates students' thoughts and enables them to take full use of their self-analyzing capacity. In this kind of class, students can develop and build up confidence and a sense of responsibility. Their passionate participation in class activities will vitalize the teaching atmosphere.

3.2.1. Create a Favorable Class Environment

Students' willingness and responsibility to learn cases will significantly affect the result of case method teaching. The class environment filled with inspiration enables students to discuss problems passionately and deliver their opinions in public, which helps to nurture students' courage. Students can experience the joys and excitements of being a decision-maker and understand responsibilities and challenges from the overall discussion. Given all these benefits, teachers should be good at creating a favorable class environment and triggering debates among students. Teachers have to provide approaches for students' effective and free communication and stimulate students' interest in case discussions. Moreover, teachers should focus on giving students the necessary trust which will strengthen their confidence in thinking and judgment. As a result, students being trusted will devote all their wisdom, knowledge, and emotions to passionate discussions and learn to understand and accept others' opinions and how to cooperate and communicate with others. Also, students can know how others analyze and solve problems, which will in turn improve their own ideas. In conclusion, an environment

for free communication gives students opportunities to make public and upright discussions, which fosters students' courage to challenge and be challenged, self-confidence, and creativity.

3.2.2. Timely Respond to Students' Performance and Statements

Teachers' sincere and patient listening to students and making timely feedback can inspire students' learning and participation. No matter how the value of students' statements, teachers should respond properly to maintain students' learning enthusiasm. Meanwhile, teachers' feedback is also an effective tool to steer class orientation. In class discussions, teachers can emphasize key points through feedback. Specifically, teachers can sum up statements with unique opinions and stress valuable highlights, prompting students to think and research issues in depth. Teachers' feedback is not limited in forms: oral expression, blackboard-writing, and if necessary, after-class communication with some students. It should be emphasized that students may raise some tough or challenging questions during discussion, yet teachers, rather than avoid these questions, have to give reasonable explanations and responses. When teachers fail to explain problems due to time limitations, after-class communication can be adopted to encourage students.

3.2.3. Skillfully Break the Ice

A class may fall into a standstill under case method teaching. Under this circumstance, teachers need to adopt flexible methods and suitable techniques to inspire and guide students, breaking the silence and heating up the class atmosphere again. A standstill usually occurs under the following conditions: Firstly, at the beginning of the class, students may be reserved because of their sense of defense. Teachers can take some measures to "break the ice" and inspire students. "Breaking the ice" refers to a teaching technique: teachers create a relaxing environment for students to automatically participate in the class. Once students' emotions are motivated and the class is heated up, the inspiring atmosphere may continue to the end of the class. Teachers can break the ice by calling the roll or organizing presentations in sequence. If the teacher is familiar with students, he or she can let active and talkative students to make presentations first. Research revealed that in group discussions, those who have made statements are more likely to be the spokesman again; however, people who have not made any statements often tend to keep silent throughout the whole process. Therefore, at the beginning of the course, teachers should try to encourage all the students to express themselves. Secondly, students may feel difficult to make any statements when the discussion involves hot buttons or students' interests. To break such an awkward pause, teachers can take a "detour" strategy. For instance, teachers can give examples to concentrate students' attention on a specific point, prevent students from the problem on-hand and enable them to contend their views from an impartial perspective. Thirdly, the class is dominated by some talkative students; however, once these students refuse to make statements, the class will be caught in a dilemma. At this time, teachers can inspire talkative students to continue their presentations and encourage other students to comment on their presentations which allows bashful students to get adapt to class discussion and communication. Fourthly, teachers sometimes may raise general and abstract questions which are difficult for students to grasp. Teachers have to reflect on whether the proposed questions are specific or not if they do not receive expected responses. For vague questions, teachers need to cut the general question into detailed ones and make a further explanation.

3.2.4. Steer Back from Digressions and Break the Deadlock

Getting off the topic is unavoidable in group discussions. There is no need to be worried but to wait and see, because some students may voluntarily rectify the direction. If students deviate too far from the topic, yet the time is limited, teachers can intervene in the discussion with a euphemistic tone. A gruff attitude should be strictly avoided. Teachers can politely and casually say, "Your opinion is quite interesting, but we'd better go deep into the last point..." or "What you said may be reasonable, but we haven't gotten through the last issue which is..." However,

it is still the best choice to develop students' self-governance and to together control the direction of the discussion. Students may face deadlocks during the case discussion. For example, students failing to answer the question or reach an agreement may lead to a pause in the discussion. Under this condition, teachers serving as an organizer should steer by difficult points and resolve the deadlock. Besides, at this time, teachers should never directly give the answer and make a judgment, which will remove the possibility of the following discussion. Students only get the conclusion but not the learning methods. Instead, teachers should inspire students with new questions and provide more information to simplify the original issue until the issue is solved.

3.3. Make a Conclusion and Assess Students' Performance

To reach the goal of case method teaching and benefit students, teachers have to summarize the teaching process and give each student a mark. There is no "standard answer" to questions in the case discussion, so how to make an appropriate conclusion requires teachers' consideration. Such a conclusion does not aim to unify students' minds and lead them to a "correct" answer, but enables students to know the pros and cons of different perspectives and methods.

Teachers can ask students to sum up their gains from discussion by themselves; or give a brief comment on students' presentations, which does not include a direct judgment but helps students figure out the difficulties in the case more clearly and specify related opinions. Based on the teaching purposes and students' analysis and communications on the case, teachers can also summarize several representative thoughts and solutions and clarify the basis of these solutions. Meanwhile, for students' reference, teachers can use relevant theories and what they have taught to make further explanations on the focus of students' debate. Moreover, teachers can also raise other deeper questions for students' further research after class.

It is also difficult to evaluate students' performance in the case discussion. Due to the characteristic of the case discussion, teachers can only determine whether a student is qualified or not based on their activeness, preparations, and presentations in class. As for the written analysis task on the case, teachers can give a strict assessment. Because this task will reflect a student's ability to analyze problems and the level of mastering the basic theoretical knowledge. Teachers can give different grades according to a student's understanding of the essence of the issue, the analysis of the issue, and his or her statements and reasoning in the written task.

4. Conclusion

Practice shows that teachers have to identify their proper roles in case method teaching, transforming from a traditional lecturer, a person who resolves students' doubts, a judge to a host, a spokesman, a director, and a catalyst. On the other hand, students also transform from passive receptors to autonomous learners. In conclusion, to fully develop students' subjectivity and get positive results from the case method teaching, teachers and students should figure out the relationship between the subject and the object in teaching, strengthen the communication between subjects, establish an equal relationship between teachers and students, and create a teaching environment suitable for cooperation and interaction.

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