Developing a teaching case study: the difficulties faced by students, as viewed by faculty

by

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In this paper, we describe an experience of asking Masters’ students in marketing (both MSc and part-time MBA students in different modules) to write a teaching case study and its pedagogical note as major assessment for the module. The written case was the major deliverable of the term. In a previous paper, the learning benefits students gained from such an assignment, as viewed by themselves, were analysed (V. Boulocher-Passet, 2015). Students in an international marketing class identified as benefits of this experience many of the learning benefits already underlined in the literature (Ashamalla & Crocitto, 2001; Forman, 2006; Vega, 2010) on student-written cases: deepening of the learning experience, longer learning, development of skills such as critical thinking, research, problem-solving, communication, synthesis, analysis, tolerance for ambiguity, as well as enhanced motivation and responsibility. Non-previously identified benefits of writing a teaching case study also from analysis. Students highlighted how writing a teaching note eased and strengthened their understanding of international marketing concepts, challenged them, provided originality and novelty in learning methods as well as gave them confidence.

Case study writing can be considered a more active experience that requires students to assume a variety of different roles—researcher, interviewer, writer—some of which can be quite new to students (Ross et al., 2008). In this article, we report, as faculty, our own perception of difficulties faced by Masters’ business students in writing a teaching case study. By learning through this experience, the main aim of the paper is to guide business faculty in enhancing the development of student-written cases, by helping them anticipate main obstacles faced by students in such an exercise of content co-creation. This paper is divided into four sections. First, we briefly review the literature dealing with student case writing and acknowledge the lack of existing research into the difficulties of the experiences using student self-developed cases. Second, we present the research context and methodology. The third section reports main findings. The final section contains recommendations and conclusions. Key implications for business educators are provided.

The difficulties of student self-developed cases: a literature review

An emerging area of interest and research has recently focused on students as case researchers and case writers (V. Boulocher-Passet, 2015). Some researchers encourage having students write case studies as an adjunct to reading and analyzing published cases (Bailey et al., 2005; Forman, 2006, Vega, 2010). It can be considered a pedagogy that fully engages students in their education and enlists their mind and talent (Bailey et al., 2005), that demands continuous, active learning that students find rewarding and that makes students learn by assuming the role of a teacher (Ross et al., 2008). Research in the field also indicates that student-written cases approach is a rich pedagogical tool to reach diverse learning objectives and brings numerous benefits to the students (V. Boulocher-Passet, 2015). Finally, it also benefits to teachers by providing dynamic, timely case material with wide-ranging information that add realism in the classroom at little or no
monetary outlay (Henson et al., 2003). Ashamilla & Crocitto (2001) underlined nevertheless the anxiety some students faced at the beginning of the process, as they felt the assignment was more complicated and they did not know where to start. Ross et al. (2008) mentioned some difficulties caused by varying levels of experience their students had with case analysis. However, we found very little research digging into the difficulties encountered by students when confronted to writing a teaching case study for the first time.

Introducing student-written cases in two marketing classes

Context overview

The use of student-written case studies as an assignment was made by the author during two consecutive years in the course of two different 20 credit-modules: International Marketing, taught within the MSc in Marketing course, and Strategic Marketing Planning in an International Context, taught within the MBA General Management course. Objectives of the module were to develop a thorough understanding of international marketing/strategic marketing theory and their key concepts. Modules were weekly taught for 3 hours during 10 weeks and different themes studied within each session, which started with a presentation of main theories and concepts accompanied by lots of examples from practice. Second half of the session was dedicated each time to discussion on one case study using traditional case study method. Two sessions in the course of the module were entirely devoted to accompany individual work on writing teaching case studies.

The teaching case study assignment

The individually written teaching case study was the major deliverable of the term in each module, valued at 75% of the students’ grade for the International Marketing class, and at 100% for the Strategic Marketing Planning one. Making this assignment an individual one was preferred by the instructor to avoid team-related pitfalls such as tourism and free riding behaviours. The individual case-study assignment was reviewed in detail during the first class session of the term. The instructor provided general guidelines about what a teaching case study is, how it differs from a research case study, how to write one, what it includes, provided also a document to refer to, and made available to students numerous different sorts of teaching case studies they could examine, as well as the SWIF Learning guide by Swiercz (2003). Examples of teaching notes in different formats were also provided. Students were required to submit a brief description of their case study to the instructor by the third week of the term. Students could send their questions via e-mail whenever they had some and/or needed guidance. To succeed, students had to forge conceptual links between their teaching note and their case narrative.

Method and design of the research

Data were collected using the ethnographic method of participant observation, "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (Schensul et al, 1999, p. 91). This technique has the potential to capture data occurring within natural environments from multiple viewpoints (Hunter-Jones, 2012). By becoming part of the actors’ conversations and interpretations, the researcher can gain a deep understanding of the social phenomenon that is being examined (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch 2003). With ethnographic methods, data collection is not staged, but rather unstructured, with collection occurring in environments naturally frequented by the research population (Atkinson et al., 2001). More particularly, auto-ethnography, sometimes known as subjective personal
introspection (Holbrook, 2006), was used in this research. It enables researchers to draw on their own subjective insights within an objective, observable, context (Freeman & Spanjaard, 2012). Wolcott (1995) suggests that the “ideal” time in the field for an ethnographic research is two years. E-mails exchanged with students, questions asked by students as well as discussions during class, and personal notes made by the author during the two year process have been analysed to provide insight into the main difficulties students faced in the assigned task.

The difficulties of student self-developed cases: findings

The main challenges as mentioned briefly by the MSc students in their reflective reports on International Marketing class were the choice of topic and company to start with, followed by the difficulty to understand the nature and/or structure of a teaching case study, unfamiliarity with the case study method, the writing of the teaching note, particularly formulation of discussion questions for the case, and searching for data (V. Boulocher-Passet, 2015).

The choice of a case/problem/situation for the assignment

This we consider the main difficulty that a lot of students faced when asked to write a case study. Not all of them however faced this difficulty in the same way.

In the part-time MBA class, most students wanted to relate the assignment to the organization that was employing them or to an organization they used to work for in a previous experience. Those participants working for companies faced little difficulty to identify a potential interesting situation to reflect upon in their assignment, while participants coming from public services institutions had difficulties to identify an international issue. In particular, the students working in health services were confronted to this issue of finding a suitable problem to dig into.

In the MSc class, the challenge of finding a company to write about was more important. Having less work experience and fewer connections to companies, some students chose among the big companies they had heard of and tended to select companies they were striving for a future position or companies that sold brands they loved as consumers. Two years of running this case study assignment shows that the main difficulty for students is to decide upon the many possibilities they have, their final choice being guided essentially by the ease of information and data collection, and a link to their country of origin, that we analyse is a way to reassure themselves. The exercise being assessed, the faculty could measure the anxiety students faced in finding the most appropriate company, the one that would help them reach an excellent mark.

It took many students up to one month of dilemma, questioning, research or hesitation before deciding upon the company/situation they would write about, as well as the scope of the case study. A lot of support was needed from the faculty during that step to discuss the possibilities, so as to calm the anxiety the situation brings to students. Even more anxiety coming from newness of the exercise was perceptible, as students were confronted for the first time with such an assignment of writing a teaching case study.

The understanding of the teaching case study method

Another main difficulty facing most students at the start of the process was to comprehend what a teaching case study is and how you should write one. Although modules included the use of teaching case studies for discussion, students had varying levels of experience of being confronted to case studies in class, with some having discovered the method at the start of the academic year.
In the part-time MBA class, most students had worked using case studies from their first year at university for this course, so were familiar with the process and structure of a case study. However, they had never had the opportunity to think of the case study from the point of view of an instructor. One main obstacle they faced was the organization of the case study and its teaching note. It was difficult for some students to grasp how a teaching case study needed not only to develop the narrative of a business story at a precise moment, but also provide hooks to raise interest among students as well as an analysis of the situation in the teaching note. Teaching objectives were also particularly difficult to formulate for students in general.

In the MSc class, the challenge made students very uncomfortable as many of them came from various backgrounds outside business studies, such as mathematics, sociology, or pharmacy for instance, and had not worked with teaching case studies before. Those students were particularly uncertain as to what should be included in the case study and what should be part of the teaching note. Faculty had to answer lots of questions around structuring the assignment, and the difference in structure of decision versus discussion cases.

The students who still had not understood after being shown many examples and after discussion with faculty, submitted cases that were disorganised, lacked consistent links and clear structure, and did not include any clear decision or discussion focus from the start, that could have guided future students dealing with the case. Also, teaching objectives for their case studies were very often not clearly set. And some students did not understand some analysis of the case was needed in the teaching note.

The choice of information to include in the case study

Selecting the information/data to be included in the case study also proved a real challenge for many students. Is there enough information in the case study to be able to answer the questions set? Did I miss any aspects of the topic/decision to be made? Do I need to include a company background? Faculty received numerous questions like this, in particular from the Msc students.

Other students had understood that case study had to be simplified in order to relate to a few precise teaching objectives, but felt difficulty reducing the complexity of the business situation.

Accessing data

Collecting the right data, finding some pertinent information represented a big challenge for students who did not have access to the organization and primary data, namely the MSc students. The MBA students were rather concerned about the confidentiality issues regarding the information to include in their narratives, they had difficulty when some data were confidential and they were not given permission to include it in their case study.

Recommendations and conclusion

For the instructor to be aware of students apprehensions and concerns is important because he or she can take measures to minimize their negative impact. Here are a few measures that were taken by the author to help students overcome those difficulties:

- allocating time to discuss topic and its suitability for the assignment,
- organizing peer exchange and feedback to help identify not only topic but also information missing,
- providing examples of excellent teaching case studies from the preceding years,
- making some examples of published case studies and their teaching notes available,
- reinforcing during class exposure to the case study method and to how cases are constructed and analyzed.

The students need a lot of support in the process, and faculty leading such a learning process should have good experience of writing case studies themselves, so as to guide students efficiently through the hurdles of this researching process. Asking students to write a teaching case study for assignment is demanding for them, but also rewarding, as they become creators of knowledge and co-creators of learning experiences.
References


