Title: Re-thinking case-based assessments in Business Management

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Abstract: Despite criticisms of the use of case studies in assessment, especially in examination settings, their use is prevalent in business management education, primarily in order to develop critical thinking skills and highlight the complex business problems faced by managers.

However, case studies readily available for business assessments typically comprise multi-national, world-leading corporations, which can result in a number of problems, not least the large volume of material available on the web about these organisations. In addition, employers feel that business courses are too focused on large corporations rather than preparing students for working in small-medium enterprises (SMEs).

This paper will present the authors approach to developing his own case studies for use in business assessments, based on local SMEs. This approach facilitates a more in-depth assessment analysis and exposes students to a broader range of business scenarios. The use of a 'live' case provides a closer fit to reality which in turn, enhances learning.

It is intended that the approach presented here will inform and challenge university colleagues to explore the development and use of case-based assessments, particularly how they might apply these practices to their own professional area.

Keywords: Case-based assessment, SME

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Introduction

The use of case-based learning is commonplace in a number of disciplines, such as healthcare (see for example, Forsgren at al., 2013; Kaddoura, 2011; Osinubi and Ailloje-Ibru, 2014) and education (e.g. Jahreie, 2010; Kantar, 2013). Moreover, the use of case studies is especially prevalent in management education (Atkinson, 2014, Garvin, 2006).

In business management, cases provide students with a representation of the 'real-world' (Hodgson *et al*., (2014), and thereby allowing students to experience the discipline, albeit at 'arms-length' and apply knowledge to address prevailing issues (Ha and Lopez, 2014) and thereby integrate theory to practice (Corner *et al*., 2006). Case studies are used to develop critical thinking skills (Healy and McCutcheon, 2010), engage students with complex business problems typically faced by managers (Greenhalgh, 2007; Lee et al, 2009; Weil *et al.*, 2011), particularly when faced with ambiguity (Banning, 2003), enhance executive "sensemaking" skills (Ickis *et al*., 2014), support visioning (Iqbal *et al*., 2010) and encourage analytical inquiry (Strelchonok and Ludviga, 2013).

In addition, group working built around a business case study can also help cultivate team-working competences (Doran *et al*., 2011), improve communication through discussion (Flynn and Klein, 2001) and therefore support the development of skills demanded by employers (Wilton, 2008). In on-line learning environments, case studies can also be a useful learning tool (Lee *et al*., 2009; Rollag, 2010), although technology plays an important role in facilitating discussion and student interaction (Chen *et al*., 2008; Watson and Sutton, 2012).

While case-based learning is only one approach to support learning (Apaydin, 2008), its use is deemed to produce a greater academic performance among students, compared to a traditional didactic approach (Kireeti and Reddy, 2015) and can result in deeper learning (Ross *et al*., 2008).

The problems of case studies in business management assessments

Despite the overwhelming support for case-based learning in management learning, the use of case studies in assessments, especially in examination settings has been subject to criticism (Packard and Austin, 2009). Selecting appropriate case studies for use in assessment can be problematic for tutors (Berrell *et al*., 2001), especially finding ones that are all-encompassing of the business curriculum being covered. Ashmalla and Crocitto (2001) warn that irrelevant cases can reduce learning effectiveness, and Pearce (2002) confirms the difficulties of producing a case that balances sufficient complexity, with credibility. While Brennan (2009) provides academics with a framework for selecting appropriate case studies, cases used in assessments are typically sourced from readily-available textbooks, websites and the media. Consequently these tend to be well-known, international corporations. Although these case organisations can highlight aspects of best-practice in business management, and embrace the globalisation agenda (Vos, 2013), problems can result in using them as a basis for assessment. Notably, the large volume of material available on the web about these organisations, and the number of assessments already prepared and circulating, can lead to plagiarism (Vernon, 2001). Moreover, corporations tend to be guarded about detailed information in the public domain particularly concerning operations activities, with annual reports perceived as of limited value (ACCA, 2012). With a large corporation, it is more difficult to examine the interrelationships between different functions and activities and how business decisions can have a widespread effect on the entity as a whole. This lack of 'intimacy' can lead to only a surface-coverage of the key learning points by students, and a lack of awareness of organisational connections. In addition, employers feel that business courses are too focused on large corporations rather than preparing students for working in Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (CMI, 2014:9). According to Eurostat (2011), 99.8% of businesses in Europe are SMEs, representing 66.7% of the working population. It could therefore be argued that by failing to provide students with case examples of SMEs, ignores the graduate employability agenda (Knight and Yorke, 2003). As Mostert (2007) highlights, case-based learning not only provides a unique scenario for critical analysis, but should help graduates prepare for employment.

The need for effective case-based assessments in Business Management

The need therefore, is for case study based assessments to provide a closer fit to workplace reality, which in turn, will enhance learning (Hodgson *et al*., 2014, Rebeiz, 2011; Theodoiou, 2012). This should ultimately enable students to adapt more readily to the complex business world (Cummings et al, 2008), by highlighting changing practices in the contemporary business environemnt (Rosenbloom, 1995). For Dunn *et al*. (2005) and Lounsberry and Pittinger (2011) however, this 'authenticity' to the real-world is supported by the reconciliation between learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities and the assessment, while Medlicott (2012) differentiates between "assessment of learning" and "learning for assessment", where the latter is supported by meaningful, relevant and real-world assessment activities. A number of authors highlight the importance of grounding cases with appropriate theoretical or philospohical reasoning (Mumford, 2005; Redtorff, 2015; Vega, 2010). Tennant et al (2010) also argue in favour of "authentic assessment" in preparing graduates for work, but highlight the importance of converging teaching and research, so that both students and staff, cohesively engage in research activity. This two-party approach is also advocated by Brew (2006), where for example, in the analysis of a business entity, the tutor not only learns about the organisation, but also benefits from the students' perspectives.

It is this participation and interaction that Cassimjee (2007) feels makes case-based learning effective. The interactive process is supported by either guest speakers

(O'Connell *et al*., 2004) or student engagement with the case organisation, in order for them to become active participants (Craddock and Matthias, 2009). This is important, as Chalmers and Fuller (2000) note, students respond more positively if they participate in assessment tasks, which in turn, can help tutors assess graduate attributes more effectively (Hughes and Barrie, 2010). Richardson (1994) also warns that the success of case-based learning is largely dependent upon students' motivation to engage with the case. In addition, Beaty (2003) feels it is vital that students can fully understand the nature of a case and its respective features in order to help derive a broader understanding and facilitate a more critical appraisal. This drives a deeper learning (Gibbs, 2007). Engaging in two-way dialogue with the case organisation can also help alleviate anxieties students typically feel about assessments (Sambell *et al*., 2002).

In summary, case-based assessments should ideally be relevant and 'real-world' (McDowell (2012), help bring topics together and support students to link and apply theory to practice (Race *et al*., 2007), allow students to gain useful insight into the complex workings and functional interactions of an organisation (Brown and Knight, 1995, Jennings, 1996), facilitate active participation by students undertaking guided research activities (Jenkins *et al*., 2003). Moreover, the connection to SMEs is important in order to support graduate employability. These facets provide impetus for this work, with the objective:

- To determine a research approach to enable the development of cases based on SMEs for assessment purposes in business management education that will stimulate student interest and engagement.

Research approach

As David and Sutton (2011) note, case study research is designed to investigate specific cases, with descriptive cases tending to be more inductive and qualitative. The approach undertaken by the author comprised personal engagement with local SMEs in order to conduct research into their business activities and then write-up their scenario into a case study for use in business management learning, teaching and assessment.

The intention was to produce a relatively short written case study (approximately 1500 words) about an organisation, in an easy to read format that would create interest with students and to stimulate engagement and further research activity, rather than a detailed, in-depth analysis of a specific topic. The avoidance of complex or technical detail was specifically avoided, to reinforce an 'easy to read' style, that could be used to support seminar activities, or provide a useful example of practice. The production of a written case study allowed it to be used more than once over a period of time. While Matthews and Ross (2010) recognise the variety of subjects that can constitute a case study, they feel that the case must relate to a particular aspect, with clearly defined boundaries For the case organisations in this research approach, there was a focus on the organisation's operations management activities, since this was the author's academic specialism.. While operations management is pervasive in all organisations (Slack *et al*., 2013), those organisations with a unique product or service proposition, or unusual operations process were deemed by the author to be more interesting to be written-up. This approach is endorsed by May and Perry (2011) who feel cases should be selected because they are revelatory or unusual.

While Stark and Torrance (2008) discuss which cases to select for study purposes, the process here was initialised by considering the jobs and employing organisations of friends, relatives, students and acquaintances for anything that might be 'interesting' and suitable for writing up into a case study. While this approach suggests selection on the basis of convenience rather than a systematic sampling strategy, the underlying purpose is not to achieve generalisations across a number of case organisations, but to derive a vehicle for student learning from a single entity. Stake (1994) refers to the 'intrinsic value' of a case, chosen because it offers some value in its own right, with the 'singluar' perspective supported by Llewellyn and Northcott (2007). Consequently, this approach yielded several good cases, such as a close relative who was a Director of a post-production media company, and a personal friend who owned a medical clothing business. When these sources were fully exhausted, the local newspaper was also a source of potential organisations, especially where a report or news item of the company had recently been featured in the business pages. This has led to cases being written on a local zoo, and a crab processing company. This 'searching and considering' is a continuous, on-going process, to heighten the author's awareness of potential case organisations, particularly SMEs that might be appropriate for learning, teaching and assessment. Here, Robson (2011) recognises the range of subjects or entities that can be deemed a case study, and therefore advises on the need for flexibility in case selection and in the research design.

A list of questions derived from the curriculum and the module learning outcomes was produced, that would form the basis of an interview with senior managers of a chosen organisation. Questions typically focused on the operations challenges faced by the organisation, how it deployed its resources to meet customer needs and how quality of product or service was managed, although these were modified in the context of each chosen case organisation.

Contact was made with the case organisation by e-mail (or for family and friends by personal contact, usually face-to-face), outlining the purpose of the activity, and requesting an interview with a senior manager. Interviews are seen by Burns (2000) as an essential requirement of case study research, given that people can provide perceptions and insights. Upon receipt of a positive response, a meeting was arranged, with the listed questions forwarded beforehand to allow the interviewee to prepare for the meeting. The interview was either recorded or shorthand notes were taken. Typically, a tour of facilities was also usually provided and in some instances, further documents relating to operations, such as key performance indicators, were provided that could be incorporated into the case scenario. The tour does facilitate a degree of ‘non-participant’ observation (Gray, 2014) of the operations activities, with the added-value of being able to question the guide to embellish any observations of self-interpretations. At this time, a request for either a guest presentation to students at university or the facilitation of students’ visiting the operation would be made. This was usually met favourably, although a visit was dependent upon student numbers and the size of the business. The interview notes were transcribed or written-up, focusing predominantly on the themes of operations challenges and resourcing, rather than attempting to derive a more detailed or quantitative analysis of interview content. Once drafted, a copy of the case study was sent to the interviewee for any amendment and approval. Upon receipt of written approval, opportunities to integrate the case into learning, teaching and assessment were identified, again through a matching process to the curriculum content of a module.

For a module assessment, the case organisation is typically distributed early in the module learning programme, to allow students to examine the organisation’s operations and undertake some preliminary research on the organisation and its industrial sector. The assessment task would subsequently be distributed, with questions derived from the learning outcomes, along with the marking guidelines. Where possible, either a student visit, or a guest speaker from the organisation would also be organised to allow the students to ask questions relevant to the organisation’s operations. Nonetheless, the author’s perspective of the organisation as an ‘outsider’ is also useful to the students. It is this integration of different perspectives, from multiple individuals on the context of a specific case, that Lewis and Nicholls (2014) feel helps build an in-depth understanding. The key points covered in the visit or the guest presentation were then discussed at the next class seminar session, particularly in relation to their relevance to the assessment task and learning outcomes.

Discussion of the approach

The desire of the author to seek out ‘interesting’ case organisations, supports a broader range of unique business scenarios being presented to students. The use of SMEs, typically local to the university, facilitates a more holistic and integrated business perspective, rather than focusing merely on a specific operations function which can be symptomatic of examining large corporations. Students can therefore more easily examine the effect operations management decisions have on the other business functions.

The typical case size of 1500 words provides salient issues and current challenges to be highlighted, rather than a detailed description of operations processes. This serves to stimulate student discussion and encourages further student research, not only of the organisation but also its wider industrial sector and environmental circumstances. This provides a more realistic organisational context and the case scenarios are potentially more up-to-date than when sourced from a textbook. However, the cases do not provide an in-depth description of a complex aspect of the business, that are typical of textbook examples, and therefore balance in a learning programme is important to ensure all aspects are covered and reconcile to the academic level. As Lundberg *et al*. (2001) note, case variety is important in order to develop a broad range of skills.

Nonetheless, by incorporating student visits and organisational speakers from the respective company in the assessment process facilitates a more intimate examination of the organisation's operations, permits student questionning and facilitates a more in-depth assessment analysis and help avoid "educator domination' (Cummings, 2000). The Chief Executive (CEO) of one of the case organisation written was keen to receive feedback from students on his business, particularly where they felt improvements might be made. When students are informed that their comments will be fed back to the organisation's CEO, a further dimension of reality is added to the assessment activity, providing an element of excitement among the students. It also provides a conduit between research and practice (Gill, 2014) and helps drive research-led teaching (Strach and Everett, 2008).

The two-way interaction allows students to be more active participants in the assessment process, rather than being "clinically –divorced" (Dean and Fornaciari, 2002). It also ensures that students are thinking about the assessment, making notes, and preparing questions as the module progresses, which eliminates the 'leaving it to the last minute' approach to assignments. There is the danger however, that students become too fixated on the assessment though, to the detriment of the on-going module content and the on-going learning programme.Yet, the cases are also useful for formative assessment purposes, as the learning programme progresses, especially for example, for students to consider the practical business aspects of a model or theoretical concept covered in a prior lecture.

When a case study is first made available in the module, students are encouraged to engage with appropriate research sources such as journal databases, government reports, marketing intelligence databases, rather than rely on web-based material. This also reduced the likelihood of plagiarism, since the volume of material circulating about small businesses is tiny compared to global corporations. However, it is recognised that a balanced learning programme needs to be considered, particularly for the education of global business practices. In addition, it is sometimes inpractical for large cohorts of undergraduate students to visit an SME, although a guest speaker and presentation at the university is a substitute.

The approach not only raises awareness of the students to the variety of SMEs and their operations in the local area, but also serves to raise their insight of challenges prevailing in such organisations which is useful for potential study projects and possible future employment opportunities. It would be difficult to convey the same depth of realism from a fictitious company as a real business. Moreover, a Lecturer benefits, as the approach also supports the integration of research into teaching (Willcoxson *et al*., 2011) and provides a means of professional updating. It also helps to raise both individual and university profiles, with the local business community and possibly develop opportunities for further student projects.

Conclusion

A clear stance has been taken by the author to develop own case studies for learning, teaching and assessment purposes where possible, by engaging with local, small businesses rather than use those derived from texts or the web. The contribution of this approach for all stakeholders involved is clear, particularly the students who are brought closer to reality and gain insight into the challenges and management practices of the types of organisations they are most likely to end up working in. Moreover, the approach will also raise awareness among business management tutors to other sources of cases and not just those readily available. To this end, it will also hopefully challenge tutors to 'step-back' and consider the variety and types of cases used, not only on specific modules, but also within course teams, to ensure a broad cross-section of organisational types are used. The generation of own, written cases provides a valuable resource for tutors to draw upon in learning and teaching environments. In addition, the potential to reduce plagiarism through the use of unique cases in assessments is especially attractive.

Nonetheless, the identification of appropriate case organisations and their subsequent development into a written piece is time-consuming, which will impact on staff workloads. Similarly, the updating of cases via contact with the respective organisation, will impinge on staff time. This activity could be deemed less valuable by institutions, than research aimed at generating peer-reviewed, academic articles. However, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) might result in a wider range of activities aimed at student learning being more favourably embraced, for which the use of case based on local SMEs possibly becoming more attractive.

While case study research is multi-faceted, the approach described in this work, will form only one part of a range of tools and techniques available to management tutors. Shortcomings primarily centre on the possible lack of depth or detail that the written case provides, although information derived from interviews, company presentations or further research will embellish that which is presented. Additionally, the focus on local SMEs does ignore large blue-chip corporations and possibly the global context of the business environment. This reinforces the need for a balanced approach to the use of case types across a programme.

For future research, it would be useful to explore the perceptions of students regarding the described approach. While university quality systems typically require an end-of-module evaluation, a more in-depth analysis regarding the organisation, achievement of programme aims and the perceived learning would yield worthwhile insight to the value of the approach. How these cases subsequently drive graduate employability would also be useful research.

Case-based learning and teaching in Business Management has received some academic coverage. However, the use of case studies in assessment remains relatively unexplored. Similarly, the boundary defined in this work focused on operations, how this could be adopted by other management disciplines such as accounting, marketing etc. provides a thrust for future research activity.

The development of cases based on local SMEs adds to the repertoire of resources available to a management lecturer. It is therefore hoped that this paper will help raise exposure to the approach and hopefully stimulate academic discussion.

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