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Robert Jones

*University of Wollongong*

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### Abstract

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is designed as a post-graduate conversion program for mature students who already possess a first degree in a non-commerce background, combined with several years of relevant work experience. Lectures are not meant to follow the traditional method of a one-way flow of information from lecturer to students. Rather, the role of the lecturer is to act as a facilitator, to tap the considerable well of knowledge and experience which exists in an average MBA classroom. In other words, information will flow not only from lecturer to students, but also from students to lecturer, and from students to students. My experience, especially in Britain, has taught me that MBA students can be extremely demanding, even aggressive. They often hold senior positions in their employment. To handle the situation a lecturer must be well prepared, up-to-date, and an effective communicator and organiser.



## ***Encouraging Classroom Participation of Overseas MBA Students***

**Robert Jones**

**T**he Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is designed as a post-graduate conversion program for mature students who already possess a first degree in a non-commerce background, combined with several years of relevant work experience. Lectures are not meant to follow the traditional method of a one-way flow of information from lecturer to students. Rather, the role of the lecturer is to act as a facilitator, to tap the considerable well of knowledge and experience which exists in an average MBA classroom. In other words, information will flow not only from lecturer to students, but also from students to lecturer, and from students to students. My experience, especially in Britain, has taught me that MBA students can be extremely demanding, even aggressive. They often hold senior positions in their employment. To handle the situation a lecturer must be well prepared, up-to-date, and an effective communicator and organiser.

### **MBA Teaching and Learning Methods**

Considerable emphasis is placed on participative and experiential learning methods, such as integrative classroom discussions, case studies, role playing, videos, group work, presentations, paper-based exercises, and so on. To facilitate this it is usual for 3-hour blocks of time to be set aside for MBA classroom sessions. This places a heavy planning burden on the lecturer to arrange the presentation of material and organisation of activities in an effective manner.

My usual approach to a 3-hour MBA session is as follows:

- 1st hour: Presentation of theory to students in order to give them the necessary structure to act as an analytical framework. Discussion is encouraged, indeed demanded, through constant interaction with students. Information and ideas are elicited from the students through carefully focussed questioning.
- 2nd hour: Student preparation for an activity, such as reading a case, working in groups, or preparing a role play or presentation.
- 3rd hour: Student feedback, such as discussion of case study, acting of role play, or individual/group presentations.

However, this framework is not rigid and depends on the nature of the topic under discussion.



## Problems Experienced

My first MBA course at the University of Wollongong was delivered in the Autumn session of 1994, to a group of 45 students. Approximately 70 per cent were overseas students, mainly from a range of South East Asian countries, but there were also representatives from USA, Africa, and Europe. Most held first degrees in science and engineering subjects and possessed work experience in occupations ranging from heavy industry to the public service. Although I have considerable experience of lecturing to students from different ethnic backgrounds (in both Africa and UK) this was the first time I had experienced such a wide range of different national groupings within the same classroom setting.

The difficulties faced by overseas students at Australian universities in relation to learning styles and non-participation are well documented (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, Smith, 1993). I experienced these problems immediately. By the end of week 4 the following issues were apparent:

- Classroom discussion was becoming dominated by a small group of 6-8 mainly local students. Overseas students rarely offered any contribution in unstructured classroom discussions and debates.
- During preparation for an activity, overseas students were rarely observed participating in group planning sessions, being content to leave things to local students to arrange, and never volunteering to act as spokespersons.
- Feedback sessions followed the same routine. Overseas students would not volunteer discussion on case studies, or act in role plays.

Methods of encouraging involvement began to dominate my thinking. Coercion did not work. On three separate occasions I was greeted with refusals when I directly requested participation from individual students. The reasons proffered were:

- the student's command of English was not good enough
- the student had not understood the lecturer
- the student did not understand the case study, as it contained complicated terminology, and the student could not read fast enough.

Lack of confidence appeared to be the overarching

problem. Issues concerned with inadequate command of spoken and written English, loss of face, humility, and reluctance to question the ideas of the lecturer, textbook, or other students are severe impediments to classroom involvement. Unless I tackled these problems I faced the prospect of conducting 3-hour MBA sessions with up to as many as 35 non-participating students. In such a situation the whole ethos of an MBA education is lost.

## Example of a Successful Participative Session

In view of the fact that I was a member of the Introduction to Tertiary Teaching class at the time, I was able to target this issue as part of my Teaching Development Cycle. Liz Ellis attended several of my classes as an observer.

It is worth recounting the details of one particularly successful participative session which occurred in week 12. The topic under discussion was Job Design. One point that had been agreed with the class was that the relative importance of certain job design characteristics varied between cultures. This provided the opportunity to ask students to form groups according to the cultural environment with which they associated. The following six groups emerged, with the numbers involved given in brackets: Australia/USA (9), India (12), Thailand (7), Europe (5), Indonesia (4), PNG/Africa (4). These groups were given a list of ten job characteristics which they had to rank in order of importance according to their own cultural traditions. The objectives were to reach a group consensus, and to appoint a spokesperson who would speak for ten minutes, explaining the group's results and rationale to the rest of the class.

From the point of view of participation the exercise was deemed a success. Discussion within each group was animated. The tendency of students to withdraw from participation was far lower than previously observed. Spokespersons appeared confident, displaying little reticence to assume the role. On two occasions they were prompted and supported by their group when they appeared to falter. It was particularly pleasing to note that spontaneous debate broke out between groups which had hitherto displayed high non-involvement tendencies. The level of enthusiasm generated was evidenced at the end of the class when



the lecturer was required to collate the findings and distribute them to the class at the next session.

On reflection, the success of this exercise was attributed to three factors which had cumulatively boosted students' confidence:

- 1) Forming groups according to a student's cultural background. As a result, students benefit from common knowledge. The norms of their own country is a topic about which they possess expert knowledge and can speak with assurance.
- 2) Awareness that overseas students are not in the minority. Rather the impression was created that the aggregate class is a collection of minorities, all of whom can make a contribution.
- 3) Giving students plenty of time to prepare their answer - in this case 50 minutes.

It is important to note that although I had introduced group work early in the course, cultural diversity had been suppressed rather than emphasised. Students were split up into mixed groups. It is now clear that this was a mistake. In theory, students are more confident in a group because they benefit from group security and feel less exposed. They do not have to take all the "blame" for the decision arrived at and can therefore be more adventurous (the concept of risky-shift). However, it would appear that overseas students in these groups did not feel the protection of such security. Rather they felt exposed and threatened, and reacted by withdrawing. It would have been a better idea to get them working in groups where they feel comfortable before asking them to work in mixed groups.

## A Model for Enhancing Student Participation

It is clear that it was an unrealistic expectation of the lecturer that students would spontaneously involve themselves in unstructured, individual and integrative discussions from the first week of the course. The minority of students who do possess such skill and confidence merely inhibit rather than encourage the rest. The role of the lecturer should be to coax involvement from students on a gradual basis, enhancing both their confidence and their realisation of what is expected of them. The objective is to achieve a co-operative climate in class as early as possible to replace

the perceived threatening situation involved in unstructured, individual contributions.

The following model is proposed to guide the lecturer:

- Make ground rules very explicit at the beginning: that is, what is expected by way of class participation/involvement and the role of group dynamics (written and discussed with rationale given). Do not assume that students know what is expected of them, or that they will soon learn the rules of the game naturally through acclimatisation. This adversely impacts on students' initial confidence, wastes time, and is threatening in concept.
- Make frequent early use of non-threatening ice-breaker sessions.
- Devise early activities which make it evident that different cultural backgrounds will enrich the class rather than hinder progress.
- Give students plenty of time to prepare for activities, especially in the earlier sessions.
- If only a sample of groups is going to formally present findings to the class, inform the groups concerned beforehand (privately), so that they are aware of their participation.
- Introduce group activities on a continuum from least threatening to most challenging. An example of the former situation is interaction with peers from a common cultural background. Examples of the latter situation are such activities as role plays, unstructured classroom discussions, and individual presentations.

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*Dr Robert Jones is a senior lecturer in the Department of Management.*

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## References

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