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Via email to [steven.shugan@cba.ufl.edu](mailto:steven.shugan@cba.ufl.edu)

Dear Steve,

I'm behind in my reading, and this is a late reaction. I saw your editorial, "Save research--abandon the case method of teaching," in the March-April issue of *Marketing Science*. You're a serious researcher, as well as an engaging presenter. I'm sure you're just being provocative—you're too smart to take a position like the one in that essay—but I'll play the game and pretend that you really believe what you wrote. I'll do that because you're an influential guy, writing an influential editorial in an influential journal, and your article is just plain wrong. Someone needs to rebut it, so I'll assert that I have the credentials: I've had success as a classroom and executive teacher, by case method and otherwise; I've been privileged to work at both UVA and the University of Chicago; I've done research I'm proud of (my JDC Little award has your signature on it); and I don't have an ax to grind because I'm not in academics any more.

You assert that people who don't know anything about the current state of a discipline are likely to shortchange their students. No kidding. But that has nothing to do with the case method as pedagogy.

You also claim that because the Socratic method predates the scientific method, it is inferior. That's like saying an eagle gallops awkwardly, or a horse doesn't soar well. The scientific method is not a pedagogical method; the Socratic method is. They aren't substitutes. If they are related at all, they are complements.

Finally, you mistake the purpose of management education. It is not to cram facts into a person, nor is it to teach as many analytical skills as possible in the time allowed. It is to get people to think like good managers. That includes not just factual knowledge and analytical skill, but also perspective, judgment, the ability to organize and prioritize, and the ability to persuade. And as for your argument that "Suppose a manager convinces

everyone to take the wrong action,” suppose you knew the right action and let the more articulate fool beat you up in the meeting. Whose fault is that, his for being more persuasive, or yours for being less?

Your point that “business is not case law” misses the purpose of law school case discussion entirely. I spoke about your editorial with a friend, a Harvard Law School graduate who is an eminent Manhattan attorney. He pointed out that the case discussion’s role is to get you to think like a lawyer. The focus isn’t the (known) adjudication. The worthwhile part of the case lies in its ambiguity, and the point of the discussion is to let you practice learning to think in a particular and productive way. Do you understand what the important issues are? Can you think clearly? Can you voice your argument so that it is understandable and compelling? How would you approach this issue if the case facts were slightly changed?

The purpose of case discussion in a school of management is to get students to think like managers. Not researchers, not clerks, not social scientists, and not lawyers—managers, whose task it is to be able to decide wisely and to get their decisions implemented. The “what happened” is often entertaining; other times, it opens the “what if the case facts change” discussion. But it isn’t particularly relevant to the initial discussion of what is ambiguous in the case.

It seems to me that what you object to is the kind of person who doesn’t stay current. What you dislike isn’t the Socratic method; it’s the kind of teacher who is uninformed but who can keep a discussion bubbling along, wherever it may go.

You and I are both aware that if you know your stuff, you can teach “hard-core” subjects such as multivariable statistics very successfully using the case method. And I also know, from my own observation, that many, if not most, people coming out of standard statistics courses taught by the lecture method don’t apprehend or retain enough to wad a shotgun. Should we then damn the lecture method? No, it’s just that if we are going to lecture, we should engage our students well enough that they retain what they need to retain.

There are further issues, of course, particularly in the area of executive education. For example, academic researchers can have good knowledge of how a decision should be made in an ideal environment without knowing much (and perhaps not caring much) about the environment in which decisions are made. But executives are people of action, and impatient with what they may perceive as “theoretical” or “ivory tower” discussions. People who work a lot with executives know that executives can get very engaged discussing actual decisions, and what they learn can often help them make better, if not optimal, decisions.

I am in complete agreement with you if what you object to is a bad or ill-informed teacher. That person is a fraud, whether he’s a great discussant who doesn’t know much about his subject, or a researcher who is a lousy teacher and proud of it. But, again, that’s not method related.

I don't see the Socratic method as the only educational tool worth having, but I know for a fact it works well at engaging people so they learn. Someone once said that "anyone who doesn't understand that education and theater are the same thing doesn't know anything about either one." At some level, that's true. The critical issue, *given* the teacher's expertise in the subject matter, is how to get it into the student's head so it sticks, and that requires the ability to engage. That's what you said in the last sentence of your article, and that's a sentence worth remembering.

Kindest regards,

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