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The Discussion that Went Wrong

Doug Sanders came to my office last week, looking quite dejected. With a sigh, he slumped into a chair.

"What an awful class I just had", he said.

Doug was an assistant professor, in his second year at the Rotenberg business school. I'd say he was about thirty years old. I hadn't seen much of him, but by all accounts he had settled in well. He had won a prize for his dissertation and had already published one article in a major journal, with several more promising manuscripts on the way. His work was heavily analytical and one colleague described it to me as "leading-edge stuff".

He seemed to like teaching. When we had a coffee about six months before, he told me that he had a good rapport with his students and found teaching a nice break from all the analysis he was doing. I'd regularly see him in the hallways chatting pleasantly with students.

I asked him what had happened.

Doug told me that he had completely redesigned his 4th-year undergraduate course in Marketing. He had heard that case teaching was becoming more and more the norm in business schools and wanted to give it a try. He was attracted by the idea of getting students to analyze a case in depth using the models he gave them. It wasn't all about analysis, though: he wanted to use cases to develop students' ability to weigh the issues and develop good judgment.

The cases he chose had a mixture of quantitative information and comments made by managers. In his first session, he had presented the students with the syllabus and told them that he expected them to have analyzed the cases in full when they came to class.

Doug approached his second session with nervousness and some exhilaration. This was to be his first real attempt at case teaching, and he prepared extensively. He went through the case in detail and developed spreadsheets for every analytical question he could think of. Then he used these to develop a detailed argument that the company should not enter the market because his projections of market size did not justify it. All this he put together into Power Point slides. This process took him two full days, and he was quite proud of the thoroughness of his work.

As he planned the session, he thought he would start with the topic of the week, market segmentation, and his thoughts on how the case should be analyzed. He would use the rest of the class to discuss students' own analyses and answer their questions.
When he arrived in class, a couple of students approached him with questions about the syllabus. He was anxious to get started and was busy getting the computer and projector

This case was written for class discussion by Prof. David Dunne. It is entirely fictitious and any resemblance of any character to real persons is unintended.

going. However, he stopped what he was doing and dealt with their questions. By the time he had finished, the rest of the class was chatting and he had to shout to get their attention. He opened the class with an agenda and went through his Power Point slides on market segmentation. He then described the situation in the case and presented the analysis he had done, and his argument for not entering the market. This took longer than he had expected – about 55 minutes – during which the students appeared to be quietly taking notes.

At the end of his lecture, he asked if anyone had any questions. There was no response, just an embarrassing silence and blank looks. Thinking quickly, he decided to ask a question.

"How is this market segmented?" (Since he had already covered this topic in his analysis, he thought it would be easy). Again, no answer.

As he was about to ask another question, a student, Jamal, tentatively raised his hand. Doug was relieved. Jamal asked whether entry by a competitor might expand the market and make it viable.

"Of course not", answered Doug. He hadn't covered the issue of competitive entry because it seemed so obvious: there were high entry barriers and competition was unlikely to enter. So Doug began to tell the class about entry barriers, but since it had been a while since he had looked at the theory, his account was somewhat vaguer than he would have liked. At this point, he called a break.

After the break, things went from bad to worse. One student argued that market segmentation by race was the same as racial discrimination; others scorned his argument. When Doug asked for students' analyses of the case, no-one volunteered and eventually he called upon a rather nervous young woman in the back row. Her market size numbers tallied with his, but the rest of her analysis was hopelessly wrong. Sighing, he returned to the slides he had shown earlier and showed how the analysis should have been done. He called on another student to present his analysis, but the student told him his grandmother was sick and he had not had time to complete the assignment.

Soldiering on, he decided to break the students into groups. He asked them to discuss the case for 5 minutes and report back. Students responded by peppering him with questions about what he would like them to do, and he answered that they should just come up with a recommendation. Once they got going, he was pleased to see a high level of interaction and chatter from his vantage point at the front of the room.

Towards the end of class, the first group of students presented its recommendation. Others disagreed, and a lively discussion followed. Looking at the clock, Doug saw that time was just about up, so he apologized that the other groups did not get to present their conclusions but promised they would be able to do so next week. The students gathered their belongings and left; Doug was left wondering why they were so unprepared for class and where the session had gone wrong.

As Doug faced me in my office a few minutes later, I wondered what I should say to him.