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Coaching a regular economics research seminar at Lisbon University in 2010-2011: a groupanalytic approach

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Coaching a regular economics research seminar at a Lisbon University in 2010-2011: a groupanalytic approach

By

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Abstract: This paper describes the implementation of a new protocol for the regular economics seminar run by the Economics Department of ISEG and the research center UECE during academic year 2010-2011. The main innovative features of this protocol were: the introduction of a discussant that explains the paper using a clear, non-technical language, thus giving “holding” to the audience; the requirement that the speaker should be “silent” during the discussion stage, in order to “frustrate” the audience and encourage them to reinterpret the paper presented in a personal way, thus giving “exchange” to the presenter. The new protocol was successful in ensuring a satisficing participation level and had a remarkable effect upon change in learning understandings in the School, namely through the engagement of important professors of ISEG as discussants during the sessions. The main shortcoming was the strength of resistances to change within the seminar team, in particular in what concerns the requirement that the presenter should be “outside” the group during the discussion stage.

Keywords: Learning group coaching; Holding; Exchange; Tolerance to frustration; Resistance to change; Rhetorics.

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1. Introduction

The Department of Economics at the *Instituto Superior de Economia e Gestão* of the Technical University of Lisbon organizes a regular research seminar where both guest speakers and in house professors present their papers. More recently, the seminar has been organized in collaboration with a research center (the Research Unit on Complexity in Economics, whose acronym in Portuguese is **UECE**) that includes most professors of the Economics Department.

Traditionally the seminar took place weekly and it had a simple way of working. The speaker, either a member of ISEG or a visiting scholar, presented a paper during up to 45 minutes. Then, a period of questions by the audience and replies by the presenter followed.

The participation was very irregular. Some seminars were attended by a sufficient number of people, while others were attended by very few people. In some of them only the seminar organizers were present. This created an “empty room” problem, particularly with visiting speakers who came from abroad and were faced with an apparent lack of interest in their work by the hosting institution.

During the academic year 2009-2010, a learning group was launched including researchers from a project inside UECE. These researchers had different specializations, although they could all be covered under the common trait of *Microeconomics*, i.e. the field of Economics that deals with the decentralized behavior of individual economic agents (firms and households)¹. This learning group was labeled *MicroUECE*. It had six members, where three were professors of the Economics Department of ISEG and the remaining members belonged to other institutions.

The group *MicroUECE* had a monthly meeting. The sessions were coached by the author of this paper. The coach assigned the turn to speak to each member and reserved for himself the last turn.

The interventions by the members varied a lot in length: from a 5 minutes statement about the research work done since the last meeting up to the full presentation of a paper during 30 minutes. Sometimes the “turn taking” was upset by a dialog between the members that commented each other’s activities.

The working of this learning group had a beneficial effect upon the Economics Department regular seminar, according to two main reasons. Firstly, visiting scholars were included in the group for short periods (usually during a single meeting). Secondly, the group sometimes mobilized to attend the seminar presented by these scholars, thus avoiding the “empty room” problem.

In this paper, we will combine the approach of the “rhetoric in economics” developed by PONTES (1997) along the path opened by McCLOSKEY (1983, 1991) and the groupanalytic approach by THORNTON (2010) in order to understand the reasons behind the weak

¹ *Microeconomics* contrasts with *Macroeconomics*, which is concerned with the behavior of aggregate variables (i.e., the GDP, unemployment rate, price level and so on).

participation in the economics seminar (Section 2). Then, we will describe the change of protocol that was introduced and the reasons why it was successful (Section 3). The impact of the protocol upon the organization (the School of Economics) and the resistances to the change are then tackled (Section 4). Section 5 concludes.

2 Reasons behind the traditionally weak participation in the economics seminar

UECE was evaluated by the FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia) in 2008. A good appraisal of the weaknesses of the economics seminar is contained in the evaluation report:

The research unit gathers a large number of research groups, which seems to reflect more the research interests of individual members, taken as such, than those of the group as a whole... (This) also mirrors the diversity of interests among the members of the unit, without a unifying research theme which could serve as cement for the unit... Even if a seminar series is organized within the unit, it seems unclear whether the unit members do participate on a regular basis. This could be related to some information spreading problems.

According to THORNTON (2010), learning in a seminar relies on the combination of two complementary elements:

- “Holding”: the participants in a seminar should feel “safe” enough, i.e., they should feel themselves in a “common ground”, in order to be able to learn.
- “Exchange”: the participants should be faced with “new” or “different” knowledge, which should work as a “challenge” for them.

The “empty room” syndrome followed from a lack of “holding” felt by the listeners in the seminar sessions. Let us explain the reasons behind this lack of “holding”.

Although “implicit”, “non-verbal” knowledge is still transmitted mainly by face-to-face touch, verbal explicit knowledge can be communicated nowadays at a virtually zero cost by Email. This fall of the telecommunication costs leads to an increasingly fast specialization of researchers in multiple narrowly defined fields of work.

According to PONTES (1997), **Rhetoric** is the discipline that establishes the conditions of persuasion, i.e. adhesion to a speech by the listeners. A keystone concept of rhetoric is the distinction between the “premises”, basic ideas that the audience accepts as true without much need to argue, and the “conclusion” or set of thesis of the speech. The speech carries the agreement with the premises by the public to an adhesion to the conclusion by means of a set of arguments.

The agreement between the speaker and the listeners about the premises is much easier if the audience is specialized in the seminar subject than if the audience is non-specialized. In

the former case, the agreement is “implicit”: it is often enough that the speaker makes a full revision of the literature, whose main references are known by the audience. By contrast, if the audience is non-specialized, the agreement on the premises takes longer and requires the use of techniques of “repetition” and “insistence”.

The lack of “holding” follows from the fact that, while most audiences are non-specialized (because the research work is increasingly narrowly defined), this “effort” to gain the adhesion of the audience to premises of the speech has not been cared for.

PONTES (1997) quotes Aristotle about the three sources of persuasion of a speech in **Rhetoric**:

1. The *Ethos*, i.e. the prestige and personality of the speaker and the degree of acquaintance with the audience. For instance, in a court people listen more carefully to the words of a judge than to the words of a lawyer.
2. The *Logos*, or set of arguments that intend to prove the conclusion of the speech.
3. The *Pathos*, or the subjective disposal of the listeners to accept the thesis of the speech. For instance, up-to-date, fashionable subjects (as the “crisis of the sovereign debt” in Economics and Finance) attract more attention than other more “esoteric” subjects.

A second reason of the scarcity of “holding” of the listeners of a speech is the change of *Ethos* of an economist. Traditionally the prestigious economics professor was a *Scholar*, competent in philosophy (in theoretical terms) and in history (in empirical terms). However, the prestige shifted to another personality, namely the *Scientist*, whom is valued by his mathematical skills, both in theoretical terms (the logical handling of theorems and propositions) and in empirical terms (the use of statistical and econometric techniques to handle data). This evolution made the agreement of the premises of the economic speech by the general public more difficult. The listeners of an economics seminar became increasingly short of “holding”, of a “common ground” with the speaker.

The existing framework of the seminar also made difficult the other element of learning, namely the “exchange” of “new” or “different” information between the speaker and the audience. Let us remind that the traditional protocol entailed the presentation of a paper by the speaker followed by a period of questioning by listeners and answering by the speaker. The fact that the presenter is constantly replying during this period inhibits the members of the public to talk, as they implicitly keep silence in order to allow the presenter to perform. Hence learning, understood as a personal reinterpretation by the listeners of the theoretical knowledge delivered by the presenter, takes place in a rather limited way.

We can better understand this if we bear in mind the theory of origin of thought as an outcome of “tolerance to frustration” by Bion (summarized by THORNTON, 2010). According to Bion, if a baby experiments a need (for instance, if he feels the need to be fed), two different things can happen:

- “Conception”, i.e., the baby is almost instantly fed, so that no thought of “being fed” arises.

- “Frustration”, i.e. the baby’s need is not instantly satisfied. If the child can *tolerate* the frustration, he can conceive the thought of “being fed”. Otherwise, if the frustration is not tolerated, the act of thinking does not occur.” Toleration of frustration “implies that the child is “safe” enough, i.e. that he trusts the parent who gives them a good enough “holding”.

Bion’s theory of learning as the outcome of “tolerance to frustration” allows us to understand the protocol of learning groups usually known as “Balint groups” (from the names of psychoanalysts Michael and Enid Balint). Under this type of learning groups, in each session a different member presents the “problem” or “issue” of his research work briefly (let us say, in 10 minutes). Then, during about 20 to 25 minutes, the group explores their associations with the “problem” that was exposed before, without trying to “solve” it. In this stage, the presenter “stays out” of the group: he is present but keeps silent. Then during 5 to 10 minutes, the presenter gives the final information, outlining the parts of the previous discussion that helped him more to develop his thought.²

The silence of the presenter during the discussion stage of the “Balint protocol, “frustrates” the other members of the group and works thereby as an incentive to independent and personalized interpretation of the initial presentation by each member of the group.

3 The new seminar protocol: why did it work?

We implemented a new protocol for the regular seminar of the Economics Department and UECE. Firstly, we describe the protocol, then the reasons why it has worked well are discussed.

The protocol is inspired by the practice of training in firms, reported by THORNTON, 2010. This type of training program adds a free discussion meeting to each training session. An essential feature of this training program is that the trainer and the coach of the discussion are different persons.

The implemented protocol has the following players:

1. The **presenter**, who owns the scientific material (the paper).
2. The **discussant**, who comments the paper.
3. The **coach**, who runs the seminar session.
4. The **audience** is made by the other members of the group.

It also has the following stages with approximate timings:

1. Up to 45 minutes: The **presenter** delivers the paper. In this stage, only questions by the audience motivated by doubts are allowed.
2. 10 to 15 minutes: The **discussant** outlines the central “issue/problem/topic” of the paper using clear words and a non-technical language, in order to make it accessible to

² The protocol of the “Balint group” includes still a final stage where the experience is reviewed together by the presenter and the other members of the group. We did not find necessary to discuss this final step.

non-specialists. While speaking the **discussant**, should be standing and facing the audience.

3. 20 to 30 minutes: Discussion of the paper by the **audience**. The **coach** should open the discussion by saying that **each** participant should make either a comment or ask a question. If the audience is relatively small (about ten persons), the **coach** can go further and assign the turn to speak to each participant. If someone who is not a member of the sponsoring institutions (Department of Economics or UECE) speaks, the **coach** should ask him his identity (name and affiliation). During the discussion period, the **presenter** remains silent and takes notes of the questions posed in order to be able to perform in the following and last stage.
4. 5 to 10 minutes: The **presenter** sums up and delivers the main conclusions.

In order to describe fully the seminar, we need to mention the **physical setting** where it takes place. The participants sit around a U-shaped table. It was chosen to move the seminar room from a meeting room in the building where the economics professors had their offices to a classroom in the building where most graduate courses take place and the mathematics professors have offices. The purpose of this move was to get a larger and brighter room that is also closer to the mathematics professors, to graduate students and to outside participants.

The implementation of this protocol was quite successful. The seminar took place regularly during the academic year 2010-2011 with a session each fortnight. Although the degree of participation was variable, depending on the subject of the session and on the personalities of the **presenter** and the **discussant**, it was always above a satisficing level.³

Why did the protocol work well enough according to the seminar aims? We will point out several reasons:

1. The introduction of the **discussant** increased the “holding” provided to the audience members, by the following motives:
 - Since the audience is often non-specialized in relation to the paper presented, the mere “repetition” and “insistence” by the **discussant** increase the degree of agreement between the **presenter** and the **audience** about the premises of the paper presented.
 - By the same reason, the clear, simple and non-technical explanation by the **discussant** increased the feeling of “safety” by a non-specialized **audience**, creating a “common ground” between all participants.
 - Moreover, while the **presenter** is often an outsider, the **discussant** is always a member of the Economics Department or UECE, increasing the feeling of “safety” with a familiar person by the participants from the home institution.
 - This feeling of “safety” is maximized if the **discussant** has a strong *Ethos*, using the term of Aristotle, i.e. if he is a prestigious personality (a full professor, the President of the Economics Department, the President of UECE, the President

³ Nevertheless the seminar protocol failed to achieve a true discussion among the participants, since the discussion period was composed usually by a set of questions or comments, one by each member of the audience, without much interaction. We believe that more practice with these ground rules and a more stable audience will allow the attainment of this goal.

of the Economics School). The selection of this kind of personalities as **discussants** maximizes the participation in the seminar session.⁴

2. The fact that the presenter is kept silent during the discussion stage encourages “exchange” of information between the speaker and the audience. With a silent presenter, the participants feel a stronger incentive to pose questions. Moreover, as there are “frustrated” by the silence of the presenter, they are constrained to reinterpret in a personal way what has been said before by both the **presenter** and the **discussant**. The silence of the presenter works here in a similar way as it does in a standard “Balint group”.

4 Implementation of the new seminar protocol and resistances to change

The organization of the seminar, including the implementation of the new protocol, was carried over by a team of three professors of ISEG: the author of this paper (who was at the time an associate professor) and by two assistant professors of the Economics Department. This team was appointed by the chairman of the Economics Department. Four elements were co-opted by the initial team. They had in common the fact that (with one exception) they had participated in the *MicroUECE* group in 2009-2010.

Resistances to change were pervasive and very strong. Some of them originated in colleagues outside the team, namely by those that had organized the seminar in previous years, but most of them arose **within** the team. We can classify the resistances in the following way:

1. Resistances to the mere existence of a team in charge of the organization of the seminar: at first, members tried to avoid face-to-face contacts and to solve problems by means of collective Emails.
2. Resistances to the existence of **any** kind of seminar protocol: “seminars should take place in an *informal* and *spontaneous* way without any rules”. A member of the team tried to implement this by discussing the protocol with the participants at the end of a seminar session. Then participants claimed that “... the seminar should be more *informal* and that each one should be allowed to speak whenever it felt like”. A variant is that the new protocol has not been tested in any “prestigious universities abroad”: “I have worked in several excellent universities in the UK and I never saw anything similar to this”.
3. Resistances concerning the shift of the seminar room. These took two forms:
 - While the old seminar room was located in the same building of the offices of the economics professors, the new one is placed in another building. “The short walk (3 or 4 minutes) would deter the professors from attending the seminar sessions, particularly in winter whenever it rained”.

⁴ An additional advantage of selecting this kind of personalities as **discussants** is the fact that their participation changes the way they regard learning and contributes to a change of learning protocols at the entire School of Economics level.

- “The new room has no clear advantage over the old one. In particular, it has the same capacity”. This kind of resistance embodied an “optics illusion” by the resistant.
4. Resistances concerning the existence of a **discussant**. “It would be impossible to find people available to be **discussants** since this a work without any reward in CV terms”.
 5. Resistances concerning the constraint to participate by all members during the discussion stage. People declared that they feel “uncomfortable” with the obligation to participate in the discussion. They said that they had the “right” to remain silent. One member during a session even said that “she was not ready to be evaluated” during the seminar session.
 6. Resistances concerning the “silence” of the **presenter** during the discussion stage. According to this resistance, the **presenter** is the most qualified person during the seminar session. Hence, its capacity to speak should be maximized rather than restrained.

Resistances arose from many people, but it is possible to isolate two groups where they were more localized. The first group included people who had organized the seminar in previous years and hence were skeptical about the new protocol. The second group included the members of the team that had previously belonged to the *MicroUECE* group. The reason why this latter group was resistant is that they were prepared to go on with their private learning objectives as they did in the context of *MicroUECE*. By contrast the team engaged them in a common learning aim, namely the coaching of the economics seminar. Consequently, they became very frustrated.

The more serious resistance was the one concerning the “silence” by the presenter during the discussion stage, because it challenged the receptive way of learning that is prevalent nowadays and proposed instead an active procedure. While other resistances could be eventually overcome by means of a formation of a consensus, this one had to be eliminated through a “command” by the author of this paper. This “command” also led to the ending of the team, so that the last seminar sessions were run individually by the author.

Could the dissolution of the team have been avoided? It is likely (but not certain) that individual interviews between the author and the other members of the team would have been efficient in keeping the team united.

The innovating seminar experience also influenced change in the whole organization (School of Economics and UECE) as important professors (full professors, President of the School, President of the Economics Department and President of UECE) were engaged as discussants in some sessions that were as a rule heavily participated.

5 Concluding remarks

A new protocol for the Economics seminar which is run by the Economics Department of ISEG and UECE during academic year 2010-2011 was implemented by a team of researchers and professors coordinated by the author of this paper.

The main innovative features were: the introduction of a discussant that explains the paper using a clear, non-technical language, thus giving “holding” to the audience; the requirement that the speaker should be “silent” during the discussion stage, in order to “frustrate” the audience and encourage them to reinterpret the paper presented in a personal way, thus giving “exchange” to the presenter.

The new protocol was successful in ensuring a satisfying participation level and had a remarkable effect upon change in the School, namely through the engagement of important professors of ISEG as discussants during the sessions. The main shortcoming was the strength of resistances to change within the seminar team, in particular in what concerns the requirement that the presenter should be “outside” the group during the discussion stage. These resistances were not adequately coped and led eventually to the dissolution of the team, the last sessions being run by the author of this paper alone.

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