**Keeping the Passion, Cooling the Anger: Handling Controversial Subjects in Class through a Structured Exercise**

**Abstract**

This paper introduces an in-class exercise suitable for upper level undergraduate and graduate students designed to effectively manage class discussions of relevant but emotionally charged current events topics raised in management classes. The exercise was created with the learning objective of having students of differing points of view truly listen to and hear one another.

**Keywords**

Current events; constructive discussion; differing viewpoints

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**Introduction:**

This recounts and demonstrates an exercise that can be used to positively structure conversations on a controversial current events topic. The primary goal of the exercise is to get students to be open to differing points of view and information that may run counter to their own beliefs. The exercise is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate students, both traditional and non-traditional. It should be carried out face to face.

The skills needed to effectively manage discussion around hot button issues that inevitably crop up in current events are seldom taught in graduate school or valued once in a tenure track teaching position in a business school. This paper presents an exercise used to handle emotionally charged issues as a result of current events presentations in a Business, Government and Society class. However, the principles of the exercise could be used when dealing with any difficult or potentially divisive topic in a management class.

**Theoretical Foundation:**

Engagement with current events which form the environment and context in which businesses and their stakeholders operate and the ability to analyze these events and understand them from different viewpoints is a skill business students benefit from. As Ezzedeen notes, “Current affairs constitute useful teaching materials because they portray events pertinent to what managers face daily, add energy to the classroom and foster in students the habit of remaining current” (Ezzedeen nd; Phillips and Clawson 1998). Literature focused on the benefits, difficulties and potential methods of discussing current events has fallen into several groupings.

One group of scholars has taken on the issue of how most productively to discuss current events (and other material), with a strong focus on conversational learning (Ezzedeen nd; Rossouw 2002; Sims 2004; Henning 2005).

Some instructors have looked at how to relate the articles to the social/critical context of contemporary society (Howard 2002; Galczynski 2011/2012; Grise-Owens 2010).

Several instructors have looked at this issue relative to Business Ethics class; fewer have focused on the use of current event articles in Business, Government and Society or similar business school courses (Doh 2014; Vidal 2015).

All the literature provides a context, some understanding and a framework for the issues raised in the experience of using current events articles in management classes.

**Learning Objectives**

The Current Events Exercise was required of all students. They needed to select an article that reported on an event that had occurred within the past week, related to an organization (preferably business) and had to be controversial, with at least two differing opinions. Student also turned in a written analysis the day they did their oral presentation. Both written and oral reports needed to describe the issue, give a short synopsis, detail who the stakeholders were and what interests they had, and then identify the ultimate arbitrator of the situation. Finally, students asked the class for any questions or comments.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The initial goal of the exercise was to increase what Rossouw terms “cognitive competencies” (Rossouw 2002), to get students to understand complex, real-world situations and the differing interests that organizations must balance, as well as to gain an appreciation of how these conflictual situations can be or are resolved. The exercise was also designed to develop critical thinking, and oral and written skills.

As the semester unfolded, it became clear that students were developing (and encouraged to develop) affective or “behavioral competencies” (Rossouw 2002). The former nurture the ability to “identify, analyze, judge and evaluate,” while the latter focus on sensitivity and moral obligation to others (Rossouw 2002).

The class, constituting a required course, reflected the predominantly white and male population of the business school. Students were either seniors or juniors. About 50% were transfer students (most from one of three local community colleges); for many of these, this was their first semester at SUNY Brockport. All were Business Administration or Accounting majors.

**Exercise Overview:**

This exercise took place on October 17, 2017, in response to presentations and heated discussions on the topic of professional football players kneeling during the anthem at NFL games. Students presented current events articles on several aspects of this topic, including the actions of advertisers on the stations showing the games, the effect on the business of a parent of one of the kneeling players and the differing interests of the NFL, the owners, the players and the fans. Issues of free speech, patriotism, societal racism and respect for veterans arose during the discussions and debate became contentious and counterproductive.

I told students we would carry on the discussion in the next class. I then developed this exercise as way to structure the airing of students’ opinions as well as their ability to truly listen to others, all in a constructive manner. The exercise can be used for any controversial topic that emerges in current event presentations/discussion.

In the actual exercise, students were first updated on the most recent facts about the situation (actions taken by the NFL, the owners and players); the importance of referencing data and factual information was stressed. A topic that had been in unclear in the previous day’s discussion, the issue of when free speech was protected, was clarified for context.

Next, ground rules for the discussion were set. If more time had been available we would have created our own class ground rules. However, I used two existing sets of guidelines and went over them carefully. First were rules developed by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching and Learning (<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/>

* + Always use a respectful tone
  + No interrupting or yelling
  + No name-calling or other character attacks
  + Ask questions when you do not understand; do not assume you know what others are thinking
  + Try to see the issue from the other person’s perspective before stating your opinion
  + Maintain confidentiality (what is said in the classroom stays in the classroom.)
  + No offensive language
  + Define/discuss key terms if possible

Secondly, I drew on our college’s own work on Community Conversations, ongoing from 2015-16. These sessions operated from a Working agreement created initially by the first groups involved and reviewed at the beginning of each session. These guidelines were defined as how groups want to work together to feel safe and free to learn, explore and discover and were used routinely in the ongoing Community Conversations series at Brockport (started in response to a shooting incidence in the city of Rochester that took the lives of several teenagers and affected a number of students, all primarily students of color). Students were shown these guidelines, which listed the following traits as useful for safe and positive conversation:

* + Show respect
  + Be honest
  + Be authentic
  + Practice openmindedness
  + Assume good intentions
  + Listen well
  + Avoid value judgements on people’s statements or perspectives
  + Allow space to revise statements
  + Our experiences and perspectives are all valid
  + Be accountable for what you say
  + Non attribution policy outside this room

We reviewed both these sets of guidelines before beginning the exercise.

To start, each student was asked to write down *individually* their answers to the following questions:

* Why do you think the players are kneeling? (May be more than one reason). What are their goal (s)?
* What is your opinion on the NFL players kneeling?
* Why do you think people are offended that the players are kneeling?
* What would you recommend as steps moving forward for the players and the owners?

Once all students had completed these questions, students counted off by the number 6 so that the groups they then worked in were not comprised of their friends or those they were sitting next to (often their group mates). So the distribution into the groups was random.

When organized into their groups, students were given the following instructions:

* Each person reads their answers, without anyone interrupting. Each person writes down one thing they found persuasive/understandable/new information from each person’s talk.
* After everyone has shared, go around again and read off the points you found persuasive from others.
* See if the group can agree on a forward course of action and write this down as a group.

Student responses showed the ability to listen to the arguments and different points of view put forward, thus achieving one of the learning objectives, the ability to actually hear and understand a differing point of view. However, little change in their own opinions occurred.

**Session Description**

Participants in the MOBTS session will be run through the actual exercise after the context is set, with a controversial issue relevant at the time of the conference. The timeline for the session is as follows:

* Introduction and overview: 10 minutes
* Actual participation in the exercise:

-Individual write-up: 5 minutes

-Participants are placed in groups, then group exercise: 20 minutes

-Reporting out from groups: 10 minutes

* Discussion of exercise and topic generally of how to handle “hot button” issues: 15 minutes

**References**

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**Appendix A**

**Current Event Analysis Assignment**

Throughout the semester each student will be responsible for presenting on a relevant current event. The presentation will be relatively brief, no more than five minutes, with an additional five minutes for class discussion. The event must be 1) recent – within one week 2) it has to relate to an organization (preferably business), and 3) it must be controversial with at least two differing opinions. On the day of the presentation students must also turn in a written analysis, including the following components:

Issue: A brief sentence or two identifying the current event.

Synopses: A few paragraphs providing some information about the issue and why it’s controversial.

Stakeholders: Who’s affected by this controversy? Sometimes, it’s management, labor, shareholders, customers, the community, etc. Write why each mentioned stakeholder has a stake in the issue.

Arbitrator: Eventually all controversies are settled (some better than others). Depending upon the controversy they’re settled by courts, or government agencies. Other times, the controversy is settled by markets, where consumers determine what’s good or not. The arbitrator is the ultimately the institution that settles the controversy among the different stakeholders. Write how the arbitrator will determine the outcome.

Students should write these assignments as if they were memos to the instructor. Consider this practice on effective writing. Also, **staple a copy of the original article with the write-up**. This exercise is worth 10% of your final grade.

1. For detailed information on the general assignment, see Appendix A [↑](#footnote-ref-1)