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The court of theories: a debate-style exercise for teaching motivation theories

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to provide an engaging debate-style exercise to be used by college-level instructors of management, organizational behavior or leadership courses.

Design/methodology/approach – This activity enables students to actively teach themselves benefits and drawbacks of four competing motivation theories: goal-setting theory, expectancy theory, equity theory and reinforcement theory.

Findings – This debate-style activity has proven useful in both engaging students and increases the depth of their understanding of motivation theories.

Originality/value – This exercise is an original exercise created by the authors to better teach the four theories of motivation.

Keywords Motivation, Expectancy theory, Equity theory, Goal-setting theory, Reinforcement theory, Classroom exercise

Paper type Case study

Nearly every college course covering basic management principles requires an understanding of basic theories that guide behavior. By understanding theoretical underpinnings, students can better apply course concepts now and in their future careers. Motivation is a foundational pillar for the field of management (see [Latham & Pinder, 2005](#) for a review of motivation theories). As future managers, students need to understand how to motivate employees, and the first step to accomplishing this is to understand the differing explanations for why and how individuals behave.

Teaching theoretical models in an immersive and engaging way is a common classroom difficulty ([Benson & Dresdow, 2019](#)). This issue becomes compounded when a concept like motivation has multiple theories including equity theory, expectancy theory, reinforcement theory and goal-setting theory. Many of these theories contain overlapping concepts that blur the lines between theories and provide competing explanations for the same behavior. The



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goal when teaching competing theories is to get students to think critically about each theory and how each might be appropriate given a specific context. Previous research has shown the importance of capturing the interest of students and that by doing so the engagement and quality of learning is increased (Chauhan, 2019). One such method for capturing student interest is use of the debate format in class.

Theoretical foundation

Debate has been shown to be an effective learning tool in higher education (Camp & Schnader, 2010; Roy & Macchiette, 2005; Ryan, 2006; Sadler, 2006) by communicating information and expanding student perspectives (Kennedy, 2007) and leading to less biased assimilation of information (Budesheim & Lundquist, 1999). Although it is considered somewhat non-traditional, debate as a pedagogical approach is linked to both increased student motivation and overall interest in the subject matter (Munakata, 2010). Debate is beneficial to management classrooms because it pushes students to think critically and differently (Swain, Bates, Bowen & Spain, 2021; Brown & Rich, 2020). Debate has shown to be an effective in management courses (specifically HRM classes) at both increasing topic understanding and enriching the overall course (Rao, 2010).

The social constructivist theory helps inform why debate can be so effective in teaching content that may be otherwise dense or unengaging. Social constructivist theory states that knowledge is built through our social interactions with others and that individuals must actively interpret these interactions to create their own knowledge (Vygotsky, 1962). Reality is built through the constructions created during these social interactions (Heylighen, 1993). Debate initiates a simulated cognitive conflict among peer students which instigates the process of social constructivism (Mishra, 2023). If students fail to engage cognitively and socially with content, then information is not learned or retained as effectively (Adams, 2006). It is vital to maintain inclusivity to effectively address the diverse needs of students (Spain, 2021).

Our goal was to capitalize on the benefits of debates by creating a classroom exercise for content that is normally considered “dry” and where student engagement can be difficult. The exercise changes the classroom dynamic from a dyadic teacher–student interaction to an environment where students passionately teach each other while defending their assigned theory. The instructor serves mainly as a facilitator while maintaining the time which creates a more enriching and immersive experience for students. It is highly recommended to use this exercise preceding the experiential exercise created by Swain, Kumlien & Bond (2020).

Context of the debate

Motivation is defined as “a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual’s being, to initiate work-related behavior and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration” (Latham & Pinder, 2005, p. 486), highlighting the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Kanfer, Frese & Johnson, 2017). Though both types are helpful for understanding behavior, extrinsic motivation better predicts work performance in simple, straightforward tasks, whereas intrinsic motivation is better for complex and creative tasks (Pittman, Emery & Boggiano, 1982). Given the dynamic nature of tasks and responsibilities in organizations, it is important to understand factors that affect both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how to influence the direction, intensity and/or duration of the effort people are willing to expend.

Scholars have developed numerous theories to explain differences in human motivation. Many of these theories share some overlapping principles (e.g. both expectancy theory and reinforcement theory rely on an individual’s assessment of the valence of the outcome as an important factor in determining the extent to which that individual will be motivated); however, each one offers valuable insight into human motivation in unique ways. To account for both this

overlap and the unique contributions of each theory, we use the context of debate to highlight the four specific process-oriented theories of equity, expectancy, reinforcement and goal-setting.

Equity theory argues that people are motivated when they feel treated fairly by someone else (Adams, 1963). According to equity theory, an assessment of whether someone has been treated fairly occurs through a process of social comparison in which a person examines their own outcomes relative to the inputs they have contributed and compares this ratio to the inputs and outcomes of someone else (Adams, 1963). In organizations, examples of “inputs” include how much time someone has worked, their skills and expertise, their loyalty to the organization, how hard they work, etc. Examples of outcomes include a person’s wages, bonuses, promotions and perks (Adams, 1963). According to this theory, it would be fair for two people to have different outcomes as long as the ratio of inputs to outcomes is similar, but it would be unfair – even with equal outcomes – if these outcomes were obtained with differing inputs. Thus, equity theory emphasizes that people are motivated by comparing their own behaviors and treatment with those of others around them.

In essence, people are motivated to reduce perceived imbalances in these input-to-output ratios – especially when they perceive they have the lower ratio (Kanfer et al., 2017) – by seeking to change their inputs, their outcomes or the reference person (Scholl et al., 1987). For example, they may seek to increase their outcomes by asking for more money, to reduce their inputs by lowering their personal effort or to find a new referent with whom a more balanced comparison can be made (Carrell & Dittrich, 1978). Additionally, people may also simply change their perceptions of themselves or of the other person, even without altering any sort of behavior or outcome (Adams, 1963). Overall, equity theory is a powerful predictor of individual motivation that highlights the importance of social comparison and explains why people are motivated to engage in both more and less productive behaviors at work.

Another theory of motivation is expectancy theory which predicts that people are motivated to make choices that they expect will result in the best possible outcomes for themselves (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). Expectancy theory argues that people rationally – though subjectively – consider the benefits and drawbacks of possible choices and select the one they believe will give them the most benefit with the least amount of pain (Kanfer et al., 2017). This determination is composed of three elements referred to as expectancy, instrumentality and valence. Expectancy is the extent to which an individual believes that their effort will result in a specific performance outcome; instrumentality refers to their belief that they will receive a specified reward if they achieve the desired performance outcome; and valence pertains to the desirability of the expected reward (Lloyd & Mertens, 2018).

The first link in this process – expectancy – stems from a person’s determination that their effort will result in the successful accomplishment of a task (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). This means that people will be less motivated to engage in behaviors if they believe that, despite their best effort, they will be unable to achieve a high level of performance (low expectancy). Regardless of its source, low expectancy can cause people to be less motivated to engage in meaningful effort to accomplish their goals. The second link in this expectancy chain is instrumentality which refers to how much individuals believe that performing well will result in certain expected outcomes/rewards (Kanfer et al., 2017). Based on this principle, low motivation occurs when people do not believe that their performance will result in the expected outcomes or promised rewards. The third element of expectancy theory is valence, referring to the level of satisfaction a person expects to receive by achieving a specific outcome (Van Eerde & Thierry, 1996). Although what people believe to be valuable is subjective, some outcomes are generally perceived as having a positive valence such as salary increases, bonuses, promotions and recognition, while others are generally perceived as having a negative valence like disciplinary actions, fatigue, stress and demotions

(Griffin, Phillips & Gully, 2020). Employees are generally less motivated if they believe that their effort and performance will result in outcomes that are more negative than positive. Overall, expectancy theory predicts that although a person may perceive any of these three elements to be either high or low at any given time, their overall motivation is the result of the interaction among them (Isaac, Zerbe & Pitt, 2001).

At the heart of our next motivational theory, reinforcement theory, is the simple idea that every behavior is preceded by some sort of antecedent and results in some sort of consequence (Luthans & Stajkovic, 1999). These elements of reinforcement theory highlight that behavior is motivated by the actual or anticipated consequences/outcomes of that behavior (Skinner, 1953). This theory argues that people learn which behaviors to continue or stop based on whether the consequences of their behaviors are positive or negative (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985). This learning often happens through a more passive process of social learning (Bandura, 1977), or it can also be more actively used to help motivate others to engage in desirable behaviors or to stop engaging in unwanted behaviors.

There are numerous ways people can be motivated to start or continue engaging in positive behaviors or to stop engaging in negative behaviors. Specifically, to reinforce desired behaviors, managers can either engage in positive reinforcement (i.e. providing a positive outcome) or negative reinforcement (i.e. removing a negative outcome) after employees engage in desirable behavior; however, if employees are already engaging in unwanted behaviors, then managers can motivate them to stop these behaviors by using punishment (i.e. delivering a negative outcome) or extinction (i.e. removing a positive outcome) (Beatty & Schmeier, 1975). Central to each of these methods is that people learn how to behave in the future from the consequences of the behaviors they are currently engaging in by paying attention to whether the results of their current actions are desirable or not (Griffin et al., 2020).

Timing is an important aspect of reinforcement theory, and the frequency with which behaviors are reinforced can influence the effectiveness and permanence of behavioral change (Latham & Huber, 1992). Research has identified numerous schedules of reinforcement that either focus on the amount of time that passes (i.e. interval schedules) or on the number of times a behavior is demonstrated (i.e. ratio schedules) between times of reinforcement and whether they are used in either fixed or variable increments. Fixed interval schedules are quite common and involve specified time periods between reinforcement (e.g. biweekly paychecks); variable interval schedules reinforce desired behaviors more randomly such as when a supervisor walks by at unpredictable times providing feedback for positive behaviors observed; fixed ratio schedules reinforce desired behaviors after a specific number of behaviors have been demonstrated (e.g. piece-rate pay structures); and variable ratio schedules reinforce positive behaviors after an undesignated number of these behaviors have been demonstrated such as when a salesperson engages in the same behaviors multiple times attempting to sell a product but only earns a commission when they actually complete a sale (Colquitt, Lepine & Wesson, 2017). Behavior can also be reinforced on a continuous schedule in which a person is rewarded every time they engage in a certain behavior (Luthans & Kreitner, 1985).

The final theory of motivation we include in this debate is goal-setting theory. Scholars have argued that goal-setting theory “is quite easily the single most dominant theory in the field [of human motivation]” (Mitchell & Daniels, 2003, p. 231). There has long been great interest in understanding how to use goals to motivate others to perform in beneficial and sustainable ways (Latham & Pinder, 2005). According to goal-setting theory, people are motivated to engage in intentional behavior that is directed toward achieving specific desired outcomes or goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). Compared to simply trying (or encouraging

employees) to “do your best,” consciously working toward a goal tends to help people achieve a higher level of performance than they would otherwise reach without the goal.

Research has highlighted numerous best practices for setting effective goals, but simply setting a goal is usually not enough to motivate high performance. Rather, successful goals depend on several factors related to the goal itself and to the person whom the goal is meant to motivate. Some characteristics of the goals themselves are often identified using the acronym “SMART” highlighting that effective goals are generally specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound (Rubin, 2002). The difficulty of the goal itself is also very important in determining its overall effectiveness, with research highlighting that as goal difficulty increases, individuals’ performance on the task generally increases also, as long as it is perceived to be realistic (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Another reason goals tend to be effective is because they provide direction for employees’ effort and because they energize people to continue giving effort until the goal is reached (Latham, 2004). However, there are also precautions that need to be considered when setting goals. First, as the complexity of the task increases, goals tend to have less effect on increasing performance, as it too narrowly focuses attention on the goal rather than on the learning needed to understand and complete the task. Second, because goals motivate people to think creatively about how to accomplish tasks, sometimes goals motivate people to engage in undesirable behaviors to reach the goal (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky & Bazerman, 2009). Thus, goals should be used carefully, but they have been shown repeatedly to motivate people to achieve high levels of performance.

Learning objectives

The Court of Theories exercise is an engaging, competitive and collaborative class-wide debate. By the end of the debate, students will be able to:

- differentiate and integrate each motivation theory with the others;
- delineate the relative strengths and weaknesses of each motivation theory;
- determine the applicability of each motivation theory in an organizational context; and
- develop oral presentation and interactive communication skills.

Materials needed

This activity would work for any course using a textbook that reviews the theories of motivation. Students should be asked to bring their textbook to class on the day this debate is conducted. Inform the students they will need the information in the text to engage in the debate. Instructors should plan to bring copies of the sections regarding motivation theories from whatever textbook is used for those that fail to bring the text. Textbook copyright permissions allow for sections of a textbook to be copied for this type of use.

General logistics

This group debate is appropriate for small- to medium-sized classrooms (16–52 students) of both undergraduate and graduate students. Groups should be no smaller than 4–5 students and no larger than 12–13 students. The number of groups depends on the number of motivation theories the instructor chooses to cover in the course (one group for each theory). The exercise was developed to debate four motivation theories (Equity Theory, Expectancy Theory, Reinforcement Theory and Goal-Setting Theory) but can accommodate however many theories best align with the course material.

Timing

Because of the number of steps to this activity, the timing is extremely important. The debate is intended for 75 min but could easily be amended to accommodate shorter or longer class times. Staying on top of this schedule is important to make sure that each theory is adequately discussed, and each group has equal time to make their case. Posting a general timeline is beneficial for running this exercise (Table 1).

Step-by-step instructions

Begin the Court of Theories exercise by telling students they will be debating which motivation theory is the best. Break students into four teams, and randomly assign one of the four theories to each team. Explain that they will prepare and present their case in a tournament style as to why their assigned theory is better than the other three with one winner selected at the end. It is highly recommended that an incentive (extra credit, candy, healthy snacks, etc.) be offered to the winners and that everyone knows about the incentive. Ensure that each student either has the textbook they were instructed to bring or that they have the handout you prepared beforehand. To maximize the efficacy of this activity, it is vital that each of the students have the information personally available.

Show the timeline to the class (either via projector or as a handout). Instruct students they will have 25 min to prepare the case for why their theory is better than the others, after which

Table 1. General timeline for the court of theories exercise

	Minutes	General timeline Event	
Introduction	5	Instructions	
	25	Preparation of cases	
Semi-final	5	Case 1 – Presentation	
	5	Case 2 – Presentation	
	1	Case 1 – Rebuttal Preparation	
	2	Case 1 – Rebuttal	
	1	Case 2 – Rebuttal Preparation	
	2	Case 2 – Rebuttal	
	1/2	Case 1 – Closing Argument	
	1/2	Case 2 – Closing Argument	
	Semi-final	5	Case 3 – Presentation
		5	Case 4 – Presentation
1		Case 3 – Rebuttal Preparation	
2		Case 3 – Rebuttal	
1		Case 4 – Rebuttal Preparation	
2		Case 4 – Rebuttal	
1/2		Case 3 – Closing Argument	
1/2		Case 4 – Closing Argument	
Final	3	Final round preparation	
	2	Round 1 Winner	
	2	Round 2 Winner	
	1	Round 1 Winner – Rebuttal	
	1	Round 2 Winner – Rebuttal	
	1/2	Round 1 Winner – Closing Argument	
	1/2	Round 2 Winner – Closing Argument	
	4	Overview	
Conclusion	4		

Source(s): Table by author

they will have 5 min to present their case. Next, another group will have 5 min to present their case. Each group, starting with the first, will have 1 min to prepare a rebuttal and 2 min to present that rebuttal. Each group, starting with the first, will then have 30 s to present their closing argument. A winner of the debate is then decided by the instructor (specific instructions on selecting a winner are discussed below). This structure is repeated with the two remaining groups with a winner being selected again. Finally, the two winning groups will have 3 min to prepare their final cases. Each will present their case (2 min each) followed by rebuttals (1 min each) and closing arguments (30 s each). The debate ends with the ultimate victor being decided.

After reviewing the timeline, recommend that everyone start by becoming familiar with the benefits and drawbacks of their assigned theory. Advise students to focus on these four questions:

- Q1. What is the theory?
- Q2. What are the components of the theory?
- Q3. How does this theory explain motivation?
- Q4. What elements of motivation is this theory best at explaining?

After everyone is individually familiar with the assigned theory, advise students they can divide their group into subgroups to prepare the defense against each of the other theories. Instruct them that the order in which they present their cases will be randomly selected immediately preceding the presentation of each case to prevent unfair preparation time. Each group must be prepared to present their case and defend against all the other theories in any order.

At this point, start the timer for 25 min and advise students of the remaining time at 5-min intervals. As students prepare, walk around to listen to the group discussions and answer questions. Following this 25-min period, randomly select the first group to present their case. After Case 1 is presented, randomly select the second group to present their case. After rebuttals and closing argument (follow the timeline above), choose a winner.

There are many ways to determine the winner for each debate. One possibility is that students may simply vote on which theory they thought won each round. However, as this introduces additional subjectivity to the process, we believe that the best way to make that determination is to make an outline of the key elements of each theory (i.e. what you believe are the key learning points). Credit one point for each element the team accurately discusses. Also, credit one point to whichever team is most persuasive. By presenting a more objective score after each round, students are less inclined to react negatively to the final decision. When presenting the winning group, take time to correct any misinformation or provide additional information that was not discussed for the losing theory. Do not discuss the winning theory yet because it gives an unfair advantage to the group advancing to the next round.

Follow the timeline to its conclusion. After selecting the final winner, take the remaining time to highlight key elements discussed for each theory. Additionally, to help keep the students even more engaged, the instructor may give the students an opportunity to critique what they heard and to highlight any errors or mistakes that they noticed about any of the theories (i.e. not just the one to which they were assigned for the debate). It is highly recommended that the incentive initially offered to the winning team is given to everyone in the class to end. As justification, conclude by emphasizing there really is no “one best theory,” but each theory has strengths and weaknesses in certain contexts. A full debrief is

unnecessary because students will have debated the important content at length throughout the activity. Students should end the activity with a solid understanding of each theory and how each theory might help students to better motivate others in the future.

Variations

One strength of this exercise is that it is very malleable. The number of theories covered, which theories are debated, and even the timeline are all changeable. Additionally, this exercise is not constrained to only motivation theories but can be used for any subject where multiple competing theories exist (leadership, ethics, etc.).

Empirical support for exercise effectiveness

This exercise has proven useful in helping students develop a better understanding of the concept of motivation and of the various elements of these motivational theories. Specifically, test scores were analyzed for 16 in-person and synchronous online sections of junior-level undergraduate Principles of Management: four that were lecture-only before using this exercise ($n = 179$) and 12 after only using this exercise ($n = 550$). All sections were given a mix of ten multiple-choice and true/false questions regarding the comprehension and application of motivation theories. Using the exercise showed a significant improvement of student scores on the exam, $F(1,727) = 10.128$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$ with students receiving this exercise ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 1.99$) outperforming students that did not ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.80$) out of ten questions pertaining to motivation theories.

Limitations and directions for further research

One limitation of this experiential exercise is that the success of the debate hinges on the willingness of the students to engage with the material. Providing incentives for winning the debate can help minimize this limitation, but it is still helpful to monitor the groups' interactions to help them stay on task. Another limitation is that despite their best efforts, students may miss discussing important elements of their assigned motivation theory when presenting their arguments in the debate; this has the potential to prevent the learning objectives of the exercise from being fully achieved. To help address this limitation, the instructions identify appropriate opportunities to correct misinformation or provide additional information that was missed for the losing theory of each debate, but in the excitement and pressure to choose a winner, this can be easy to overlook. Finally, even though results demonstrate the effectiveness of this debate in helping students better understand the theories of motivation, the exercise does not provide students with explicit instructions regarding effective debating techniques. As a result, it may be possible for a group to win the debate because they are more skilled at debating rather than because they did the best job of discussing their assigned motivation theory.

One area of future research that the Court of Theories exercise highlights pertains to the last limitation discussed related to the chosen context of debate. Considering the literature discussed earlier regarding debate as an important pedagogy in management education, this exercise provides a great opportunity to explore the effectiveness of training students in various debating techniques and skills on both persuasiveness (i.e. winning the debate) as well as performance (i.e. understanding the material better). Similarly related to this context of debate, in our analysis, we found that student performance increased after using this classroom exercise. It would be a great opportunity for future research to examine the effectiveness of debate as a learning tool compared with other effective pedagogies such as using object lessons or case studies on student outcomes such as learning and performance.

Implications for practice

This exercise highlights the practical usefulness of using debate as a learning tool in real-world educational settings, both regarding motivation theories and many other management theories. Debate provides a fun but effective way to encourage learners to think deeply and comprehensively about a topic, because not only they can be more convincing the more fully they understand the advantages and disadvantages of whatever they are arguing for but also they can be more effective the more completely they understand the opposing or alternative arguments as well. This is particularly relevant for management education because the goal of educators is not simply for the learners to understand the material but to recognize and even practice how to use their knowledge in real-life work environments. Effective managers need to understand both the positive and negative consequences of choice alternatives when making decisions and the more they can learn to engage others in debate to identify these various perspectives on possible choices the better decision-making they can achieve.

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