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## THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN "THE CASE METHOD"

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### ABSTRACT

Modern textbooks and practitioners of the case method have not fully explained the responsibilities of the student under the case method. This failure has led to confusion about the value of the case method and its alleged shortcomings. The author presents a five-point program to help students understand their role in the case method.

### ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

Several recent articles have pointed out that the case method, rather than being a single approach, actually encompasses a spectrum of approaches. The role of the instructor in this spectrum can range from lecturing to virtual abstention, depending on the instructor's view of the case method and the material being taught. Dooley and Skinner have categorized instructors' roles with entertaining yet descriptive sobriquets -- facilitator, coach, quarterback, demonstrator, etc. (2)

Whichever technique the instructor chooses under the case method, he still imparts his particular value system upon students and actually may reduce the value of the case method by preventing student independence. Argyris points out that students attempt to master the instructor (in an effort to attain better grades) rather than the topic. As a consequence, students rarely took risks by exploring alternative principles or value systems since these rarely were rewarded by the instructor. (1)

### ROLE OF THE STUDENT

If it is true that the particular teaching technique and value system of the instructor are crucial in the case method, then Students should be made aware of their role in interacting with the instructor and questioning that particular value system. A search through textbooks reveals that we may not be apprising students of their responsibilities under the case method. While many authors instruct students in making an effective presentation, few authors explain what is expected of students relative to the instructor, what the role of the instructor is likely to be, and more importantly that students must continually question the values implicit in the case and the instructor. This double loop learning (where students detect errors in analysis and question the underlying basis for that analysis may be the real value of the case approach.

Textbooks vary in their treatment of this subject; the variation is seldom across disciplines, but within disciplines. In finance few textbooks explain case techniques at all. Case methodology is taught more often in management and marketing, although the treatment here usually is a short course in effective oral or written communication and the value of the scientific method. Few indeed are the texts which explain the student's huge responsibility under "the case method."

### FIVE POINT PROGRAM

I suggest the following five point program for informing students of their responsibilities in the case method:

1. Explain the value of the case method, either in learning principles, applying principles to actual situations, conceptualizing problems or developing judgmental skills.

2. Explain methods of effective oral or written presentation. This topic is treated very well by most texts.

3. Explain the role of students relative to one another and relative to the instructor. Particular roles may change according to the educational objectives or teaching techniques of the instructor, but "the case method" as developed at Harvard involved maximal participant interaction together with minimal dependence on the instructor. (4)

4. Explain that there are no correct or incorrect answers to problems, only alternative courses of action based upon each person's value system and conception of the problem.

5. Perhaps most importantly, explain that students should continually evaluate problems in light of alternative value systems. Anyone who has taught a business discipline for more than a few years recognizes that ethical and sociological forces are dynamic and that managers must adjust continually to a changing business environment. New analytical techniques are developed at a rapid pace, so managers who are unwilling or unable to take the risk of a fresh approach to an old problem may be doing themselves and society a disservice. (3)

### REFERENCES

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- (3) Kiechel, Walter, III, "Harvard Business School Restudies Itself," Fortune, Vol. 99, No. 12 (June 18, 1979), pp. 49-58.
- (4) McNair, Malcolm P., The Case Method at the Harvard Business School, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1954.