

STUDENTS' VIEW ON THE USE OF CASE METHOD IN CHINA

Jimmy Chang
Kwan-ling Ng
Karen Ka-leung Moon

Bosco Yu
Lai-kuen Chan
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
tchangj@inet.polyu.edu.hk

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a survey of students' view on the usage of the case method in China. The findings strongly support the effectiveness of the case method. Problems and difficulties are identified.

INTRODUCTION

The case method is regarded as very popular among students and they see it as an effective approach to teaching strategic management (Wheelen and Hunger, 2004). Its role in strategic management is confirmed by Alexander, et al, (1986), Jennings (1996), and Chang, et al (1999, 2001).

In a recent survey of lecturers, David Jennings (1996) and Jimmy Chang, et al (2001) confirmed that case study method is a major method employed in teaching strategic management, and stressed the need for lecturers to define their objectives in using specific cases. They provided an in-depth analysis of what the case study method is able to achieve. Cases are supposed to be illustrative and can be related to strategic analysis and strategic thinking. They require communication and interpersonal skills, serve pedagogic expedience, are integrative, and related to information skills (Jennings, 1996, Chang et al, 2001). To what extent, would students in China whose first language is not English consider the case method as an effective approach to learning strategic management and achieving what the case method is designed to achieve?

Thus, the authors examined how students in China evaluate the objectives of the case study approach and the use of cases in their course. In addition, the authors had sought to find out if the students in Hong Kong agree that the case method can help them in understanding strategic management as a process. Hence, the following hypothesis was established:

Working hypothesis, $H_o: P=P_o=0.5$; and

Alternative Hypothesis, $H_a: P>0.5$;

Where P = the proportion of students in China, who agree that the case method help them understand the subject of strategic management.

$P_o = 0.5$ when there is no difference between the proportion of students in China, who agree and those who disagree.

METHODOLOGY

A survey questionnaire was conducted with two groups of students in 2004: a) part-time postgraduate students who enrolled in the subject of Strategic Management in quality in Shanghai, China and b) part-time postgraduate students who enrolled in the subject of Strategic Management in quality in Hangzhou, China. Participants in this survey have gone through the case study method in the course of their learning. A total of 57 questionnaires were administered and fifty-seven usable questionnaires were received.

DISCUSSION

Students were asked if the case method has helped them understand the subject content in strategic management. They could choose to answer agree, disagree, or neutral. Table 1 shows the result.

Fifty-four respondents (96.7%) agreed with the statement that the case method has helped them while none of the respondents disagreed. Only two neutral responses were recorded and constitute 3.5%. The z value, 2.000 is significant at 0.000 level. The result supports the alternative hypothesis (H_a) - the percentage of students who agreed that the case method can help them in learning the subject is greater than those that disagreed. In another Hong Kong study by Chang et al (1998), 266 participants (75.78%) agreed with the statement that the case method has helped them while 8 (0.027%) disagreed and 77 (21.93%) neutral responses were recorded.

The z values, 4.243 and 6.000, for the Shanghai students and the Hangzhou students respectively are both significant at 0.000 level. It is evident that both Shanghai and Hangzhou students seems to appreciate it more and this may be explained by their exposure to the realities of business and the way that cases are descriptive of experiences of their organisations.

Table 1: Students' View on the Effectiveness of Case Method

| | Shanghai Test Postgraduate Statistic <u>Students z</u> | | | Hangzhou Test Postgraduate Statistic <u>Students z</u> | | | Combined Test Shanghai & Statistic Hangzhou z Postgraduate <u>Students</u> | | |
|--|--|----|---------|--|----|---------|--|----|---------|
| | Yes | No | Neutral | Yes | No | Neutral | Yes | No | Neutral |
| Case method helps students understand the subject of strategic management. | 18 | 0 | 1 | 36 | 0 | 1 | 54 | 0 | 2 |
| | 4.243*** | | | 6.000*** | | | 2.000*** | | |

Note: 1. $z = (x - np_0) / [np_0(1 - p_0)]^{0.5}$,

Where x = number of students agreed the case method help them understand the subject of strategic management

n = sample size = 18 (for Shanghai postgraduate students);

n = sample size = 36 (for Hangzhou postgraduate students);

n = sample size = 54 (for the combined Shanghai and Hangzhou postgraduate students)

$p_0 = 0.5$.

2. *** significant at 0.000 level. (All at single-tail test)

Only 2 responses fall into this category of neutral response and no disagreement was recorded. This is true in the HK study (Chang, Lee, and Ng, 1998). Further enquiry is needed to find out why they are not comfortable with the cases used in their programme study.

A list of learning objectives associated with the case method Romm and Mahler (1991), Osigweh (1989), Christensen (1987), and Dooley and Skinner (1977), Jennings (1996), Chang et al (2001) was used to examine whether or not students agree with them. Table 2 summarizes the result.

All of the respondents involved in the study agreed that learning objectives are to acquire knowledge (Item a): to develop analysis and synthesis (Item c); and to relate theory to practice and assist with the long-term retention of that understanding (Item d). This is consistent with the previous study conducted in Hong Kong (Chang, Lee and Ng, 1999).

Over ninety percent of the students agreed that learning objectives are to confront the complexities of specific situations (Item b); to transfer knowledge and techniques from classroom to the manager's own organization (Item e); to illustrate issues or managerial principles (Item g); to develop judgment and wisdom. (Item j); to enliven teaching (Item k); and to bring realism into instructional settings (Item m). Less than six percent of the students disagreed that the above objectives can achieve what they were intended to achieve!

'Neutral' responses (less than 9 percent) were recorded for all except the three items only (a, c, & d). When compared these results with the HK study (Chang, Lee, and Ng, 1999), less than forty percent of the Hong Kong respondents had neutral responses in all category while less than nine percent in ten out of thirteen items in China. 'Disagree' responses were also recorded in eight items (e, f, h, i, j, k, l, & m). When compared with the previous Hong Kong study on case method, less than eight percent of the respondents disagreed on all the thirteen items. Though the 'neutral' responses and "disagree" responses are low, there is still a need for lecturers to question the use of case studies, to clarify particular objectives associated with the choice of specific cases and, to select the appropriate case to use in strategic management as suggested by Jennings (1996). It could be also the result of poor implementation of the case study rather than the criticism of the case method itself (Osigweh, 1989). In addition, lecturers need to be aware of the reasons why they employ the case method for their classes. In other words, they have to define their teaching objectives before the selection of the case (Jennings, 1996, Chang et al 2001). The current study documents how students in China evaluate the learning objectives of the case method and their effectiveness.

Students were asked if they agreed with the objectives of case study as identified by Jennings (1996) and Chang et al (2001) in their studies in UK and HK. Table 3 summarizes the result.

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Table 2: Students' View on the Learning Objectives of the Case Method

| <u>Learning Objectives</u> | <u>Disagree(%)</u> | <u>Neutral(%)</u> | <u>Agree(%)</u> |
|--|-----------------------------|---|---|
| a) To acquire knowledge | 0* 10 [#] (2.9) | 0* 62 [#] (17.6) [#] | 57* (100) 279 [#] (79.0) [#] |
| b) To confront the complexities of specific situations | 0 9 (2.5) | 2 (3.5) 118 (33.4) | 55 (96.5) 224 (63.8) |
| c) To develop analysis and synthesis | 0 6 (1.7) | 0 77 (21.8) | 57 (100) 268 (75.9) |
| d) To relate theory to practice and assist the long term retention of that understanding. | 0 2 (2.3) | 0 86 (24.4) | 57 (100) 256 (72.5) |
| e) To transfer knowledge and techniques from classroom to the manager's own organization. | 2 (3.5) 23 (6.5) | 2 (3.5) 107 (30.3) | 53 (93) 221 (62.6) |
| f) To develop interpersonal skills, communication and listening skills. | 5 (8.8) 25 (7.1) | 2 (3.5) 110 (31.1) | 50 (87.7) 215 (60.9) |
| g) To illustrate issues or managerial principles. | 0 13 (3.7) | 1 (1.8) 109 (30.9) | 56 (98.2) 229 (65.3) |
| h) To provide managers with a neutral situation in which they are free to explore problem that are not their own | 2 (3.5) 19 (5.4) | 5 (8.8) 120 (34.0) | 50 (87.7) 212 (60.0) |
| i) To develop self analysis, attitudes, confidence, Responsibilities. | 5 (8.8) 24 (6.8) | 2 (3.5) 96 (27.2) | 50 (87.7) 230 (65.2) |
| j) To develop judgment and wisdom. | 3 (5.3) 19 (5.4) | 2 (3.5) 104 (29.5) | 52 (91.2) 227 (64.3) |
| k) To enliven teaching. | 2 (3.5) 19 (5.4) | 2 (3.5) 145 (41.1) | 53 (93) 184 (52.1) |
| l) To involve students intellectually and emotionally. | 3 (5.3) 23 (6.5) | 4 (7.0) 105 (29.7) | 50 (87.7) 222 (62.9) |
| m) To bring realism into instructional settings | 2 (3.5) 13 (3.7) | 2 (3.5) 103 (29.2) | 53 (93) 235 (66.5) |

Note: 1. * - Current survey responses from China
 2. # - Previous survey responses from Hong Kong
 3. # - Missing cases for (a) 2; (b) 2; (c) 2; (d) 3; (e) 2; (f) 3; (g) 2; (h) 2; (i) 2; (j) 2; (k)5; (l) 3; (m) 2 for the Hong Kong Study only.

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Table 3: Students' Views on the Case Study Objectives

| | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| a) Illustrative purposes | 0* 9# (2.6)# | 4* (7.0)* 83# (23.5)# | 53* (93)* 256# (72.5)# |
| b) Strategic analysis/ strategic thinking objective | 1 (1.8) 7 (2.0) | 1 (1.8) 68 (19.3) | 55 (96.5) 275 (77.9) |
| c) Pedagogic expedience | 3 (5.3) 23 (6.5) | 6(10.5) 119 (33.7) | 48 (84.2) 205 (58.1) |
| d) Communication and interpersonal skills | 2 (3.5) 14 (4.0) | 5(8.8) 62 (17.6) | 50 (87.7) 275 (77.9) |
| f) Integrative objective | 1 (1.8) 10 (2.8) | 6(10.5) 98 (27.8) | 50 (87.7) 243 (68.8) |
| g) Information skills | 2 (3.5) 18 (5.1) | 6(10.5) 97 (27.5) | 49 (86) 236 (66.8) |

- Note:
1. * - Current survey responses from China study.
 2. # - Previous survey responses from Hong Kong study.
 3. # - Missing cases for (a) 5; (b) 3; (c) 6; (d) 2; (e) 2; and (f) 2 for the Hong Kong Study only.

The case method appears to be a highly suitable tool for illustrative purposes (Item a) and the development of strategic analysis/strategic thinking (Item b). In fact, over eighty percent of the students in China indicated their agreement with the objectives stated in case method. This is also supported by the HK study though the percentages of support were around sixty to seventy percents compared with eighty and ninety percents in China. The development of analytical skills, teamwork, and report writing comes from having to deal with the complexity of the case and the

subsequent demand on students to justify the recommendations they make.

LIMITATION OF CASE STUDY METHOD

The authors also discovered the students' views on the limitations of the case study method. Based on Kennings study (1996), three areas were examined in the current study. Namely demand on student's time, scope for analysis, and relevance. Table 4 summarizes the result.

Table 4: Limitation of the Case Study

| | Disagree (%) | Neutral (%) | Agree (%) |
|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a) Demands on student's time | 1* (1.8)* 6# (1.7)# | 4* (7.0)* 84# (23.8)# | 52* (91.2)* 261# (74.0)# |
| b) Scope for analysis | 2 (3.5) 11 (3.1) | 5 (8.8) 96 (27.2) | 50 (87.7) 244 (69.5) |
| c) Relevance | 3 (5.3) 13 (3.7) | 3 (5.3) 100 (28.3) | 51 (89.5) 238 (67.4) |

- Note:
1. * - Current survey responses from China study.
 2. # - Previous survey responses from Hong Kong study.
 3. # - Missing cases for (a) 2; (b) 2; and (c) 2 for the Hong Kong Study only.

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Eighty-nine percent of the total students admitted the company described in the case was not known to them. The need to familiarize themselves with such a company means learning about the company from scratch! This signifies the importance of the availability of local cases. As Jennings (1996) suggested the problems could be alleviated through case research writing to include case that have a regional or local focus. Nevertheless exposure to unfamiliar organizations can be a real challenge and not all students will find that undesirable!

CONCLUSION

The present study confirms that the case method is effective in helping students to learn the subject of strategic management. It helps lecturers to understand the students' view on the use of the case approach and the objectives normally associated with cases. Suitable strategic management cases serve to help students acquire knowledge, to develop analysis and synthesis, to relate theory to practice and assist the long term retention of that understanding. More emphasis and efforts need to be invested by lecturers in enhancing the achievement of the other objectives which may be less obvious to students. This means careful selection of cases and making learning objectives more explicit to students.

The case method is a suitable tool for illustrative purposes, for the development of strategic analysis/strategic thinking and communication and interpersonal skills. Well organized discussions which tend to develop analytical skills, teamwork, and subsequent report writing do make significant demands on the students' time and their capacity to manage complex descriptive material. This must be understood in the light of the fact that English is not their first language. Overall, the use of case method is supported by students in China to effect learning and understanding of the strategic management.

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