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Role and genre expectations in undergraduate case analysis in Information Systems

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ABSTRACT

This study examines case analysis writing in the field of Information Systems (IS), focusing on the roles students adopt in their writing and the functions that these roles perform. Previous research on case analysis in business has found that adoption of specific roles, such as business consultant or manager, is important in case analysis writing. In this study, we investigate role expectations in IS case analysis assignments across a 4-year IS curriculum, and students' performance of roles in writing in one IS course. We examined case analysis prompts from six courses as well as an interview with an IS faculty informant to identify roles expected in case analyses across an undergraduate IS curriculum. Secondly, we examined student writing in one IS course to examine students' performance of the expected roles. Results showed that students are expected to perform a wide range of roles, and that some roles included multiple distinct functions. In addition, prompts were arranged in many assignments in ways that structured a case analysis genre. Lower-graded analyses showed an over-reliance on reporting information from the case and on displaying disciplinary knowledge. Implications for teaching and incorporation of case analysis in information systems and business administration programs are discussed.
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1. Introduction

The discipline of Information Systems (IS) focuses on the interface between technical aspects of information technology and non-technical aspects of business management (Westfall, 2012). In IS education, a common assignment is case analysis. Drawing from business education, case analysis is used as a way to motivate students to actively participate in experiential learning (Kreber, 2001; Smith, 1997), help students develop higher-order reasoning skills (Cappel & Schwager, 2002), encourage problem-solving and decision-making skills (Easton, 1982), and bring the complexities of real-life situations into the classroom (Hackney, McMaster, & Harris, 2003). Previous research in business writing (e.g., Forman & Rymer, 1999a, 1999b; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994; Nathan, 2013) has found that in order to successfully write case analyses, students need to adopt specific roles, or personae, in their writing, such as a business consultant or manager.

The present study draws on this previous research on business case analysis writing, most of which has investigated writing by graduate students, and extends it to undergraduate writing in the field of Information Systems. We investigate the

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roles that students are expected to perform in case analyses across a 4-year IS curriculum, and students' performance of these roles in writing in one IS course.

2. Literature review

2.1. Information Systems

As a discipline, IS focuses on using computers and information technology tools to generate, process, and distribute information so that businesses or organizations achieve their objectives effectively and efficiently. Writing is important in professional IS work, and although writing skills are some of the most requested by employers, a gap still exists between employer expectations and IS graduates' skills (Liu & Murphy, 2012). The Association of Information Systems' 2010 undergraduate curriculum guidelines state that it is "impossible for an IS professional to perform effectively in any organizational role without excellent oral and written communication skills" (Topi, Valacich, Wright, Kaiser, Nunamaker, Sipior, & de Vreede, 2010, p.21), and previous research has recommended that IS faculty take responsibility for helping students improve their written communication skills (Merhout & Etter, 2005). Thus, it is vital for IS students to learn to write disciplinary texts, such as case analysis, and IS faculty need to be aware of expectations in order to more effectively teach students to write these texts.

2.2. Case method

IS education has many commonalities with business education, such as the use of cases. Instead of lectures, students are presented with case studies describing a company, its background, and/or its employees; highlighting problems encountered by the company or product; and, sometimes, the solutions considered. Cases are often factual, reporting on actual businesses, but some are fictional; however, they always present an objective account of a realistic business situation. The most widely-known approach to using cases in business education is the Harvard case method (Leenders & Erskine, 1989), in which students analyze a case and write an analysis of the case including their solution to the problems presented in the case. This written analysis then becomes the foundation of an in-class discussion of the case in which students defend their solution to the case. The written analysis is given various terms in practice and in the literature, such as *case study*, *case write-up*, *case report*, or (the term used here) *case analysis*. Although the Harvard case method has been influential in business education, adaptations and other approaches to using cases exist, with considerable variation between different contexts and cultures (Nathan, 2013).

The use of case-based writing assignments has been found to enhance learning in IS courses (Pomykalski, 2006; Sirias, 2002), and as such, cases also play an important role in IS education (Hackney et al., 2003). The *Journal of Information Systems Education* has been publishing teaching cases since 2002, with a 2003 special issue dedicated to cases for IS courses. IS cases are typically written based either on the writer's own first-hand experiences (often during consulting engagements) or on information gathered from published reports about a company. Students respond to prompts that ask them either to analyze issues retrospectively, such as *What went wrong and why?* or *What steps could have been taken to prevent these problems?*, or to make suggestions about what a decision maker *should do* moving forward (Cappel & Schwager, 2002, p.289). Rather than focusing solely on business, IS cases typically focus on technologies as they are used in businesses and for business purposes (Cappel & Schwager, 2002).

2.3. Case analysis genre

In the field of business communication, research has suggested that the business case analysis is not just a series of responses, but rather a relatively stable genre with recurring stages (e.g., Forman & Rymer, 1999a, 1999b; Freedman & Adam, 1996; Freedman et al., 1994; Nathan, 2013). Because the fields of business and IS are closely related, we draw on previous descriptions of business case analysis as a benchmark for better understanding IS case analysis as a potential genre.

Although previous research has suggested that the business case analysis is a genre, the question of whether it is a professional or pedagogical genre has been debated. While some see it as a simulation of real-life business writing (Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, & Leenders, 1997), others describe it as resembling no kind of actual workplace writing (Forman & Rymer, 1999a). Forman and Rymer describe the case analysis as a purely pedagogical genre whose function is secondary to the main activity of the in-class case discussion. Freedman et al. (1994) describe case analysis as one step in students' process of entering a professional community; however, they also found that case analysis in classroom assignments lacked much of the ambiguity and complexity found in real companies, concluding that case analysis writing "is and must remain radically distinct from workplace writing" (p.221) as it is grounded in the rhetorical exigencies of the classroom.

Previous studies on case analysis genre have focused largely on two related aspects: roles that student writers are expected to perform, and genre stages of case analysis.

2.3.1. Roles

Previous studies of case analysis in business generally agree that students are expected to enact various roles in case analysis writing. A role can be thought of as a textual identity that the writer adopts through their writing. This corresponds to what is known in rhetoric as *first persona*, or the persona that the author projects to the audience. For example, Freedman et al. (1994, p.202) note that in case analysis assignments, "students were expected to adopt the roles of management

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