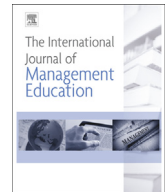


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Research notes

Re-thinking case-based assessments in business management education



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ABSTRACT

Despite criticisms of the use of case studies in assessment, especially in examination settings, their use is prevalent in business management education, primarily in order to develop critical thinking skills and highlight the complex business problems faced by managers.

However, case studies readily available for business assessments typically comprise multi-national, world-leading corporations, which can result in a number of problems, not least the large volume of material available on the web about these organisations. In addition, employers feel that business courses are too focused on large corporations rather than preparing students for working in small-medium enterprises (SMEs).

This paper will present the authors approach to developing his own case studies for use in business assessments, based on local SMEs. This approach facilitates a more in-depth assessment analysis and exposes students to a broader range of business scenarios. The use of a 'live' case provides a closer fit to reality which in turn, enhances learning. It is intended that the approach presented here will inform and challenge university colleagues to explore the development and use of case-based assessments, particularly how they might apply these practices to their own professional area.

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1. Introduction

The use of case-based learning is commonplace in a number of disciplines, such as healthcare (see for example, [Forsgren et al., 2013](#); [Kaddoura, 2011](#); [Osinubi & Ailoje-Ibru, 2014](#)) and education (e.g. [Jahreie, 2010](#); [Kantar, 2013](#)). Moreover, the use of case studies is especially prevalent in management education ([Atkinson, 2014](#); [Garvin, 2007](#)).

In business management, cases provide students with a representation of the 'real-world' ([Hodgson, Brack, and Benson \(2014\)](#)), and thereby allowing students to experience the discipline, albeit at 'arms-length' and apply knowledge to address prevailing issues ([Ha & Lopez, 2014](#)) and thereby integrate theory to practice ([Corner et al., 2006](#)). Case studies are used to develop critical thinking skills ([Healy & McCutcheon, 2010](#)), engage students with complex business problems typically faced by managers ([Greenhalgh, 2007](#); [Lee, Lee, Liu, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2009](#); [Weil, McGuigan, & Kern, 2011](#)), particularly when faced with ambiguity ([Banning, 2003](#)), enhance executive "sensemaking" skills ([Ickis, Woodside, & Ogliastris, 2014](#)), support visioning ([Iqbal, Shaikh, & Nazar, 2010](#)) and encourage analytical inquiry ([Strelchonok & Ludviga, 2013](#)).

In addition, group working built around a business case study can also help cultivate team-working competences ([Doran, Healy, McCutcheon, & O'Callaghan, 2011](#)), improve communication through discussion ([Flynn & Klein, 2001](#)) and therefore

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support the development of skills demanded by employers (Wilton, 2008). In on-line learning environments, case studies can also be a useful learning tool (Lee et al., 2009; Rollag, 2010), although technology plays an important role in facilitating discussion and student interaction (Chen et al., 2008; Watson & Sutton, 2012).

While case-based learning is only one approach to support learning (Apaydin, 2008), its use is deemed to produce a greater academic performance among students, compared to a traditional didactic approach (Kireeti & Reddy, 2015) and can result in deeper learning (Ross, Zufan, & Rosenbloom, 2008).

2. The problems of case studies in business management assessments

Despite the overwhelming support for case-based learning in management learning, the use of case studies in assessments, especially in examination settings has been subject to criticism (Packard & Austin, 2009). Selecting appropriate case studies for use in assessment can be problematic for tutors (Berrell, Wrathall, & Wright, 2001), especially finding ones that are all-encompassing of the business curriculum being covered. Ashmalla and Crocitto (2001) warn that irrelevant cases can reduce learning effectiveness, and Pearce (2002) confirms the difficulties of producing a case that balances sufficient complexity, with credibility. While Brennan (2009) provides academics with a framework for selecting appropriate case studies, cases used in assessments are typically sourced from readily-available textbooks, websites and the media. Consequently these tend to be well-known, international corporations. Although these case organisations can highlight aspects of best-practice in business management, and embrace the globalisation agenda (Vos, 2013), problems can result in using them as a basis for assessment. Notably, the large volume of material available on the web about these organisations, and the number of assessments already prepared and circulating, can lead to plagiarism (Vernon, Bigna, & Smith, 2001). Moreover, corporations tend to be guarded about detailed information in the public domain particularly concerning operations activities, with annual reports perceived as of limited value (ACCA, 2012). With a large corporation, it is more difficult to examine the interrelationships between different functions and activities and how business decisions can have a widespread effect on the entity as a whole. This lack of 'intimacy' can lead to only a surface-coverage of the key learning points by students, and a lack of awareness of organisational connections. In addition, employers feel that business courses are too focused on large corporations rather than preparing students for working in Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (CMI, 2014:9). According to Eurostat (2011), 99.8% of businesses in Europe are SMEs, representing 66.7% of the working population. It could therefore be argued that by failing to provide students with case examples of SMEs, ignores the graduate employability agenda (Knight & Yorke, 2003). As Mostert (2007) highlights, case-based learning not only provides a unique scenario for critical analysis, but should help graduates prepare for employment.

3. The need for effective case-based assessments in business management

The need therefore, is for case study based assessments to provide a closer fit to workplace reality, which in turn, will enhance learning (Hodgson et al., 2014; Rebeiz, 2011; Theodosiou, Rennard, & Amir-Aslani, 2012). This should ultimately enable students to adapt more readily to the complex business world (Cummings, Maddux, & Richmond, 2008), by highlighting changing practices in the contemporary business environment (Rosenbloom, 1995). For Dunn, Morgan, O'Reilly, and Parry (2005) and Lounsberry and Pittenger (2011) however, this 'authenticity' to the real-world is supported by the reconciliation between learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities and the assessment, while Medicott (2009) differentiates between "assessment of learning" and "learning for assessment", where the latter is supported by meaningful, relevant and real-world assessment activities. A number of authors highlight the importance of grounding cases with appropriate theoretical or philosophical reasoning (Mumford, 2005; Rendtorff, 2015; Vega, 2010). Tennant, McMullen, and Kaczynski (2010) also argue in favour of "authentic assessment" in preparing graduates for work, but highlight the importance of converging teaching and research, so that both students and staff, cohesively engage in research activity. This two-party approach is also advocated by Brew (2006), where for example, in the analysis of a business entity, the tutor not only learns about the organisation, but also benefits from the students' perspectives.

It is this participation and interaction that Cassimjee (2007) feels makes case-based learning effective. The interactive process is supported by either guest speakers (O'Connell, McCarthy, & Hall, 2004) or student engagement with the case organisation, in order for them to become active participants (Craddock & Mathias, 2009). This is important, as Chalmers and Fuller (2000) note, students respond more positively if they participate in assessment tasks, which in turn, can help tutors assess graduate attributes more effectively (Hughes & Barrie, 2010). Richardson (1994) also warns that the success of case-based learning is largely dependent upon students' motivation to engage with the case. In addition, Beaty (2003) feels it is vital that students can fully understand the nature of a case and its respective features in order to help derive a broader understanding and facilitate a more critical appraisal. This drives a deeper learning (Gibbs, 2007). Engaging in two-way dialogue with the case organisation can also help alleviate anxieties students typically feel about assessments (Sambell, Miller, & Hodgson, 2002).

In summary, case-based assessments should ideally be relevant and 'real-world' (McDowell (2012), help bring topics together and support students to link and apply theory to practice (Race, Brown, & Smith, 2007), allow students to gain useful insight into the complex workings and functional interactions of an organisation (Brown & Knight, 1995; Jennings, 1996), facilitate active participation by students undertaking guided research activities (Jenkins, Breen, Lindsay, & Brew, 2003).

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