

INCREASING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN CASE DISCUSSIONS: USING THE MICA METHOD IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT COURSES

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Strategic management courses frequently consist of a case analysis component where students diagnose company situations and problems at a strategic level. In fact, in surveys and discussions of education in the field of strategic management (e.g., Alexander, O'Neill, Snyder, & Townsend, 1986; Eldredge & Galloway, 1983; Summer, Bettis, Duhaime, Grant, Hambrick, Snow, & Zeithaml, 1990), the case method ranks highest as the primary method of instruction. In addition, class participation in analysis of case studies is the criterion most often used to evaluate business policy/strategic management students (Alexander et al., 1986).

The traditional format of case discussion, developed over 75 years ago at Harvard Business School, gives primary responsibility to the instructor for conducting the discussion, maintaining its flow, and summarizing learning (Christensen & Hansen, 1987). Too frequently in traditional case teaching, the thinking and analysis are done by the professor rather than the students. Unless a written component is required, the students often skim the cases and

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reach quick, shallow, judgments. Some students read nothing and rely on their wits to pick up enough from the initial student comments to "wing it."

The purpose of this article is to describe the McAleer Interactive Case Analysis (MICA) method. Although the method can be used in any case-oriented class (i.e., marketing, management, finance, law, etc.), the context for this study is a strategic management class. The method is designed to increase student participation in the review of strategic and operational-level action steps in the analysis of cases.

Traditional Approach to Stimulate Case Discussion

The traditional approach to stimulate case discussion involves a discussion-question format (Charan, 1976), whereby the instructor calls on members of the class to answer instructor-formulated questions. Unprepared students can cause classroom tension (Bernhardt, 1991). Such a situation demands skillful handling by the professor to keep students motivated and participating during the semester. Instructors must also repeatedly work to encourage reticent participants and curb overzealous discussants. Additional potential drawbacks to the traditional approach to case discussions include such aspects as the following: The success of the process relies primarily on the students' responses to the instructor; students often repeat ideas made by others earlier in the discussion and regard their repetitive efforts as active participation; and grading for participation appears highly subjective, devoid of documentation, and general in nature.

MICA Method

The MICA method (McAleer, 1976; McAleer & Hale, 1992), has been refined by us to accommodate Strategic Management case analyses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The distinction is that students must develop at least one action step (i.e., course of action they recommend) that is strategic in nature and another that is operational (or functional) in scope. This requirement encourages students to analyze each case from a strategic perspective, rather than devoting the entire analysis to advertising, personnel, or production issues, which typically constitute their initial response.

The method has three main components: (a) student teams administer the case discussion, (b) class members discuss action steps proposed by the class, and (c) the professor evaluates the students based on what they say at the time they say it according to established MICA scoring criteria. Scoring is based

on the content and frequency of student comments, and scores for each case are posted immediately after class.

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

Early in the semester, students form teams of three persons and are assigned the cases they will administer rather than present. Teams consist of a chairperson, a counter, and a blackboard person. Teams are responsible for compiling and typing a listing of action steps submitted by the class beforehand, and for monitoring the discussion on the day of the case. Teams can be as few as two persons (chairperson/boardperson and counter) or as many as six (three people compiling and typing the action steps, the other three conducting the case discussion), depending on the size of the class and the number of cases discussed during the semester.

The case discussion begins with an introduction of the administrative team members. No summary of the case is presented. The team distributes the listing of 10 to 15 action steps that are grouped into strategic and operational categories. Action steps are suggestions to improve the situation described in the case, and the process of developing them encourages students to take a position regarding the case. In addition, the professor may require a written statement of the problem or an executive summary for early cases to encourage students to think along these lines before writing the action steps. The action steps are identified by the authors' last names on the listing distributed by the administrative team. Students who author action steps have the first priority to speak and therefore have the opportunity to present the strongest arguments, which are the basis for the scoring system. Because it is common for two or more students to submit similar actions steps, the team can list authors in the order in which the steps are received or determine the order of authors according to the completeness of the action step submitted. A random listing of authors is also another alternative.

To begin the case discussion, the chairperson asks if there are any modifications or amendments to the action steps compiled by the team. For example, a student might suggest that Step 5 (which is to sell the New York division) is similar to Step 12 (which is to divest an operation). The administrative team consults with the authors of both steps and decides whether the steps should be combined.

Once the proposed action steps have been modified or clarified, the team then selects the first two action steps for discussion from the list, and the process of discussion begins. Authors of action steps are called on first to provide the rationale for their proposed course of action. Once all authors have completed their discussion, any student who wishes to support or argue

against the step raises his or her hand and is called on by the team chairperson. The administrative team is responsible for cutting off long-winded discussions and terminating discussions of a particular course of action when arguments become redundant.

The counter keeps track of how many times each class member has been called on and assists the chairperson in selecting speakers. This technique is designed to provide an equal discussion opportunity for those who wish to participate. The blackboard person records on the board all action step modifications at the beginning of class, writes on the board all action steps being discussed, and records the outcome of the action step discussion.

That is, after an action step is discussed, the administrative team conducts a vote of the class whether to accept or reject the action step. If accepted, it becomes a fact of the case. Once the first two action steps have been debated and voted upon, the chairperson opens the floor for nominations of other action steps from the listing. This ensures a democratic process in terms of action step selection, and the team conducts a vote to determine the next step for discussion. Class members may vote for more than one step and ties are decided by the chairperson. The process continues until approximately 10 to 15 min before the class period ends. Typically, 6 to 10 action steps can be debated in an 80-min class period.

At the end of all discussion of action steps, the chairperson asks the class if there was any unspent research (additional research that students did for the case but were unable to include during the course of the discussion.) One article per student is allowed and students receive additional credit based on their oral summary of the article's content as it applies to a particular action step. These summaries are very brief and usually take 1 to 2 min at most.

The administrative team then delivers a brief summary of the decisions made by the class and asks students to spend a few minutes thinking about their class discussion and developing relevant *postulates*. Postulates are general observations by individual students about the case discussion. For example, after one session, a student noted that the class was unwilling to consider diversifying into any market areas where Japanese competition existed, and his postulate was that "we tend to be too frightened of Japanese competition." A member of the class is asked to volunteer to record postulates developed after each session, and these are distributed to students at the end of the semester. The semester's postulates frequently provide a summary of the class's learning, particularly in terms of strategic concepts and functional issues.

SCORING

The professor, seated at the back of the room, assigns points to students based on the content and frequency of their arguments. See Appendix A for selected MICA grading criteria. Each time a student speaks, he or she may earn from 0 to 4 points plus bonus points as judged by the instructor. Authors of action steps speak first and have the greatest opportunity to back up their argument with facts not yet given. Thus authors tend to accumulate points quickly. In addition, the first time any student speaks, he or she is awarded one bonus point regardless of content to encourage participation and give evidence of attendance. For each case, a student may earn a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 25 points. Appendix B gives an example of typical student comments and the resultant point allocation. The score for each member of the administrative team equals the highest points allocated to any student for that day, thus the team has an incentive to keep the discussion moving along so that fellow students will score points.

When the last action step has been discussed and the vote recorded, the professor asks if any class member feels that he or she was discriminated against (i.e., consistently had hand up but was not called on). If a student indicates that he or she was not treated fairly, the professor asks the administrative team counter (a) how many times the student was called on in a nonauthor priority call and (b) excluding author calls, what was the average number of times students were called on that day. The administrative team comments on the alleged discrimination, and the professor considers his or her own observations, the statements of the student, and the administrative team to make a decision. If it is judged that discrimination occurred, the student is given one to three first discussion opportunities (after the authors) during the next case. In addition, 3 to 10 points may be deducted from the case grade of each member of the administrative team for that case. Under these circumstances, bona fide cases of discrimination rarely occur.

Scores are posted on a spreadsheet at the end of class, using student identification numbers for confidentiality.

PROFESSOR'S ROLES

The professor's roles are coaching, scoring, altering the course of debate during the case discussion as required, enforcing MICA rules as needed, and providing a wrap-up of the case. The professor may intervene at any time during the class for the purpose of guiding discussion or coaching students.

For example, the professor may accept or reject an action step without allowing discussion if it is deemed to be a standard business practice or it is too trivial to be discussed given the context of the case. Coaching is a way of showing students how to score points. It is used extensively in the first few cases or in a trial case. An example of coaching would be an intervention by the professor after a student comment. The professor would note that the student did not score points because the comment had already been made by someone else or that no points were scored because the research presented did not apply to the action step being discussed.

Second, scoring requires the professor to use his or her skills in at least three areas. First, active listening to every point made by each student is necessary due to the scoring technique. This requires constant alertness and a strong resistance to "tuning out." Next, the professor must develop an open attitude that will enable him or her to objectively evaluate the arguments presented. This may be difficult when the viewpoint presented happens to be contrary to the professor's viewpoint. Last, the professor must be consistent in rewarding the effective participants and not giving points to those who do not contribute to the discussion. Evaluating comments in the case when everyone scores 20 to 25 points will result in lackluster discussion of cases because the incentive to excel will be removed.

The third and fourth roles of the professor are to alter the course of debate if necessary to enforce MICA rules. This is especially important during the early cases if the class discussion moves away from the specifics of the action step being discussed and if the administrative team does not quickly refocus the discussion. The professor must interrupt immediately and note what has happened, reminding students that no points are awarded for these digressions. Also, the professor should reject an action step if the class votes to discuss a course of action such as "The company needs a mission statement." It is the professor's role to stop the process, remind students that this action step as it stands is a normally expected practice. That is, it would be difficult to develop arguments against this action step. The author should develop a proposed mission statement and submit it as an action step, which can then be debated.

Another role involves the wrap-up session at the end of the period. The professor asks the class members if, in their opinion, they have helped the company. Students comment on their perceptions, and as the term progresses they usually become more aware of the quality of their decisions. For example, one group discussed a company that had been a takeover target and had high levels of debt. Yet in the wrap-up session, the group noted that, although they considered the debt when discussing courses of action (difficult to get loans for expansion, etc.), the final strategies they recommended did

not help the company become more solvent. Several students noted that the group had lost sight of the company's difficult debt situation and relied entirely on management's bright forecast for future sales and earnings.

The professor may consider keeping brief notes next to a student's name to help the professor provide feedback to individual students or the administrative team. For example, during the wrap-up, one of the authors recalled the situation wherein a class member had asked for a summary at the half-way point in the period and the administrative team advised that it would summarize at the end. Using this opportunity to give immediate feedback on the process, the professor reminded future administrative teams to comply as much as possible with student requests, especially if it facilitates the discussion.

Discussion

From our experience, the MICA method overcomes many of the drawbacks of the traditional approach to case discussions. First, the method requires and achieves in-depth preparation. Students in both undergraduate and graduate courses report reading the cases three and four times prior to class. Students who try to skim the case rarely earn more than 10 points because case facts are required to bolster arguments and gain points. For greater preparation, students frequently do voluntary outside research, conduct personal interviews with knowledgeable business people, and seek other sources to increase their information base.

Second, the students administer the process. The professor has key roles, as noted earlier; however, his or her presence is less visible as a result of sitting at the back of the room. Often with the traditional method, students tend to address all comments directly to the professor, even when class seating is arranged in a circle. In the MICA method, students turn to each other to make their points and seem to lose sight of the professor's presence.

A third advantage is that students begin to learn to state their arguments quickly, using factual data from the case. They soon become accustomed to accepting critical counterarguments by their peers, and many have reported that these class discussions have broadened their viewpoints and have given them more confidence in speaking in other courses. It is unusual after the fourth case for students to rehash what others have said during any part of the discussion. As the students become more familiar with the process, the administrative team members, anxious for their fellow classmates to make numerous points, will stop the discussion if comments become somewhat repetitive.

Last, although the subjectivity of grading still exists, there appears to be a logical framework for the system. In a preliminary testing of the grading guidelines, the two authors scored a case discussion and invited a management colleague to do the same. This professor was not familiar with the interactive case method format and was briefed beforehand only about the grading criteria. The point allocations were compared at the end of the class and the degree of correspondence between the three scorers was almost perfect. We have also experimented with independent cross-scoring in several marketing courses and achieved similar results. Thus early indications are that the scoring, though subjective, does not appear to be a function of the individual instructor nor of the course content.

Limitations

Whereas MICA has several positive features, there are limitations to the process. Some students' initial reactions are negative. It is clear from the opening lecture explaining the method that students will be required to think and participate on a regular basis, and they are often fearful that they do not have the ability to compete effectively. Further, most students are unaccustomed to being graded on what they say on a case-by-case basis, and it may be 2 to 3 weeks before they realize that someone, in fact, is listening and evaluating their every statement. Many expect that they should receive points every time they speak, regardless of the content. These expectations can be dispelled if the professor schedules a practice case and then, as the semester progresses, makes a point to discuss individual performance with students outside of class.

Another concern is that for the first few cases, an extraordinary amount of effort seems to be placed on the MICA process rather than the content of discussions. Once again, progress in this area is even more evident as the semester advances. In early cases, the class tends to veto most action steps. Also, some students simply do not listen to early discussions and try to achieve points by stating high-level abstractions or repeating something that a peer has said. However, as students become more familiar with the process, their confidence increases and they become genuinely concerned with attacking the problems presented in the cases. Not only does the quantity of action steps increase but also the quality of the action steps and the debate improves. In the strategic management course, we require initial discussion of strategic-level action steps to avoid focusing on operational issues before the com-

pany's strategic concerns are addressed. This situation occurred in one class in which a long debate was conducted regarding whether or not to increase advertising in a certain division. Then, in a later action step, the class voted to divest the division from the corporation's holdings. Rather than interrupt the process, the professor let the discussion continue. The administrative team and the class noted the problem and voted to discuss operational strategies later in the period, once the strategic direction had been established. However, in spite of these early on difficulties, classes tend to mature and perform increasingly effectively from the fourth case on.

Conclusion

The MICA method of analyzing cases is designed to increase student participation in class discussion. The method's scoring criteria helps to eliminate the problem of poor preparation on the part of students. The professor's roles are coaching, scoring, altering the course of debate, enforcing MICA rules and providing a wrap-up at the end of the case. This differs from the professor's role in the traditional discussion-question approach to case analysis, whereby it is the professor who, more often than not, is responsible for the flow of the discussion. Furthermore, with regard to teaching skills, Bernhardt (1991, p. 43) recently remarked that "the (traditional) case method offers many pedagogical advantages but requires special skills for an instructor to use it effectively." Using the MICA method, an experienced teacher with (a) the willingness to listen and objectively evaluate student comments, (b) the courage to discriminate between students in terms of quality of performance, (c) the willingness to publicly post scores after class, and (d) reasonable competence in the field of study concerned can provide an environment in which case situations are debated vigorously, students are active participants in the learning process, and experience is gained in presenting succinct arguments for or against a course of action.

Appendix A

Selected MICA Grading Criteria

1. The comment must be relevant to the specific action step being discussed.
2. The comment must contain a supportive argument (because . . .).
3. The comment must not be a repeat of what was said before.
4. A single comment may be worth more than 1 point. The following subjective scale will be used:
 - 1 point—ordinary, but relevant comment
 - 2 points—insightful comment that points out consequences of taking or not taking the action
 - 2 points—when financial ratio analysis is included in the comment
 - 3 points—outstanding comment that clearly settles the issue being discussed
 - 4 points—outstanding comment that clearly settles the entire case (this kind of comment would occur once in every 2 or 3 years of teaching the class)
5. Bonus points may be awarded on the basis of demonstrated “hard core” published research. Hard core means relevant material that is presented by a person or group obviously knowledgeable about the situation involved. Further, the research must be tightly applicable to the action step being discussed or presented in the unspent research portion of the class. When research is presented, it is important that the presenter state the relevance of the research to the action step being discussed and give citations for the source of the research. The authors suggest that the presenter be awarded 1, 2, or 3 bonus points if the research meets the above criteria.
6. Bonus points may also be awarded for cited bona fide interviews with business persons who are knowledgeable about the subject matter involved. For example, a telephone interview with a manager of the company involved in the case or a local person who works in the same industry who has relevant knowledge would meet bonus criteria provided that the comments reported were relevant to a specific action step.
7. Members of the administrative team each earn the number of points earned by the highest scorer in the class provided they have performed their duties acceptably and have not been penalized by a discrimination charge.

NOTE: Points may be awarded to students for submitting action steps to encourage participation in this regard. Some students may request that additional points be awarded to the author(s) when an action step is accepted or discussed. We do not recommend this practice because time constraints do not allow all action steps to be discussed.

Appendix B

Sample of Student Comments and Point Allocation

The following are sample student comments relating to an action step that dealt with pursuing a growth strategy (vertical integration) and the resultant point allocation:

Student A: "I think we should expand by developing our own source of supply"—0 points—no justification; just repeated part of the action step.

Student B: "I agree"—0 points—no justification.

Student C: "I agree because the facts presented in the case show that our costs for supplies have tripled in 2 years"—1 point

Student D: "If we do develop our own source of supply, we should probably acquire an existing firm because we do not have the manpower or expertise in those areas"—1 point because important consequence of the contemplated action was noted.

Student E: "We should also look into acquiring a retail outlet"—0 points—a different action step.

Student F: "I should like to point out that an article entitled (XXX) in the (source) dated (XXX) by (XXX) indicated that the shortage of suppliers for our industry has allowed a dramatic increase in price to companies like ours. In other words, owning our own source of supply is attractive because there is a market for these supplies"—3 points—good use of research relevant to the action step being discussed (1 point for outside research; 1 point for discussion of article content; 1 point for tie-in to action step).

Student G: "Yes, but an article by (YYY) in (source) dated (YYY) reported that 'We are looking for a great and prosperous future in our industry, as soon as present conditions clear themselves' " —0 points—research not specific to action step being discussed.

Student H: "Our balance sheet shows that we only have \$XXX cash on hand and our debt-to-equity ratio is 79%. We cannot adopt this action step because we do not have the money and there is little potential for borrowing any more. Let's vote on the issue"—2 points—excellent justification based on the facts of the case and a good attempt to terminate discussion of the policy.

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