

A DIFFERENT TAKE ON “LIVE” CASES: DECISION MAKING UNDER TIME PRESSURE

Kiersten M. Maryott, Ph.D.
University of Pittsburgh
kmm174@pitt.edu

ABSTRACT

A concern expressed with the traditional case method is an overall lack of “realism”. The “live” case format provides more realism in that the content of the case is timely and, given the personal involvement of the company’s key decision-makers, can cover much more detail, expressing more of the vibrancy of the actual situation (Markulis, 1985). Most of the published research related to “live” cases describes these “live” cases as more of project, spanning multiple weeks within the course (Abston, 2014; Abston & Vuong, 2017; Ancona, Ross, Wallace & Weir, 1977; Green & Erdem, 2016; Hoover, 1977; Levi, Cannon & Friesen, 2012; Markulis, 1985; Weir, 1978). While a “live” case spanning multiple weeks can certainly provide a very valuable learning experience (Abston, 2014; Hoover, 1977; Markulis, 1985), it does not provide the student with experience making decisions under severe time constraints and with limited information. This paper explains a different format for “live” cases, a format that requires students to “think on their feet” and create recommendations for a client within a much shorter frame of time.

INTRODUCTION

A concern expressed with the traditional case method is an overall lack of “realism”. This lack of “realism” stems from 1) the lack of detail, given that a written document cannot possibly cover the elaborate details that occurred at the time of the actual event, and 2) that once the event has passed, it is hard to convey the same urgency in students as when the event was actually occurring (Markulis, 1985). A solution, often discussed in the literature, is a “live” case (Abston, 2014; Abston & Vuong, 2017; Ancona, Ross, Wallace & Weir, 1977; Green & Erdem, 2016; Hoover, 1977; Levi, Cannon & Friesen, 2012; Markulis, 1985; Weir, 1978). According to Markulis (1985), the important features of a “live” case are as follows:

(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. (p. 169)

As such, the “live” case format provides more realism in that the content of the case is timely and, given the personal involvement of the company’s key decision-makers, can cover much more detail, expressing more of the vibrancy of the actual situation.

An additional concern, given students’ access to online resources, is that often the “answers” to traditional cases are readily available for students to purchase. A quick Internet search for “answers” to cases written by this paper’s author, which were only used in her own courses, results in numerous opportunities to buy previous students’ answers to these cases. One solution to this problem, if an instructor wants to continue using traditional cases, is to write new cases for each new semester. Obviously, this solution is incredibly time and effort intensive. If an instructor wished to use multiple cases each term, given the time/effort required and availability of relevant content to use, probably impossible. As with the concern for lack of realism, “live” cases seem a great solution to address the cheating potential associated with traditional case method instruction. Given the personal involvement of the company, the fact that the situation has either just happened or is something the organization is currently facing, means that this particular “live” case situation has not yet been “seen” in academia and therefore no “answers” should currently exist.

One of the pillars of our MBA program is the idea of being “Katz Ready”. Being “Katz Ready” translates to enabling our students to “hit the ground running” when they graduate and being able to immediately contribute to an organization. Given this focus on immediately being able to provide value to an organization, experience based learning is a central part of our curriculum. One component of being “Katz Ready” is being “Boardroom Ready”. Managers often have to make decisions with limited information and with severe time constraints. In order for students to become “Boardroom Ready” they need experience making decisions and/or creating recommendations based on limited information and under time-pressure. Most of the published research related to “live” cases describes these “live” cases as more of project, spanning multiple weeks within the course (Abston, 2014; Abston & Vuong, 2017; Ancona, Ross, Wallace & Weir, 1977; Green & Erdem, 2016; Hoover, 1977; Levi, Cannon & Friesen, 2012; Markulis, 1985; Weir, 1978). While a “live” case spanning multiple weeks can certainly provide a very valuable learning experience (Abston, 2014; Hoover, 1977; Markulis, 1985), it does not provide the student with experience making decisions under severe time constraints. This paper explains a different format for “live” cases, a format that requires students to “think on their feet” and create recommendations for a client within a much shorter frame of time.

THE COURSE

The course is a 1.5 credit 7-week MBA course on the topic of “Services Marketing”. This is an elective course taken primarily by students with a Marketing concentration. The class is held one evening a week for 3 hours at a time.

THE ASSIGNMENT

The live case takes place entirely within one 3-hour class session. For each live case, a local organization visited during a class session and at the start of class presented the class with a challenge (this could be an opportunity the company is facing, a current problem, etc...). During the presentation of the challenge, the company representatives provided background details as needed. Following the presentation of the challenge, the company representative had a question and answer (Q&A) session with students. Following the Q&A session, the students (in teams) are provide 1 hour to do further research and to put together a 10 – 15 minute presentation for the client, to address the proposed challenge. While the student teams are working on their research, recommendations, and presentation the client was available to answer any further questions that came up. At the end of the 1-hour time lime, the teams reconvened in the classroom and delivered their presentations to the client. As the teams made their presentations, they had the opportunity to get immediate feedback from the company, both specifically regarding each team’s recommendations and, at the end, overall feedback based on the combination of recommendations from all teams.

RESULTS & IMPLICATIONS

This format has been used in three separate offerings of this course. In addition to the University’s “Evaluation of Teaching” survey, an anonymous survey was conducted in Blackboard (our online course management platform) to allow the author to dig a little deeper and get feedback on various components of the course. This section discusses the results of those two feedback surveys, across the three different semesters, as they relate to the “live” cases.

Overall, students found the live cases to be an incredibly valuable learning experience. First, I will present comments students provided in the anonymous survey I conducted within Blackboard. In response to the question “Please provide me with overall feedback on the live case component of the course. Were they valuable? What did you like? Not like? Would you recommend I utilize this concept (potentially with different organizations) in future terms? Do you have recommendations for specific companies I should try to bring in?”

- The overall live case component was the best part of the class. I think we learned so much from the real situations that they were experiencing on a day to day basis
- I thought the live cases were engaging and valuable. The challenges varied and required quick thinking. I recommend this going forward.
- The live cases were one of the main highlights of this class for me. I was really intimidated by the concept when it was first introduced on the syllabus but I am so glad that I got a chance to participate in them. Not only did they introduce real applications to marketing, but forced me to think on the spot, argue a case that I was minimally prepared for, etc. I would definitely recommend you continue utilizing this concept!
- I could not have been more impressed by this method of education. The number of positives are simply astounding, having the subjects the case surrounds in the room to interview and get further clarification beyond what would ever be found in a standard case was outstanding. Being able to get this in depth look and for the most part customize the case to the needs and interests of the class was awesome. Another great aspect of this style was the fact that we could get instant feedback on our suggestions, see what has already been incorporated since the case was “written”, this added a level of education and insight that a simple text [case] could never provide. I would HIGHLY recommend you continue to drive this style of case work, in fact I would recommend this be shared as a best practice across the campus.
- Live cases were a challenge and very helpful for the learning process. I liked everything about this and I just think we would have two live cases instead of three because I needed more time for the content program too.
- Yes they were valuable. I liked that we had to work together and present in a limited amount of time. It was interesting to see that we were able to come up with pretty well thought out presentations in that short amount of time. I would definitely utilize this for future teams. It helps team members to understand how the others think and work and ultimately work more efficiently together.
- I quite like the idea of live cases as a concept, but I feel there is room for improvement in execution. Time constraints made it very difficult to get any more than a cursory understanding of the organizations we were analyzing, and as a result I think a lot of students' insights were redundant and somewhat superficial. I would consider conducting the entire live case together as a class, rather than breaking up into groups, to allow for more focus and a deeper dive with ongoing client feedback. If continuing to break into groups, I would at least recommend having each group focus on a different part of the assignment to see a more diverse array of answers. As constructed, it felt like we were bound to end up telling our clients things they already knew. I would have preferred the opportunity to solve an actual problem for them.
- The concept of the live case is excellent. Broadly speaking, I liked having some information available beforehand, as we did with The Penguins Foundation. I would recommend continuing to use this concept.
- Katz encourages all students to participate in case competitions, but to be honest, just the idea of a competition of that nature

really intimidates me. Knowing that I was required to do two in this class was worrisome, but they helped me tremendously. Not only did it give me my first hands-on experience with cases, but both made me feel a little less concerned about taking part in a competition in the future. For the second case, I wish we had been given some information prior to class, but otherwise, it was a great experience.

- Overall, the live case component of the class was a great and refreshing way to attack case studies. I love the idea of having a class where we have a limited amount of time to solve a real world issue with in an actual company in [our city]. These sessions were absolutely valuable and I would definitely recommend utilizing these as much as possible. The one recommendation I have is to be a little more clear about the specifics of what is actually being asked by the company during the case. Sometimes our group felt like with the limited amount of time given - the scope of the case was too large to tackle.
- They were valuable because it required us to think on the fly and deliver a result to the client.
- I definitely recommend you continue to utilize this concept. It is tough, no doubt, but I think the challenge and unrealistic time limits is a valuable learning tool and a real life constraint. My main concern with the live cases is that I almost feel like there isn't enough time to fully deliver value to the participating orgs. Ultimately, that is for them to decide I just hope they derived value from it and that it accurately represented [our] MBA students.
- I enjoyed the live cases. It made us work during class and we also got live feedback from the companies. I think these are a good item to continue with moving forward. I would suggest providing students with more background information prior to the class on either the company or the specific case. For example, our class did not know what inbound marketing was and I think this hindered us in the case since we had 5 min to learn it before applying the concept to their company. I thought that the quality of our recommendations could have been better if we had a little more prep. I also think that providing students with more information beforehand will further separate those that prepared and those that did not.
- I enjoyed the live cases. I thought it was a great way to engage the class through brainstorming in a brief amount of time and being able to present the ideas to the individuals involved. I think it allowed for application of our studies as well as the ability to present, which I think is a skill that can always be improved. Receiving feedback was also nice to have. I would complain about the 1-hour time limit, but I think that was great because it made us have to focus and organize thoughts and make a plan. I don't have any recommendations for other companies but I definitely think you should continue these.
- Overall, I enjoyed the live cases. I think they were valuable for developing quick thinking skills, as well as preparing a succinct presentation. I liked that the live cases were interactive with the clients and other students in the classroom. I do think that having information on the case prior to class was helpful in preparation for a valuable presentation to the clients. Researching the topic further prior to class gave more time for students to collaborate and create thoughtful recommendations.

I get a much higher response rate in the Blackboard survey because the students get a very small number of points towards their grade simply for completing the survey. The survey is entirely anonymous, I can tell whether or not someone has completed the survey, however I cannot tell whether or not someone provides detailed feedback or quick cursory responses. While I do incentivize students to complete the survey, I typically get quite detailed responses (as one can see in the above comments), so it does not seem that students feel “forced” to respond. I would think that if students felt forced to respond, their feedback would be much shorter and without as much detail.

University wide, there is a fairly low response rate to the evaluation of teaching survey. The University wide survey asks broad questions related to instructor effectiveness and course effectiveness. Given the lower response rate and the broader questions, it is not surprising that there is less feedback specifically related to the live case component of the course. The following comments are taken directly from the University evaluation of teaching survey. Only comments related to the live case component are provided.

- Live case studies were such a good practice for implementing course topics in a live setting
- The case assignments with the companies that came in were really helpful and fun to work on
- The live cases are fantastic, and I wish they were incorporated into more of my classes at [the business school].
- The live cases were definitely a very interesting learning experience and helped with the knowledge.
- Include more activities like the case assignments
- Reduce the "busy work", readings, blogs, etc. and increase the focus on the live cases. I truly feel that I gained a greater understanding in speaking with the external client. Very interesting.
- I really enjoyed the live cases. I thought the hand-on experience and having a short time frame to brainstorm was a great use of time and putting forth what we were learning.

There has been some disagreement among students regarding the number of live cases to complete during the term. With only 7 class sessions, when I originally designed the course I offered 3 live cases – which left 3 sessions for content delivery and 1 session for a final exam. Based on student feedback and their desire for additional content, the last 3 offerings of the course have had 2 live cases – leaving 4 sessions for content delivery and 1 class session for a full-term project presentation. A typical term schedule has content delivery the first 4 weeks, 2 live cases in weeks 5 and 6, and then a final project presentation during week 7. Clients for the live cases have included The Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation, SDLC Partners, American Diabetes Association (#340Design), Newton Consulting, Brunner, and the University of Pittsburgh Community Engagement Centers.

There is solid agreement that the live cases offer an incredibly valuable learning experience. Even without any prompts related to “time pressure”, it is interesting to note that quite a few students bring up the time pressure inherent in the assignment and how valuable an experience it was to have to come up with recommendations within such a short time window. Anecdotally, I also

had students tell me what a great experience the live cases were in the course and that they found them so much more valuable than traditional case analysis. I even had one student report that she almost dropped the class when she found out about the 1-hour time limit, but was so happy that she decided to stay in the class as it was one of the most valuable learning experiences she had in the MBA program. Several students mentioned that they wished this practice was used in more courses. Part of being “Boardroom Ready” requires students to be able to think on their feet and to realize that sometimes they have to put together a presentation with limited notice and time. Students were very nervous about this at first, but definitely saw the value once having the experience.

REFERENCES

- Abston, K. A. (2014). Comparing Live and Traditional Case Studies in a Dual-Level Compensation and Benefits Course. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 41, 236-237.
- Abston, K. A. & Vuong, J. (2017). Training and Development: A Live Case Project. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 44, 78-81.
- Ancona, J.; Ross, K. A.; Wallace, T. L., & Weir, J. E. (1977). An Experiential Understanding of the Trust Dimension Using Consulting Cases to Teach Business Policy. *New Horizons in Simulation Games and Experiential Learning*, 4, 49-66.
- Green, A. & Erdem, M. (2016). Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Industry in Hospitality: Using Real Life Case Studies. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 43, 43-46.
- Hoover, J. D. (1977). A “Live-Case” Approach to the Business and Society Course. *New Horizons in Simulation Games and Experiential Learning*, 4, 159-165.
- Levi, A.; Cannon, H. M. & Friesen, D. P. (2012). The Use of Data in “Live” Cases to Encourage Systems Thinking and Integrative Analysis: An Exercise in Linking Human Resource Programs and Financial Outcomes in Real Organization. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 39, 268-278.
- Markulis, P. M. (1985). The Live Case Study: Filling the Gap Between the Case Study and Experiential Exercise. *Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises*, 12, 168-171.
- Weir, J. E. (1978). The Use of a Live Case in Teaching Organizational Theory and Management Principles to Graduate Students. *Exploring Experiential Learning: Simulations and Experiential Exercises*, 5, 228-234.