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Research notes

Antecedents of team performance on case studies in a strategic management capstone course

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ABSTRACT

Acquisition of knowledge and skills through team-based case studies is a common pedagogic approach in the strategic management courses. This study explores why some student teams perform better in case study work than others. Several variables associated with team attributes and their effects on team performance were examined. Results showed that effects of the independent variables varied in relation to subjective SA ("self-assessed") team performance and objective EA ("expert assessed") team performance. Except for the grade/performance orientation, other independent variables, including team process effectiveness, analytic orientation, learning orientation, and advance preparation showed a positive relationship, and diversity showed a negative relationship with subjective SA performance. In contrast, only two independent variables, advance preparation, and diversity, were related to objective performance EA; the former had a positive relationship and the latter had a negative relationship.

1. Introduction

Strategic management is a capstone course, which is typically required for all concentrations in the curriculum of colleges of business administration. Although class size patterns for the capstone course may vary across colleges of business, the present author's college sets a cap of 30 students per section. This course encompasses the common body of knowledge in strategic management and aims to integrate knowledge and skills pertaining to the functional areas such as marketing, finance, human resources, accountancy, and management information systems. The capstone course is quintessential for the college of business administration graduates because irrespective of the students' functional concentrations, strategic management and functional integration knowledge and skills are a necessity for managers to succeed in modern corporations. The quest for competitive advantage can be sourced anywhere in the value chain and requires new strategic initiatives advanced in any functional area to profitably set the company apart from competitors, and implementation of these initiatives usually involves the cooperation of multiple functional areas (e.g., Barney, 1995).

Textbooks on strategic management usually include conceptual material followed by case studies. In management education, there has been an increasing shift from instructor-centered/"spoon feeding" to student centered/experiential learning (Mundell & Pennarola, 1999). In the instructor-centric approach, educators may use case studies, but mainly to explain and highlight concepts in class discussions and assign teams of students, and develop a set of questions about the

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case study to be answered and presented in a written report. The student-centric approaches, in contrast, are mainly associated with methods that develop and use critical thinking skills and emphasize experiential learning. Drea, Singh, and Engelland (1997) emphasized that experiential learning would be an effective catalyst in developing an active student-centric learning environment. Experiential learning method and the team-based learning are instrumental for students to actively construct their own knowledge and skills (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Davis, 1996; Lempert, 1996). Case studies in this approach are viewed as instrumental for students to confront open-ended, ill-structured, real-world issues surrounding a profit or not-for-profit organization. Instructors usually require students to work in teams to identify the main issues/problems and develop viable solutions, while they act as a facilitator/coach (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). Hernandez (2002) argued that team-based learning, which is instrumental for the team members to bear greater responsibility for their own learning, is associated with higher level thinking and learning in contrast with the traditional approach focused on recall and memorization.

Extant research has been for the most part silent on the pedagogic issues associated with a strategic management capstone course. Educators face challenges to facilitate effective ways for students to acquire critical thinking skills, ensure students learn not to avoid but to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity in making strategic decisions, and optimize learning and performance in a team setting.

Given the central importance of team-based learning in a strategic management capstone course, this study explores the determinants of team performance on a case study work. Several propositions were developed to predict the effects of the various team attributes on both the subjective/SA (Self-Assessed) and objective/EA (Expert Assessed) performance measures. The propositions were tested and results were analyzed using regression analysis. Finally, the results and implications for the educators are discussed.

2. Conceptual framework and propositions

Professional schools such as business and engineering often place the capstone as the culminating experience in their respective degree programs. Capstone course is typically taken at the end of the students' program in their final semester before graduation. In management education, such courses often emphasize integrative problem-based learning as opposed to “content acquisition” based learning (Elam & Spotts, 2004; Peters & Yanagi, 2006) and are often labeled strategic management.

Capstone courses rely upon a constructivist approach (Springer & Borthick, 2004), which represents the center of gravity of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) in contrast to more traditional “spoon feeding” pedagogy. Springer and Borthick (2004) describe it as “constructing one's own understanding rather than inheriting a teacher's words” (p. 278)—Using constructivist approach-driven experiential learning, capstone courses prepare students to contrive better ways to act in response to ill-structured, “messy” problems (Cavaleri & Fearon, 2000).

The traditional “spoon feeding” approach bears little opportunity for students to develop critical thinking, creativity, and team workplace skills that are achieved by performing in teams (McDaniel & White, 1993; Raelin, 2009). There has been an increasing appeal to shift the pedagogic paradigm from the traditional “spoon feeding” model to the one that presupposes students as active learners, taking greater responsibility for their learning and puts students in the driver's seat and allows teams of students to teach each other (Bok, 1988; Davis, 1996; Sweet & Michaelsen, 2012). In the latter paradigm, the professor shifts his/her role to that of a facilitator/coach. However, in practice, “spoon feeding” style remains in various degrees manifest in colleges of business. Raelin (2009) has posited that a substantial shift away from “spoon feeding” in management education is unlikely due to deep-seated, long-standing consensual beliefs.

The constructivist approach works best when students possess critical thinking skills. The need for critical thinking in business education has been often noted in the literature (e.g., Braun, 2004; Ulrich, 2005). Smith (2003) has emphasized the difficulties of teaching critical thinking in business education. A particular model for teaching critical thinking is grounded in problem-based learning (PBL) (Savery & Duffy, 2001). PBL entails confrontation of cognitive conflict, which emanates from exposing students to ill-structured problems, as a stimulus for learning (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Peterson, 2004).

Experiential learning calls for a shift from a grade/performance orientation (GO) to learning orientation (LO). Student characteristics best matched for learning orientation include self-discipline, independence, and openness to experience to carve a platform for intellectual curiosity and creativity (Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002; Tippin, Lafreniere, & Page, 2012). Although educators generally prefer students to exhibit LO (Ames, 1992; Laverie, Madhavaram, & McDonald, 2008), the traditional methods of teaching are usually antithetical to LO.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that team-based learning appears to be the widely accepted approach in the strategic management capstone course. Strategic management textbooks generally provide information regarding how to analyze case studies, and mention, specifically, about the importance of team-based learning in this connection (e.g., David & David, 2015). The important underlying incentive for professors to divide the capstone classes into teams is to enable students with different concentrations (e.g., marketing, finance, human resources, international business etc.) to integrate their specialized knowledge with other functional areas. A variety of experiential learning-centered assignments, beyond case studies; such as simulation projects generally transpire in student teams (Lamont, 2001). Teams allow making space for good conversation among the students, and as such, opportunities are likely created for reflection and meaning-making experiences that