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THE USE OF VIDEOTAPED CASES IN TEACHING INFORMATION ACQUISITION AND DECISION-MAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an alternative to the traditional use of business cases in teaching decision making. The skills required of a student in dealing with written case materials are quite different from skills later needed on the job: to listen, take notes, and formulate responses to problems communicated verbally. The authors have developed several variations of audio- visually based cases. Advantages and disadvantages of these pedagogical alternatives are discussed.

Uses and Limitations of Traditional Teaching

The long history of the use of case analysis in colleges of business testifies to its rich contribution in the classroom. It provides the instructor with a tool, whereby a more holistic approach to problem-solving can be taught. Further, it can present the student with a situation which could arise in reality, thereby simulating actual decision-making experience. While one could list many other positive benefits of case instruction, it is the purpose of this paper to examine some specific limitations of this method and suggest ways an alternative approach may be used.

Despite the involvement generated by case analysis, it would be highly desirable to find a way to "bring the case to life." Students rarely suspend their disbelief in the case analysis process. Additionally, it might be argued that receiving the material in a case in its totality is somewhat artificial as business problems typically unfold over time through verbal and written interaction. Cases are usually written from a single point of view despite the large number of viewpoints represented in a typical business situation. Long cases tend to bog students down in detail while short cases tend to lack depth.

No teaching methodology is without its limitations and case analysis is no exception. A rather serious gap exists in many instructional programs that could be filled through the creative modification of the case approach.

Adapting Video Tape Techniques to Case Analysis Instruction

Although numerous applications of video tape have been made in decision-making [2, pp. 79-81; 4, p. 3+; 6, pp. 64-72] little has been done in adapting tape to the presentation of decision cases. A series of experiments were performed to determine: (1) whether written assignments based on taped cases were as good as those based on traditional written cases; (2) whether students found taped cases as challenging and as satisfying as traditional written cases; (3) whether companies would be willing to cooperate in the production of video taped interviews on which cases could be based. Some of the findings of the earlier experiments have been reported elsewhere [7, pp. 145-147]. Briefly, it was found that blind referees could not find differences in student papers that were based on taped cases, except when they were better than assignments based on written cases. Students found taped cases initially more frustrating, but eventually more satisfying. The note taking and listening skills required to do a taped case was, at first, threatening to most students. Most students, however, reported that video taped cases were more challenging and therefore more satisfying once

completed.

Firms were reluctant to participate for three reasons: (1) the fear that an employee would slip and say something either embarrassing or confidential in nature while being interviewed; (2) that information contained in the case would somehow be used against them; (3) that they would be criticized by their own superiors for taking part in such a project.

That reluctance of firms was the only major discouragement to the project but other problems also presented the need to revise the technique. The following section deals with the various ways adaptation of the original technique was accomplished.

Problems Encountered

Several problems are addressed in the list below with some possible solutions:

1. Obtaining the permission of firms to tape interviews. There is a common reluctance to having something documented on tape that might hurt the firm at a later date. Experience has shown that if firms are aware of the care that will go into the production of the taped case, about one out of three will agree. Assuring the firm that if they later find themselves in a situation which would require them to withdraw permission for the tape, they can do so without question. Revocable permission will make cooperation easier to obtain. That, of course, places the instructor in the position of having to give up the use of a good case periodically. The alternative is to deal with organizations that do not require confidentiality, such as non-profit organizations. Much of their dealings are already public in nature.
2. If in the taping of an interview, sensitive information arises, it may be more productive to edit it out than have trouble getting a release from the firm. Some firms will not release the use of the case until they have seen the final version edited.
3. Some visual cues are not easily taped. Depending on the nature of the problem, slides and printed material can be added to the presentation of the case. Slides can be taped into the edited version of the video tape and printed material can be handed out as with traditional written case material. Flexibility is important. The objective is realism and communication in a normal framework, not only to use video tape.
4. Some tapes would get quite boring if used in their entirety. It is helpful to use a voice-over to summarize material at certain points.
5. It is tempting to "dramatize" a case when company officials refuse to be interviewed. Experience has shown that it is much less effective, even with good acting.

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6. Students are usually unprepared to do video cases the first time. Preparing the students to expect a difficult time in doing the first case or two will help, but there will still usually be a high level of frustration for students in the early stages of case analysis.
7. Students will find they take notes quite differently from each other and will therefore not agree on many "facets" of the case when they discuss it in class. The instructor may wish to downplay differences if they are small or occasionally replay the taped segment if it is convenient.

The Video Taped Meeting

In looking for ways to present a real business problem, from multiple points of view, in a realistic manner, it was discovered that most small staff meetings in most firms deal with a single problem. Several actual meetings were taped in different contexts and with different numbers of people [7, pp. 145-147]. Although the technical production was rather primitive, the outcome was encouraging. Students were initially frustrated with the new approach but later evaluated it as a very satisfying experience. In addition to the taped meeting, a number of other cases have been produced and tested in the classroom. The following is a listed description of other variations of video taped cases that have proved successful:

1. Taped interviews with a land developer wherein he describes the current marketing problems associated with a particular development at several points in time. This was done over several months as a local market softened for his product.
2. Taped interviews with representatives of a local bank fighting the charter application of a proposed new bank and with representatives of that new bank. Each presented "facts" supporting their points of view concerning the need for such a bank.
3. Interviews with different members of a channel of distribution, each presenting his perception of the power held by each role in the channel. This works particularly well in a channel experiencing a downturn in sales. Attribution of blame for the problem is quite striking.
4. Tape focus group interviews to have students design a proposed market survey. Depth interviews with individuals can be used to demonstrate the difference in project direction that might result from basing it on either individual pilot interviews or focus group responses.

Other experiments are planned which would include interviews with different functional managers in a marketing organization as to how they perceive a new product development decision and interviews with two marketers in a competing market as to how they would each describe the market in a single geographic area.

Although the context of the recent experiments was a marketing program, adaptations can easily be made in other functional areas of business. Examples might include the taping of meetings involving personnel policy, labor negotiations, and discussions about venture capital acquisition strategies.

Other Formats for Presenting Video Cases

In addition to the taping of meetings, a number of other formats have been useful in preparing video cases. Virtually any forum that would prevent the details of a business situation is potentially useful as a video case. The following list of alternative formats for video cases have proved helpful in providing training or variety for the student:

1. Prepare students for doing taped cases by having a short

"listening" exercise in class. Students will probably do poorly answering questions about a taped meeting but it prepares them to take the notes needed in video case analysis.

2. Tape several customer complaints. (These are easy to find by asking students or faculty to describe purchasing problems they have recently encountered.) Have students formulate policies for responding to consumer complaints.
3. Have a professional salesperson deliver a sales presentation in a real or role playing situation. Have students critique it from the standpoint of a sales manager.
4. Tape interviews with salespeople who have recently sold a major appliance or house and then tape a parallel interview with the buyer. Their perceptions of the selling/buying processes frequently contrast rather sharply. Have students do an "autopsy" on the sale, showing ways in which sales people could have been more responsible to customer needs. Although it is difficult to find them or get cooperation, a more interesting case is the sale that failed.
5. Tape news excerpts from a "breaking" news story showing how a firm deals with a public relations problem or product recall. This requires much time and may involve copyright infringement.
6. Go back to interviewees in any of these situations a couple of years later and have them add a post script. Time perspective is usually demonstrated to the students this way.

Conclusions

The use of video taped cases offers a number of very promising directions for business education. Like most teaching techniques it presents problems and requires both time and money to be done correctly. There is a virtually endless number of possibilities and applications which arise from the basic video case form. Students have found the technique to be helpful to them after the initial adjustments have been made. Of the many techniques that are now available to vary the student's learning experience, few offer more potential relevance than video cases. Future applications will involve combining video cases with other educational techniques.

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Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 10, 1983

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