CASE-BASED STRUCTURED CONFLICT: A MEANS FOR ENHANCING CLASSROOM LEARNING ─────────────────

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The case method of teaching involves a written description of an actual situation, wherein a person is confronted with the need to make a decision regarding a particular challenge, opportunity, problem, or issue (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994; Naumes & Naumes, 1999). The case method enables students to step into the role of the decision maker, figuratively speaking. Cases provide a mechanism by which students can become intimately involved in real-world situations and take ownership, feel the pressure, and recognize the risks of exposing their ideas to others (Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, & Leenders, 1997). Cases therefore promote the ability to discern the essential elements in a situation, to analyze and interpret data, and to use those insights to inform action (Wasserman, 1994). Students are thereby offered the opportunity to enhance both their judgment and critical thinking skills by (a) participating in the analysis and solution of relevant problems, (b) seeing how theory applies in practice, and (c) learning by doing and teaching others (Merseth, 1999).

The case method is proving itself a most effective educational vehicle, as it deals with some of education's most basic challenges (Shulman, 1996). Cases are now used around the world as a primary means for teaching in a wide variety of disciplines (Erskine, Leenders, & Mauffette-Leenders, 1998). For example, the case method has found successful application in such

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areas as accounting (Barkman, 1998; Dittenhofer, 1991), nursing (Lowenstein & Sowell, 1992), psychology (Block, 1996), physical education (Collier & O'Sullivan, 1997), teacher education (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999), physical science (Herreid, 1994), library management (Roselle, 1996), and public administration (Rosenbloom, 1995), to name a few. With regard to the study of management, it is particularly important to note that a large and growing number of business schools are adopting the case method of teaching (Booth, Bowie, Jordan, & Rippin, 2001). In part, this trend reflects the idea that students can approximate real-world experience without risking real harm if their strategies are ill-designed or if their interventions are poorly crafted (Harrington, 1996; Merseth, 1991). "In essence, cases are to management students what cadavers are to medical students, the opportunity to practice on the real thing harmlessly" (Mauffette-Leenders et al., 1997, p. 4).

Although there are a variety of ways to implement the case method of teaching, anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of instructors adopt the directed classroom discussion approach as their primary means for implementing this teaching technique (Barnes et al., 1994; Booth et al., 2001; Mauffette-Leenders et al., 1997). In this approach, the instructor is central to the process: leading the discussion by asking questions; calling for volunteers; probing, recording and facilitating student comments; supplying data, theory, or insight that may enhance the thinking and learning in class. Discussion, whether in small or large groups, is a crucial avenue to learning in this format (Levin, 1999). For example, Lundeberg, Mathews, and Scheurman (1996) found that 85% of students surveyed believed that they learned more from discussing a case in class than they did from working with a partner to analyze a case or from writing an analysis on their own. Furthermore, 70% of the participants indicated that the class discussion was valuable because it exposed them to different viewpoints, whereas 33% said that the case discussion increased their understanding because they had to learn to defend or alter their viewpoints.

Researchers have found that the character of the participants significantly determines the quality of case-based classroom discussion. Although the instructor's skill as a facilitator is key, the makeup of the student body also matters. For example, students with prior knowledge are found to be more able to deeply engage such discussion (Kleinfeld, 1992). In that same vein, Lundeberg (1993a, 1993b) found that nontraditional students were responsible for a disproportionate number of meaningful contributions during the case discussion, as opposed to the traditional, college-age students. Undergraduate students often lack the background of experience needed to either properly frame or appropriately analyze the key issues in anything but the

simplest cases (Eisenbeis, 1994; Grossman, 1994). Undergraduate students also have difficulty identifying with a senior manager's problems. They therefore want cases that deal with simpler businesses and issues closer to the level of the beginner in business (Wade, 1999). In addition, undergraduate students worry about their school performance and grades: Pressures to perform at high levels may be subtle, but they can be oppressive (Barnes et al., 1994; Wade, 1999). The case method has a tendency to make students even more fearful about assessment because they lack neat lecture notes to guide them (Barnes et al., 1994; Wade, 1999). Students are therefore always on guard. Some students are crippled by fears of making a mistake. As such, they rarely volunteer insights or questions. Even when called upon, responses are often cautious and narrow (Eisenbeis, 1994).

In the face of such a circumstance, the instructor is challenged to find an effective means for drawing undergraduate students into a case-based interactive learning environment. This article advances one approach—structured conflict—as a primary means for facilitating the discussion that is so crucial for effective use of the case method.

Case-Based Structured Conflict

A growing body of management research literature points to the importance of "cognitive conflict" as a means for enhancing the quality of the decision-making process (Amason, 1996; Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995; Priem, Harrison, & Muir, 1995; Schweiger, Sandberg, & Rechner, 1989; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). The central idea is that an open discussion of substantive differences on pertinent aspects of the issue contributes significantly to the quality of the decision-making process because such conflict contributes toward a fuller development and analysis of alternatives. In addition, the process of resolving differences and building consensus enhances understanding of and commitment to the choices made. In a related vein, this stream of research notes that organizations can purposefully structure such conflict in their decision-making process. Two approaches—devil's advocacy (DA) and dialectical inquiry (DI)—are found to be particularly effective means for bringing about open communications within a context of cognitive conflict.

Although both DA and DI are characterized by intellectual debate, these approaches to structured conflict differ in both process and consequence. DI calls for one group to develop and present their approach for dealing with the issue at hand, whereas a second group has the responsibility for both identifying the critical assumptions that underpin the first group's analysis and

offering an analysis based upon a set of alternative assumptions. On the other hand, DA calls for each group to advance a particular (usually contrary) position relative to the issue at hand. Although these two approaches are similar in nature and both benefit the quality of the decision-making process, research evidence suggests that DI has a higher likelihood for inducing "social" conflict (Schweiger et al., 1989). The intergroup antagonism and emotional exchanges that characterize such conflict often have dysfunctional consequences for the decision-making process (Amason, 1996).

Drawing upon the foregoing research findings, this study proposes that undergraduate students can more fully benefit from a case-based pedagogy when classroom discussion is actively managed along the lines of the cognitive conflict brought out by the purposeful implementation of the DA process. The essential steps for implementing such a case-based structured conflict approach are described below.

Case Selection

In general, the complexity and ambiguity that naturally attend real-world business management problems enable credible presentation of alternative analyses and positions. If a case is to be effective, it must therefore be sufficiently complex and ambiguous, at least relative to the central issue. However, as noted above, undergraduate students are generally not well equipped to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of senior management in large organizations. On the other hand, a case must not be so simple that it cannot adequately support credible arguments on either side of an important issue. The case selection process must find a successful compromise for meeting those contrary requirements. Cases that deal with small firms and simple businesses offer one means for satisfying those conflicting requirements.

The structured conflict approach has been used successfully in my undergraduate class in strategic management. Several of the cases used in that course are identified in Appendix A. Those cases were chosen because they reflect relatively simple businesses, yet they allow students to explore contrary points of view relative to a variety of important general management questions in areas such as competitive strategy, mergers and acquisitions, capital budgeting, paths to diversification, choice of governance structure, crisis management, social responsibility, and ethical behavior. However, it is noted that a growing number of cases are available to address a very wide range of management issues. For example, cases are available in such areas as entrepreneurship, organization theory, organizational behavior, marketing, human resource management, international business management, hospital-

ity and tourism, health care, finance accounting, economics, production operations, purchasing, quality management, information systems and technology management, nonprofit organizations, and social work. Therefore, Appendix A also identifies several distributors of cases, to help the reader access such material.

Ideas for Constructing the Course Outline

The instructor will generally determine the key issue, central problem, and alternative positions to be advocated in each case. Although some students may be able to assume those responsibilities, experience shows that timing considerations make it likely that student influence will be limited. To provide ample time for students to develop their analyses and prepare for their presentation, the position assignments must be made known in advance. One full week seems to be adequate. However, using the syllabus to outline the entire semester's work schedule is advised. To help more clearly exemplify that format, a copy of a recently used course schedule is presented in Appendix B.

Using only a single case in a course, or even a few cases, likely will prove to be ineffective, especially if prior course work has not thoroughly familiarized students with the rigors of case-based learning. If the potential effectiveness of the case method is to be fully realized, a commitment to a much more regular caseload is required. The appropriate frequency for case presentations will depend on the length and frequency of class meetings, as well as the complexity and length of the cases. For example, if a class meets twice a week for 60 to 75 minutes and the cases are moderately complex (e.g., about 10 to 15 pages in length), then one case per class may be too onerous a workload. Presentations every other class meeting will likely prove to be more appropriate for both the instructor and students. If case presentations are scheduled to occur every other class meeting, then the intervening class session may be used to further discussion of the previous case and begin preparing students for the upcoming case or to introduce other related material.

Each position for a given case may be assigned to either an individual student or a small team. Careful planning is required to achieve an acceptable compromise between class size, the number of presentations for each student, the number of cases covered, and the instructor's time commitment for both course preparation and evaluation of the students' work. For example, if one desires to have each position presented by an individual student, then class sizes over 28 students permit only one presentation per student— assuming 30 class meetings, 2 meetings before the cases begin, 1 case per

week, and 2 position presentations per case. In this same vein, if the non-presenting students are required to submit individual position papers, then the instructor is faced with a very substantial time commitment if all papers are to be returned in the next meeting. If the grading is not complete before the next session, then the students' ability to prepare for the next case may be compromised by a lack of feedback. In the face of these problems, a team-based presentation format may prove an acceptable solution despite the more difficult task of equitably evaluating each individual student's contribution. On the other hand, learning to work in small teams is a potential offset and teams usually produce a higher quality presentation. As such, the small-team format may be very acceptable. With class sizes in the range of 30 to 40 students, it is possible to cover a dozen cases with two position presentations per team and have all teams submit their position paper on each case. Within this format, it is important to keep the teams small, which helps to minimize any free-rider effect. For example, 2 or 3 students per team works well, but 4 is often problematic.

Managing the Process

Spending considerable effort on orienting the students to the nature of case-based learning is an essential part of managing the case-based structured conflict learning process. In particular, the instructor must anticipate the students' frustration with the degree of complexity and ambiguity present in most real-world situations and therefore in the cases. To help manage that problem, the instructor should start with simpler cases and gradually move toward increasingly complex cases. When appropriate, incorporate the added complexity of financial analysis to again reflect the real world of business. I suggest reading both Dooley and Skinner (1977) and Erskine et al. (1998) for help in this process; each provides an excellent discussion on how to gauge the difficulty of cases.

In that same vein, minimize the risk that students will feel as though they are making fools of themselves when they stand before their peers to make a presentation. Students are likely to sense considerable personal risk in formulating and presenting their assigned position. Embarrassment in the early stages may do irreparable harm to a student's willingness to actively participate in future assignments. Some students or teams may require significant amounts of help, especially in the beginning and particularly if the case method is new to the students. Be prepared to work closely with those students as they develop their positions in the early cases. Show them the way,

but avoid becoming their crutch. This can become a most difficult aspect of the process.

Some students will press for the right answer. Be careful not to unduly favor one team's position over another's when addressing such inquiries. Remember that one of the primary benefits of structured conflict is its ability to facilitate the students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and appreciation for the value of alternative perspectives. With that in mind, try to steer discussions toward matters that are more pertinent to the process, not the correctness of the position being advocated. For example, work toward facilitating discussions that are designed to highlight and reinforce the linkages to theory, exemplify the appropriate use of analytical tools, expose the distinction between critical and noncritical variables, aid in understanding the whole picture, or help reveal implicit assumptions and their impact. The internal dynamics of the team decision-making process is another dimension for fruitful process-oriented discussion.

In the face of your efforts to avoid a focus on the right answer, some students may attempt to play it safe and present a position that straddles the alternatives. The instructor must be clear and forceful in letting the students know that they are to comprehensively and vigorously advocate their assigned position. However, be aware that those directions can sometimes yield heated discussion, and social conflict is of course a potential side effect of structured conflict. Therefore, the instructor must actively manage and control the process to minimize personal antagonism.

I have found that the quality of both the team presentations and the ensuing class discussion benefit from an appropriate assessment system. Generally, I suggest that the grading system strongly emphasize the quality of the argument made in support of the position being advocated. Toward that end, I have found success with seven specific evaluation criteria. First, did the presentation make thorough and unbiased use of the pertinent facts in the case? Second, did the presentation exemplify the appropriate use of available analytical tools? Third, did the presentation make full use of pertinent theory? Fourth, was the logic of the argument clear and accessible? Fifth, did the presentation explicitly state the critical underlying assumptions? Sixth, how effective was the style and format of the presentation? Seventh, how well did the team manage questions from the other team, other students, and the instructor? Although a variety of weightings is possible, I have found considerable success with 20 points for each of the first three items and 10 points each for Items 4 through 7.

Finally, if the nonpresenting students do not submit position papers, there are several alternative means to minimize the likelihood of a free-rider mentality. One possibility is to have nonpresenting students answer preassigned

questions about the case, either for submission or as a mini-presentation to support the primary presentations. Another approach is to have nonpresenting students take on evaluation (or other) roles and you may then score their participation. Or, ask for ad hoc oral presentations of their positions. Each of these approaches has proven to be effective. However, one's final choice should reflect class size and length, as well as teaching load and the ability to absorb additional work.

Conclusions

The use of case-based structured conflict places the student at the center of the classroom learning experience. Although some undergraduate students see such a situation as attractive, most find the prospect intimidating. Nonetheless, student feedback has been unambiguous and consistently favorable. When compared to other sections using a more teacher-centered learning environment, my classes (i.e., that use case-based structured conflict) are consistently the first to be filled, and lengthy waiting lists are common. Those class selection decisions are made with the full knowledge that many hours of hard work are required to prepare for an effective in-class presentation in my course and, as one student put it, "Everyone knows that making a class presentation is like having your dentist do a root canal." Apparently, the case-based structured conflict teaching method—when properly administered— significantly enhances the willingness of undergraduate students to participate and engage an active learning environment.

My experience clearly indicates that multiple exposures to a case-based structured conflict environment can help students to acquire several important skills. First, analytical skills are enriched when students are regularly encouraged to reason clearly and logically and then present and defend those perspectives to their peers. Although some students can be initially overwhelmed by such a challenge, students regularly acknowledge the motivational power of a supportive environment. Second, students develop the ability to formulate reasonable assumptions as a necessary part of the problem-solving and decision-making process. Cases seldom contain all the information pertinent to decisions. Hence, case-based structured conflict compels students to make decisions with available information, thereby helping them to tolerate incompleteness of information and ambiguity. At the beginning of the semester, students clamor for guidance when confronted with case-based learning. With time, most students become comfortable with their ability to formulate and use estimates and assumptions. Some students seem to relish the opportunity to construct their position statement around a tightly crafted

set of reasonable assumptions. Third, case-based structured conflict helps students to enhance their self-confidence in various ways. There is little doubt in my mind that repetitive opportunities to identify, analyze, and debate critical issues help to deeply ingrain the lessons learned. It is the cumulative impact of this process that will enrich undergraduate students in their ability to take on future tasks, because they have acquired the ability to effectively tackle complex business problems and make decisions. These skills now become personal assets.

Although anecdotal in nature, feedback from undergraduate management students clearly and consistently indicates that their learning experience was materially enhanced by use of the case-based structured conflict approach. For example, I have had students link classroom experiences with a growing sense of their ability to manage time, think independently, work cooperatively in small teams, make formal oral presentations, effectively advocate their personal views, see all sides of important issues, and appreciate the value of alternative perspectives. Although several examples of such unsolicited feedback are available, one student wrote,

> What you taught me in Strategic Management is helping me in my professional career and allowing me to distinguish myself from many other competitive coworkers of Xerox. Your teaching methods eased my transition from school to the real world. As a matter of fact, I was deeply changed by the environment (fun and challenging) that you set up in your class to motivate us to continuously learn, grow, and compete/work with each other. We did tackle difficult cases together, which enhanced our judgements and pushed us to make fast decisions. As a result I want you to know that you did sharpen our judgmental, managerial, and leadership skills.

Isn't that gratifying?

Appendix A
A Sampling of Organizations That Distribute Cases

The European Case Clearing House
Babson College
Babson Park
Wellesley, MA 02157
E-mail: ECCH@babson.edu
Web site: http://www.ecch.cranfield.ac.uk

Darden Graduate School of Business Administration
Darden Educational Materials Services
University of Virginia
P.O. Box 6550
Charlottesville, VA 22906-6550
E-mail: dardencases@virginia.edu
Web site: http://www.darden.virginia.edu

North American Case Research Association
Web site: http://nacra.net

Harvard Business School Publishing
Customer Service Department
60 Harvard Way
Boston, MA 02163
E-mail: custserv@hbsp.harvard.edu
Web site: http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu

Richard Ivey School of Business
Ivey Publishing
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario
Canada, N6A 3K7
E-mail: cases@ivey.uwo.ca
Web site: http://www.ivey.uwo.ca/cases

Book publishers are also excellent sources for case material. For example, in my teaching of Strategic Management at the undergraduate level, I have relied heavily on various editions of a text by Thompson and Strickland—*Strategic Management: Concepts and Cases*—from McGraw-Hill. Specifically, I have used the following cases with success:

Cannondale Corp. & the Mountain Bike Industry
The Fudge Cottage
Ben & Jerry's Homemade, Inc.
Video Concepts, Inc.
Callaway Golf Company
Pasta Perfect, Inc.
Cuchara Valley Ski Resort
Coral Divers Resort
Quaker Oats Company, Gatorade, and Snapple Beverage
Campus Designs, Inc.

Jim Thompson Thai Silk Company
The Whistler Golf Course
Supra Boats and the Competition Ski Boat Industry
Carmike Cinemas, Inc.
The Alabama Symphony Orchestra
Lance, Inc.
The Hue-Man Experience Bookstore
Robin Hood
Walsh Petroleum
E&J Gallo Winery
Ryka, Inc. Lightweight Athletic Shoes for Women
Caribbean Internet Café

Appendix B
A Sample Course Outline and Class Schedule

Day
1. General introduction and discussion of course requirements
2. Lecture: The Strategic Management Process: An Overview and The Three Strategy-Making Tasks
3. Case: Robin Hood (Teams 1 and 2)
4. Lecture: Industry and Competitive Analysis
5. Case: Ben & Jerry's Homemade, Inc. (Teams 3 and 4)
6. Lecture: Evaluating Company Resources and Competitive Capabilities
7. Case: Cannondale Corp. and the Mountain Bike Industry (Teams 5 and 6)
8. Lecture: Strategy and Competitive Advantage
9. Case: Callaway Golf Company (Teams 7 and 8)
10. Lecture: Matching Strategy to a Company's Situation
11. First Test
12. Case: Ryka, Inc.: Lightweight Athletic Shoes for Women (Teams 9 and 10)
13. Lecture: Strategy and Competitive Advantage in Diversified Companies
14. Case: Pasta Perfect (Teams 11 and 12)
15. Lecture: Evaluating the Strategies of Diversified Companies
16. Second Test: Hand in Part A and sit for Part B
17. Strategic Problems: Basic P&L/ROI Analysis
18. Strategic Problems: Basic P&L/ROI Analysis
19. Case Analysis: The Fudge Cottage (Teams 1 and 2)
20. Review of Fudge Cottage and Preparation for Third Test
21. Third Test: Basic P&L/ROI Analysis
22. Case Analysis: Video Concepts (Teams 3 and 4)
23. Review of Test, Review of Video Concepts, and Preparation for Next Case
24. Case Analysis: Cuchara Valley Ski Resort (CVSR) (Teams 5 and 6)

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