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STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND PERCEIVED LEARNING: AN ANECDOTAL COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL VERSUS GROUNDED CASES

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ABSTRACT

In a marketing capstone course student convinced their instructor to replace several traditional case studies with a grounded case. Specifically, students asked to work on marketing plans for the School of Business and the university. The enthusiasm with which they tackled their work was remarkable. In addition to event details, student perceptions regarding the grounded case as compared to traditional cases, and hypotheses regarding the unusual levels of involvement, are provided. Students believed that the grounded case work, while much harder, was much more worthwhile than traditional cases. High involvement levels might be attributed to the fact that students initiated the project, that students were concerned about their university, and that they believed they would be taken seriously.

I. INTRODUCTION

In spring 2003 students in the capstone marketing course at a regional Southwestern university developed and presented two marketing plans: one for the School of Business, and another for the entire university. It was an opportunity for the university to leverage its scarce resources while providing senior students with an opportunity to put all of the marketing pieces together in a real-world project. While this is noteworthy in itself, what caught the attention of faculty and administrators who attended the presentation was the energy and enthusiasm with which the students presented and discussed the results, and the clear feeling that the students had been exceptionally involved in the exercise. The magnitude of their involvement was unusual enough that the decision was made to document what had occurred, in the belief that such anecdotes might be useful within the context of discovery (Hunt, 1976).

The objective in this paper is, therefore, to relate the particulars regarding the genesis, management, and results of this real-world marketing plan assignment. Further, since the students in that class also did a considerable amount of text-based case analysis, the perceptions of students regarding text-based versus grounded cases

are presented. Finally, some preliminary hypotheses regarding the success of the exercise are generated and discussed.

II. COURSE AND GROUNDED CASE DETAILS

During the spring, 2003 semester the senior capstone marketing class at a regional Southwestern university was progressing as usual, using largely a text-based case approach, whereby students, organized into teams, evaluated the situation of a particular firm and generated written recommendations. During class, a team would be randomly called on to present their analysis and recommendations, and the class, as a whole, would discuss and debate various options perceived to be open to the firm. During the third week of the course a 23% tuition increase was announced by the university's administration, and the future of the university was a common topic of discussion among students and other members of the community. Two students approached their professor and requested that the class work on developing a marketing plan for the university as well as one for the School of Business. The professor told them they would have to develop a proposal and present the option to the class. The class unanimously supported the proposal, which essentially called for replacing three full text-based case assignments with the marketing plan work.

There were 8 semester-long groups in the class. Four were assigned to the UNIVERSITY marketing plan project, and four were assigned to the School of Business marketing plan project. Within each project the four groups were assigned the following tasks:

Group 1: primary and secondary marketing research

Group 2: market segmentation

Group 3: targeting

Group 4: positioning

Each group was given one week to perform their assigned task, after which they were required to brief the subsequent group, outside of class and in the presence of the instructor, as well as pass on their written material. The market research groups took two weeks, using spring break to collect information by visiting competing schools and several feeder high schools. While working on the grounded projects student groups were excused from class write-ups and discussions but were still required to read the assigned cases.

After the positioning groups were finished, they presented the draft results of the findings and made recommendations to the entire class. Following this presentation, each group developed a 3 Ps marketing plan. Price was considered fixed.

At this point, the existing groups were dissolved and reformed into the following for each project:

Consolidation group: Responsible for merging all plans into a 'best' plan

Financial/Quantitative group: Responsible for fleshing out the numbers

PowerPoint group: Responsible for developing a PowerPoint presentation

Revision group: Responsible for editing and refining the products

Presentation group: Responsible for presenting the results

While working on the project's students consulted with administrators, faculty, and others when the need arose. In the opinion of the professor the amount of work required for the projects exceeded the workload that was replaced.

When the project was complete the finale consisted of a presentation to administrators, faculty, and students, which was characterized by an unusually high amount of energy and enthusiasm. The presentation generated a lively discussion with the audience about strategy and tactics of the university and School of Business.

III. TRADITIONAL CASES VERSUS GROUNDED CASES

While not well developed, two types of cases are beginning to be distinguished in the literature: traditional cases and grounded, or living, cases. Traditional cases, such as those found in many textbooks and published by the Harvard Business School, are used to demonstrate how real-world problems might be tackled, constitute a war story to drive home a point, illustrate a theory, or to develop problem-solving and communication skills among students (Rangan, 1995). Grounded cases (Mosca and Howard, 1997), also referred to as living cases (LeClair and Stottenger, 1999), consist of real-world ongoing situations where students collect, as well as analyze, information, usually over a longer period of time. In this type of real-world case students generally make recommendations for real decision-makers, rather than act as if they were the decision-makers. Many faculties probably recognize this as a type of service-learning project.

While much has been written about the benefits of case-based education (see, for example, Bonoma, 1989; Corey, 1998; Gragg, 1982), there has been relatively little comparative empirical work on grounded versus traditional cases. A literature search yielded only one study which directly compared the traditional case approach to a grounded learning case (Mosca and Howard, 1999). In that study, for three

semesters, one of the authors was responsible for teaching 2 sections of a business strategy course. In one section each semester cases from a text were employed, while in the other section students worked on a real-world ongoing grounded case. In total, 75 students went through each type. When asked about their experiences at the end of the semester, 100% of those involved in the grounded case indicated that the experience provided them with a feeling of solving a real world problem, 100% indicated the case increased their confidence in their abilities to problem solve, and 100% indicated they were motivated to do outside research. In contrast, only 14% of the students that used the text-provided cases felt like they were solving real problems, only 14% were motivated to do outside research, and fewer reported gaining confidence in their ability to solve problems. Further, the average grade point average for the grounded learning sections was 3.2, versus 2.8 for the conventional sections. Finally, the faculty state that the quality of the reports in the grounded learning sections were professional grade, versus a wider spread, and generally lower quality, among the conventional sections.

Two other published studies are relevant regarding the efficacy of grounded cases as compared to traditional cases (Jessup, 1995; LeClair and Stottinger, 1999). In the first, at California State University, San Marcos, a year-long senior-level consulting project was developed for business students (Jessup, 1995). The real-world clients, and the faculty member charged with teaching and managing the course, considered the experience a success. Student evaluations were very positive, with the overall evaluation of the course, on a 5-point scale, being 4.45 (n=20), as compared to the college average of 4.00.

In the second the University of Memphis, in conjunction with Vienna University, offered an intensive two-week MBA marketing course that required teams of students to develop competing marketing plans for a mid-sized United States firm seeking to expand their presence in Europe (LeClair and Stottinger, 1999). Reportedly faculty and executives found the work to be very good. In particular, faculty found the quality of the reports superior to those completed during traditional semester-long courses. Students rated the course higher than other semester-long graduate marketing courses. Two caveats about this study need to be mentioned: first, the caliber of students accepted to this course may have been higher than the average MBA student, and second, since the entire format of the course was unconventional there are a number of factors which could account for the quality of work and satisfaction of the participants.

IV. STUDENT PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE TWO TYPES OF CASES

The 26 students in the course evaluated weekly text-based cases, as well as participated in the grounded case project. As such, it was decided to capture student

perceptions about the two, particularly with regard to the relative value of the grounded case to the text-based cases. Consequently, a 10-item Likert questionnaire, along with a request for comments, was administered to the students after they had completed their final exam. In the questionnaire the text-based cases were simply referred to as cases, and the grounded case simply as the marketing plan.

Table 1 shows the results. Twenty-five of the 26 students (96.2%) believed that the value they received from working on the marketing plan exceeded that they would have received from working on cases. Similarly, 22 of 24 respondents (91.7%) indicated that working on the marketing plan provided them with an educational opportunity that cases could not have offered. Twenty-three of the 26 (88.5%) indicated the marketing plan work was a highlight of the class, and all but one recommended making it a regular component of the course.

Table 1. Student Responses Regarding the Marketing Plan Experience (%)*

	Strongly Agree 1	Some-what Agree 2	Neither agree nor disagree 3	Some-what disagree 4	Strongly disagree 5
I was more motivated to work on the marketing plan than I would have been on any additional cases. (n=26; mean =1.50; standard deviation =.762)	61.5%	30.8%	3.8%	3.8%	0.0%
Work on the marketing plan provided me with a feeling of solving a real problem. (n=26; mean=1.27; standard deviation =.452)	73.1	26.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Working on the marketing plan helped me gain more confidence in my ability to problem solve than I would have gotten from working on more cases. (n=25; mean =1.60; standard deviation =.913)	56.0	36.0	4.0	0.0	4.0
The value I received from working on the marketing plan exceeds what I believe I would have gotten from more cases. (n=26; mean =1.38; standard deviation =.697)	69.2	26.9	0.0	3.8	0.0
Working on additional cases would have been more fun than working on the marketing plans. (n=26; mean =3.65; standard deviation =1.093)	0.0	19.2	23.1	30.8	26.9
This experience was a highlight of this class. (n=26; mean =1.54; standard deviation =.811)	61.5	26.9	7.7	3.8	0.0
I would recommend making the same (or similar) exercise a regular component of this class. (n=26; mean =1.35; standard deviation =.562)	69.2	26.9	3.8	0.0	0.0
Working on the marketing plan provided more opportunity to practice various types of quantitative and financial analyses than I would have gotten from working on more cases. (n=24; mean =2.50; standard deviation =1.216)	29.2	16.7	33.3	16.7	4.2
I believe the marketing plan will provide value to the university (School of Business). (n=24; mean =1.25; standard deviation =.442)	75.0	25.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Working on the marketing plan provided me an educational opportunity that cases could not have offered. (n=24; mean =1.17; standard deviation =.637)	91.7	4.2	0.0	3.8	0.0

* n = number of respondents out of a possible 26.

At the end of the questionnaire students were encouraged to supply comments they believed would help faculty evaluate the value of working on the marketing plans. Nine students, or 34.6%, did so. The comments were independently reviewed by two faculty members who were charged with categorizing comments as being positive, neutral/constructive/observational, or negative. The only discrepancy between the two concerned comments regarding the amount of time and effort required by the project: one faculty member categorized the 5 comments as being neutral or observational, while the other categorized the comments as being negative. Overall, apart from the comments that the exercise was very time consuming and hard work, all comments were positive about the experience. Some representative partially edited comments follow:

“I put more time and learned more from doing this than any other project. I was able to use all the different techniques that I learned in all my other classes!”

“It was very rewarding, but it was so difficult. I spent more time than a full-time job would’ve required for a couple of weeks. It was great, but it was honestly an extreme amount of work.”

“I really enjoyed the marketing plan and I believe it could work, but only hope it will be used. It was good to see how to use real life financials & not textbook financials. It mostly helped with getting rid of the sterileness of being in the classroom.”

“Never have I been able to relate what I was learning so well to a real-life project! What a complement this project could be to senior marketing students...that is if what they came up with was used otherwise it will only become another project equivalent to a case.... Part of the magic was the thought that just maybe our results would be looked at and used...when administration reacted positively and showed interest to see our results it was fuel for the fire.”

“The marketing plan was hard work but very rewarding!”

“The response from the faculty was amazing. At first, I thought I was wasting my time, but after the presentation and response, it was more than worth it.”

Importantly, the resulting marketing plans, from the perspective of the faculty, were very good, given the time constraints. This result is consistent with the findings of others (LeClair and Stottinger, 1999; Mosca and Howard, 1997; Jessup, 1995), who

indicate reports compare very favorably with those from different courses. Further, the exercise provided the university with ideas about what should be done in this particular instance, as well as educated some about what is normally included in a marketing plan.

V. DISCUSSION

It is clear from the responses of the students that the grounded case project was very motivating and perceived as being of great value. Indeed, it is clear that the perceived benefits of the grounded case exceed what they believe they would have obtained had they replaced the project with additional text-based courses. But many faculties have students work on real-world projects without generating the enthusiasm that this particular project generated. What made this project so involving and rewarding to students?

Perhaps the most interesting question is why this particular grounded case, as well as those reported in the literature, generated such positive outcomes. After all, many faculties routinely assign students to work for organizations dealing with real problems and opportunities. To what extent can one generalize from these grounded cases to grounded cases in general? In this instance, the students consisted of seniors about to graduate from their institution, which was perceived to be facing an uncertain future. They were the initiators of the projects, and clearly were interested in giving something back to their alma mater. Would their enthusiasm for the grounded case have been as great if the subject was of less immediate interest to them, or if the instructor had imposed a grounded learning experience on them?

Among some idiosyncratic hypotheses regarding this particular experience are the following:

- 1) The project was no more captivating and beneficial than other grounded cases, but was perceived to be so due to the enthusiasm and personal characteristics of the students charged with presenting the plan to administrators and faculty.
- 2) The project focused on an institution that was important to the students.
- 3) The project concerned what was perceived to be akin to a crisis: The drastic tuition increase generated a very uncertain future for the university.
- 4) Instructor perceptions, comments, teaching style and/or involvement may have generated student enthusiasm.

- 5) The marketing plan project was initiated by the students, who had to persuade the instructor to allow them to pursue the projects.

Other possible replicable reasons are:

- 1) The project represented an unexpected change of pace.
- 2) The students believed that their recommendations would be taken seriously, that the administration was interested in their work and would adopt quality recommendations.
- 3) The comprehensiveness of the project. The project dealt with everything from assessing the market to strategy and tactics development.
- 4) It was the last undergraduate semester for the students, and a chance for students to tackle a real-world project.

It is likely that several factors came into play. To the extent that future research can identify the reasons why some grounded cases generate greater student involvement and higher quality work than other case experiences, then it will be possible to predictably provide a more enriching educational experience for students.

Negative consequences to highly involving projects must also be considered. Undertaking a project that requires so much time and dedication on the part of students means that other courses, with their presumably worthwhile material, might get shortchanged. Further, the demands on instructors must be considered. Consistent with the published experiences of others, the time commitment on the part of the instructor was greater than for other courses. On the other hand, the instructor was recognized as the outstanding educator for the university for the year, and he attributes that award to this particular group of students and their rewarding experience.

Given the circumstances that surround this project, generalizing this experience to other settings needs to be done cautiously, if at all. Indeed, one of the reasons it was decided to survey the students was because of the perception that this was an instance that was unusual in terms of student motivation and output.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this instance, at least from the perspective of the students, the grounded case was of greater value than what would have been obtained through additional text-

based cases. While this is consistent with reports from others (LeClair and Stottinger, 1999; Mosca and Howard, 1997; Jessup, 1995), it is not yet clear that this can be generalized to other settings. What is needed are studies and experiments across a variety of situations before one can conclude that grounded cases are superior to traditional cases, and in what way.

Important considerations that cannot be forgotten are the educational objectives that are the focus of casework, as well as how to judge the relative outcomes of the two case types. For example, grounded case learning may not be as good as other approaches when the intent is to provide students with problem-solving practice across a variety of situations. Students may also be the inappropriate judge of the relative efficacy of different instructional methods.

At the very least the experience demonstrates how a university can leverage its resources through the use of knowledgeable students, generate enthusiasm among students who can provide accurate and relevant data for administrative decision making, and enhance the overall educational experience at the same time. Given that the background of many university administrators lacks any marketing or marketing strategy training, such an exercise can be very educational for them, as well.

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