THE USE OF WRITTEN CASES IN THE MBA PROGRAM
AT THE FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AT VSB-TU OSTRAVA

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Abstract

The author presents her experiences as a lecturer with the use of written case methodology in an MBA program. The discussion focuses on the application of this methodology in both classroom teaching and examinations in the Managing People module. Attention is also drawn to particular differences between the British and the Czech educational environments as well as the historical context of MBA programs in the Czech Republic.

KEY WORDS: MBA program, managing people, case method, case analysis process, concept application, case exam, skills development

INTRODUCTION

MBA programs were first offered in the Czech Republic after 1989. Programs, which relied on new educational approaches, were strategically designed to equip managers for a constantly changing business environment. They focused on developing analytical skills as well as such soft managerial skills as teamwork, leadership, and communicational expertise. The format of delivery differed from what participants had become accustomed to in their earlier educational experiences insofar as they can no longer could be merely passive “consumers” of what the lecturer delivered, but had to become active and critical participants in the learning process. The Faculty of Economics at VŠB-Technical University of Ostrava, Czech Republic offers a full range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs, including the MBA, which has been developed through a long-standing partnership with the Faculty of Business and Law at Liverpool John Moores University. The Faculty also offers a part-time MBA program.

USE OF WRITTEN CASES

THE MANAGING PEOPLE MODULE

The Managing People module, which is taken during the first year of study in the MBA program, focuses on developing the critical knowledge and skills that contribute to effective leadership and management of individuals and groups within organizations. The content covers various aspects of managing people, such as the organizational context, interpersonal relations and communication, attitudes and perception, personality, motivation and stimulation, group dynamics, team building and teamwork, conflict management, and leadership. The module is intended to enhance personal and professional development and also facilitate the application of knowledge and theoretical models in the workplace.
The modes of learning are connected with the aims of the module, with primarily participative methods utilized to create an active learning experience. Classroom sessions are comprised of mini-lectures, group work, practical exercises, and cases. The three main methods employed are group discussions, group activities, and written case studies.

Students must complete one written project and one case examination in addition to class participation. The project involves investigating a workplace problem, applying concepts and theories, analyzing the situation, and presenting a rational conclusion with recommendations. In respect to the examination, a case is distributed for preparation ahead of time, but the specific questions are assigned at the beginning of the examination itself.

**REASONS FOR USING WRITTEN CASES**

Written cases have been used in the Managing People module from the beginning of the MBA program at the Faculty of Economics. Case study examinations were introduced in 2003.

Written cases have been used in this module for a number of reasons, with two of the most important being the following: (1) Since the MBA program is franchised, the Managing People module is obliged to utilize specific content, delivery methods, assignments, and assessment methods. (2) Perhaps more importantly, it is almost impossible to realize the aims of the module (enhancement, facilitation and development of soft skills) without case application.

The use of the case method has many strong points. For example, by teaching with cases instructors can:

- encourage and facilitate active student participation in discussing the issue, the analysis, and the solution of practical problems
- demonstrate how to apply theory in practice
- assist students in understanding concepts and various approaches
- facilitate the development of students’ application skills
- facilitate the development of students’ communication skills, presentation skills, and so forth

**PREREQUISITES FOR TEACHING WITH CASES**

Class size typically varies between 15-30 students, which the author’s experience has indicated to be optimal. Not only does this size permit the instructor to know the students well, it also enhances the opportunity for individual students’ to actively participate and interact with others during class.

The classroom is laid out in a simple “U” shape. The classroom is often small, but students adapt to such conditions. It is also equipped with an overhead projector, white board, and flip chart, all of which are used during group or class case discussion. At times it is useful for the instructor to review previous cases and solutions with students for the purpose of enriching an on-going analysis and discussion with new concepts and approaches.

**GUIDELINES FOR CASES**

The Managing People module consists of 35 teaching hours. A total of 8 to 10 cases are used to address all of the main topics with an additional case being used for the examination.

Comparing the setting at JMU with that at the Faculty of Economics in Ostrava, one could say that the latter in general represents a non-case environment. In Great Britain students are familiar with learning by means of cases and participative methods from the primary school level, while the educational environment in the Czech Republic is influenced by a different tradition. Students at JMU are accustomed to case exams during undergraduate programs, but they are not used at all to this at the Faculty of Economics. In addition, cases are used only rarely in teaching at the Faculty of Economics.

Because of these differences in learning backgrounds, handouts that provide guidelines for case analysis are given to MBA students at the Faculty of Economics. Instructors use these handouts to briefly explain case concepts, various case forms and approaches, how to identify a problem, problem analysis (how to ask, how to apply concepts, etc.), how to interpret data, problem solving, and how to present solutions and recommendations. An emphasis is placed on the fact that a given case does not have only
one correct solution, with the number of relevant solutions depending on circumstances, priorities, the approaches applied, etc. There is a checklist at the end of the handout that summarizes the basic steps:

- Read the case
- Read the case again and make notes
- Structure information
- Analyze the problem (identify the main problem)
- Apply concepts
- Transform information into context
- Transform information into tools that enable you to make decisions
- Use tables and matrices for clarity
- Establish the probable causes of the problem
- Consider relevant solutions
- Set assessment criteria
- Identify the probable strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions
- Consider probable consequences of various solutions
- Explain your solutions on the basis of case information and concepts (Why?)
- Consider implementation (Who? What? When? How?)

Keep your mind on:

- Internal and external organizational factors
- Financial, technological, and human resources
- Employees, management, customers etc.

CASE ANALYSIS PROCESS

After the guidelines above have been explained, students are directed to select a case method issue for discussion. They begin with a very simple case, and the instructor endeavors to facilitate their active participation and learning. It is typically rather difficult to begin teaching with case methodology since students are often passive and expect to be directed at every step, although they become more active and gradually learn the case approach as more cases are introduced. This initial difficulty is attributed to the fact that students have usually been passive members of the teaching process in the traditional Czech educational system and have not been expected to be active in class to any significant degree. This type of previous experience coupled with existing stereotypes clearly influences their behavior, although certain instructors are now attempting to change this situation, such as by using humor, providing encouragement, or discussing real-life experiences in the workplace.

In the author’s use of individual case analysis during class, each student analyzes a case and writes his or her own solutions and recommendations. Volunteers then present their solutions, which are followed by a group discussion. The class as a whole is divided into several groups, with each group having the opportunity to make presentations. An open class discussion in which students attempt to select the best analyses, solutions, recommendations, and implementations concludes each case presentation. The instructor takes part in this process by facilitating the discussion through questions, encouraging participation, etc. Students are asked to prepare more detailed written case analyses at home since the time available in class for this purpose is limited. It appears, however, that students tend to not take seriously their responsibility for written case analysis outside of classroom time. This is evidenced by the fact that they are often silent when asked in subsequent class sessions whether they wish to read their own written analyses or comment on any previous cases. Nevertheless, both students and the instructor find the case analysis interesting and fruitful. Students become quite active in class, and the instructor has a good opportunity to observe their presentation and communication skills, analytical skills, etc.

CASE EXAM

The case exam is a combination of a take-home and an in-class exam. An examination case is distributed for preparation ahead of time, but the particular questions are distributed only at the beginning
of the exam itself. Students also receive examination guidelines during the exam itself that are designed to assist them in the presentation of their answers.

Case preparation is time consuming, as is the grading of case exams. There are also problems concerning the objectivity and subjectivity of evaluation procedures. The instructor normally develops an initial evaluation framework that is based on the concepts taught, then reads half of the exam answers, modifies the framework, and prepares the final grading scheme.

Because of the differences between the Czech and British educational environments, there are also differences between the weighting given to the project and the case exam. The weighting at JMU is 60% for the project and 40% for the case exam, while at the Faculty of Economics it is respectively 70% and 30%.

CONCLUSIONS

Instructors encounter difficulties in the Czech Republic in respect to logistics. For example, it is up to instructors to locate appropriate cases because of the non-case environment within the faculty, and they must rely on cases adapted from Czech textbooks, various foreign cases that are adapted to the Czech environment, or self-written cases. The fact that cases used at the Faculty of Economics are generally shorter than those used at JMU is connected with the educational and cultural differences of British and Czech MBA students.

MBA students evaluate the case approach as very interesting and stimulating, and indicate that it enhances and supports active learning and the development of a wide variety of skills, including analysis, application of theory, and communication. Such comments are made not only during classroom sessions, but also in written work. Students clearly do not need to be persuaded that teaching with cases is much more effective and interesting than the presentation of certain concepts that they must simply memorize.

Students generally accept the case approach, and they emphasize the added value it provides. They state that it furthers their personal as well as their professional development, and that it assists them in reaching the goals they set for themselves when they entered the MBA program. There is an apparent discrepancy, however, between what students say in this regard and what they do, and it would be much better if their behavior were consistent with their comments.

In spite of the various difficulties and problems connected with the use of written case methodology, MBA students generally appreciate the case method. Not only does the application of case methodology challenge both instructors and students, teaching and learning with cases is without doubt one of the best methods available for this type of program.

REFERENCES

