

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 12, 1985

THE LIVE CASE STUDY: FILLING THE GAP BETWEEN THE CASE STUDY AND THE EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

Business Policy has been the subject of Innumerable ABSEL articles-- particularly ones which have debated the merits of case vs simulations; or lectures vs discussions. For example, over the past eleven years some 60 articles have appeared on this topic alone. Two issues which continually arise are ones dealing with pedagogical modes, for example, whether one type of mode is more realistic than another and whether one type of mode is more experientially-based than another. There is a presumption, of course, that some sort of realism and experientially-based instruction are imperative for a Business Policy course. The following paper presents a variation of the standard case study methodology, called the 'live' case approach. The paper describes and presents a rationale for the Live Case approach in Business Policy courses, particularly for undergraduate courses. The Live Case is presented as both a more realistic approach to learning and as a more experientially-based pedagogy than standard text- nook cases. The article cites the advantages and disadvantages of the Live Case approach and concludes with the author's personal observations on using the Live Case approach in a senior level undergraduate Business Policy course. The article also contains an important "how-to-do-it" section for practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

The case study method is no stranger to teaching strategies, particularly in Business schools. Historians of pedagogy claim that the technique dates back to the time of Socrates and is based on the principle of 'guided discovery', i.e., learning by doing, but under the watchful eyes of an expert. As early as 1921, the administration at Harvard Business School listed the adoption of the Case Study Method (CSM) as one of its greatest achievements for that year. (Copeland, 1958) The administration wanted to prepare students for managerial leadership by providing them with a background of general business facts and principles necessary for developing a broad business perspective. They believed that this goal could best be achieved by giving the student practical training in dealing with business problems. The practical training would consist of: (1) ascertaining of the facts, (2) appraising and sorting of facts, (3) stating of business problems in a businesslike manner, (4) analyzing business problems, (5) reaching conclusions based on the foregoing and (6) presenting of such conclusions orally and in writing.

This method of 'guided discovery' was to be used in all business courses. Theoretically, it would help train students to understand the realities of the business world, to be better prepared to analyze business opportunities and to become good social, as well as corporate citizens.

Since its formal introduction at Harvard Business School, the Case Study Method has been touted as a major teaching vehicle or modicum in business schools, particularly in Business Policy Courses. The popularity of the CSM is best reflected in the numerous articles and studies written about the benefits of the CSM and/or offering suggestions on how to sharpen the case study method. For example, the Association of Business Simulations and Experiential

Learning (ABSEL) alone has had at least 60 articles devoted to the examination and 'praise' of the case study method.

Basically, the case study method is said to be advantageous because it helps students obtain a better understanding of management issues by giving 'real life' examples. Cases are assumed to be representative of 'real life' business problems and supposedly their use helps students learn to apply their analytical abilities to challenging business situation(s). While some cases reflect contemporary situations, some cases are thought to be timeless and are used regularly to exemplify universal tenets or principles as portrayed in particular case circumstances. According to Glueck and Stevens, "Cases are not designed to illustrate optimum conditions, but to serve as learning mechanisms which will allow you to distill your experience, the theories you have learned and the research you have carried out and apply them to a given situation." (1983,7)

Typically, the steps taken in case analysis include:

- 1) clearly defining the major and secondary problems in the case,
- 2) developing a model of the cause of the problem (or success),
- 3) establishing alternative solutions to the problem or explanations for success, and
- 4) choosing and implementing a solution. Despite the popular and long tradition of using case studies in business schools, critics remain skeptical-- if not of case studies per se--at least about the claims made as to some of the benefits derived from using the case study method. Some of the major concerns, issues and complaints regarding case studies and their use as teaching strategies in business schools as follows:
 - cases are impersonal and sterile (Davies, 1981; Leonard & Eurich, 1942)
 - some of the 'real' problems illustrated in cases are not very real at all or seldom occur in the business world (Davies, 1981)
 - written cases tend to be overly simplistic about issues and decisions that are quite complex in the real world (Beckman, 1972)
 - frequently, the urgency of the business situation is lost once the case is committed to paper (Leonard & Eurich, 1942)
 - cases tend to become outdated once they are written (Jones, Bagforci & Jallen, 1979)
 - especially at the undergraduate level, students are too immature and lack general education and experience to appreciate case studies (Beckman, 1972; Pierson, et. al. , 1959)
 - instructors tend to push their own biases (Jones, Bagford & Wallen, 1979; Argyris, '80)
 - case discussions are dominated by a few vocal students and/or frequently degenerate into endless and inconclusive debates (Davies, 1981; Beclnan, 1972; Kelly, 1983)
 - the case itself or the case discussion usually reveals the case 'solution' very early and thus tends to discourage interest, effort and further analysis (Berger, 1983; Argyris, 1980)
 - frequently cases lack areas for rigorous quantitative analysis (Pierson, et. al. , 1959; Carlson & Misshauk, 1972)

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A persistent theme that underlies many of the criticisms cited above, is the lack of realism associated with cases. Many promoters of the Case Study method associate the learning benefits derived from using the CSM with the realistic nature contained and transmitted through cases. Critics claim however, that while the case situation describes a real event the sense of realism is unfortunately lost once the actual situation is over or the decision has been made. Critics charge that this sense of realism cannot be evoked vicariously in students because the situation is over and the participants seem removed from the original events. Consequently, cases lose their realistic nature, sound dry, and seem impersonal.

Cases frequently involve personalities and their decision-making styles which are difficult to portray in writing; no matter how simple or complex, how intricate or straightforward an actual business decision is the written case seldom captures much of its essence. Hence, students fail to see the complexity of the actual situation upon which the case is based and tend to develop a simplistic notion of the real situation. Furthermore, they lose interest and enthusiasm in the case and hence fail to put forth much effort in analyzing the case and tend to rely on the instructor's imposed solution.

While it is probably safe to say that the argument over the 'realisticness' of the CSM and the pedagogical values of using case studies will continue, it is theoretically plausible to say the arguments and concerns raised by critics have logical validity and should be taken seriously. The argument, though, should not be limited to a choice between using the CSM or not using it, but rather whether it is possible to make cases more realistic. If they can be made more realistic, they have at least the potential for bringing about increased student learning and appreciation of business decision-making.

What Is The Live Case Method.

The Live Case has been indicated for use elsewhere. Hoover has suggested its use in courses where social responsibility is a major theme (1977), and Richardson has suggested its use in the Marketing curriculum (1979). Others, such as Haltennan, et. al., have studied various dimensions of the Live Case (1979), while Ancone, et. al. have investigated trust as an important variable of the Live Case approach. All of the above are not specifically concerned with the use of the Live Case per se in the Business Policy course, they all do report favorably on its use in general.

The Live Case differs from the typical case study found in Business Policy texts in that the Live Case has the added features of: (1) personal participation and appearance by the company's key decision-makers during the case presentation and discussion, (2) the immediate accessibility of the company for the students, & (3) the company situation or strategic decision is one that has just recently been made or is about to be made. The combination of these factors, then, bring the case to 'life' for the students. The dimension of realism that critics charge is lacking in the CSM is fully compensated for through the Live Case. Like the so called textbook cases, students must also prepare and analyze relevant financial data, use appropriate operations techniques, engage in market and organizational analysis, as well as research the industry.

Thus, students not only carry out the typical duties associated with case analysis, but have the added benefit of going to the company, speaking to company personnel about the case and having a company representative in class during the case presentation. There is no lack of interest when the

company owner and/or president is in class, listening to the students examining his/her organization.

Case Selection and Preparation.

The first task is to determine the number and type of local businesses that might be willing to participate in a Live Case. An initial phone conversation can usually determine whether the owner and/or key decision-makers are interested in participating. A surprising number of local business people are usually more than happy to be of service to a Business School. For example, local business people feel that their participation in a case study is an important source of exposure for their company. Sometimes, a business person will participate in a Live Case if they simply receive an unbiased, and free strategic appraisal of their firm. Furthermore, many business people feel a social responsibility to assist business students who aspire to become successful business people after graduation.

At Geriaseo, the Live Cases were used to complement the text cases in the Business Policy course. There were a variety of businesses used, including an independent insurance agency, a retail furniture store, a paper-boc manufacturing firm, and a maker of high quality office furniture and a regional not-for-profit mental health Center. Clearly, the different settings ranging from service organizations to retailing and not-for-profit agencies offer a rich variety of managerial and strategic situations.

Initially, businesses are selected for possible participation based on the following criteria: (1) willingness of key people to participate in a face to face class presentation; (2) important changes or decisions in the organization which are appropriate for Business Policy analysis; (3) reasonable proximal location of the firm to the college and; (4) availability of company data and trade journals to the students.

In general, cases can easily be prepared over the summer months. Case preparation typically entails one or two visits to the company. Company visits usually last five to eight hours and the actual writing of the case takes from one to a couple of days, depending upon one's institutional resources.

Live Case Use In A Class Setting.

At the beginning of the semester, the students in the Business Policy course are divided up into teams of two students each. Each team is given their choice of doing either one of the Live Cases or one of the textbook cases. Approximately one third of the students enrolled in the course opted to do a Live Case, knowing that the owner/manager would be present during the formal presentation. Although students had to research the case, they were instructed not to discuss the case with the owner/manager until the actual date of the presentation. As agreed upon beforehand, the owner/Manager attends the class during the formal presentation, a question and answer period is held which allows the student critics to challenge the team which presented the case. Finally, the business representative(s) has the opportunity to explain, defend, and indicate why he or she did what they did in terms of their business. This is the highlight of the Live Case study as students have an opportunity to listen to, question and in some cases criticize the key decision-maker(s). There is no doubt at this point that the case is real and the students are experientially involved.

Thus, the Live case represents a significant departure from the bookish and impersonal tone of so many text-

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book cases, which frequently fail to affect student's interest.

Some Problems And Constraints--And Ways To Deal With Them.

There are some problems in using the Live Case approach. However, these problems are not insurmountable, as the following examples illustrate: (1) Some owners may be reluctant to divulge company information, particularly financial data about their company. This concern can generally be dealt with by assuring the owner that whatever information is given for a case study will remain 'in-house' and not for publication. The assurance that any information would be used for academic purposes usually was enough to convince owners that their company's financial statements would remain safe from competitors' hands; (2) Many of the companies willing to participate in the Live Cases were medium or small sized companies and/or privately owned firms. The potential drawback here is that the generalizations that can be made regarding business strategy are limited to firms of this size or type. While this is not an inherent or fundamental shortcoming of the Live Case approach, it does tend to limit the generalizations that can be made about business strategy to firms of this size and type; (3) Students are sometimes intimidated or hesitate to make statements which might be construed by the business people as critical of their decision-making or business strategy. This reluctance on the part of students was dealt with by insisting that the student presenters had to say something critical about the business they were presenting. Perhaps this was rather unfair to the business people, but it was a rather good way to coerce students to speak out when a strategy or decision seemed bad or unjustified. On another note, the reluctance on the part of students to assert themselves in case presentations served as a point of introspection later on in the course. That is, students were asked to extend and extrapolate their reluctance to determine how they would perform in subsequent managerial roles. Furthermore, the ability to criticize tactfully in this situation is a skill that is acquired as a by product of the Live Case approach. (4) Finally, because many business people could not come to class during the day, many classes had to be scheduled in the evening. To be sure, there is always some student resistance to this.

Substantial Benefits.

Students' responses to the live cases were highly favorable. This positive evaluation was consistent across all students regardless of whether they were directly involved with the case presentation or not, i.e., students who presented the case, those who were pre-designated as critics, as well as the remainder of the class who simply read and attended the presentations. The quality of student output was also impressively high. Some student's work was even beyond expectation. For example, in one live case presentation, students showed slides they had taken of the firm, while in another live case, students brought in a video tape showing the company and interviews with key company personnel. Other students found ways to interview competitors of the company they were analyzing. This last aspect brings an opportunity for students to learn to develop appropriate professional and ethical conduct, including learning how to be reasonably discrete when discussing a particular case with a competitor. Usually, I suggest that the students do not tell the competitor that they are working on a case study of the ABC company as such, but rather that they simply want some general information about the business or industry. More importantly, I have noticed that students are much more prepared to discuss the case intelligently, having done extensive and more thorough research than they generally do for the textbook cases. Perhaps they do not want to feel

embarrassed in front of the company representative as it is of anything else.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while one cannot say that use of live cases solves or even addresses all of the complaints and concerns raised by critics, it does add a dimension of reality to the Case study method. This dimension has the ability to augment interest and effort and increase student learning by bringing key business decision-makers and their experiences closer to the students. It is clear that the live case approach has a definite place in the spectrum of teaching pedagogies.

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