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On the Nature of Teaching in an MBA Program

Thoughts on pedagogical approaches for first-time instructors

Dedicated to Richard Sylvester (1933–2020). Dick was my professor, advisor, and friend. He was a fantastic and inspirational teacher.

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In March 2017, I had the opportunity to shift from my career as an entrepreneur–CEO to become an instructor at the Yale School of Management. It was a dream opportunity. I knew I did not want to continue to be an entrepreneur or CEO after having spent 25 years building and leading two companies—it had been great fun, but that chapter of my life was over. Teaching was a perfect way to remain part of the business and entrepreneurship ecosystem, helping others launch their journeys as leaders and entrepreneurs. I was thrilled but also filled with trepidation about the actual practice of teaching.

When I started teaching at Yale, I was nervous and felt like a true rookie. I did not have a road map for approaching classroom instruction or building a course to provide rich and meaningful learning opportunities for students. The purpose of this note is to help other first-time instructors navigate in-class dynamics and explore pedagogical approaches. I offer these perspectives humbly; I have only four years of experience as a teacher and am by no means an expert. My background is as a practitioner, and I do not claim to have a formula that drives teaching success. What I offer are lessons from the field.

Before I began to teach, I had several conversations about instruction with David Dodson and Peter Kelly, both lecturers at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Additionally, professors Rick Ruback and Royce Yudkoff at Harvard Business School allowed me to observe them and co-teach with them for a full semester. These conversations and experiences were immensely useful in preparing for my teaching role at Yale. To pay it forward, I am sharing some ideas that have worked for me. I certainly do not assert that my approach to instruction is unique or correct; it is just *my* style. I hope other first-time instructors take what works for them and leave what does not.

My Teaching Philosophy

I think of teaching as the transmission of information and knowledge. It involves sharing concepts with students, including specialized techniques and strategies, to increase their probability of success. Teaching provides opportunities for students to add to their toolkit and sharpen their existing tools. Furthermore, teaching helps students develop their individual cognitive development, critical reasoning, and analytical skills.

In addition to this explicit agenda, I believe strongly that teaching has an important implicit agenda that provides an additional learning opportunity. Part of my pedagogical philosophy is to push students to develop their own individual business philosophy and leadership style, which will help define how they will behave when they are in the arena as a CEO or entrepreneur, and my course design is informed by this objective. This aligns with the Yale School of Management's mission to educate leaders for business and society. My teaching style is constructed to help students discover their own voice and compass to guide them in future leadership roles. There is no single correct approach to leadership: two students sitting next to each other in class can have wildly different styles, and both can be right. I aim to help students develop their own business leadership approach and values.

Finally, I view my role as a teacher to inspire students to explore entrepreneurial and leadership roles they previously might not have considered or thought tenable. I am trying to lift and propel students to higher levels than they can imagine for themselves. This aligns with Yale University's mission to educate aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society.

Classroom as laboratory

To facilitate this development, I tell students that the classroom is a comfortable and protected laboratory—the perfect context for exploration and experimentation. The classroom has a safety net, so the consequences of taking risks and being wrong are extremely low, especially compared to post-graduation situations. It is the best place for students to find their voice and style by engaging in conversation and testing ideas and philosophies. Of course, some students get an idea or concept wrong at times. The beauty of the classroom environment is that when this happens, the student's peers and I can help them get back on track. To achieve this end, it is important to create a comfortable, non-intimidating classroom environment. Students should never feel embarrassed for being wrong—they should be brought back on target respectfully—and learn.

Students, much like employees, have different needs and learning styles. Part of being both a CEO and a teacher is trying to get the best out of everyone. I try to offer different methods of participation for different learning styles, allowing students to prepare using pre-class prompt questions ahead of time, to think about new questions during class, and to reflect on critical learning.

One small way I connect with students is to learn their names and backgrounds. That way, I can say hello to them as they enter and leave class or when I see them on campus, and I can draw upon their experiences and skills in classroom conversations. Students appreciate when you know who they are. This small gesture helps engage and motivate them.

Using Cases

My teaching approach is based on the case method. In each class, we explore a business opportunity, challenge, or issue. We read the case and perform quantitative and qualitative analysis, drawing upon the Yale SOM core curriculum and students' personal experiences and weaving in assigned supplemental readings. The case method drives vigorous class discussions in which students take divergent viewpoints and debate an issue. I view my role as driving and directing the conversation without being a dominant participant. I've learned to resist the temptation to express my opinions too early or too frequently because that might squelch students' active learning and the development of their own ideas and intuitions.

My teaching practice also includes writing case studies to enhance student learning opportunities. These case studies have focused on gaps in the current case literature, exploring topics that present new learning opportunities. They have focused on Yale SOM and on underrepresented protagonists (women and people of color). I have also written instructive and informational case notes that provide some best practices and recipes for tackling a specific business topic or issue.

Setting the tone

A final aspect of my teaching approach is the tone I set for the class. I do not make friends with students, but I make sure to be approachable and available. I do not think of students as my customers, nor do I see them as a product to be served up to the business community after graduation. I think of myself as a partner in their educational journeys.[3] I want to help each student learn as much as they want, including through one-on-one conversations and providing additional reading suggestions.

If students do not do the work and readings for class, I ask myself where I have gone wrong. Perhaps the readings are not compelling enough, or I have not generated enough enthusiasm for the work. I also keep in mind that these students are adults. Many are married, and some have children. They are busy trying to find jobs, launch businesses, and keep commitments beyond my class and Yale. So, when students fail to complete some work or preparation, I try to be understanding. In general, I try to strike an avuncular attitude, serving as a mentor or a coach. Despite my decades of entrepreneurial experience, my teaching approach is not autobiographical. The class session is about the students and their learning opportunities—not about me.

Before Class

Here are some of my thoughts on pre-course and pre-class activities.

A violinist's practice determines the success of their concert performance; the recital is just the outcome of all the preparation that preceded it. Teaching is much the same: Most of the work is done before even entering the classroom. I think of the in-class experience as the relatively brief concert performance, representing only about ten percent of the teaching commitment. Much of the groundwork for a successful course or class session is set before they ever begin. Syllabus design, reading selections, and pre-class student communication establish the class's mood before anyone enters the room. I know whether a class session will be successful before it begins because it is a function of the work and practice I have put in.

Developing the syllabus

I have developed four courses at Yale, all related to some aspect of entrepreneurship. When designing a new course, I try to reflect on what I would have wanted to learn as an MBA student and aspiring entrepreneur. I then build the class sessions based on content that would have resonated with me as a student.

For example, when I first started to teach, I created a new course, Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition, with a simple question in mind: What did I want to know when I was a 24-year-old entrepreneur embarking on a nebulous, scary, and exciting journey? I created a syllabus that explored the topics about which I wish I had more in-depth knowledge as a fledgling entrepreneur, including industry selection and business model, finance in an entrepreneurial enterprise, human capital issues, customer selection and management, board management, operations, failure, and exiting a business. The syllabus plots the progression of an entrepreneurial journey from inception to conclusion—and even post-exit opportunities, challenges, and issues. Although it is not autobiographical, it mimics the trajectory of my professional, pre-academic career.

When building a syllabus, I use cases I have written, and I search existing case libraries for potential cases that illustrate the learning points I want to emphasize. I select cases that reflect a wide range of industries and geographies (domestic and international), genders, and ethnicities to reflect student demographics.* Exposing students to entrepreneurs and leaders who look like them emphasizes that they, too, can become entrepreneurs and leaders. Some students see themselves as manufacturing folks, while others are service industry aspirants. Cases must be drawn from various industries that resonate with a wide range of students. See **Exhibit 1** for sample case demographics in a syllabus. My complete syllabi are available on my Yale bio page.

Pre-class assignments

Several weeks before the semester starts, I send a welcome email to my students to set the class's tenor. This email establishes the ground rules and my expectations for the course in a warm-hearted, enthusiastic manner.

I also send out surveys that must be completed before each class throughout the semester. The survey gathers student opinions and positions, which allows me to "warm" call students on the case analysis based on their orientation. The survey also shows me the class's general understanding of the case and its pertinent issues to help shape the conversation.

Before each class, students are assigned two to four hours of reading and analysis, typically consisting of the featured case, one or more supplemental readings that focus on a framework, concept, or model related to the case, and perhaps a brief video. The syllabus includes accompanying question prompts to guide the students' preparation.

I use a pre-class checklist routine (**Exhibit 2**) before every session to calm myself by ensuring I am in the right mindset and have everything I need to bring to class. I review the checklist several times in my office and even bring a laminated copy to class and keep it on the podium. My checklist works for me. It is not necessarily exhaustive or right for everybody.

In the Classroom

During a class session, I try to guide and pace the conversation rather than taking a prominent position in the debate. The case method is Socratic in nature, and in class, I ask far more questions than I provide answers. By engaging in debate and having to answer questions, students are forced to defend their positions with data and analysis, and most importantly, they participate actively in the learning process. They drive the learning experience rather than being passive recipients of information. The case method requires students to do a lot of pre-class preparation, so they have a high degree of accountability. Students must assume that they will be part of a vibrant conversation and be cold called to participate in it when they walk into class. This approach raises the bar and fosters a high-energy, lively class experience. When I started teaching, David Dodson advised me, "Be ten times more enthusiastic than you think you need to be. Then, students will be excited, too." Dodson also cautioned me on the sin of being boring: Students will not learn as much from a soporiferous instructor as a vibrant instructor.

Each class session follows the same arc: identification of challenges and opportunities, identification of potential solutions (including mathematical analysis and implications), application of a framework or model, and selection of the most compelling course of action. I particularly enjoy seeing students waver

* When teaching these cases I do not specifically discuss gender or ethnicity. I am not an expert on these topics. Rather, I approach the case with a completely neutral attitude about the protagonist's demographics–of course there are female entrepreneurs and we do not even need to discuss that fact.

during a class session, moving mentally between positions as they try to figure out the correct answer or approach (of course, there might be more than one). I consider the session a success if students oscillate in class and leave with a different view.

My classroom experience is structured and formulaic. Students know what to expect and how the class will unfold. The classroom dynamic reflects my teaching style and philosophy and is designed to engage all students and facilitate learning opportunities. I may use a few slides to highlight a framework, a piece of data, or a humorous image to emphasize a point, but the focus is the conversation, not the screen. Here is a brief overview of a typical 80-minute class:

- I use a quotation related to the case on the board for students to consider as they walk in the room. Each class begins promptly with the lights being dimmed, the doors being closed, and a **one- to two-minute video** related to the case of the day. This video might feature the case protagonist, the case industry, or a case theme. This video is my signal that the class has begun, and we should all now be engaged.
- Before jumping into the class conversation, I ask two students to be responsible for identifying the **key learning opportunities** during the class wrap-up. This creates active engagement and student ownership and is a wonderful way to involve students who are not frequent contributors.
- I try to use **props** as much as possible, and if I have one for a given class, I bring it out now. For instance, if the case is about a corrugated roofing company, I bring corrugated roofing to class to help students better understand what the company and the case are about.
- The core of the class explores **three to four conversation pastures**[4] (a 15-to-20-minute conversation segment that delves into a specific case topic) linked to the preparation prompts (see **Exhibit 3** for sample session prompts). This part of the class allows students to step into the case protagonists' shoes and resolve the issues at hand, using qualitative and quantitative support to justify their solutions. There is typically engrossing debate among wide-ranging views and perspectives. This part of the class involves both volunteer participation and cold calling. I invite students who identified with a particular point of view in the pre-class survey to explain, defend, and develop their opinions. I try to link the conversation to previous cases and readings to connect the dots between each class session, building upon what was already explored and established.
- During the **class conversation**, I move physically around the room, from the whiteboard at the front of the room to the aisles, rather than staying behind the podium. I call on people in different parts of the room and am conscious of calling on a balance of female and male students and students of all backgrounds. I ask follow-up questions to get students to think more deeply. An ideal dynamic is when two students vigorously (but politely) debate opposing perspectives. It is important to resist the temptation to tell students the right answer instead of letting them reach it themselves.
- **I record student comments on the whiteboard** in an organized fashion to recognize and validate their remarks and participation. When a student makes a goofy, off-kilter comment, I reply by asking, "Does anybody want to take the other side of that trade?" This is my polite way of not authenticating the comment without having to tell a student they are wrong. No student should ever be embarrassed—nothing is more likely to limit their future participation.
- I frequently provide students with a spreadsheet that is a **starter for quantitative analysis**. I have discovered that many students eschew the mathematical analysis that my classes require. By giving the students a quick start, they can learn an approach to the quantitative riddle in the case. Then

the class conversation can focus on interpreting and implementing the analysis as compared to how to perform the computations.

- Once or twice during a course, I create a **role-play scenario** where a student is selected using a random number generator (with great suspense and anticipation). The selected student will need to step into the protagonist's role and deliver a presentation to the entire class on an issue in the case–how to tell the board it is wrong, terminate an employee, or convince the customer a price increase is warranted. This allows the student to feel what the situation might be like for real with drama and fanfare.
- When **cold calling students**, I draw on their backgrounds, which are available on the student bio pages, to generate participation. For example, if a student worked in an industry related to the featured case, they would surely receive a cold call from me commenting on their industry expertise. This creates a more personalized class experience.
- If the **case protagonist is a guest,** either in person or by video, they will be invited to speak for the last 20 minutes of class. Protagonist guests are not guest lecturers who lead the class session but are supplemental to the case analysis. The guest will typically share how they resolved the issue featured in the case, what tools and analyses they used, and where the company went after the case closed. Students then have the opportunity to ask the guest questions about the case. Class guests bring a case to life, highlighting its complexities and emotions and its outcome. Guests also serve as role models and allow students to begin building their professional networks.
- The last five minutes of class are used to **wrap up and identify the session's key learning opportunities**. These learning opportunities are not case-specific but are elevated, generalizable themes more universal in nature. The two students who were asked to share learning opportunities at the beginning of the session will now highlight the key takeaways. Other students can volunteer key learning opportunities, and if any are missed, I fill in the blanks with reference to a closing slide. In every class, one of our key learning opportunities is a personal note of encouragement, like "you can do this," to emphasize that each student can get in the arena and try to be an entrepreneur or a CEO. This is meant to encourage students to take on leadership roles and not live life on the sidelines.
- I close class by proposing a **question for pondering**: one more thought that I hope students will discuss as they leave class or over lunch to keep the conversation going.

Post-class

Just as class begins before the actual class time, it continues after class time ends. Here are the key things I do after class:

- I **send an email to the entire class** highlighting the conversation's critical points and sharing any materials used in class that the students should have, including slides.
- I also send **three to five students individual emails** recognizing and thanking them for a particularly insightful comment or analysis, aided by my teaching assistants (TAs), who help me record such comments. This email is a brief sentence or two (Elizabeth: Nice job in class today picking up on the operating leverage with incremental revenue. Thanks!) I might also email a

student asking for more participation and comments in class. Each student will ideally receive at least one individualized email by the end of the semester.

- If there was a guest in class, four to five students may have signed up for **lunch** with them to gain more insight into their career and journey. If the guest is willing, I typically do a video interview with them to build a library of content for future class and student use.
- I also use lunchtime as an **opportunity to get to know students** better by periodically hosting small student groups for a conversation on cases, entrepreneurship, Yale, and post-MBA life and plans.
- After each class, I **reflect on how the session and case landed** with students. I do an informal poll of my TAs and a few students to see how they felt the class went. If a case went poorly, I think critically about whether the problem was with the case itself or how I taught it. Often, I realize I tried to cover too much ground with one case, which can decrease the session's quality. I've found that right after class is the best time to make notes about changing the approach to the session in the future. If a case does not click, it should be dropped. Even when all the class sessions work well, I aim to replace two or three cases each time I teach a course to keep it fresh. If the class session was recorded, now is also the moment to review the video and see what worked and what went awry. Be warned that watching a video of your own teaching performance is painful and embarrassing—we all think we are better than we are. Through video analysis, you can assess enthusiasm level, student body language, balance in participation, feeling, and whether some students were over-engaged while others were unintentionally ignored.
- In the **last class session**, I thank students for choosing to be in my course, for their participation, and for allowing me to learn from them, which I always do. I encourage students to keep in touch and offer to be a resource for them as their careers and lives unfold (office hours for life). I thank my teaching assistants in front of the class and give them a gift—books, of course! I also send out handwritten notes to the highest performers in the class (the top ten percent, who earn High Honors), which is an easy way to acknowledge and encourage students' hard work.

After a class session, I typically feel an odd combination of being energized and fatigued. I love engaging with students and drawing upon our reciprocal energy and enthusiasm. Seeing the students pull a case apart and then put it back together is fun and exciting. Watching a wide range of students' hands pop up in class makes me feel like I am reaching them. Hearing the students identify a session's key learning opportunities shows me we have accomplished something. I find teaching both fun and invigorating; however, I often feel tired after class, both emotionally and physically, but in a good way, as it lets me know I gave everything I could to the class session.

I know a class was successful when students charge at me after it ends to pepper me with more questions and thoughts. I also know the class worked when I see many nodding heads and when students' opinions change during the session as the conversation evolves and morphs in unanticipated directions. When people laugh and have fun in class, learning opportunities are more vibrant and memorable, so I strive to make each class enjoyable. That way, students want to put in the work for future classes.

Final Thoughts

Finding your own teaching style takes time. It is an iterative process of discovering what works and fits for you. David Dodson encouraged me to improve one thing each semester and resist the temptation to make too many changes at once. I have done this and find that it works. Observing other instructors in the classroom has also been helpful. I enjoy seeing how faculty members structure their class sessions, and I always pick up a worthwhile nugget. Inviting other faculty members into your classroom to observe your teaching and provide feedback can be useful (and humbling), too.

I know teaching is right for me because it is fun, fulfilling, and brings me joy. I am nervous but excited before each class. I miss teaching over the summer and look forward to the beginning of each semester. The end of a semester is bittersweet, bringing a sense of accomplishment, relief, closure, and a hint of loss. I spent the first 25 years of my professional career building and investing in businesses. It was wonderful–a genuine expression of my values and philosophies. Teaching is an extension of that and truly feels like a calling and an act of service. I have benefited from so much mentorship, support, and guidance in my life, and through teaching, I have an opportunity to provide the same for a future generation of leaders. It feels fantastic to share my experience with students to make their lives slightly better and more manageable. The presence (or absence) of this kind of energy, attitude, and commitment will let you know if teaching is right for you.

When I think about the professors who most impacted me as a student and how I can imitate them, there are two common denominators. First, they cared deeply about the subject matter, and their enthusiasm was palpable and contagious. They clearly loved thinking, talking, and writing about their course content. Second, they cared deeply about students and helping them on their educational journey. They enjoyed speaking and interacting with students and had time for them. They shepherded students toward more profound academic discovery, gave students confidence and encouragement to grow, and were inspirational. In short, the best teachers I have ever encountered care deeply. This trait alone will influence all the others and will go a long way in creating a successful teaching career.

Teaching is all about the students and creating a learning environment to better develop their personal voice and style in a constructive context. It is about helping students develop new skills and hone existing ones in a fun and challenging classroom experience. Finally, it is about having students look back on a course and know they are better for having taken it—more knowledgeable, better prepared, and more ready to become leaders in business and society. In my opinion, there is very little that is more satisfying.

Good luck with your teaching career; I hope you find it as fun and fulfilling as I have found mine.

Exhibit 1: Sample demographics analysis of cases included in a syllabus

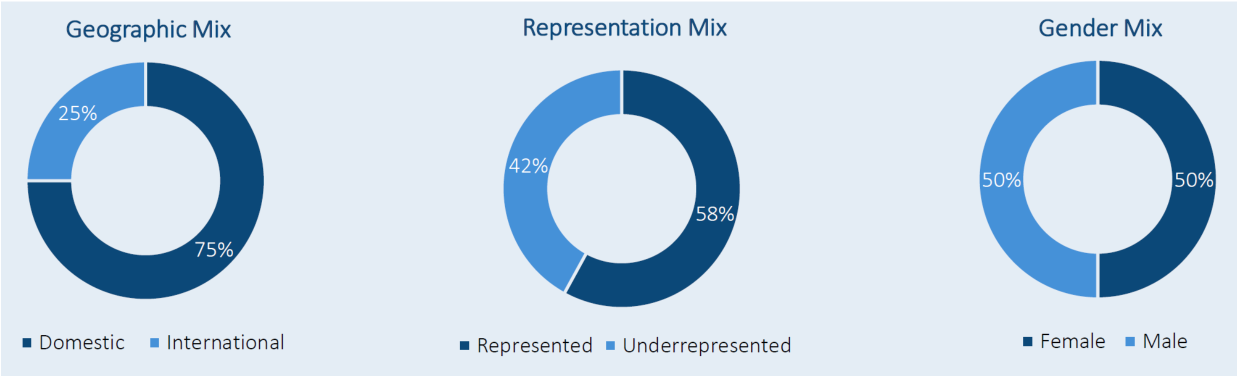

Exhibit 2: Sample pre-class checklist

1. Jump drive
2. Dongle for laptop
3. Power cord
4. Turn off phone
5. Print pastures
6. Props
7. Prep guest—guideline and comment sheets
8. Survey
9. Syllabus
10. Onscreen presentation
11. Be enthusiastic 10x
12. Ask student guests—name, from, favorite X
13. Where have we been? Where are we going?
14. Listen
15. Ask questions!
16. Be humble
17. Move around the room
18. Call on variety of students
19. Write names next to comments on board
20. Let's build on this
21. Wrap-up cold call, wrap-up assignment
22. Highlight next class
23. Follow-up email to class
24. Follow-up email to a few students
25. Thank-you notes to guests

Exhibit 3: Sample question prompts for a class session

Acquiring a Company

SESSION 3: MAKING AN ACQUISITION DECISION

MON, Nov 2

Reading:

- Kalil Diaz (Yale SOM 17-014)
- IESE International Search Funds
- On the Nature of Economic Characteristics
- Cola Capital Forbes Article
- I Said, You Said: He is the Entrepreneur
- Assignment: In a simple spreadsheet, please detail how much Kalil should pay, and what should the capital structure look like. Kalil Excel

Questions:

- What unique issues exist for international search funds? For the entrepreneurs? For the investors (US and international)?
- How would you think about investor composition in an international search fund – why?
- How do you begin to think about industry targeting and selection?
- What characteristics do you seek in an industry, and why?
- What do you think of Kalil's screening process?
- Should Kalil go through with his target acquisition?
- How much should he pay, and what should the capital structure look like?
- What do you think of Kalil's expansion strategy?

Survey:

- Session 3 survey

Exhibit 4: Additional Resources

- 101 Things You Can Do in the First Three Weeks of Class | Graduate Studies | Nebraska (unl.edu)
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Endnotes

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[3] Andersen, Espen, and Schiano, Bill. Teaching with Cases: A Practical Guide. Boston, Harvard Business School Publishing, 2014. Page 113.

[4] Austin, James, et al. "Key Elements for Excellence in Classroom Cases and Teaching Notes." Harvard Business Publishing, no. 915417, April 17, 2015. Page 7.