The Case Study Approach in Management Education in Japan: Effective Strategies for Reading, Analyzing and Reporting Findings

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The case study method is widely accepted today as an important tool of management education at the postgraduate level around the academic world. Throughout the USA in Law Schools and especially the Harvard Graduate School of Business, the case study approach has become the norm for challenging graduate students to make connections between academic studies and practical management situations. The skills that would underpin a successful engagement with the case study method in a business school are often those in which Japanese students have traditionally been weakest, especially when the learning medium is that of the English language. This article examines some of the problems that Japanese Graduate School students may encounter in adapting to the case study method in a management education context. The article serves as a preface to an empirical study based on Japanese students studying toward a Master of Business Communication course in the Nagoya Graduate School.

1. Introduction

Management education students who respond well to the case study approach demonstrate a high aptitude for dealing with real-world situations, and readily accept that the business environment in which they will find themselves in the future will be underpinned by uncertainty. Graduate students who always yearn for an ultimate or correct answer to management problems, on the contrary, are apt to find the case study approach rather challenging at first. To fully comprehend a case study, requires the careful use and development of analytical, organizational and communication skills. It also means that through careful preparation students will be more involved in the learning process, rather than merely relying on the teacher (Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Sivan et al, 2000). Assumptions about familiar teacher-student oriented curricula are replaced by a student-centred emphasis on the context of the case study method (Grant, 1997). Theoretically such a learning environment is particularly amenable to constructivist principles (Hung and Nichani, 2001). As a consequence, pedagogical theorists freely argue that it increases student motivation (Mustoe and Croft, 1999). For educators, the case study approach also opens up the question of how to deal with more democratically structured pedagogical environments, in which more authority is recognized to reside with the students (Brookfield, 1995).

The central question of this paper is what skills Japanese management education students require in order to respond to the problems and opportunities presented by the case method when studying in English. In responding to this question, this paper has three main sections: a brief history of the case study method, an overview of the case approach in management education, and a strategy for

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analyzing and presenting case studies findings. The context provided by this overview will serve as a preface to a follow-up article to be based on an empirical study of Japanese management education at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business.

2. History of Case Studies

Though widely used today in management education, the case study approach is not a new form of presenting information for management education students and researchers. Anthropology and Sociology are normally cited as the two disciplines that are largely responsible for the development of the case study approach, which is used in a wide variety of contemporary pedagogical contexts. Though these two disciplines have had a formative influence, research, teaching and learning in other academic disciplines has also played a key role. In mapping the history of case studies, recognition has to be given to clinical approaches of psychiatrists and doctors, the emphasis on casework central to much research in social work, and the research tools pioneered by anthropologists and historians. In addition to these academic research methods, cognizance has to be given to the use of case studies by journalists. The challenge posed by all of these disciplines and forms of enquiry was to analyze culture and society via a more practical focus, which stressed that the researcher could acquire meaningful insights by engaging in empirical research projects as opposed to primary research.

Predictably, the case study approach has also been attacked by academic disciplines more used to the generalizable laws of the scientific method. Such criticism was especially evident during the heated discussions that took place between pro-quantitative and pro-qualitative camps in the 1920s. Such demands grew as positivism became increasingly established during the 30s and 40s. Ten years after World War II quantitative methods had obtained the ascendent position, especially as a result of the survey approach and the sociological method. Case studies had been effectively marginalized as a research method.

New life was breathed into case studies by professors at Harvard Business School when they began to use them as part of a practical approach to teaching exemplary scenarios from business and management. Adapted as either a supplement or central element of a new teaching strategy, the use of case studies developed as a pedagogical tool, progressively changing the dynamics of traditional learning environments. In the lecture halls and seminar rooms using the case study method, the relationship between student and teacher was undergoing a fresh process of negotiation. Students were challenged to engage in a more active form of knowledge construction. Case studies supported the development of a range of new skills for students of management education. Students were encouraged to deal with real scenarios requiring practical solutions; to identify the central protagonists in a range of extant situations; and to understand their motivations as well as the factors that influence their decision-making processes. Students are expected to contribute to analyses that draw on their own experience and knowledge, to unravel exemplary problems in management, and to be able to situate their theoretical findings in the context of significant case histories. Theoretical knowledge is thus tested and challenged by exemplary management problems and histories, and students are able to test their aptitude for dealing with them.

The case situations therefore function as a simulator for real-world problem management, and students are variously expected to cope with taking on roles in the boardroom or crisis team of a major corporation. Most importantly for the focus of this paper, the case study approach requires students to co-operate and engage with other learners in a collegial team environment. Students are expected to engage in questioning others as well as themselves, and taught from experience not to expect a definitive answer at the end of a linear process. In order to be successful it is anticipated that students understand how they are responsible for their own learning, just as they would be for finding solutions to actual management problems. The success of the Harvard approach has led to the adaptation of case studies as an integral element of management education in business schools around the world. Inevitably, cultural traditions, both in terms of learner pedagogy and management decision-making, strongly affect the way the case study approach is integrated into different pedagogical traditions.

3. The Skills Required by Case Studies in Management Education

Case studies in management education are perhaps most satisfactorily characterized as shortened forms of narrative, often based on real data and research, in which students are required to identify appropriate strategies in order to resolve the central problem and make a series of recommendations. A rationale should be provided to explain the solution (Fry et al.,1999).

One of the most interesting aspects of cases is that they can provide students with opportunities to engage with significant historical or still living business leaders and to examine suggested solutions alongside what actually happened. Case learning is intended to be a stimulating experience for management education students. But unless Japanese students have used cases in other courses, they are likely to find that they will need to develop some new analytical and communication skills.

Preparation skills

Initially, preparing a response to a case can be an extremely frustrating experience. In a well-prepared case, the information is often fragmentary and ambiguous, and even perhaps deliberately attempts to confuse the reader. On the other hand, detailed cases can frequently present an overwhelming amount of information and data about the context of the problem. A prerequisite of getting to grips with a case during the initial preparation phase, it to accept its ambiguity and multivalence; there are no correct readings, and the task of the reader is develop and justify a content-rich reading based on a rationale.

Discussion and debate

In a management education context, generating high quality discussion and debate is often the primary intention. This is one area where Japanese learners studying management in English often meet barriers to their progression. Debate in English and the requirement to provide strong reasons with effective supports, is one of the most challenging areas of the engagement with cases for Japanese students. Learners are challenged to respond, often under time pressure, in a group environment, that requires a spontaneous light-footedness of thought that can be similarly unfamiliar to second

language learners. In a mixed group of international students, Japanese learners are often clearly at a disadvantage in that their levels of input and participation are markedly lower.

Effective decision-making

Thirdly, Japanese students are often uncomfortable with role-playing and decision-making, particularly when the latter is under time pressure and requires the succinct presentation of a coherent analysis. Other characteristics that may inhibit decision-making range from shyness to a resistance to be involved in a role-playing activity in which students are portraying actual individuals. This problem is exacerbated when the individuals are from other cultures and there are stark ethnocentric differences with the students' native traditions.

Playing devil's advocate

A final issue is that students studying using cases may be asked to represent views with which they strongly disagree. While this may present certain conceptual difficulties, instructors must attempt to articulate how potentially valuable this element of case study analysis can be. By adopting such an approach, students are better able to understand and provide a rationale for their own position.

Moreover, case study analysis constantly reiterates the point that the decision-making process is an undeniably confrontational process, in which students have to actively engage with and overcome others holding views as strongly as their own. Students will learn important activities such as negotiation and how to move towards a consensus, while involved with strong differences of opinion. Case studies presuppose that students are able to put themselves in the position of senior managers so that they can understand the key pre-requisites of effective decision-making: to improve the analytical quality of management decisions, deal with a decision within an appropriate period of time, and strive to better the frequency of effective decision making. Management by definition is the ability to make effective decisions on the basis of fragmentary information while under the pressure of time constraints.

4. Types of Case Study

Cases can be separated into a number of types. Under the more generalized category of case study exist several subdivisions, each of which can be selected depending on the objectives of the management education context. Typically, these types of case study include the following:

Problem-oriented

The *problem-oriented* case study presents a simulation of a senior manager who is required to make a number of strategy-oriented decisions. While on occasions the required strategy can be obvious, in others management students need to grasp the nature of the problem before proceeding to recommend a solution. Providing a viable rationale is a central element of these types of case.

Corporate information case studies

This case format outlines important information on a management situation without necessarily defining a problem for which a satisfactory solution must be found by students. The intention of these cases, then, is to provide readers with an overview of the way a particular corporation functions, paying close attention to its markets, organizational culture and behaviour, as well as a perspective on the strategies senior managers deploy. The main task for the student is to examine and provide an explanation for the corporation's strategic functioning.

Leadership style cases

This type of case, as the name suggests, describes the leadership style of a corporation or prominent executive. Detailed information is given vis-à-vis strategic decision-making processes. Management students are expected to develop a grasp of how decisions have been made, their context and their effectiveness in relation to the wider goals of the organization.

While there may be other types of case studies the vast majority of them can be categorized using the nomenclature given above. Inevitably, some case formats will develop a hybrid approach, and integrate characteristics from the other types outlined above.

5. Strategies for Analyzing Case Studies

What then is an effective way to begin an analysis of a case study? Many methods and strategies are available. Here is a summary of one such approach, which management students can take to analyze case studies based on eight steps:

Analyze the history and development of the company

The first point of entry is to examine the critical incidents in a company's history. This time-line approach will enable an analysis of the company's past strategy and decision-making structure to emerge.

Identification of the company's strengths and weaknesses

Following this, a more formal SWOT analysis can be provided. All of the critical incidents that were mapped in the first stage can be used to provide an historical overview of the company's evident strategic strengths and weaknesses.

Examine the external environment and context

Continuing to focus on the elements of the SWOT analysis, this stage foregrounds the environmental opportunities and threats. In particular, the environmental phase allows students to focus on the wider macro-environmental factors.

Closer evaluation of the SWOT analysis

The previous two stages have helped to put the four variables of the SWOT analysis into relief. It

should be clear how the company functions, its strengths and weaknesses measured against strategic opportunities and threats. To what extent is the company in a competitive position? How can the organization face the threats posed by the market and turn them into opportunities. The succinct and detailed analysis provided by the SWOT variables is central to an effective information gathering process.

Corporate-level strategy analysis

This stage in the analysis turns to consider the organization's objectives and mission. While this information can often be extracted from the detailed information provided by the case, on other occasions it must be pieced together by inference. This perspective is crucial to an understanding of the organization's overall corporate strategy and direction. More detailed aspects of this line of analysis will focus on the organization's engagement with mergers, acquisitions and subsidiaries.

Business-level strategy

When the organization's corporate-level strategy has been delineated and the SWOT analysis is complete, the focus turns toward its business-level strategy. This can be relatively simple if the company is a single-business unit. If on the other hand, there are many business elements, each business unit will have its own business-level strategy.

Structure and control systems analysis

In the penultimate phase the objective is to articulate the nature of the organization's structure and control systems. This will enable an analysis of the fit between strategy and structure.

Recommendations

Importantly, the analysis should conclude with a series of recommendations based on the arguments provided in the analysis. Recommendations are focused on providing solutions to the strategic problems that the organization is currently confronted with. There should be a logical connection between the analysis and the recommendations. Recommendations can be articulated in the form of a schedule or timetable for changing the current state of affairs. The recommendations should clearly indicate how changes at one level of the organization affect the other interrelated levels.

Close adherence to these stages will provide a detailed analysis of the context of the case study. Following this type of careful preparation will put management education students in a position to participate effectively in discussion of the case under consideration. The most significant point to remember is that the strategy for analyzing the case should be connected with its evident content. While it may be permissible and necessary to elide a number of the stages identified in the method outlined above, this will always be intimately context dependent and relate to the specific case under analysis.

Written Reports

Having done the analysis, written or oral reports are standard ways of presenting the solution to the case in a graduate education context. This requires a high degree of clarity based on a logical approach. It should be particularly evident how the solution has been arrived at and why others were rejected.

The following model provides the basic features of a considered analysis process. First, in business communication a concise report is often considered better than an unnecessarily longer version.

Secondly, the report should be well written, and its style should compliment its content. An effectively written report would contain the following elements:

1. *Executive summary.* The summary is a concisely written statement, usually less than one page in length, placed at the front of the report. In it a summary of the salient points of the analysis as well as the solution are presented, with a succinct series of supporting reasons provided at every stage.

2. *Problem statement.* The major issues and problems of the case sudy should be clearly identified. The summary should be aimed at readers already familiar with the case but nevertheless attempt to present the facts in an engaging and recognizable fashion.

3. *Alternatives.* A discussion of all relevant alternatives should also be provided. This should incorporate a brief engagement with the major arguments that support or undermine each alternative. The main assumptions of the analysis should be articulated as well as the contextualizing constraints that affect each one.

4. *Conclusion.* The conclusion presents an overview of the analysis and its underpinning logic. Why was a particular solution adapted? Why were the alternatives rejected?

5. *Implementation.* Finally, a proposed plan of action should be articulated. The plan will indicate how the effective implementation of the strategic decision making-making process is to be achieved.

Oral Reports

Oral reports are also a frequent requirement of programs using case studies. Typically, individual presenters or a team of students, with clearly defined roles, will be assigned an oral report. In many pedagogical situations, each student must be prepared to discuss any aspect of a case if called upon to comment on ideas presented by other students. Usually it is not uncommon for a significant percentage of the final course grade to be based on the quality of a student's oral participation in classroom discussions.

The process of preparation of an oral case report should include the following:

1. *Overview of the case context.* A brief summary of the salient points, mapping the parameters of the case context.

2. *Problem statement.* A concise description of the most significant obstacles and issues presented by the case scenario.

3. *Analysis of the possible alternatives.* A presentation of the relevant alternative solutions in a succinct fashion.

4. *Conclusion.* A brief but well-informed summary of the solution chosen coupled with an

analysis of why other courses of action were rejected.

5. *Implementation.* Finally, present the implementation plan, giving an appropriate time-line for the successful adoption of the proposal.

Rarely, a full case presentation will be required. Typically, parts will be identified for presentation, and at all stages students will be asked to provide a rationale for their chosen arguments and solutions.

6. Conclusion

The basic premise of the case study approach is that students are actively engaged in learning through a process of discovery rather than passively assimilating information listening to lectures. Management education students are challenged to develop analytical skills, in that they are able to diagnose the context, define the salient problems, understand the case's underlying assumptions and constraints, and decide on an appropriate course of action. The active development of students' skills differentiates the methodological approach to case studies from other styles of graduate teaching and learning. The objective is to enable students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their analytical and decision-making processes, allowing them to hone the skills required of an effective manager in today's distinctive international business environment. Davis and Wilcock (2005) summarize the key case study skills that Japanese students studying business in an English-speaking context will need to master if they are to be as successful as their international counterparts:

1. Group working
2. Individual study skills
3. Information gathering and analysis
4. Time management
5. Presentation skills
6. Practical skills

This paper has sought to define the parameters affecting the way Japanese management education students frequently engage with case studies. Arising from this overview, further research will be undertaken for a subsequent article using data collected from an empirical study focusing on feedback from Japanese students in the Graduate School at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business.

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