

Clip #5 - The Case for Participant-Centered Thinking (33:48) Austin

PROFESSOR JIM AUSTIN: The issue of teaching and learning is a very old issue. Around here at Harvard, people have been thinking about it for a long time. In 1869, one of our most distinguished presidents of the University, Charles Eliot, said, "Our major problem is not what to teach, it is how to teach it."

And so that is a challenge that always faces every educator: How best to teach? Which is really a question: How best can we learn?

And so in this session, in fact we're going to explore that. But the purpose of this whole course is focused on a certain type of discussion leadership. It is on participant-centered; it is on discussion-based; it is on active learning. And so, therefore, we're going to try, at the beginning of this whole program, in this session, to plunge ourselves into that.

What is different about discussion-based leadership, compared to the traditional lecture method, and what are the challenges that this new method implies?

That's the only question. That's the simple one we have to answer here. So let's see where it takes us. What's different about it?

__: One is centered on the teacher, and the other on the participant.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So we have kind of a teacher and we have the students. And sort of under the lecture method this is primary; and under this one, you're saying the focus is more over here. So this is the focal point. Now, what are the implications of that? What does that imply?

__: Risk.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Risk. Maria Helena, for whom?

__: For both of them.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: OK, so this implies risk for both. What kind of risk? Malu?

MALU: Risk of losing control on the side of the professor. Risk of feeling, I don't know, uncomfortable with the freedom on the side of the students. If I have been conducted by professors all my life as a student, how should I behave if I'm sharing responsibility?

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So you're saying the teacher is losing control and you're saying that makes you uneasy?

MALU: Not me, but...

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Would professors that have been doing the lecture method be uneasy if all of a sudden you're not lecturing?

__: Yeah.

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PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Why is it? How do you lose control here?

MALU: Because you share the scene.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: You're sharing something over here. So over here under a traditional method, you have all the control. And so when you shift the focus over here, therefore, these students are now sharing in the control of the class, and that might make you uneasy. Daniela?

DANIELA: Also the teacher has to develop other skills that he or she might not have.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So when we come down to execution here, this implies some new skills? What new skills?

DANIELA: Social skills, communication skills.

__: Listening.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So I hear "social." I hear "communication." I hear "listening."

__: Questioning.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Questioning.

__: Empathy.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Social—maybe that's part of this over here, but let's put it up here. Empathy.

__: Motivating.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Motivating, OK, all right. Additional skills that maybe they didn't have to necessarily have before? Daniela? Ursula?

URSULA: Bridging concepts. You have to quickly bridge concepts, because if one student talks about something, and the other one talks about something else....

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: OK, which is listening and then communicating, so that's bridging.... So that says something else. You're saying the class as a whole, all of a sudden, is different?

__: Yes.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: How?

URSULA: If student *A* says something, and you have to bridge the concept—he's talking to your case—and *B* says something, maybe *A* has something to do with *B*, and you have to share and talk about this integration of the concept.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: OK, so that there is all of a sudden a new variable to which we have to pay attention. If we're lecturing, do we have to worry about that?

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___: No.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Except the ones that are sleeping, you say? You might have to throw something at them? But here Ursula says, "Well, no, we actually have to pay attention to that, because now that's part of the process."

URSULA: If *A* says something and *B* says something, and you just say OK, it adds nothing.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: That's not what we're talking about here. So this linking, this bridging, is really quite important. Lavinia?

LAVINIA: Finding the focus and time management.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Well, let's see about this. Time management. And when you say "focus," what do you have in mind there?

LAVINIA: The power to bring the class to the discussion, to the subject, and not let them spread into other things. There is some kind of leadership.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: All right, so there is some sort of direction, a role that you're playing there in terms of direction. Jorge?

JORGE: You have to try and open the discussion so that people feel comfortable, and very open-minded, and no shyness, so that you're free just to say what you think and try to....

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So something about eliciting participation. There, OK, all right. Do we have to worry about that in a lecture? You got to keep them listening, right? And make sure they're writing, but other than that, maybe not.

___: I think of, on the left side, the traditional method—the key process is teaching. On the other side, the key process is learning, not teaching. So the key skill of the first case is the content itself. You want people who are actually very knowledgeable about the content they're teaching. Whereas, in the second case, you need people who are more knowledgeable about the nature of the learning process.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So we have content and we have process. Now, let me just push this a little bit further. So if we're going to be discussion-based teachers, we don't have to worry about content, we have to worry about process.

___: Both of them.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Ah! You have to worry about content?

___: Yes.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: But I thought we were just up here, you know, asking questions and bridging and linking and listening and.... Why do I have to know.... Give me anything. I'll teach it. I'll just get up here and ask some questions and listen and.... Why do I have to know anything about this? Why? Where does content come in here? I didn't hear anything about content. Juan Manuel?

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JUAN MANUEL: I will say that it is very difficult to teach using a discussion-based methodology. You need to be really knowledgeable about the subject that you are teaching, or you are conducting, rather, than teaching.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Why?

JUAN MANUEL: Well, it's easier to follow any idea that a student might say, and say, "Oh, that sounds interesting, oh, that sounds interesting," you know, "That sounds interesting." But nothing comes out that really.... I mean, we just had a lecture a while ago, and we had some information regarding the theory behind the case, you know, similar to what we're doing here. But you really need to know what you are doing. Otherwise, everything that we say will be interesting.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: All right, so focus about what? Focus about the substantive issue over here. So it's both of these together here. And you're saying they're kind of interactive. All right. Salvador?

SALVADOR: To summarize issues, I would say that it's much more demanding—the participative approach—than the teacher or lecturing approach, in the sense that the traditional approach just requires preparation on contents. But the other one requires preparation on process, and preparation on contents as well.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So this is both execution and preparation, both of these together. I see a lot of kind of differences and new demands, Salvador is saying, that makes this more challenging for the teacher. What about the student? What about the student over here? What's different there? Veronica?

VERONICA: Well, the student needs to be much more involved. The students have to assume responsibility for the learning process much more in the participant learning process. Because if they don't assume this responsibility, it's very difficult to....

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: They're sharing in the control. But that also means you have to share in the responsibility for what?

__: For learning.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: For their learning. And what does that mean? What are the implications of that?

__: More time.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: More time to do what?

__: Preparation.

__: To prepare, to explore, to fail, and to share learning.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: OK, let's just think about this. We kind of have preparation over here for the professor. And what does this mean for the students? What's different? Continue, Ricardo.

RICARDO: They don't have the answers. Sometimes they just look for the answer. Just give me the theory and let's move to the other one. Here you have to discover the theory, and that takes time, and effort, and frustration, and sometimes they don't like it.

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PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So there's a discovery process here. They can do the preparation, but you're saying that won't necessarily give them the answer. And so they have to discover the answer. And I hear you saying, and that might not be so easy. And therefore, this might be something they will have to learn how to live with.

RICARDO: They want to just answer these three questions, and with that you are set, and let's go to the next case, and....

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So this is not so easy, this is not going to be easy. I'm hearing a sense of discomfort for the students. What else for the students?

___: Well, they have to open their minds, because they have to listen and understand there are different perspectives or views. They have to develop the skill to listen to their partners and to work in groups, and they're not used to doing that.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: All right, so the skill set over here, just as we had skills over there, we're saying that the skills over here, one has to be, you're saying, openness—kind of a mental attitude as a skill. Any other skills that they need in order to engage in this one? Antonio?

ANTONIO: I think the teacher needs to develop different materials.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Ah, back over here. So this is yet another one. We've got teacher, we've got the student, and we've got the class as a whole. We also then may have some implications about materials here.

ANTONIO: And about the place.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: We may have some kind of infrastructure here. That's what you meant by place, yeah? The physical. So we can come to these two. Let me just stick a little bit further here in terms of skills that the students might need that they wouldn't necessarily have in the lecture. Beth?

BETH: They have to be more cooperative instead of competitive.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: That's interesting. So they have to learn how to cooperate. Well, I don't know, Beth, I mean, are you sure? Have you ever sat in with some of these MBAs? They're very competitive people here—type As, you know. They say, "That's not the way it is!" and, "My answer is going to be better than yours." That sounds very competitive to me. What do you mean "cooperative"?

BETH: I'm trying to exchange ideas, not only to....

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So I guess you're pointing in both directions here. So this is "cooperate," and it has something to do with openness, and it has something to do with the exchange of ideas rather than selling my idea or competing here. Hmm, OK, that's interesting. Geoff?

GEOFF: There seems to be almost a contractual agreement—a teaching contractual agreement.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Between whom?

GEOFF: Between the teacher, the student, individually, and the class.

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PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So a contract between this and this, and then a collective contract you're saying. What do you mean?

GEOFF: The teacher has the obligation with respect to process and content, with respect to materials. The students have a contract with respect to the dignity of one another, individually, and to the rules of engagement. The class has to have rules of engagement. So there are clear obligations that associated with this type of teaching—social obligations and duties.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So this has a lot to do with behavior of the group, the individual, and the professor, and it gets into some of this exchange and how we actually operate down there. Martha?

MARTHA: Another skill is communication. They have to communicate their ideas to the group, to the professor and, in a sense, they have to convince the rest of the class that their ideas are good.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So one form of this is their communication is convincing.

MARTHA: Yes, but they have also to respect the class, the rest of the class, so a sense of respect is going on also.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So over here, these may get over here into sort of the norms of interaction here. I hear one called “respect.” In the traditional method, would there be something equivalent to that in the class?

___: Respect towards the teacher.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Ah, so there is a norm about respect towards the teacher. I find over the decades that may be a depreciating phenomenon but, nonetheless, in the good old days.... So this norm of respect among one another, what I'm hearing, is different. There's still something about that relation, but OK, respect as it relates to the peers here. Yes, Raul?

RAUL: The students need to develop critical thinking.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Critical thinking. Now, help us understand a little bit more what you mean by that, Raul, and how does it enter in here as a skill in this method?

RAUL: In the lecture, when you are in a lecture program, the students believe what you are saying. Here the students do not believe all the things that are....

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So there is a need for the student to hear these other comments, and somebody may be trying to convince them. And you're saying they've got to look at that critically and make a judgment as to the quality of what that is. OK. Michael?

MICHAEL: I think there's a strength to this that hasn't been mentioned, but also some weaknesses. One is that in lecturing you get the position of the one person, but in a class you do get ninety other perspectives. And some of them really have a lot to contribute to the issue. So in fact, there's a lot of learning that comes from your peers rather than just the teacher. But that also, since I'm Oriental—your strength is your weakness. The system really requires a lot of the teacher and the class, because then you do depend on peers that are motivated, that have perceptive comments because, if not, there's something that doesn't quite click.

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PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So the process under the learning here is collective. And what I hear you saying: There, therefore, is a collective risk if any part of the system—individuals aren't engaged in it, or the group isn't functioning well, or the teacher isn't working, then the learning process can be broken.

MICHAEL: So my question that I'd like to pose is this: With great teacher, great students, this combination may be unbeatable. But weak teacher, good students, maybe...or great teacher, not-so-great students—is the lecture better?

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Fortunately, we have great students and a terrific teacher in this classroom, so let's keep going here!

GEOFF: I just want to ask whether what you have here is effectively a continual think tank.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: OK, go further.

GEOFF: Basically, with the cases and with the methods that you're going through, you are stirring up thinking in a focused fashion, and what you have is a think-tank type of construct that you're using as a teaching mechanism. And that's very powerful if you have people that are experienced in it, and that will be what we are looking at managing.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: "Think tank" here. And so these types that we're tapping over here, we have heard "values," and we have heard "knowledge" that people have, and we have heard "experiences" that they've had. Also then we've got sort of "emotions" that they have. So this is what's getting stirred up within the think tank here. What else do we have?

RICARDO: I think that we are here learning for life. I mean, you're transforming people so they are better prepared for the whole life, not just businesses—the whole personal project that you are dealing with. Because in the lecture method you are not transformed. You just receive some knowledge and that's all. Here you're transforming people.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: But what is it about the process that creates the transformation? That's what we have to answer here. Chichi?

CHICHI: I think basically people learn in three ways. One is by speaking, another one is by reading, and the third one is by acting. And then with the discussion-based learning, we create the atmosphere for them to actually do all three at the same time.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So we read, we speak and [act]. So the method, when we looked at the skills there, requires all three of these. So we've got multiple different ways to read here.

What about the process of discovery itself, the relevance of discovery itself as part of the cognitive process of learning? Because this is what we're all talking about: the cognitive processes here. Mike?

MIKE: There are two things. One is that I think as a student, and in fact if I look back at my own experience, the learning that has always been the more pleasurable is the stuff where you have the freedom to discover it yourself in some way. Therefore it lasts longer.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Higher retention.

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MIKE: And the second is that when you pointed to the learning column and asked what is it best for, it is much more important that this technique will work for issues that are not of the optimization or right-answer calculated issues. They are always more on what goals should you choose, and where are the ethical limits of what you're going to do. Because there are no right answers. It's the broader aspect of judgment that it brings around. There's no doubt.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: So we're seeking for judgment over there. OK, they're particularly useful in this sense.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: We're from management schools, right? We're from management schools. Now, if you think about a manager: In the end, we have a product to create. They've got to actually go out there and manage. And so if you think about the skills that a manager needs, what are they? Help me understand them. Maria Helena?

___: Decision making.

MARIA HELENA: Yes, and I think that the most important thing that we discovered ourselves—the teacher and the students in the process of learning I put myself in the situation and I discover what are my limitations and what are my strengths.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Ah, so part of this process is the capacity to know your strengths and weaknesses. A good manager ought to know that, right? The capacity to be able to judge, "Oh, I got that right"; "Oh, I don't know about that." OK, so there's one capacity. OK, so what other strengths? Capabilities.

___: Decision making.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: What else?

___: Risk taker.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Taking risks. What else, Alberto?

ALBERTO: Comparing alternatives.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Being able to compare alternatives. Victor, what else?

VICTOR: Manage people.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Manage people. Daniela, what else?

DANIELA: Communicate your ideas.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Communicate your ideas. Juan Manuel, what else?

JUAN MANUEL: Analytical skills.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Analyze.

JUAN MANUEL: Let's go farther; let's go to emotional. Why not empathy, intuition...?

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Empathy, intuition—critical leader skills. What else?

__: Persuasion.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Persuasion. You've got to convince all these other nonbelievers. What else, Ricardo?

RICARDO: Good criteria.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Part of critical thinking, then, having good criteria there. What else, Peter?

__: Global understanding.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Understanding the big picture. OK, there's a whole list, and there's probably some more, if we think about it.

Now, if that's the set of capabilities that we want managers to have, now let's go back and visit our discussion over here. When students engage in the process, what is it that they have to do over here in order to engage in this process, which we said they didn't have to do under a lecture method?

Was that one of the critical skills that a manager needs? Learning how to work together, humans, HRM skills, learn how to work with the class? "Communication" I think I heard there. Critical thinking.

__: Motivation.

PROFESSOR AUSTIN: Motivating, persuading, communicating, so that the process is the product, in some senses. But in addition, there's some other stuff, too. They also have to know about things, right? And knowledge and concepts and frameworks, and so forth. So you get a double win here. Right? It goes then back to this. Yes, and yes. And so maybe we're doing both of those in terms of the learning.

So maybe all of these obstacles in fact really are opportunities for interesting learning.

This is a risky undertaking. Boris Pasternak once said that art without risk does not exist. And discussion-based leadership is part art, because it is a creative and partially unpredictable process. That is what art is. And, therefore, it can make us uncomfortable because it is risky. But it is a manageable risk, because discussion-based leadership is also based on systematic preparation, planning, and direction.

So it is, in fact, much more controllable. And what is at the heart of that? It is this dual preparation that you are preparing content and process. And behind that and behind the execution of those discussion plans are the triple treasures of teaching—the three critical arrows that you have in your quiver for a discussion-based instructor.

The first and most powerful? Questioning: the capacity to create powerful questions of the right kind, directed to the right individual at the appropriate time. Questioning.

And the second, because that's the dynamic nature of this process: listening. Every question elicits, in fact, a response. So being able to listen actively to the person that's speaking, and not only to the

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individual, because it is in the sense like the conductor of the orchestra. You must listen to the violin, but at the same time you're listening to the whole orchestra. So you're managing the individual and you're managing the entire group, because that's your learning process.

And then, finally, the third one: responding. For everything you listen to, you, then, as the instructor, have to respond. And you have a whole portfolio of instruments to use: verbal, nonverbal, movement, words, asking another question. It's a whole portfolio of possibilities.

Now, the beauty of all of this is, it is eminently learnable. Nobody walks in the door of the Harvard Business School already knowing how to be a discussion leader. We all learn it, and we help each other learn how to do it better.

It is our aspiration that during your two weeks here you will be able to move forward on that journey of learning how to engage in this most powerful learning process.

It is a privilege for us to have you here. We thank you for coming. Enjoy your two weeks. Thank you very much.