

DANGEROUS BUSINESS: AN INTERACTIVE ETHICS CASE ACTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

“Dangerous Business” is a web-based ethics exercise designed to help students explore the topics of Business Ethics and Social Responsibility. Using advanced technology, including artificial intelligence, provided by the University of Southern California Institute for Creative Technology, we were able to make case method teaching more immersive and interactive for students. Because it is web-based, the exercise can be used for on campus classes or for distance learning environments. Initial feedback from students has been very positive. A brief video synopsis of the exercise can be viewed at <http://msbstream01vid.usc.edu/ELC/DangerousBusiness.wmv>.

INTRODUCTION

Effectively teaching the concept of Business Ethics and Social Responsibility to undergraduate and MBA business students is a daunting task. Case method teaching is widely used as a technique to help students to see the real world application of concepts and principles (e.g., Bass, 1990; Hughes, Ginnett & Curphy, 2002; Yukl, 2002). Cases provide students with a sense of the real world impact of business decisions. Students can analyze a case and consider how they would manage a particular situation. However, traditional case method teaching has a few

limitations. Cases, delivered in paper format, can be less than dramatic and may not effectively help students get immersed into the case. Also, cases tend to be static; they are rarely updated with new material. Finally, the case method approach usually involves a large group discussion limiting the availability of participation from each student. At the University of Southern California, faculty and staff of the Marshall School of Business and the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) partnered to create an immersive and interactive case activity. Our intention was not to steer away from traditional case base teaching, but to attempt to enhance the student experience of a case with video and artificial intelligence technology to allow students to interact with the case participants in a more immersive way. This short paper is simply a description of the activity and initial student reactions to the exercise. A quick video synopsis of the activity is available at the following web address:

<http://msbstream01vid.usc.edu/ELC/DangerousBusiness.wmv>.

THE CASE

The case is based on the McWane Corporation. McWane is an Iron foundries company. The television news show “Frontline,” in cooperation with the New York Times, did some investigative reporting of the McWane Corporation regarding Environmental and Worker Safety

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 34, 2007

violations. They contrast the McWane way with a competitor, ACIPCO. ACIPCO has a more enviable record on Environmental and Worker Safety practices. The news footage, company reports, and the company websites provided the content for the exercise.

THE DESIGN

We want students to tackle ethical issues in the context of a competitive business environment. Students are initially introduced to the company without any information about ethical violations. Through a web-based program, students receive a synopsis of the industry, company reports, and graphic displays of revenue trends. Students also follow a hyperlink to the McWane website to get a sense of the business. As the students progress through the web-based program, each screen poses a new question. Answers are typed into a text box. Some questions are preceded by video segments of interviews from the "Frontline" television news show (See Pictures Below). Typically, the video segments include interviews of people associated with the McWane Corporation and ACIPCO. Students are asked a variety of questions in regard to how well the stakeholders are treated. They are also asked to

put themselves into the position of the case characters and consider what they would do in that situation. Moreover, students have the ability to ask the case characters questions. Using artificial intelligence technology, students are able to type questions. Characters from the case give video responses to the questions. Through the use of the video and the interviewing tool, the students become much more immersed in the case than they would from simply reading a description of the ethical violations. The case "comes to life," creating a more engaging, and hopefully, a more impactful experience.

COURSE APPLICATIONS

This exercise is flexible in how it can be used. Students can go through the course individually or groups can be assigned to discuss each question and then input a group answer. The exercise could be done as homework or it could take place during class in a computer lab. The exercise can be used for traditional on campus classes or with distance learning environments. Because the exercise is web-based, it is very flexible in how it can be used.

PICTURE 1



PICTURE 2



AXL.NET TECHNOLOGY

ICT, in collaboration with the U.S. Army Research Institute, created a technology called AXL.Net (AXL is an Acronym for Army Excellence in Leadership). AXL.Net is used for U.S. Army leadership training. That technology also works well for business cases.

The AXL.Net enhances the case method teaching approach in several ways. It provides multi-media capability. Videos, pdf files, pictures, and charts are easily uploaded into a course. The use of artificial intelligence technology enables an interviewing tool to allow students to interact with characters from a case. In addition, data collection is easily handled. All student responses can be captured and stored. For quantitative questions (e.g., rating questions or ranking questions), data from participants can be compiled, in real time, and charts of student responses can be generated. The AXL.Net technology is also fully authorable by the user. A professor can easily add or delete multi-media or questions to fit the needs of a particular class or time constraint.

PILOT STUDY

Thus far, one undergraduate senior level management class has participated in this exercise. Two MBA classes also participated in November, 2006. The first pilot test was a success. Students had a positive experience and the exercise creators were able to obtain important feedback for future improvements.

The setting of the pilot study was somewhat unique. The exercise took place in the Experiential Learning Center (ELC) located at the University of Southern California. The ELC has 13 studio rooms, each with the appearance of a typical conference room. Each studio has a conference table with white boards as well as presentation equipment (e.g., Computer, DVD player, Projector, and Screen). In addition, there are cameras mounted in each studio as well as two way mirrors to allow the facilitator to view the proceedings from outside the room. Video taping is typically done in these rooms during experiential exercises as a resource for the debrief. During the debrief, a facilitator can play video clips of the exercise and follow the clips with discussion questions. In the pilot study, video recording was useful not only for the debrief, but also to view how the participants interacted with the computer program.

Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 34, 2007

Class participants were assigned to different rooms resulting in groups of about 5 participants per room. Participants were instructed to work through the exercise as a team. For each question, they were to discuss it as a group and then input one answer for the team. Participants were well engaged for a period of about 75 minutes. After the exercise, the entire class gathered together into one classroom for the debrief. The facilitator led the discussion with the entire class. Charts and graphs were used as well as video clips of the students in action. The graphs helped show differences between groups in terms of their responses. Video clips of interesting conversations also helped inspire additional dialogue. The topics of discussion were not much different than those posed in the exercise, but the debrief provided a forum for different groups to voice their conclusions.

Students were asked to evaluate the activity. On a seven point scale where one equals “strongly disagree” and seven equals “strongly agree,” student responses averaged higher than 6.0 on the following questions: “The teaching module is a valuable tool for teaching ethics.” “The teaching module is easy to use.” “The teaching module was informative” “This exercise demonstrated that financial decisions impact subordinates, the environment, and society at large.” Please see the chart in the appendix for more detailed statistical results for all questions from the most recent MBA class.

Not all aspects of the pilot study were overwhelmingly successful. Some groups didn’t finish the exercise during the 75 minutes. Such feedback was critical in helping us improve the time expectations. Also, some students tried to “game” the interview tool. In other words, some students became more interested in testing the limits of the interviewing tool than actually attempting to gain content material. Again, this feedback was very helpful for the creators to understand how best to introduce the tool in order to avoid having it become a distraction.

CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This exercise is a useful tool to help engage students on the topic of Business Ethics and Social Responsibility. While traditional case method teaching is at the heart of this exercise, the advanced technology creates an environment where the case comes to life. This exercise is the first of many such exercises that we are creating. Essentially, this exercise will act as a template for exercises that deal with a variety of business issues.

REFERENCES

- Bass, B. (1990). *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, research, and managerial applications*. New York: The Free Press.
- Hughes, R., Ginnett, R., & Curphy, G. (2002). *Leadership: Enhancing the lessons of experience*. San Francisco: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Yukl, G. (2002). *Leadership in organizations*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

APPENDIX

MBA Exercise Evaluations

Instructions Given: For each item, circle the number that best reflects your level of agreement with that statement where:

- 7 = Strongly Agree
- 6 = Somewhat Agree
- 5 = Slightly Agree
- 4 = Neutral
- 3 = Slightly Disagree
- 2 = Somewhat Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree

Question	Mean	S.D.
The teaching module is a valuable tool for teaching ethics.	6.59	.62
The teaching module is easy to use.	6.41	.51
The teaching module was informative.	5.88	.99
The teaching module was responsive to my educational needs.	6.12	1.2
The questions included as part of the module made me think critically about the issues.	6.06	1.1
I was frustrated with the teaching approach.	1.94	1.2
This exercise made me think about what makes a manager ethical.	6.17	1.1
This exercise made me think about what makes a manager unethical.	5.78	1.4
I can apply some of the things that I learned here to my activities as a manager.	5.89	.99
This exercise demonstrated that financial decisions impact subordinates, the environment, and society at large.	6.22	.65
Interviews with the characters gave me insight into their decisions.	6.06	.83
I felt like the characters answered the questions that they were asked.	5.06	1.1
I wanted more feedback about how I was doing during the training module.	5.47	1.6
I felt like the scenario was realistic.	6.42	.62
The training made me think about ethics in a different way than I usually would.	5.17	1.2