MCSJ The Management Case Study Journal

THE IMPORTANCE AND ROLE OF MANAGEMENT CASE STUDIES

Dr Bruce Gurd
Senior Lecturer
International Graduate School of Management
University of South Australia

Abstract:

This paper analyses the challenges for the development and use of management cases. The management case has value to practitioners, to students, and to academics. For practitioners the case can provide an exemplar of current practice or provide cases where problems have arisen as a guide to better management practice. To students of management the case provides a contextual basis of exploring the application of theory. Academics find values from cases as educators – although there are new issues in teaching cases that need to be addressed. The management case study is a form of legitimate academic research, that adds benefits to the practitioner, the student, and the broader research community.

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the challenges for the development and use of cases in post-graduate management education, although some of the issues are equally applicable to the undergraduate environment. There appears to be an on-going need for quality cases (O Cinneide, 1998) and hence for new journals. One reason for this is the rapidly changing business environment, including the rise of e-business. Case writers are addressing management principles in rapidly changing contexts. Change also affects the mode of educational delivery. In particular, the shift to on-line education raises new issues for the way cases are taught. The paper concludes by recognising the value of cases to the academic in their role as researcher, as well as educator.

2. The Management Case and the Practitioner

Cases can be useful to practitioners to demonstrate best practice in management or examples of poor practice. Even an historical case can be used to meet demands of current practice. The corollary is that history will suggest that the major insights of a case were a result of misunderstandings. Sometimes with the benefit of hindsight the case writer's constructions of good management practice are not sustainable. Moore's (1994) analysis of Burns Philp may appear, with the benefit of hindsight, to be overly optimistic about the "new" strategic direction. Rice (2001) produces a very different account, suggesting that major mistakes were made.

Cases can also illustrate a new technique or approach to management. Kaplan (1998) argues that the case is a critical part of the dissemination of new practice. The early development of activity based management was matched by many Harvard cases which demonstrated the use and impact of that technique. For example, Schrader Bellows (Cooper, 1986) demonstrated the proliferation of products and problems in strategy direction that can result from poor information. The Hewlett Packard Roseville Network Division (Cooper and Turney, 1989) showed how the cost accounting system needed to be modified to support an environment where product life cycles were being shortened and the information system needed to support strategy of providing a flow of new cost-effective products. Target costing was another management technique well illustrated by cases. The only problem here was that one of the exemplar cases (Cooper, 1994) became the first modern Japanese

The Management Case Study Journal is available online at: http://business.unisa.edu.au/mcsj/
and is produced by the International Graduate School of Management:
http://business.unisa.edu.au/igsm/
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automotive plant to close down – not supportive of the case. Despite the possible problems, cases could be more widely disseminated through the practitioner community as a form of continuing education. The application of management theory in a case context would give managers a deeper understanding of how to apply theory in their own organisations.

3. The Management Case in Education

3.1 The History of Cases in Management Education

Management case teaching appears to have commenced at Harvard University in approximately 1909 (Christiansen, 1987; O Cinneide, 1998), and this method developed into an "almost religious devotion to cases" (Leavitt, 1991, p.131). Today case-based teaching occurs in most post-graduate management education programs, especially in MBA programs. It is common to find strategic management texts where the case studies take up more of the book than the authors' exegesis of the principles. Many texts also provide guides to case analysis (e.g. Thomson and Strickland, 2001, C-2 to C-16) and some courseware to lead the student through the case such as Case-TutorTM provided by the publisher McGraw Hill. The case method ranks highest as the primary method of instruction by authors who have reviewed educational methods in strategic management (e.g., Alexander et al, 1986; Summer et al, 1990). In an area such as strategic management it makes little sense for educators to explore the theoretical issues in isolation from organisations in which the principles need to be applied. Yet cases have applicability to any problematic field - they add a richness to theory by showing how it can be applied to real life situations faced by managers where the consequences of choices may be irreversible. Although case studies are used widely in higher education there is little research to demonstrate improved educational outcomes (Krebar, 2001). Krebar (2001) cites the study of Halpin et al (2000) which demonstrates improved outcomes in the engineering discipline by using case studies.

3.2 The Advantages of the Case Method to Educators and Students

> *A student of business with tact*
> *Absorbed many answers he lacked.*
> *But acquiring a job,*
> *He said with a sob,*
> *"How does one fit answer with fact?"*
> (Gragg, 1940, p.4)

Despite the abundance of electronic media and other technologies to enhance education, it appears that educators have a tendency to lapse into a model where the student receives and the educator gives. The case method relies on the educator being willing to accept that educational effectiveness is more likely with an "active" or "participative" learning style than the traditional "passive" approach (O Cinneide, 1998). The emphasis is on learning by doing (Smith, 1997). Krebar (2001) demonstrates the link between the case study approach and Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning. Engagement in the case study provides concrete experience; defining the problem develops abstract conceptualisation (Krebar, 2001). The student then engages in active experimentation to produce solutions and finally engages in reflective observation (Krebar, 2001).

O Cinneide (1997) observes that moving to case-based teaching is difficult because it changes "the locus of control within the classroom from being centred on the teacher's knowledge to a fully participative group discussion" (see also Christiansen, 1987; O Cinneide, 1998). In an undergraduate environment this shift may be even more threatening as large class sizes frequently make student centred approaches to learning quite costly and more difficult to co-ordinate. Mass lecturing and multiple choice testing seem to be the easiest way out. Listening to lectures does not provide the skills to solve real management problems in real management contexts – the case method attempts to solve the problem of Gragg's student by enabling the understanding of the theory by application to real business issues.

The Gragg (1940) limerick cited above raises one of the prevailing long-term values of the case method – to address an issue through discussion and debate without the pressure of immediate action. The aim is to develop the skills to solve real management problems and to use the experience of others as a source of knowledge. The richest cases require decisions to be made (Thompson, 2000) and multiple choices for the manager. Krebar (2001) argues that a case used in learning must have enough detail that the student can sort through the relevant information and have some information to discard. Although a case used in education is often written from the viewpoint of a particular management discipline, the case writer needs to aim for a case that is not disconnected from a broader environment, and therefore may need skills and understandings from a variety of disciplines to cogently answer. Marketing cases, for example, are likely to have financial implications, and financial cases will have connections with strategy, ethics, and human behaviour.

The method is particularly suited to those who would benefit from exchanging their views on problematic concerns. In China, for example, managers are facing the pressures of changing from a centralised to a market economy and few issues have established precedents. Educators have indicated a need to move away from rote learning of the "right answer" to the challenges of decision-making and the process of debate which characterise the case method (Weber and Oleck, 1998; Forman and Rymer, 1999). Chinese students appear to welcome this change and readily accept cases, although not the teaching methods used in the West (Thompson, 2000). There is no evidence, based on national culture, that case studies are restricted in their usefulness, although they may need to be taught differently.

Easton (1982) argues that six skills are developed by the case method – analytical, application, creative, communication, social and self-analysis. It could be argued that the latter three skills could be and are developed by other parts of an education program. However, these are central skills for any manager and in casework these skills become inter-related, as they are in managerial life. Sawyer et al (2000) demonstrate from their research that case-based education develops skills such as research, problem solving, communication and professionalism not developed by other approaches to education. O Cinneide (1997; 1998) neatly sums up one of the advantages of case learning – it is fun. The case study stimulates the mind of the educator and the student (Christiansen, 1987; Bruner, 1999) to lift the level of interest above standard exposition of management theory.

3.3 Problems and Challenges for Educators and Students

Perhaps more critical for the educator who uses case studies is the issue of how cases are taught. Despite the potential of cases it is possible to find them being taught in a manner which is too teacher-centred. Christiansen (1987) argues that the case study approach lessens the focus on the educator. Forman and Rymer (1999) argue that the predominant form of use is very teacher-centred, despite the promise of a democratic learning process (Bonoma, 1989). The case teaching process is seen as choreography (Rangan, 1995; Christiansen, 1987) where the instructor orchestrates the oral discussion and case study write-up. Despite the claims that there is "no right answer", students feel pressured to take a stance – even in deciding to take a role as problem solver, practical thinker or disciplinary thinker (Forman and Rymer, 1999). The nature of the questions set and the oral guidance of the educator take the student down a predetermined route where they may deliberately use an inappropriate theoretical model because they think the instructor expects it (Christiansen, 1987; Forman and Rymer, 1999).

The class discussion may orchestrate a definitive result, or students may engage in a combative style in the amphitheatre, with a winner and loser. This mode of education falls far short of the democratic ideals of the case and particularly appears likely to alienate women (Forman and Rymer, 1999). In contrast to this view, Thompson (2000) uses early research from a different cultural setting, China, to suggest that women feel more comfortable with case studies than men. Forman and Rymer (1999) have continuing concerns about the role of the educator in the case discussion, acting in a detached way as "*a figure who descends from the heavens to bestow wisdom on the mere mortals in the case*" (p.395). Such an approach to education can produce warped and unrealistic attitudes to management practice.

Advocates of the Harvard approach argue that these problems are those of the instructor and not the method (Christiansen, 1987), Forman and Rymer's analysis suggests that the problems are much more fundamental to the present practice of case teaching. Siciliano and McAleer (1997) discuss a method of interactive class analysis that encourages indepth preparation, student centred discussion, more concise case analysis and a more objective framework of assessment. Empowering students to participate fully and not be pressured by the instructor are issues about which case educators need to be more thoughtful. Thompson (2000) argues that in China, students will not respond to the standard Harvard style case teaching model because the cultural conditioning is such that one does not speak up unless confident that they have the right answer.

A challenge for the educator is to help the student to be incisive and thorough in their analysis. Superficiality can be a product of factors such as insufficient theoretical tools to start work on the case, lack of attention to key facts and issues, and a lack of willingness to think creatively about alternative "solutions". Using cases which are not rich enough in the complexities of organisational life may encourage thin analysis.

Cases which have multiple routes for analysis as they may encourage the reader to think about broader issues, especially the behavioural and organisational. As Smith (1997) observes, cases are of necessity a slice of organisational life; and inconsistencies, uncertainties and shortages of information are all part of organisational life. The frustrations they may introduce to the case are those of the lives of managers.

The advent of on-line education raises new issues of how cases can be taught. Privateer (1999) warns against using a replicant model where the existing approaches to education are just repeated using current technologies. With the teaching of cases on-line there are range of problems which necessitate a quite different educational model. There is little extant literature on the problems of and potential for teaching cases on-line. Some institutions have taken the cases in a face-to-face section of the course or have used video conferencing and other technologies as surrogates for the classroom experience (De Sanctis and Shepherd, 1999; Nixon and Helms, 1998).

To really harness the advantage of student-centred learning in a time and place convenient for them, the next stage is to teach the cases asynchronously using the internet. Examples of this approach are not common in the literature. An attempt has been made at the University of South Australia for MBA students. Experience in the subject Financial Planning and Analysis suggests that one of the central problems of teaching on-line cases is to create the same spontaneity of response and involvement that is fundamental to the classroom environment. The on-line student may enjoy access at any time from any point in the world and is not expected to come on-line every day, especially as many may have chosen on-line study because they have demanding jobs and are studying part-time. In this environment the case discussion is more likely to be linear commentary rather than a true group discussion (Schrum and Benson, 2000). Within the asynchronous case discussion there is the problem that the case discussion may have moved on from points that the student may have had significant issues to contribute. The educator has a problem too because they may want to stay out of the discussion not to "give the game away" to students that are behind the rest, but to provide challenge and contributions to the students who are well advanced. Palloft and Pratt (2000) suggest the educator has a role of "gentle guidance" (p.119) to enable the students to enter into a free exchange between them and therefore enjoy a collaborative learning experience rather than an educator driven learning experience.

All of Easton's (1982) six skills may still be developed in an on-line case study exercise but in different ways. Two of these - communication and social skills may be demonstratively different in the on-line environment. With social skills, both "listening" and "communication" have changed meanings in an on-line environment. The on-line student loses both the immediacy of the classroom case as well as the non-verbal cues, voice inflections and other aspects of communication, which are normally taken for granted (Thomas, 2001b). In the absence of these - sarcasm, wit, and cynicism could be misinterpreted. Perhaps more stressful is a feeling of loneliness and an inability to seek ready help (De Sanctis and Sheppard, 1999).

With on-line case work the student is likely to have the problems raised by DeSanctis and Sheppard (1999), including the blending of study with other life objectives without the discipline of "the class", the difficulty of solving team-based personality problems, and geopolitical disturbances. On balance there seem to be significant benefits for mature learners to study on-line. The challenges of on-line case-based teaching need to be further researched.

4. The Use of Cases to the Research Community

Educational cases are differentiated from case research, inasmuch as the research case is usually written with a theoretical framework structuring the case, and therefore provides analysis to the reader. Christiansen (1987) points out that at Harvard Business School the case process has been an important link between teaching and research. In those circumstances the tenured academic or DBA student enters the field with the intention of writing a case with a prescribed structure (O Cinneide, 1997; Christiansen, 1987). Sometimes a case can be an outcome from a major research endeavour (e.g. Thomas, 2001b). Cases can in turn be used as an input to research, providing insights to practical issues in organisations which can be the basis of further research.

Kaplan (1998) argues that the development of cases for MBA and executive development courses is a critical part of the process of developing new management theory and practice. Kaplan's first mention of the balanced scorecard is in a footnote to a teaching case, Analog Devices. While writing the case for teaching purposes he came across a corporate scoreboard which he was able to develop into the balanced scorecard, an approach to performance measurement now internationally known.

Teaching cases have little overt theory, designed as they are to be analysed using theory (Heady and Smith, 2000); albeit often having implicit assumptions from the author's theoretical viewpoints. Some research cases are relatively thin theoretically – being mainly descriptive. Some cases that appeared thin on theory have been fruitfully re-analysed by others. For example, Dent's (1991) case on the change of culture of EuroRail was criticised by Llewellyn (1993) because it did not go far enough, concentrating on the accounts of the managers and not the broader external factors. Further analysis by Llewellyn (1994) and Laughlin (1991) added further theoretical underpinning to the earlier description. Llewellyn (1994) applied the theory of boundary maintenance to Dent's study. She showed that the change of gatekeepers on the external boundaries from railway people to profit-conscious Business Managers changed the way the boundaries were managed and provided greater focus in the organisation on accounting information. Laughlin (1991) explored the case using his middle range theory of organisational change. Here the same case has been used by different researchers and analysed using quite different theoretical lenses. Similarly, Macintosh's (1994) analysis of General Motors under Sloan and of the ITT world of Howard Geneen are examples of the use of cases for intense evaluation beyond the educational and general interest assumed in the original writing. Therefore there are substantial opportunities for researchers to analyse cases and draw out richer insights than envisaged by the original author. In this way, teaching cases can become important inputs into the research process and stimulate management thinking.

These few examples demonstrate the importance of cases to the research community. If Kaplan's (1998) thesis has merit then the case is an essential element in management research.

5. Writing Cases - The Contribution of the Academic as Author

There is no sign that cases are diminishing in their usefulness (O Cinneide 1998; O Cinneide 1997). Though many of the issues of management cases are unchanging, new cases are needed to tackle these issues in the context of a changing and complex business world. The impact of e-business has led to the emergence of new issues. There is a need to develop cases that capture these issues and focus on the challenges facing management in this environment. Similar changes permeate other disciplines that rely on case input as part of the educational process. There is a need to produce new cases. Except for a few classic cases that focus on dilemmas that are universal and timeless, cases do tend to date quickly (O Cinneide 1998) with rapid changes to the business environment. O Cinneide

(1998) suggests that motivation is greatest when cases are most recent and the dilemmas they pose are poorly addressed in existing literature.
The need for more cases is being met by large suppliers of cases such as Harvard Business School. The concern is that North American cases only have broad applicability outside the United States where the subject is one where principles and practice are relatively similar to the USA. This is broadly true in finance although even there USA taxation laws and reporting practices may be a distraction for countries with different systems. It is less true in areas where local cultural factors have a bearing (e.g. organisational behaviour). Some evidence suggests that students prefer "local" cases to which they relate more easily (Thompson, 2000). The research evidence (Heady and Smith, 2000) suggests that cases are biased towards large companies, and do not pay enough serious attention to issues such as bankruptcy and social issues. Service industry is under-represented and manufacturing companies predominate; but despite this there is lack of attention to the production function, and the supervision of operations (Heady and Smith, 2000). The large number of cases may obscure the lack of coverage of all areas.

Case writing receives less recognition in most universities than writing theoretical or conceptual papers and so academics face less incentives to write for a practitioner audience even when there are obvious potential learning benefits (O Cinneide, 1998). The development of case study journals[1] may support academic recognition for management academics who see case study writing as a legitimate academic pursuit.

Historically the craft of writing case studies was acquired "on the job". There are now formalised courses and texts on "how to do it" in addition to the in-house programs. There are continuing debates and enhancements to the writing approach. For example, O Cinneide (1998) has suggested that much more attention be given to the development of teaching notes and "front-loading" them in the case writing process.

The argument of this paper is that the writing of cases has benefits to practitioners, educators, students and the research community. Case writing should be seen as a legitimate concern of the management educator and encouraged.

6. Conclusion

There are many areas for further examination in relation to management case studies. First, the presumption of North American and European business schools that cases are the best way to teach management needs greater scrutiny. Is the case really providing the best possible education of future managers? Which cases produce the best outcomes? While we presume that cases are beneficial we will never examine these issues. These questions suggest a rigorous educational research program. A second issue is how cases can be better disseminated to the practitioner market. Should management cases be re-written for professional journals in a manner that guarantees greater accessibility?

A major issue remains relating to the teaching of cases using new technologies. This review cites a few articles about case study teaching using technology. None address the teaching of cases using asynchronous distributed educational methodologies. This is an area which needs considerable exploration.

Case studies continue to have much to offer in management practice, education, and research. Practitioners will find occasions when they can apply principles of a case to their situation. Management students will continue to need cases which are relevant to management practices and the organisational context of the 21st century. The challenge ahead is to re-assess the methods of the instructor to produce a truly collaborative learning environment where the student can feel free to think laterally about the case. Cases will be taught in different ways, especially as used for on-line

[1] such as *Asian Management Case Journal* and *The Management Case Study Journal*

education. Teaching with new technologies poses challenges for educators that are yet to be seriously tackled. Researchers will use cases to explore and develop new theoretical perspectives and insights.

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