

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR CASES

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Cases have played a small, but significant, part of ABSEL's growth and development. In early conferences and proceedings, references to cases were infrequent and debates were often held to discuss whether or not cases were actually a part of experiential learning. In later years, cases, particularly "live cases," became part of ABSEL's research and application streams and, in fact, a major case track was developed for each of the three recent meetings. The involvement of ABSEL and its members in case research and case application raises several critical issues for consideration.

### A PREVIOUS ARGUMENT

Several ABSEL conferences ago, I wrote a somewhat controversial (deliberately), occasionally quoted, paper entitled "Experiential Learning: If It Feels Good, Do It!" In that paper and the related discussion, I argued that perhaps we were struggling too hard to evaluate various forms of experiential learning because, in fact, what we were trying to evaluate is not measurable within standard research formats. I concluded, for the sake of argument, that we all are capable of instinctively evaluating what we do. This capability for inductive evaluation is something most professional educators develop after years and years of course work, research attempts, and practical experience. We seem to develop an uncanny ability to sense, if we care to, the success of our lectures, examinations, experiential exercises, simulations, and cases.

### THE ARGUMENT APPLIED TO CASE RESEARCH

My reaction to the topic of "Designs for Research on Simulation-Games, Cases, and Other Experiential Exercises" is quite similar to my position on evaluation. I am professionally and personally concerned that we may be attempting to do the impossible, achieve the unnecessary, and present it to the uninterested. This is particularly evident when we look at the interest shown by practical ABSEL sessions versus purely theoretical research sessions. We are interested, in very practical terms, in what works. And it is apparent that this is what ABSEL members are interested in, writing about, and making work in their classrooms.

The issue before us is how this relates to using cases for a research base. But first, there is one final point to clarify. I am not now, either personally nor professionally, opposed to theoretical research. I am opposed to any research, applied or theoretical, which does not have practical application. Too often, practical ideas from one source do not work for another teacher or in a different setting. I suggest simply that the number of variables we deal with in education, particularly in experiential education, are far too numerous to quantify and effectively research using "traditional" research techniques.

Cases present some unique problems and opportunities. The development of cases with effective teaching materials is to some observers a declining art. The reward structure for publishing cases does not equal that of publishing research reports. Yet the benefits of thoroughly examining a company or situation and effectively writing a teaching tool based on

that experience are personally very rewarding (a clear internal versus external dilemma). The development of good cases is

research and the standards for measurement should not be the need for overall concepts or principles developed from the case. If the case accurately portrays a real or simulated situation, meets objectives in a teaching and learning environment, and can be evaluated for effectiveness, the only conclusion is that it is good research. Cases also present opportunities to teach effective research techniques, although the problems of students simply discovering what really happened do present some of the problems in case development and analysis.

There is one example of case research that I think deserves description in this forum: the idea of using cases as a form of feedback to participants and as the basis of data collection for applied research and publication. Using a case as the basis for an assignment, participants can be asked to analyze, present the case, and/or submit written papers. In one format, students can be asked to analyze a number of small cases, in an in-basket format, and record their responses to a standardized set of options. Data can then be collected from a number of different groups and reported. The most serious limitation of this design is that, in many environments, a long period of time elapses before a sufficient data base can be generated. It does, however, meet some of the basic criteria of valid research:

practical, interesting, and often replicable.

### SUMMARY

The issues of research are simple questions with very complicated answers. The questions are What, HOW, Why. Maybe the questions are too simple -- and that is why we will never be able to develop a set of final answers.