Innovative Methods of Teaching Management

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ABSTRACT

The Indian corporate environment has witnesses a multitude of changes in the past few decades. These changes have brought to the forefront how important managerial effectiveness is to business enterprise survival. The effective teaching of management is, therefore, gaining increasing prominence. The teaching of management should encompass not only the delivery of concepts or theory but also develop team work skills, balanced decision-making and application of the concepts being taught. The lecture method is incapable of fulfilling all these objectives. It can be combined with other simple methods to enhance student learning. There is a vast variety of methods to choose from and a lecturer can pick those suitable to his or her context. The article is divided into five sections. After the introduction, a section is devoted to the concept of active learning followed by a section on seating arrangements. The next section elaborates on different innovative methods and the last section contains the concluding observations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Business management of corporates today is a complex task involving multidimensional issues and a continually evolving environment. The teaching of management to students was intended to prepare them for this challenging task. Every year the need arises to strengthen our management pedagogy to equip 'would be' managers with an adequate knowledge and skill set. While subject syllabi may be fortified and course structures may be modernised, a majority of college teaching in India today still rests on the lecture method. This is not an adequate method to develop the analytical skills, management decision making and group skills that are required in the workplace. It can be supplemented with a range of activities and exercises, both at the individual as well as group level, for enhanced learning.

The lecture method is particularly limiting as students' mental faculties are used merely for passive listening. Exposed to such lectures for hours on end further dampens the will to work on something creatively and reinforces the rote learning mechanism.

Studies indicate that for the lecture method less than 15% of knowledge is retained after five years (Lynton and Pareek, 2000). To enhance learning and memory, simple exercises can be conducted to help students absorb what they hear, react to lecture material and apply the course material to real life situations. Such 'active learning' may take the form of formally structured exercises, informal team based discussions or brief writing exercises. Depending on the comfort level of the lecturer and the needs of the subject, such innovations can be used easily in combination with lectures to magnify the learning.

The next section is devoted to a brief theoretical construct on active learning. This construct demonstrates how students' involvement in the learning process may be increased so that they may gain the most from it. This is followed by a section on regrouping the class which discusses different seating arrangements that may be used to facilitate the activities that may be conducted. Thereafter, a section is devoted to the different innovative methods available and is then followed by the conclusion.

2.   MODEL OF ACTIVE LEARNING

Fink (1999) has proposed a model of conceptualizing the learning process that may help in identifying ways to promote active learning.

 Model Summary: A student will learn or benefit most from a class where he can have a dialogue (conversation) with himself as well as with others. This may take any form whether it be a discussion format, writing, debate or cross examination. The model further stresses that if the learner cam also obtain the experience of doing (performance of situation) or at least its observation, it would vastly enhance the learning. This is the primary reason why learning activities in teaching should involve some form of dialogue as well as some experiential work. Combining such activities with lectures (a limited form of dialogue with others) reinforces the concepts of the subject being taught and creates space for their application in a natural way. Fink (1999) illustrates this by describing how simple activities can combine to deliver enhanced impact:

"For example, if students write their own thoughts on a topic (Dialogue with Self) *before* they engage in small group discussion (Dialogue with Others), the group discussion should be richer and more engaging. If they can do both of these and then observe the phenomena or action (Observation), the observation should be richer and again more engaging. Then, if this is followed by having the students engage in the action itself (Doing), they will have a better sense of what they need to do and what they need to learn during doing. Finally if, after Doing, the learners process this experience by writing about it (Dialogue with Self) and/or discussing it with others (Dialogue with Others), this will add further insight."

3.   REGROUPING THE CLASS

Many activities involve students pairing off or forming groups to discuss given tasks. Physically rearranging desks helps the flow of communication and reduces unwanted distractions. Teachers may use these configurations to help students organize themselves to avoid confusion and maintain control of the class.

Lecture format:
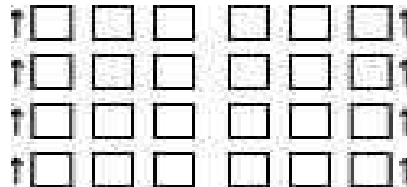
This is the most traditional format. This format is likely to precede learning activities.and is used when all students are having a common activity such as a lecture or film.
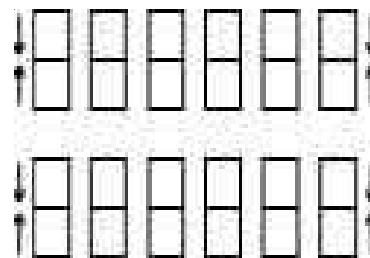
Pairs: Participants can form these by turning to face each other. It is always advisable that pairs have some space around them to give them a feeling of privacy and to avoid disturbance from other pairs. Pairing off is easily done, takes little time to form, and minimal time to return to the lecture format

Depending on the class strength and room space, five to eight such groups can easily be formed. Again, these groups have a little space around them as explained earlier.
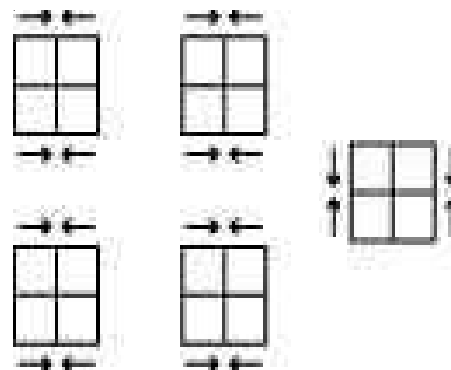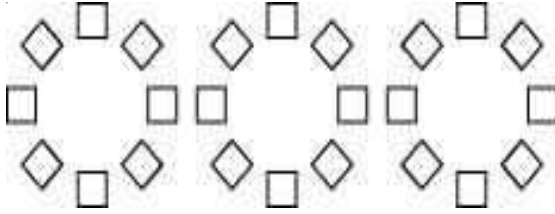
Task Groups: Chairs can be clubbed to form small Activity Groups of six to eight members. These are formed when tasks involve greater time and discussion. Generally, one person in each group may be chosen as the group co-coordinator and co-coordinators may be asked to present group work at the end.

4. INNOVATIVE METHODS

This section focuses on simple methods to be supplemented with lectures for enhanced learning of students. A sub-section on team based methods is followed by sub-sections on pairing exercises, exercises for individual students and assessment methods. Finally, a brief sub-section is devoted to teaching with application softwares.

Team based methods: Numerous concepts in management can be discussed fruitfully in groups by allocating tasks to be done. This helps increase participation as well as fosters memory retention of the concepts involved. Moreover, students who are shy are saved the embarrassment and can skillfully contribute to groups. Teams should preferably be formed heterogeneously (with regard to gender, background and academic performance). Spontaneously formed groups can also work well especially where students know each other well and are comfortable sharing differing views with each other. A lecturer can choose from the following methods:

Simulated Panel : The class is divided into groups and each group assigned a topic relevant to the subject but preferably not part of syllabus (the syllabus coverage is the direct responsibility of the lecturer). Each panelist in the group makes a brief presentation as the group collectively covers the entire topic. The floor is opened to the audience to discuss, comment and question. Students in the audience can also be assigned roles such as shareholders, consumers, lawyers, government bureaucrats, etc.

Games : Simple well conceived games with clearly defined learning objectives can influence university students to think about issues at work. The discussion after the game that focuses on the theories is essential for the learning to take place. The game can reveal numerous insights into group formation, leadership and organizational structure.

Role Playing : Students play roles by enacting out situations. They are, thus, able to conceive the concepts and theories personally and realize the dimensions involved. Complex role playing might take the form of a play (depending on time and resources); for example, students may recreate a management case situation. Each team may present reasons from the case study and prepare questions for cross-examination.

Task Groups : This is the simplest form of team based learning. The lecturer asks a question to the entire class and allows them to form groups to thoroughly search for its solution. Group coordinators may be asked to summarize and present their group findings at the end.

Debates : These are useful for topics that are well known to students and involve clear pros and cons. Teams may be formed to support or reason against the central theme. Teams should be given adequate time to rebut the argument(s) and, time permitting, the original speakers asked to respond to the rebuttal.

'T' Lists : Participants make a list of arguments by working in groups. They then draw a "T" and label the left- and right-hand sides of it with the opposing positions (or 'Pro' and 'Con'). They then list everything they can think of which supports the two sides. On generating a comprehensive list students can be asked to analyse it. This

method is helpful to highlight and compare the views of a subject which is less known to students.

Block Projects : In block projects, every member of team13.8

erspectives.

Exercises for Individual Students:
Individual student exercises are easy to conduct as the flow of the class is not broken for seating arrangement. However, they are limited in their learning as they contribute to only a dialogue with oneself and rarely involve experiential activity.

Muddiest Point : In this, towards the break or end of the class, the lecturer asks the class 'what was the most difficult part of today's lecture'. Alternatively, opinion may be sought on the easiest or clearest concept discussed in the lecture. Some students may find a particular area easy and others may find the same topic difficult. Such situations are easily tackled by asking the students to explain to each other. If many students have difficulty with a particular area, the lecturer may consider giving more time to the topic.

Daily diary : Encouraging students to reflect on and write about their class learnings/ experiences is a powerful eye opener to all involved. Class discussion on entries (those willing to share) and direction giving by the lecturer on these reactions help channelise student energy on priority areas. Students gain insights on themselves, others and learn to organize their learnings into an integrated mental framework. Such an exercise naturally promotes long term memory retention also. However, student procrastination or unwillingness to write may prove to be stumbling blocks.

Affective Response Method : Students are asked to explore their feelings on the topic being studied. Evaluating their emotional reaction to an area of study helps highlight the human dimension of management problems.

Discussion can then ensue on whether a humane outlook is practical, beneficial or possible. Further, the importance of combining rational with emotional outcomes is understood through this method. This can also be used before the theory (or case study) is presented to increase the receptivity and relevance of the topic under study.

Assessment methods: This section is devoted to the purpose of feedback to the lecturer on the degree to which the class is assimilating what is taught. Timely information about how many students are comprehending the course material in classes saves energy and effort for the lecturer and allows him to focus on areas that are difficult for the class. Written tests/assignments are incomplete feedback mechanisms as they are not instant and are the outcome o home preparation of students rather than active understanding in the class.

Quotations : This method is especially helpful in gauging the depth of understanding of students. When a lecture is made on a topic consisting of varied schools of thought or opposing viewpoints, the lecturer places on the projector a single quotation on the subject by an author that students have not been exposed to. Students are asked to explain the position of the author in the context of the theories taught in the lecture. The ensuing discussion provokes interest and formation of student opinion apart from feedback to the teacher.

Finger Signals : The class is asked a question and students asked to answer immediately by indicating their fingers (one for yes, two for 'no', or some such similar format). This ensures immediacy and students are unable to copy. The method works with both conceptual questions and knowledge based questions but the effectiveness depends on framing of appropriate question language and positive atmosphere in class.

Teaching with softwares: With many universities in India offering facility of

overhead LCD projectors in rooms, the use of application software becomes a natural part of teaching. Introducing such software from the initial lecture itself ensure optimal understanding as well as deepening the interest in the subject. For instance, in the teaching of business statistics, displaying the use of SPSS in the initial classes for simple initial concepts of mean, median, correlation breaks the fears associated with it and creates an effective bridge to advanced concepts. Additionally students feel a desire to experiment and discover other tools and tests available in the software, thereby deepening their interest and understanding of the subject.

Lecturers will also find that learning these softwares is easier than they thought. Moreover, learning the basics of any subject application software (e.g., SPSS, PROWESS, EVIEWS or even Microsoft Excel) takes only a few hours. Practicing the basics on fictitious data for just a week can give them the confidence of not only

dealing with the software but also teaching the basics. The inclusion of softwares in teaching theoretical concepts will be a formidable leap for India and its future generations.

5.   CONCLUSION

Students tend to be passive learners in the traditional lecture mode of teaching. This results in learners lacking the in-depth understanding that business decision making requires. This paper suggests lecture teaching can be supplemented with numerous techniques and activities to enhance holistic learning for college students. These activities are simple to conduct and enhance student memory retention. As students become involved in the exercises and group activities, they deepen their interest in the topic and also learn to apply theoretical concepts to real life. Lecturers can chooses from the range of methods outlined in the paper according to their comfort level and the subject being taught.

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