

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 23, 1996

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND THE CASE METHOD: SURVEY AND EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports the findings of a survey of UK lecturers involved in teaching strategic management to postgraduate and post experience students. The survey identifies the lecturer's objectives in using case studies and the effectiveness of the case method in achieving those objectives. A number of problems and difficulties are identified. The research identifies other methods that are used in the teaching of strategic management, together with their strengths and weaknesses.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND THE CASE METHOD

Following its success in the Harvard Law School the case method was adopted in 1910 by Harvard University's newly formed school of business administration. At first cases were "just about anything the new faculty could find to provide a basis for provocative classroom discussion (Christensen, 1987, p.25). That included the use of businessmen, who provided written accounts of their own company experience and used those accounts to lead classroom discussion. By 1924 recent MBA graduates were employed to research and prepare cases. Not only case material but also the aims of the case method developed. While the early cases emphasized the description of business and managerial practices (Osigweh, 1989) the use of cases developed to include the application of analysis to provide support for recommendations (Alexander, O'Neill, Snyder and Townsend, 1986).

The case method has come to play a major role in the teaching of strategic management (Alexander, et al, 1986). The subject is served by a large number of texts that typically include the familiar form of case study, lengthy descriptions of companies and their environments, with the intention that the material will form a basis for students to acquire insight and practice the skills of strategic management. The authors provide a common rationale for the use of cases in teaching strategic management. The popular text by Mintzberg and Quinn (1991) introduces case material as "a rich soil for investigating strategic realities". This is to be achieved both through description of strategic situations and through the students development of prescriptive analysis. While the authors warn that involvement in a real organization is the ideal way to understand strategy each of the cases is seen as providing "the data and background for making a major decision" as well as an opportunity to understand the realities of a particular organization. (Mintzberg and Quinn, 1991, p.xiv).

Similar justifications are provided in other popular texts with cases included; "to simulate the reality of the managers job" (Jauch and Glueck, 1988, p.404) and to "provide an opportunity to analyze the strategic issues of specific organizations in ... depth ... and often to provide solutions" (Johnson and Scholes, 1989, p.xx).

CASE TEACHING: OBJECTIVES AND CONFLICTS

The intentions of text and case authors represent some of the possible uses of case studies. Case studies can be used in many different ways, their use will be shaped by the lecturers own view of the subject and the role of case in its teaching, by the instructors style and the expectations, backgrounds and abilities of students. Consequently the term 'case method' is a broad title that is applied to a range of teaching styles and objectives that can be adopted within the use of case studies for teaching (Gray and Constable, 1983, Dooley and Skinner, 1977).

The scope of the case method is shown by a summary of the learning objectives that have been associated with the case method.

Cases can be used as a means to:

- acquire knowledge
- confront the complexities of specific situations
- develop analysis and synthesis
- relate theory to practice and assist the long term retention of that understanding
- transfer knowledge and techniques from classroom to the managers own organization
- develop interpersonal skills, communication and listening
- gain illustration of particular points, issues or managerial principles
- provide managers with a neutral situation in which they are free to explore problems, because they are not their own
- develop self analysis, attitudes, confidence, responsibility develop judgement and wisdom
- enliven teaching
- gain the students intellectual and emotional involvement bring realism into instructional settings

(From Christensen, 1987, Dooley and Skinner, 1977, Osigweh 1989, Romm and Mahler, 1991).

While the case method promises a wide range of educational and training outcomes there are difficulties and contradictions in

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achieving them. Among them is the dilemma of case as a participative method that will capture the student's interest, and case as a form of illustrative material. This dilemma becomes apparent both in the development of case studies for teaching and the use of case studies as a research method.

It has long been recognized that teaching cases may not be true' accounts of business life. Towl provide a description of case writing at Harvard Business School in which it is emphasized that a case should have a 'plot structure' and not simply be a "photographic slice of life". "A case involves a problem of some kind, and the more you can build that up, the more you can develop the interest or the drama of that clash of ideas or maybe a clash of people, the better the chance of getting the kind of student commitment that makes for a good classroom discussion". The case should develop sufficient interest to lead to a willingness on the part of the student "to take at face value the situation which the case presents, forgetting that it is artificial" (Towl, 1 969, p.64-72).

A similar trade-off between realism and the requirements of the teaching situation is noted by Yin "for teaching purposes, a case study need not reflect a complete or accurate rendition of actual events: rather, its purpose is to establish a framework for discussion and debate among students the criteria for developing a good case for teaching ... are different from those for doing research' (Yin, 1989, p.14).

If the discussion is not based upon a real situation can it be effective in developing the student's ability to understand and deal with the business world away from the classroom? Or, as Mintzberg proposes is the case method counter productive in teaching strategic management? Providing a misleading simplification of the realities of the strategy process which may in the extreme prove dangerous by leading managers to lose touch with the real sources of strategic understanding, encouraging them to wait in their offices "waiting for pithy reports instead of getting outside where the real information for strategy making usually has to be dug out" (Mintzberg, 1990, p.116).

The problem of realism primarily concerns the material used in case sessions, the case study, further issues are raised by the process of teaching with cases, the case method. Argyris's study of an executive programme (Argyris, 1980), concluded that the case session did not operate in a way that facilitated attainment of the instructors stated objectives. The intended joint exploration of open situations, where there were no answers, became structured to converge on the lecturer's own analysis and recommendations.

Case is a flexible means of teaching and there may be as many 'case methods' as instructors, consequently it may be inappropriate to generalize the conclusions of Argyris's study to all case teaching (Berger, 1 983). However the study does signal the need for caution in the use of cases. The criticisms that can be made of the case method may not be intrinsic to the method but the result of poor implementation, requiring clearer specification of objectives and greater attention to situational variables (Osigweh, 1 989) the use of peer review and self assessment via closed circuit television (Smith, 1987).

Further development of the case method may be assisted by greater clarity concerning the methods objectives. There is a need to identify the objectives of case users and the methods effectiveness in meeting those objectives. This understanding is necessary to all stages of the case method, from the writing and selection of case material, through to the use of cases and the review and evaluation of case sessions.

THE RESEARCH

The research reported in this paper explores the use of cases by lecturers in strategic management. The study identifies the lecturer's objectives in using case studies as part of their teaching the effectiveness of cases in achieving those objectives and the problems involved in using cases. The research took the form of a postal questionnaire that was administered to a sample of lecturers at UK higher education institutions. The sample was drawn from the membership list of BETA (The Business Education Teachers Association). Strategic Management (also known as Business Strategy or Business Policy) is a common subject in UK business schools, it is to be expected that all business schools on the BETA mailing list would be involved in teaching the subject. The questionnaire was sent to a named person at forty-nine institutions, sixteen questionnaires were returned, a response rate of thirty two per cent. All of the responses were usable.

CASE USERS' OBJECTIVES

The principal question included in the questionnaire was open, requiring the respondents to state their main objectives in using case studies as part of the teaching method. Each of the lecturers listed a number of objectives, the sixteen respondents providing a total of sixty-seven objectives. These were categorized to form six sets of objectives.

TABLE 1
CASE STUDY OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE	EXPRESSED AS:	AS A PROPORTION OF ALL OBJECTIVES CITED
ILLUSTRATE	To illustrate	34%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- discussion points- the methodology of real world decisions- to add to experience of organisations	
STRATEGIC THINKING	ANALYSIS/STRATEGIC	19%
	To encourage	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- the development of analytical skills- strategic thinking	

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PEDAGOGICAL EXPEDIENCE using cases to maintain 16%
the teaching process (in contrast to a
student based learning objective)

- provide interest and stimulate discussion
- prevent boredom

COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS 15%
to develop

- group working
- report writing
- presentation skills

INTEGRATIVE 12%
to integrate

- the activities of functional areas
- theory and practice
- knowledge about various subject areas

INFORMATION SKILLS 4%
to develop

- research skills
- information handling skills

The most frequently cited objective concerns illustration, the use of cases to provide description of real world situations, this use accounted for one third of all responses and was cited by over eighty per cent of the respondents. There are a further four major sets of objectives. Cases are used to develop the students' abilities in strategic analysis and their strategic thinking. Cases are used to assist integration, developing understanding of interactions and relationships, whether that is between various business functions, the interaction between theory and practice or the relationships between various academic subject areas.

Other objectives concern communication and interpersonal skills and pedagogic expedience, the use of cases to facilitate the teaching process, for example through avoiding boredom. The development of research and information handling skills was of minor significance, accounting for under five per cent of the objectives cited.

Table 1 shows the frequency with which each objective was cited, however frequency does not necessarily indicate importance. In the research this was assessed by the respondents ranking their objectives. Three sets of objectives were distinguished by being given first ranking in importance. In order of number of times chosen by the respondents they are:

Strategic Analysis / Strategic Thinking

Illustrative

Integrative

The remaining objectives, communication and interpersonal skills and pedagogic expedience are of secondary importance in the use of case.

EFFECTIVENESS AND PROBLEMS

The research assessed effectiveness in two ways. The lecturers evaluation of success in achieving the participation of students and also lecturers' ratings for the achievement of objectives.

The case method is a participative form of teaching typically requiring the student to become involved in extensive preparation and classroom discussion. Considering all of the phases of a case exercise, seventy five per cent of the respondents rated student participation as one or two on a five point scale, excellent to poor. In general the use of cases appears to be associated with high student participation.

To explore the success of the case method in achieving particular objectives (Table 1) a five point rating scale was used by respondents to evaluate the performance of their students.

TABLE 2
PERFORMANCE IN ACHIEVING OBJECTIVES

OBJECTIVE	RATING
1. COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	91%
2. INTEGRATIVE	71%
3. PEDAGOGIC EXPEDIENCE	67%
4. ILLUSTRATIVE	62%
5. STRATEGIC ANALYSIS/STRATEGIC THINKING	57%

Each objective was rated on a five point scale "Excellent" (1) to "Poor" (5). This percentage (rating) is calculated as follows

- For each objective
- Total the number of times the objective receives a rating of 1 or 2.
- Express that number as a percentage of total number of ratings available for that objective

(Reference to 'information Skills' is omitted due to low number of responses.)

The case method appears to be a highly successful vehicle for the development of communication and interpersonal skills. Case exercises can be structured to provide opportunities for reporting, group work and role-playing. As a consequence it is possible that any deficiencies in the case material may be compensated for by the process that the student is required to undertake.

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The least successful use of cases is in the development of strategic analysis and strategic thinking, the objective most frequently rated as most important. The objective received both the lowest overall rating (57%) and was also the only objective where performance was rated as poor by some respondents. The illustrative use of cases is similarly given a low rating. The relative lack of success in developing analysis and strategic thought may reflect the difficulty of attaining those teaching aims as much as any particular failure of the case method. There is evidence that case may be the best vehicle available for developing problem solving skills (Smith, 1987).

To provide insight into the limitations of case teaching the respondents were asked to identify the main problems, obstacles and difficulties that they encountered in obtaining and using cases. These can be summarized to four issues.

Demands on Student's Time

There may be too much or too little information for the time available. Students, especially part-time students, may not give the case a full reading. The resulting discussion can be too open for the time available.

Scope for Analysis

The case may encourage a particular solution. Many cases lack information giving industry background and there may be a lack of material for conducting analysis.

Resources

Published cases are often expensive, as are texts including cases. There is a lack of time for case writing. Colleagues may be reluctant to share case material. The use of cases requires a high level of staff commitment.

Relevance

There is a lack of public sector material, U.K. material, cases that provide a European perspective and of material that includes senior women managers in key roles. The company depicted in the case may be unknown to the tutor and students. It can be difficult for the tutor to understand the material. It can be difficult to judge whether a case will work, many cases may be discarded after one use. After considering the cases complexity and topic it may be questionable whether the case material is correct for the course. Cases can be used indiscriminately.

Case material can become dated. Cultural differences can be difficult. It can be questioned whether the case is real' or a projection of the authors own views.

These problems focus upon the availability and quality of case material rather than the operation of the case method. The lack of scope for analysis, insufficient information and the encouragement of a particular solution, are problems that obviously limit the achievement of objectives directed toward developing the skills of strategic analysis and strategic thinking. The limited success of cases as illustrative material gains some explanation from the problems of relevance. The reported lack of public sector, U.K. and European cases and cases including women managers, the age of the case material and its cultural context, all limit the illustrative potential of the case material.

Overall the problems and difficulties indicate that cases often fall short of the particular requirements of the course on which they are used and may not provide the user with a convincing and realistic document.

A number of the problems, such as relevance, the demands on students time and the issue of providing sufficient scope for analysis, could be aided through improved case research writing and editing, tailoring case material to fit the particular demands of teaching situations. Even so there are dilemmas, for example between writing a case to suit the availability of student time and the inclusion of sufficient data to support analysis.

Many of the respondents identified a problem with resources, however the issue needs to be interpreted against the number of cases that are used by lecturers. From the survey, usage by individual lecturers ranges from three cases in a years teaching to over fifty, the most common quantity being between eleven and fifteen cases a year, a figure similar to that found by Alexander et al (1986) in their survey of US business policy / strategic management professors. The intensive use of cases makes it especially difficult for lecturers to generate their own case material and may result in the use of case material that is not entirely satisfactory.

OTHER LEARNING METHODS

Eldredge and Galloway (1983) found that typically courses in strategic management employ a number of methods, case, texts, management games, field projects, video and guest speakers. A similar pattern is found in the present study. All but one of the sixteen lecturers reported using other methods in the teaching of strategic management. The various methods were evaluated by the respondents to identify their strengths and weaknesses compared to the use of case studies. (Table 3).

A range of alternative teaching methods are available and each method has significant strengths and weaknesses. The various methods may be used to complement each other, Teach and Govahi's (1993) study of business school graduates concludes that various teaching methods, experiential exercises, simulations, the case method and lectures, develop different skills. Use of a variety of teaching methods develops a wider range of skills as well as introducing variety to the overall teaching method.

The alternative teaching methods can be used to illustrate business

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TABLE 3
OTHER LEARNING METHODS

LECTURE WITH DISCUSSION.

Strength

Good coverage of material
Ability to focus on issues
Clear communication of knowledge of the subject
Efficient

Weakness

Low participation, low reflection
No / low skill development
Student boredom
Low absorption of information

GUEST SPEAKERS.

Strength

From 'the real world'

Weakness

May communicate realism poorly

VIDEOS.

Strength

Depict real life

Weakness

Insufficient availability

TUTORIAL.

BASED ON CURRENT ISSUES

Strength

Current
Student participation
Provides a range of views
General statements can be derived

Weakness

Difficulty in maintaining direction
Possible dominance by strong individual
Students may seek definite answers

BASED ON AN ARTICLE

Strength

Directs toward specific issues

Weakness

Low student credibility
Possible low participation

SEMINAR, SUBJECT OR COMPANY FOCUSED.

Strength

Focused discussion

Up to date

Real companies

Involves preparation and research

Weakness

Situation may allow non participation, lack of research and preparation

BUSINESS GAMES.

Strength

Complex

Helps develop scenarios

Competitive situation

Participants can see the effect of decisions

Interest

Hands on experience

Weakness

Lack of realism, static aspects

Time consuming

Costly and demanding on staff resources

COMPANY BASED PROJECTS.

Strength

Discovery

Understanding

Develop research skills

Model testing

Relevance, through self selecting organisation

Self direction and management

Weakness

Restrictions on information access

Time consuming

Difficulty in application of theory

Difficulty in generalising findings

CONSULTANCY PROJECTS.

Strength

Includes responsibility to client

Weakness

Little or no scope for experimentation

May not be controllable

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situations and to develop analysis. Video, guest speakers, seminars orientated to a current or company issue, each of these can provide real world insight. Similarly, company based and consultancy projects located in live organizations appear to be particularly promising in terms of their realism and the range of skills involved.

CONCLUSION

The survey results confirm that case studies are a major method in the teaching of strategic management. All of the respondents used case studies and the most common rate of use, between eleven and fifteen cases per year, indicates that, for strategic management, case study forms a central part of the overall teaching method.

The research also helps to define the role and effectiveness of case study teaching. Most often the primary objective for using case studies in the teaching of strategic management is to develop ability in strategic analysis and strategic thinking, however this is found to be the least effective use of the case method. In general cases are most effective as a means for developing communication and interpersonal skills and integration, skills that are relevant to the practice of general management rather than specifically associated with strategic management.

Cases continue to play a major role in the teaching of strategic management but there is a need for lecturers to question their use. The present study finds agreement with Reynolds (1978) that teachers should be explicitly aware of their teaching objectives for each class. A starting point in doing so may be provided by defining their objectives in using each case against the five objectives identified by the present study (Table 1) and considering the likely effectiveness of the case session in achieving those objectives. The result may be a reduction in the use of cases to include only those that are appropriate and most likely to be successful, creating opportunity for the use of other learning methods.

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