

## Teaching People to Bargain Online: The Impossible Task Becomes the Preferred Method

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### Abstract

The author traces her attitude-reversing experience developing, against her professional judgment, an online version of a skill-based, interactive collective bargaining class for undergraduate college students. The author explains the methods used to teach the class and lists the advantages and disadvantages of teaching a skill-based class online. Finally, she relates this class to best online instructional practices, concluding that the significant advantages compensate for the absence of in-person communication in a traditional classroom.

**Key Words:** Collective Bargaining, Negotiation, Best practices, Interaction, Skill-based instruction, Distance education

### Introduction

Two years ago, this professor thought about quitting her job. Her institution of higher education directed her to teach an undergraduate labor/management relations class in an online format. Her classes had for a decade culminated in a major practicum in which students participated in mock multi-issue collective bargaining, face-to-face negotiation, as realistic as possible. How in the world could that be done online? It absolutely could not, she was absolutely positive. Now the professor has taught her undergraduate labor/management relations class entirely online for a summer session and a fall semester. She is a convert, totally transformed from her earlier position. Teaching a bargaining skills class online offers real advantages not experienced in a regular classroom. It also fits with today's digital natives, although a number of professors have to get on board.

Online instruction works well for corporate universities and other training venues in the business world because it is effective in transferring skills to the workplace. Added values occur in the private sector and in the college setting where it may not be expedient or cost effective to convene people for single-location, same-time classroom instruction. This paper summarizes the process for teaching bargaining skills online, the advantages, and the shortcomings. The paper ends with a comparison of the unit of study with best practices for online instruction in the hope that other reluctant professors will embark upon their own online ventures for skill-based, interactive classes that may have been excluded from this mode of instruction.

### The Teaching Method

The online software for this class is not particularly high tech and does not include interactive video. It has a chat function in real-time, but many students with dial-up connections or older hardware have difficulty with it. Therefore, the major delivery tool is the asynchronous discussion feature which requires students to log in and log out frequently. Here is the process the professor followed.

1. Bargaining teams were established. Students expressed preferences in forming their own groups; the professor made sure that teams had even levels of bargaining and online experience. The six teams with three or four students each had names for identification purposes, such as "Ruby" and "Ecru."

2. The professor set up a private “caucus room” for each team – a discussion board with only those team members allowed to post or read messages. The teams had several days to communicate in their caucus rooms to become better acquainted and formulate their initial proposals. All students were expected to make timely and pertinent contributions to the proposal formation and subsequent alterations. It became immediately apparent that this online discussion gave the professor much more information as to what individuals were understanding about the bargaining process and the extent to which each student was participating, in contrast to face-to-face group work for which the professor could not monitor all interactions that were progressing simultaneously during class.
3. The professor set up a “bargaining table” (another discussion board) for each set of two teams for each round of bargaining, where they could exchange proposals and rationale and make counter proposals. Members of both teams could read all the posts, but only the spokespersons transmitted proposals agreed upon in the caucus rooms, much like the practice when two teams face each other across the real-life bargaining table. When bargaining opened, the two teams had a few days to reach agreement. They had to agree on times and methods of proposal exchange, offering more realistic practice than the prior bargain-during-class-times procedures.
4. Previously in the regular classroom, teams would participate in one major round of bargaining about 20 issues. The purpose was to give them real-world experience. Students valued the one practice, but often commented at the end that they wished they could repeat the assignment with the knowledge they had gained. In the online class, the professor arranged three different bargaining rounds to avoid an assignment too cumbersome for handling online. In the first, both teams made proposals for changes in the health insurance program. This complex issue allowed students to make multi-item proposals on an important issue in today’s workplace. In the second round, students did research and proposed changes for pension benefits, another currently critical issue with several components. In the third, multi-issue round, each team was responsible for salary and any three non-economic items. Students had to learn about package bargaining, repeatedly creating one offer covering all outstanding issues until agreement was reached. In each round a team faced a different opponent, providing variation in bargaining situations. Students also switched back and forth from round to round between management and union roles to experience both perspectives. Because there were three rounds, students could apply what they had learned in the previous round to the next one.
5. Because of the complex nature of the assignment and the lack of “face-to-face” time in the classroom, the professor wrote specific general bargaining instructions as well as separate directions for the management teams and for the union teams. She posted the instructions on the general discussion board and invited questions there. She posted the management or union directions in the caucus rooms. It was important to establish clear instructions for online activities and for grading criteria. To encourage integrative efforts as much as possible, students were expected to produce a balanced package, one that both union and management would recommend for ratification. Students needed that direction because of the tendency of novice bargainers to view the process as totally competitive, a “game” of winners and losers. An added benefit was the creation of written instructions that could be revised and used the next semester, whereas in the past, many of these directions were given verbally in class.
6. A deadline for settlement was created a few days after the round began. A 10% penalty applied for settlements up to one week late and zero credit was given for no settlement after the extra week, to create a deadline somewhat like a contract expiration date.
7. Time was set aside each day of caucus or bargaining activities to monitor the discussions and contribute comments. In a regular classroom, it is not possible to monitor all groups simultaneously. In the online class, the professor scanned all communications, posting messages to guide those unsure of what to do and redirecting those who were making decisions that would create difficulty later. She checked how many messages each student was reading and posting; on occasion she sent private e-mails to those who were inactive to offer assistance and encourage participation.

8. Grades were based on the team outcome and the individual contributions of each team member. The key criteria for the teams were the extent to which the settlement was balanced and the extent to which each team represented the best interests of its side. Individuals were graded on the basis of the quantity and quality of their contributions. The online software created an organized permanent record of all postings, which could be retrieved for a whole class or for individual students, and created a frequency analysis of how many messages each student read, contributed, or answered.
9. The professor prepared an analysis of the three different settlements for each round. She distributed the analysis (without student or team names) to all students so that they could compare their results to others for another form of feedback for their learning.

### **The Advantages**

The professor was already convinced that online instruction, with careful development, can substitute quite adequately for in-person instruction. She had taught other classes in that format and was pleased with the results. However, those classes were traditional independent study classes. The experience described in this case study disproved her assumption that students could not learn to bargain online. Indeed, she found a number of advantages for online instruction for a skill-based, interactive course:

*Early Correction and Teachable Moments:* In the regular-classroom practicum, the professor made the rounds of the bargaining teams, moving from room to room and staying for a while in each. She often felt that students behaved differently when she was present. Obviously, she missed much of the interactions because she could not be in all groups at all times. On occasion, a “strange” settlement would sneak through, such as the semester one team gave up health insurance in exchange for a 2% salary raise. After the settlement was announced, students were embarrassed to have their agreement criticized.

With the online instruction, the professor scanned all caucus discussions, posting messages when redirection was needed to improve proposals before they were posted for the opposing team. Students liked that and they learned immediately and with their self-esteem intact. Teams started posing questions to her, as though she were a member of their teams. Sometimes, she responded that the choice was theirs, but more often she gave advice. Each question created a “teachable moment” as students read the answers intently because of the immediacy of their need to know. Often the answer was in the course supplement booklet she wrote to take the place of class lectures. If so, she would refer them to the page at the time when it was relevant to them because they had a question. If the answer was not in the course supplement, the professor made a note to add it the next time. Because she could monitor all caucus discussions and give assistance, she did not feel that any one team was receiving an advantage as she sometimes did in the face-to-face classes where she could not monitor all conversations.

*A Fit for Their Lifestyles:* This type of instruction fits students’ high-tech lifestyles. They logged in five minutes in the morning, a brief time walking across campus, at the beginning and/or end of their lunch times at work, before beginning dinner, small bits of free moments here and there. When the first undergraduate class ended, the 22 students had amassed 2357 messages posted and 116 e-mails transmitted. In the second undergraduate class, students sent 2168 messages and 150 e-mails. (About 10% of the messages were from the professor, answering and posing questions and commenting. Most of the e-mails needed responses as well.)

*Teaching Assistance:* Having students with bargaining and online expertise on each team worked very well. When students were interacting in the professor’s absence, these experienced students helped their teams, just like teaching assistants. Students experienced with the software assumed the most of the responsibility of training their novice team members, a tremendous help for the professor. Those students with workplace experience in union environments helped with bargaining advice. Here’s an example from one team: “Can you guys give me some examples of ‘non-economic’ issues? . . . I don’t know what kinds of issues I need to come up with.” Two team members explained the term before the professor read the question. Here’s another example of an answer from a management team member whose team mate wanted to propose an increase in leave: “The bereavement policy is something we should leave to the union to bring up. You’re actually giving the employees more of a benefit by adding additional family members, and even though we care about the employee, we have to stay away from adding such benefits.” Experienced team members redirected their peers, resulting in more time for the

professor to monitor communications because she had assistance in composing responses. If the student response was less than needed, she could still respond. In the regular classroom, she could not be a party to all conversations, as she was able to do online.

*Permanent records:* The discussion dialogues in online software are permanent records that can be reread or studied. It is easier to grade accurately and give appropriate credit to team members based on the number and content of their posts. The documentation enhanced fairness in assessing students. An instructor can provide analysis of the permanent record to augment learning. The permanent record creates a data file for research as well. This permanence is a major and important difference in teaching bargaining online and makes it well worth some of the shortcomings listed below.

*Several Rounds To Improve Skills and Correct Mistakes:* Because of the technology involved, the professor divided the bargaining practicum into three simpler rounds. Each round, students made better decisions and avoided prior mistakes. She could have used this technique in the regular classroom practicum, but the online course was the motivator to venture away from the familiar.

*Accommodating Distances, Times, and Gas Prices:* These classes had many non-traditional students with families and full-time jobs on all shifts. Even the traditional students played sports, participated in activities, and had part-time jobs. The course was first offered during the summer, a prime vacation time across the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday. It didn't matter. Team members did their research and writing on their off-shift times, when their children were asleep, or on vacation. They studied others' messages and posted their responses or new material when they were available. They left the car in the garage, staying home in their comfortable clothes, doing the washing, cooking supper, and mowing the lawn in between messages. One student went on a cruise and continued participating aboard ship; another accompanied her Army husband to Germany. One spent the last week of class in church camp with her children. These digital natives know how to multi-task.

*Experience with the Future:* In the future, more business deals will be bargained using online technology. Some already are, across cities, states, nations, and oceans. This class helped prepare students to learn how to be effective in online negotiations.

*Writing Practice:* The online interactions gave students considerable practice in writing, the major communication venue. The professor did not grade for writing *per se*, but did make it clear that correct punctuation and spelling are important.

*Experiencing the Consuming Nature of Bargaining:* On occasion, two teams became caught up in the bargaining process in attempting to reach agreement. One evening two teams were online for six hours. The professor intervened and told them to take a break for the night. These teams were experiencing the consuming immersion of real bargaining. In contrast, in a regular classroom, the bell rings and students move on to another class regardless of the status of bargaining.

### **The Shortcomings**

The professor admits that everything was not as perfect as it may seem so far. There were shortcomings:

*Technical Glitches:* Outside forces sometimes affect the delivery of online instruction. A storm knocked out power for the campus fileservers for several hours during one round. Because discussion is not real-time, students had to constantly refresh their pages. Individual students had program updating, pop-up blocking, dial-up kick-offs, and other technical issues to overcome. However, power outages cause traditional classes to be cancelled and students miss classes for other reasons. Today's students handle these technical glitches rather well.

*The Limitations on Issues:* The professor is still reluctant to try an online full-blown contract bargaining round with many issues. The current technology is slow and posted messages take longer to type, transmit, and read than the spoken word. However, software enhancements will be available in the near future.

*Lack of Non-Verbal Communication:* Research tells us that communication is mostly non-verbal, from

50% to as high as 93% non-verbal, depending on the researcher's claim. Even though the professor encouraged careful expression, communication lost some value without facial expression, tone, volume, etc. Still today's students are used to this mode as this comment illustrates: First student – "Looks good to me! I misunderstood what you were saying. I think you were just saying you were going to post it here in our caucus room . . . didn't mean to snap!" Second student – "I didn't think you did snap. No problem." First student: "Good. I just know how things can sound sometimes online . . ." Here's another student using words to express feelings when the opposing team was late in responding: "waiting . . . waiting . . . WAITING . . . WWAIIITTIINNGG . . ."

*Teaching Bargaining Online Is Hard on the Instructor:* This class took more time than the professor had anticipated. She spent one to three hours a day developing the course and monitoring the activity for the first summer course covering eight weeks; some of that was because she was designing the course. She is considering the recommendation of colleagues to set regular, reasonable hours to be online.

With software improvements – real-time chat, pre-recorded video segments, and interactive video – these shortcomings will moderate or disappear. Many online instructors have them now. However, real benefits accrued in this situation, even in the absence of the software enhancements.

### Messages from the Research

Some professors assume that online instruction should be limited to courses where the content can be delivered via independent read, study, and test methods. They may be advocates for online instruction for these traditional purposes, but not for skill-based classes where synergistic interactive practices and role plays are necessary for students to develop skills. To the contrary this experience and research in best practices in online instruction convinced this professor that online instruction can be the preferred method of instruction in an entry-level bargaining or negotiation class, rather than a distant second choice when a traditional, face-to-face class is not possible.

Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2001) created online adaptations of the "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" originally published by Chickering and Gamson (1987). Their recommendations for quality online instruction or "lessons learned" are these (pp. 2-5):

1. Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students.
2. Well-designed discussion assignments facilitate meaningful cooperation among students. (Require participation, use small discussion groups, focus discussions on a task, make tasks result in a product, engage learners in the content, give feedback, evaluate quality, post expectations.)
3. Students should present course projects.
4. Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback.
5. Online courses need deadlines.
6. Challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for quality work communicate high expectations.
7. Allowing students to choose project topics incorporates diverse views into online courses.

An online bargaining class can meet these recommendations generally and is especially conducive for recommendations 2, 5, and 6. The smaller caucus and bargaining discussions encourage participation. Creating a proposal focuses students on a goal. The settlement is the end product to achieve, to judge on its merits, and to compare to others' products. The time expectations for proposals, counter proposals, and settlement create real deadlines students identify as more than a date on the syllabus schedule. By its nature bargaining is challenging and inspiring, culminating in a form of euphoria, especially for novice student bargainers, when settlement is achieved. On its own (along with instructor congratulations) it produces a clear awareness that the lesson has been learned.

Two studies list criteria for effective online teaching. Hacker and Niederhauser (2000) outlined five best practices: requiring that students actively participate in their own learning, using examples, collaborating with others to solve problems, including feedback, and motivating students to engage in learning activities. Lewis and Abdul-Hamid (2006) described four categories of strategies used by exemplary online teachers: fostering interaction, providing feedback, facilitating learning, and maintaining enthusiasm and organization.

The online bargaining study lends itself exceedingly well to these best practices. Both studies mention

interactive participation. The thousands of messages written and read attest to the interactive achievements of these students. As to collaboration and feedback, students made proposals and agreed upon counter offers with their own team and with their opposing team, asked questions which were answered by the instructor and by other students, received private feedback for their team, and were able to compare their results with other sets of teams via the analyses. The three separate rounds and switching roles between management and union allowed students to improve and vary techniques via examples. Concerning motivation and enthusiasm, the competitive nature of bargaining sparks interest among students. As it turned out, this trait of bargaining instruction (also present in regular classroom instruction) seemed to transform the potentially impersonal and one-way online instruction into active discourse.

Other online scholars recommend ample interactions among students and between students and instructors (Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006; Grant & Thornton, 2007; & Mupinga, Nora and Yaw, 2006). For each undergraduate course above, over 2000 discussion postings occurred. These numbers may be compared to two online classes in another subject taught by the same professor during the same timeframe. Students in the non-interactive subject-matter course made 95 discussion postings in one semester and 403 in the second semester. Obviously, the bargaining class was more conducive to interactions.

### Conclusion

Although the professor does not advocate making this teaching technique the only one for bargaining instruction, she does believe it can be a rigorous first course that accommodates the life styles of students and prepares them for the digital workplace. Even though trust may be harder to build in online bargaining, negotiators today do not always have the choice of communications medium (Naquin and Paulson, 2003). The bottom line is that online and face-to-face instruction each offer a distinct forum for learning and preparing students for their careers; we need both.

The comments in the box are the unsolicited comments as students said goodbye to each other after the summer class. These final postings attest to the positive student reactions to the skilled-based online experience. The professor is convinced they learned a good deal; they seem to think so too. She hopes readers who have been reluctant to teach skill-based, interactive classes online or who have limited technology available will begin to experiment, perhaps discovering as she did that the seemingly impossible task becomes the preferred method.

#### Students' Comments about Online Bargaining Class

First team: On completing a final in another course: "Whew. One class down; one more to go. But, this is the fun one!" Another member: "so, if they agree we are done with this class. This was my first online class and I did enjoy it."

Second team: "I have never had the experience of bargaining before. I learned a lot!"

Third team: "I understand about being on vacation...it's okay. You did good on the last round of bargaining, what are you talking about not doing a good job? I know the last round was difficult but, we made it through (finally!) and that is all that matters."

Fourth team: "OK this was a very interesting class." Response: "It is hard to do this in a summer class but we did it and I feel we did good."

Fifth team: "Just wanted to tell you guys it has been a pleasure being on your bargaining team. I think we did a great job."

Sixth team: "That's good an agreement was reached. I'm sorry that I didn't get back to you before you guys agreed, but my son was having a fit and he is in the terrible twos so that should explain it. Good Job Team!" Response: "I really like the final agreement. Good job!! Thank you." Another: "Wonderful working with the two of you!! Outstanding job!!"

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