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Toward effective negotiation instruction at the graduate and professional level

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abstract

Negotiation training is common in graduate and professional programs, including those of law, business, international relations, and public policy. Though negotiation classes are frequently oversubscribed, their long-term impact is unclear. This paper will examine how negotiation is currently taught, and offer recommendations for improving negotiation courses for graduate and professional programs.

Negotiation courses, common in graduate and professional programs, have seen a substantial rise in popularity (Thompson & Leonardelli, 2004; Susskind & Corburn, 2000; Bazerman & Neale, 1993). This trend is not surprising: classes teach a practical skill and are highly participative. However, the impact of this educational activity remains unclear (Lewicki, 1997). Risk lies in treating swelling enrollments as indication of effective teaching and dispatching enthusiastic, overconfident but unprepared students into the real world. Negotiation andragogy remains inchoate, and its long-term efficacy undetermined. This paper examines current instruction practice in negotiation courses, and makes recommendations for improvement.

1 Andragogy vs. Pedagogy

Instead of the term *pedagogy*, this paper will employ *andragogy*, more suitable for describing the learning process of mature students that enroll in graduate and professional programs. Pedagogy centers on five principles (Weiss, 2005): (a) learners depend on teachers; (b) learners seek to accumulate knowledge, not serve as a resource for other students; (c) inclination to learn is determined by impartial factors (e.g., age); (d) learning focus is on subject matter; and (e) learners are extrinsically motivated. In contrast, andragogy operates on the following: (a) learners become more self-directed; (b) learners both learn from and teach others; (c) learners' lives and circumstances determine readiness to learn; (d) the focal point of learning is tasks and problems; and (e) learners are intrinsically motivated (Knowles, 1992).

2 Transfer

Transfer is defined as “the ability to apply a concept, schema, or strategy learned in one situation to solve a problem in a different, but relevant situation" (Gillespie, Thompson, Loewenstein, & Gentner, 1999, p.364). Indeed, transfer supersedes mastery of course material, for the value of knowledge is limited by ability to transfer. The challenge facing negotiation students is to exploit outside of the classroom the knowledge and skills imparted in the classroom. As Gillespie, et al. (1999) point out, “differences between the contexts of learning and use decrease the likelihood of transfer" (p.363). Negotiation occurs on a daily basis, but students often fall back on old negotiation habits that they recognize as ineffective (Gillespie, et al., 1999). Instructors should tailor andragogy to optimize transfer since students seek to develop bargaining skills in a lasting way, not just for the duration of the program.

Nadler, Thompson and Van Boven (2003) conducted an experiment comparing the effectiveness of four models of creating and transferring knowledge in the teaching of negotiation skills: didactic learning, analogical learning, and observational learning, and learning via information revelation. Of the four, analogical and observational training were found to be the most effective.

Didactic learning, or the teaching of abstract principles, is particularly ineffective with beginners, who usually fail to see how to apply the principles to new situations (Novick, 1988). Nadler et al. (2003) found that didactic learning produced students that understood and analyzed negotiation well, but who performed less well in terms of outcomes of actual negotiation. In other words, didactic learning produced poor transfer. For a practice-oriented field such as negotiation, explanation of abstract principles alone is inadequate.

Learning via information revelation means that performance can improve when a person gains relevant information that allows comparison of current strategy with a model strategy (Balzer et al, 1989, Hammond et al., 1980). Thompson and DeHarpport (1994) discovered that transfer was better when students got information about the other side's preferences and priorities at the end of a negotiation task than when they were informed of only negotiation outcomes. Such improvement in the classroom may be short-lived, as learning via information revelation has obvious limitations. In the real world, negotiators usually get only the results, as no instructor conveniently discloses each side's motivations. Negotiators have to infer what works and why, and thus need a learning style that they can apply independently.

Observational learning is the idea that learners can enhance their abilities by watching others perform. Nadler et al. (2003) found that the negotiation skills of the experimental group given observational training improved significantly. However, the members of the group fared poorly when describing what they had learned from observation. This inability to explain suggests that knowledge will not be readily available for transfer to new situations.

Analogical learning posits that a learner can grasp a new situation through knowledge gained from previous situations (Polya, 1957, Pirolli & Anderson, 1985). Learners inspect old and new not for superficial similarities but deep, underlying constructs. Knowledge learned in one context can be ported over to an apparently dissimilar context. Thereafter, learners can apply ideas from situations that they understand well (Gentner, 1989). Gillespie et al. (1999) concluded that encoding knowledge through analogical reasoning improves negotiation skills, and advised designing “a problem-solving schema or strategy that is decontextualized and uncluttered by irrelevant, surface-level information" (p.365).

Instructors should employ analogical learning for two purposes: (a) that students may begin building a theory of negotiation; (b) that students may modify theory on their own, a practice which they will continue after the course. Experienced practitioners know that there is no "pat set of strategic moves that would routinely (if not inevitably) lead to effective negotiation" (Cobb, 2000). Likewise, there are no rigidly set parameters for negotiation behavior, which varies as much as human culture, personality and creativity do. Though their models of negotiation will be idiosyncratic and incomplete, students will alter and expand them as they accumulate experience.

3 Common Approaches

Negotiation courses typically seek "to impart some type of theoretical framework for understanding negotiation; to provide opportunities to practice negotiation, if possible; to reflect on students' experiences of negotiation; to encourage students to continue their learning process" (Conley Tyler & Cukier, 2006, p.1). In an informal survey of four areas of professional schooling (international relations, law, business, and public policy), Fortgang (2000) found that central to courses in all programs were self-reflective, analytical, and experiential approaches, but that the mix varied by school. Ranked from most to least heavily used, the methods for teaching negotiation in the four types of schools were (a) simulation, (b) journal writing (c) case analysis (d) practice-based reading and theory-based reading (tied), (e) self-assessment tools, and (f) internships. Exercises and simulations, forms of experiential learning, were "heavily used" by all four schools (p.327). The heaviest users of journals were law schools and public policy schools. Public policy schools used case analysis the most, followed in order by international relations programs, business schools, and law schools.

Negotiation classes teach a practical skill, and the prominence of hands-on, experiential learning is not surprising. However, learning to negotiate only through experience is the least effective route (Nadler, Thompson, & Van Boven, 2003). Negotiation students need both theoretical background and firsthand practice, yet even together these are insufficient, for "a rich review of experience is arguably the most important aspect of training" (Conley Tyler & Cukier, 2006, p.5). It is the triumvirate of theory, practice, and reflection that promote transfer by creating a cross-situational perspective. Toward this end, self-assessment tools should match journal writing in frequency.

4 The case method

Analogical learning provides a means for improving a common feature of negotiation classes: the case method. Typically cases are analyzed one by one. Gillespie et al. (1999) favor "analogical reasoning" over "isolated case analysis" (p.366), since "it is *comparing* multiple cases that prompts knowledge transfer" (p.367, emphasis original). Students can thereby infer principles common to seemingly disparate situations. In other words, case analysis can be used to hone transfer skills. One pitfall is the possibility of *negative transfer* or *false mapping*, where students arrive at specious conclusions (Novick, 1988), Instructors should verify that students are not transferring erroneous conclusions.

5 The role of gender

Gender has been treated as an "add-on" to negotiation courses (Kolb, 2000, p.347). Though problematical, the role of gender in negotiation cannot be overlooked, for there is evidence that men and women negotiate differently. For example, women have been found to fare worse than men in salary negotiations (Barron, 1998). Stuhlmacher and Walters (1999) conducted a meta-analysis that showed women to be more cooperative. Nonetheless, gender disparity may be due to factors other than negotiation style, such as context or background. Reflexively or deliberately, negotiators may engage in behaviors that they believe appropriate for their gender: men may adopt supposedly masculine behaviors and women may adopt feminine ones because of the context (Kolb, 2000). Negotiation andragogy should afford greater prominence to the issue of gender, but without promoting implicit gender roles. As one factor in negotiation, and not necessarily the primary one, gender must not be essentialized.

In theory, the instructor can do as Kolb (2000) proposes: "weave insights about gender more directly into the curriculum" (p.348). However, there are challenges. One is that gender differences seem to be less conspicuous in the classroom simulation than in the "real world" (Parghi & Cody Murphy, 1999). Another is that students dislike gender attributions: the characterizations are usually to the deficit of one gender because of the way that society interprets the traits (Kolb, 2000). For example, the description "men focus on task, are objective and self-interested, while women are empathetic and care about the process and the relationship" (Kolb, 2000, p.349) does not portray two different but equal groups: Men come off as rational, hard-headed negotiators, while women fail to separate the person from the problem. This implicit hierarchy of styles may leave women students feeling as if they have a style "handicap" to overcome. As Kolb advises, "We have to be very careful when we explore difference in the classroom because we run the risk of reinforcing a gender hierarchy" (2000, p.350).

Kolb (2000) suggests illustrating gender differences without making the typical male style of negotiation the reference point. For example, role plays with same-sex pairings in a "fishbowl format" and discussion in groups of members of one gender produce interesting results (p.349). The instructor then poses questions that get students to reflect on gender differences in negotiation.

6 The role of culture

Culture has gotten short-shrift in the literature and the classroom (Avruch, 2000). One cannot fully describe negotiation behavior without accounting for the effects of culture, the product of experiences in our lives, our interpretations thereof, and the perceptions that we inherit from our forebears (Schwartz, 1992). Still, incorporating culture into negotiation pedagogy is not a straightforward task. Culture is never uniform, cannot exist independently of the human mind, and is not equally present within the individuals in a group. Moreover, each negotiator has membership in numerous groups and by extension, in multiple cultures. As a result, a negotiator cannot be described wholly in terms of the characteristics defining a single culture. As Avruch (2000, p.344) aptly points out, "For a given individual, culture always comes in the plural."

Avruch (2000, p.344) insists that instructors "not teach that culture is another 'variable' that can be arrayed alongside age, income, or passport nationality. ... Culture is context, not cause. It is, speaking metaphorically, the 'lens' though which causes are refracted." Avruch dismisses the value of a typical role play in which students assume a different cultural identity. Avruch's contentions and the subject matter's complexity notwithstanding, practitioners must deal with real-world behavior. To throw up one's hands and claim that culture defies simple definition and practicable andragogy is to overlook one of the greatest hurdles that negotiators face: communicating across cultures. The number and popularity of books on the subject of culture and negotiation attest to the perceived value of cultural understanding. Negotiators deem culture relevant; educators should treat it as a topic of import.

Certainly there are andragogically inappropriate choices. Culture-linked behavior cannot be reduced to a terse description, so instructors must avoid arming students with a set of recipes on how to deal with someone from a particular culture. Rather, instructors must instill in them a need to understand how culture can drive negotiation behavior, and therefore to anticipate behavior without overlooking the individual variation in a culture. An individual comprises many cultures, and each culture constitutes a narrative, with some narratives more prominent than others. For example, national character is a noteworthy narrative, but it does not always occupy the dominant position. In the choir of cultural narratives, different voices stand out in different situations, while others fall silent.

How should an instructor incorporate cultural lessons into the negotiation classroom? Negotiation classes should peel away biases that students have about culture. A first step for instructors is to teach students how to apprehend their baseless perceptions of different cultures and disabuse themselves thereof. This is particularly necessary with regard to one's own culture, which is usually invisible those within it.

Students in graduate and professional schools enter the negotiation classroom encumbered "with preconceived notions of the topics they are studying" (Loewenstein & Thompson, 2000, p.401). One step for unlearning such theories is "confronting people's entrenched belief systems about negotiation" (p.400). It is not feasible for an instructor to uncover every "naïve theory" (p.402) to which each student subscribes, for students have disparate backgrounds and beliefs. Nevertheless, theories must be exposed for students to replace them with more effective ones. Self-reflection will help bring them to light.

7 Learning through reflection

Self-assessment and reflection on classroom experiences are valuable for reinforcing learning. Marsick, Sauquet, and Yorks (2006) discuss the use of reflection to learn from experience. This framework, adapted from a model of informal and incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), can be applied to learning negotiation and conflict resolution. It is based on the work of John Dewey (1938), who described the process of learning from experience as involving:

> (1) observation of surrounding conditions; (2) knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by

> recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have had a wider experience; and (3) judgment that puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. (from Deutsch, 2006, p.487)

Reflection is crucial to the process of learning from experience because it makes people aware of discrepancies between understanding and experience (Marsick, Sauquet, & Yorks, 2006). They can then alter their actions to reach their desired solution. A negotiation situation can be fluid and unpredictable, and reflection is useful for making sense of events. The biases and beliefs that guide reflection must also be considered and questioned. This meta-examination of underlying assumptions has been dubbed *double-loop learning* by Argyris and Schoen (1978). It stands in contrast to *single-loop learning*, in which people adjust tactics when actions do not produce intended results.

Marsick, Sauquet, and Yorks (2006) provide a list of critical reflective questions including:

- What else is going on in the environment that I might not have considered but that has had an impact on the way I understand the situation?
- In what ways could I be wrong about my hunches?
- How are my own intentions, strategies, and actions contributing to outcomes I want to avoid?
- In what way might I be using inapplicable lessons from my past to frame problems or solutions, and is this framing accurate?
- Are there other ways to interpret the feelings I have in this situation?
- How can I better gain a pathway into experience of other people that might challenge or change my assumptions?
- What metaphors and stories capture my experience and differentiate it from those of others? (p.494)

These help reveal biases, and encourage re-examination of beliefs related to culture as well as gender. The questions are relevant to andragogy because they promote autodidactism, an essential characteristic for continued learning beyond the conclusion of the course. Careful analysis and application of knowledge from previous cultural interactions will help them navigate uncharted cultural territory with greater care.

8 The role of technology

Traditionally negotiation classes have been face-to-face, but McKersie and Fonstad (1997) endorse online instruction. A negotiation course should take hybrid form, with the physical aspect at the core of the course, supported by an online component to complement experiential learning. Online learning is an underexplored area of negotiation andragogy, but cannot be allowed to lag the spread of technology, which students nowadays depend upon for communication and interaction, both instrumental to negotiation. Migrating parts of a negotiation course online furthers the goals of andragogy such as self-directed learning and learner interaction. Weiss (2005) discovered that a combination of "pull" and "push" technologies was optimal (p.81). An example of pull technology would be a website, which requires students to access a location to perform work. A push technology would be email, which supplies information to students without demanding additional effort of them.

Online andragogy is applicable to any negotiation program regardless of curricular emphasis (e.g., experiential, self-reflective, analytic). Through the online system, instructors can disseminate materials such as cases for analysis, readings on theory and practice, and video recordings of effective negotiators in action. Students can discuss these materials electronically and asynchronously. Online activity supports and reinforces lessons in the physical classroom. Prior to a physical class session, students can plan strategy for an upcoming negotiation; afterward, they can reflect on the class and conduct self-evaluations. The hybrid format offers the additional advantage that more face-to-face time can be devoted to role-play and simulations. Online role-plays are feasible and certainly recommended to accustom students to online negotiation, which can influence non-verbal communication, a key aspect to understanding emotions and culture-bound reactions.

An online forum will be especially helpful for introverted students. As Weiss (2005) found, "students who proclaimed themselves to be quiet and even meek in a traditional classroom seemed empowered and participated with surprising enthusiasm [online]" (p.79). Weiss (2005) asserts that through online interaction, introverts will acquire self-assurance that will persist when they engage in face-to-face interactions. Extroverts did not encounter any disadvantages in online interaction (Weiss, 2005).

The hybrid approach is beneficial for programs with students that are scattered geographically and get together for a weekend to a week of intensive, daylong sessions. Executive MBA and MPA programs often follow this format to meet the scheduling needs of professionals. If feasible, the course should allow registration across graduate and professional programs so that students recognize that negotiation approaches vary according to situation and goals. For example, the approaches optimal for business transactions may not work in the government sphere because resources are public and profit-making is not the central concern.

Other forms of technology take advantage of observational learning. Video recordings of effective negotiators serve as models for students to evaluate and emulate. Moreover, recordings of students during in-class simulations will allow for more detailed self-evaluation and evaluation from other students. Students will be able to keep recordings of themselves for future reference.

9 Post-course follow-up

This is the conundrum of best teaching practices: Instructors adopt the approaches that bring about the desired effect in the classroom, but cannot be certain of the duration of the effect. Research on negotiation andragogy must therefore proceed in parallel with the research on negotiation behavior, for they are linked. To effectively design a negotiation andragogy that creates life-long learners requires long-term follow-up. Researchers should track students of past negotiation classes to see how well they retain conceptual understanding of negotiation; how well they apply the techniques and transfer knowledge to new situations; how their understanding of culture and gender has evolved; and whether they have successfully become autodidacts. A heuristic for choosing techniques for long-term study would be to identify those that offer evidence of benefit in the classroom. It is not likely that a form of learning that is not effective in the classroom would be effective outside of it. In particular, the case method has an established presence in negotiation andragogy, and would be an appropriate tool for assessing, say, transfer. Former students could be asked to analyze a case that presented ostensible differences but had underlying similarities to cases used in the students' courses. Level of knowledge and transfer could be assessed and curriculum revised accordingly.

10 The Future of Negotiation Andragogy: Teaching the teachers

Research underscores the fact that educators must set transferability as a goal so that students can apply their learning to new situations outside of the classroom. In the same way, instructors must acquire the ability to apply new forms of andragogy, for as one scholar observed, “[T]raining in the skills of teaching, in how to orchestrate a negotiation course, and in how to work effectively in a cross-disciplinary manner ... remains inadequate” (Lewicki, 1997, p.264). As they teach students to refine theory and practice, instructors must likewise revise negotiation andragogy. In effect, the course design will mirror the autodidactic process of the students: Revise approaches and methods in light of new evidence. To grow, the field of negotiation education must accumulate evidence of best practices that benefit both students and teachers.

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