

THE CLASSROOM ROLE OF THE CASE INSTRUCTOR

Stuart U. Rich, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon

ABSTRACT

A case may be used as a springboard or frame of reference for a lecture, or for a non-directed, unstructured class discussion. This paper discusses the middle ground between these two extremes, and within this context addresses the following questions: What is the case method? What are the elements of successful case teaching? What do the students expect of the case instructor? and What is the role of the instructor in classroom discussion?

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion about the case method of instruction is unlikely to produce worthwhile results unless some attempt is made at the outset to define the terms used. In their article "Casing Casemethod Methods," Dooley and Skinner stated, "Most discussions of the case method are largely meaningless. The phrase 'case method' embraces such an array of pedagogic practices that the term itself has no precise connotation. There are as many varieties of the case method as there are practitioners. The only common denominator in the method is the use of a case study. But the purposes to which the case is put, and the actual events that occur in class, vary almost without limit" (Dooley and Skinner 1977, p. 277).

These authors went on to describe a number of alternative scenarios of case method classes. At one extreme was a class which took the form of a lecture by the instructor, using the assigned case as a springboard and frame of reference. He "walked the students through" the important aspects of the case, did almost all the talking, and answered only those student questions which he deemed relevant to the case. At the other end of the spectrum was the class which the instructor started by simply raising the question, "If you were the president of the company (described in the case), what would you do?" The instructor called only on volunteers, and gave them almost complete latitude as to whether they addressed themselves to the remarks of prior speakers, or spoke to some new aspects of the case, or merely expressed opinions not particularly relevant to the case problems at hand. Occasionally the instructor would jot a point on the board, or suggest moving on to another issue in the case, but generally the students discussed what they wanted to discuss, and in the way they wanted to discuss it.

In this paper I would like to deal with the case method as falling on some middle ground between these two extremes. It is on this "middle ground" that I believe most case instructors operate, or at least try to operate, depending on the nature of the cases they are dealing with, the objectives of the courses being taught, the background and abilities of their students, and the overall case or non-case orientation of their school. Within this context, I shall try to answer the questions, What is the case method? and What are the elements of successful case teaching? Then I'll consider what the students expect of the case instructor. (After all, as members of the marketing profession, we should give some consideration to what our customers or clients want.) Finally, I'll describe the role of the case instructor in classroom discussion.

WHAT IS THE CASE METHOD?

Let me first give a simple definition of a case, and then go on to describe the basic pedagogical elements of successful case instruction. A case is a record of a business issue, or issues, which have actually been faced by business executives, together with the facts and opinions upon which executive decisions had to depend. In other words, cases are descriptions of real business situations in which executives take action and are responsible for the results. Notice that this definition excludes "armchair" cases, or make-believe situations written up by the instructor to illustrate a particular point in a lecture. Likewise, "vest-pocket" cases, or very short caselets lacking adequate data upon which to make a decision, are also excluded.

There are at least five basic pedagogical elements underlying success in case instruction. They are: the primacy of situational analysis; the imperative of relating analysis and action; the necessity of student involvement; a non-traditional instructor role; and an administrative point of view (Christensen 1981, p. 8-13). Let's look briefly at each of these.

First, the primacy of situational analysis means analyzing a specific situation "as it is," not "as it might be." The student must deal with the problems and frustrations of a real-world situation, where there is likely to be an absence of needed information, a conflict of company objectives and of company personalities, and an imbalance between needs and resources.

Second, the imperative of relating analysis and action means that the class considers action along with analysis whenever possible. The case discussion should include how to translate a logical plan into the committed behavior of a group of managers.

Thirdly, the necessity of student involvement refers to the active intellectual and emotional involvement required of the student. If the student clearly takes a position in his own mind on the issues of the case, then he (or she) will be quite personally involved in the discussion - and intensely interested. On the other hand, if the student reads a case and remains neutral about it, then he (or she) is unlikely to be affected and thus will not learn a great deal from the case session.

Fourthly, a non-traditional instructor role means that the teacher accustomed to the traditional lecture method may be uncomfortable on first encountering the case method. This reminds me of a short rhyme on educational philosophy:

"When many sit in relaxation while
one dispenses information,
We call the process education"
(Bronthius, Davis, and Druskel 1957).

The case instructor, in other words, is not a dispenser of information, and his job is not so much to teach students as to encourage learning.

The fifth element of successful case teaching is the development of an administrative point of view. Although hard to define precisely, this term refers to

a composite pattern of acquired skills essential for the successful manager. These skills include, first, a focus on the specific situation within the context of the total situation. For example, a manager must deal with all factors, both technical and human, within the context of the whole company, as well as external competitive pressures. A related skill is a sensitivity to interrelationships, or the ability to see how action taken to resolve, say, a sales problem may affect manufacturing and inventory control. A third skill is approaching problems as one responsible for the achievements of the organization. In describing this skill, one author noted, "We academics live in the world of commentators and critics. But in the management world, the successful individuals must not only see what needs to be done but take responsibility for getting the problem solved" (Christensen 1981, p. 13). Related to this skill is the fourth one, an action orientation, or the desire of a manager to help his organization move ahead to deal with its problems and exploit its opportunities.

WHAT THE STUDENTS EXPECT OF THE INSTRUCTOR

What do the students expect of the instructor? First of all, they expect him (or her) to be knowledgeable in the field in which he is teaching - in marketing, for example, to have a good grasp of fundamental concepts such as product life cycle and market segmentation. The objectives of the course and the objectives of each case should be clear to the instructor and he should have absolute mastery of the essential details of each case.

Secondly, the instructor is expected to provide the students with cases (and back-up reading materials) which will make it possible for them to think purposefully. The instructor, in choosing cases to use, should be aware that the "climate" of the case method class deserves careful planning. If the instructor expects to play "conductor" and the class to play the "orchestra," then the case is the "score" (Reynolds 1977, p. 133). Surveys have been done of both students and faculty as to what awakens student interest in a case and what characteristics are shared by successful cases (Bennett and Chakravarthy 1978, pp. 12, 13) (McNair 1971). Conclusions can be summarized as follows:

1. A good case tells a story. It has a time structure, an expository structure, and a plot structure.
2. A good case focuses on an interest-arousing issue or problem.
3. A good case is set in the past five years.
4. A good case permits empathy with central characters.
5. A good case includes quotations from company sources. These may be spoken or written, and add realism and allow the student to interpret such quotes in the light of what he knows of those with whom the quotes originated.
6. A good case requires appraisal of decisions already made. In other words, the case provides not only issues of its own, but data to evaluate past management decisions, since decisions in real life are guided by precedents and prior commitments.
7. A good case requires solution of management problems.
8. A good case teaches a management skill.

Thirdly, what about the actual classroom discussions - what do the students expect here? Students' expectations can be summarized as follows (Christensen 1981, p. 31), (Frey 1983), (Erskine, Leenders, and Muffette-Leenders 1981, pp. 133-179):

1. Confidence that the instructor knows where the discussion is going, and that what may seem like disjointed odds and ends will really lead them to some discovery.
2. An assurance that the instructor will not humiliate them when they attempt to contribute and make an error. Mistakes are real learning opportunities.
3. An insistence by the instructor that students state their positions or conclusions. Students do not want to nail each other down.
4. A clear statement of rules of class attendance, and the importance of class participation in the final course grade.
5. Encouragement of wide participation in class discussion.
6. Direct or indirect signals from the professor that student analysis is moving in the right direction.
7. Asking students to list major topics for discussion and writing them on the blackboard. This is useful for the first ten minutes. Thereafter, the instructor should help ensure their coverage.
8. A clear statement by the instructor of the objectives of the course, and a show of enthusiasm for those objectives.

ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR IN CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

In assessing the role of the instructor in case discussions we should first review how students learn by the case method. As suggested in our earlier description of the pedagogical elements of successful case instruction, they learn through inductive rather than deductive reasoning. As in other professional fields such as law and medicine, management education is based on situational analysis and prescription. The reasoning is inductive; it proceeds from the particular to the general. By comparison, deductive learning proceeds from the teaching of a set of principles or theories which the aspiring managers then seek to apply to the treatment of specific situations. "In management, however, problems do not yield to sets of laws, theorems, or principles unless perhaps the problems are reduced to artificially simple forms" (Corey, Lovelock, and Ward 1981, p. 6).

Essentially, through case study, students learn by discovery, that is, interpreting and finding meaning in the information provided in the case. They learn by the development of their analytical abilities through skillful probing by the instructor. They learn by continual practice - through rigorous analysis of a large number of cases. Finally, they learn by contrast and comparison, identifying common elements among different cases, and understanding why what might work in one situation will not work in another (Corey, Lovelock, and Ward 1981, p. 6-8).

Given, then, the elements of successful case teaching, what the students expect of the case instructor, and how students learn by the case method, what should be the role of the instructor in classroom discussion? A good summary of the role is provided by Abell and Hammond (Abell and Hammond 1979, p. 9):

The discussion leader's role is to encourage and to facilitate, to ask questions; to rephrase; and to summarize. He or she does not tell the group what to think, but encourages members to think for themselves, examine their positions, to explore fully various facets, and perhaps leads them to consider areas they may have missed. The purpose is not to reach a consensus but to air various approaches and the arguments for and against them.

The soundness of the process of analysis is far more important than the conclusion, since there are many good solutions to most managerial problems.

SUMMARY

We have seen that there is a wide divergence of views on what constitute case teaching. At one extreme, a case may be used simply as a springboard for a lecture; at the other extreme, it may be used as a backdrop for an unstructured student "rap session." In the middle ground between these two extremes, cases are used to train students to become future managers by teaching them to make decisions, and by inculcating in them an administrative point of view. Thus the cases used are based on actual situations facing executives. They are decision-oriented, and call for taking action. The learning process involved is inductive rather than deductive.

Within this context, there are a number of factors the case instructor must consider before determining his (or her) appropriate classroom role. First, the mission of the school, the objectives of the courses being taught, and the backgrounds and abilities of the instructor and of the students must all be examined. For example, if the mission of the school (explicit or implicit) is to turn out scholarly observers of the business scene rather than practicing business administrators, then the traditional lecture method may be more appropriate than the case method.

Next, the case instructor must consider the basic pedagogical elements of case teaching - in other words, what the instructor expects of his students. As noted earlier, these expectations include the ability of the students to do situational analysis, to relate analysis to action, to identify and take a position on the issues of the case, and to develop an administrative point of view.

Finally, the case instructor must be aware of what the students expect of him (or her). Among other things, they expect the instructor to be knowledgeable in his field, to make clear the objectives of the course and the cases, and to have a mastery of the essential details of each case. The cases used should make it possible for the students to think purposefully. They should, for example, contain interest-arousing issues, permit empathy with central characters, teach management skills, and require solution of management problems. During the classroom discussion of the cases, the students want to be confident that the instructor knows where the discussion is going, and, while insisting that they state their positions or conclusions, will not humiliate students if they make errors. Other expectations include encouragement of wide classroom participation, and signals from the instructor that the analysis is moving in the right direction.

Having addressed all of the above issues, the case instructor may decide that his role should be that of a facilitator, a coach, or an orchestra conductor, or perhaps a combination of all three. Under any of these roles, he does not tell the class what to think, but encourages members to think for themselves, to examine their positions, to reach meaningful conclusions on the case issues, and to show a willingness to take responsibility for the implementation of their recommended courses of action.

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