

# GSB WORKING PAPER NO. 36



## WRITING CASE STUDIES AS A STUDENT LEARNING TOOL

BY

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CERICOS Provider Code 00301J

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ISSN 1323-7853

ISBN 1 74067 349 2

JUNE 2004



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No. 36  
Working Paper Series  
04.05

**Writing Case Studies as a Student Learning Tool**

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## **Abstract**

Analysing case studies is a common teaching technique in many management related subjects and often forms an important part of the assessment process. Writing case studies is a logical extension of such an approach. Not only is the bank of case material continually updated and upgraded, but case writing can also lead to higher order learning due to the complexity of the activity. With appropriate guidance and supervision by the instructor, case writing can be a very powerful addition to the assessment options available. This paper outlines the learning benefits inherent in case writing by students and then details how such an activity can be implemented into class activities. Examples of the instructions provided to students and the various resources available are presented. Finally, the paper reflects on the success of case writing for students undertaking the capstone unit in the Master of Business Administration at Curtin University of Technology.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Analysing case studies is an important part of many management courses. Often assessment items involve asking students to analyse a case and develop an outline of their preferred direction both in terms of what they think should be done and how such an approach could best be implemented. At the graduate level, cases are often an integral part of the teaching method, using a case-based teaching method made famous as the dominant pedagogy in teaching MBA (Master of Business Administration) students within Harvard Business School. However, analysis can take students only so far. After all, “if experience is the best teacher, what better way to learn ...than by writing a teaching case” (Barnes, Christensen and Hansen, 1994: 285).

Writing case studies immerses students into the complexity of business where multiple perspectives, imperfect data, and numerous issues that all require resolving need to be appreciated. Analysing existing written cases tends to provide students with a limited range of perspectives and the material tends to be written with a focus on just one or two issues (due to space considerations). In comparison, writing case studies exposes students to the true complexities of business. Additionally, writing an answer guide for the case study provides a theoretical underpinning to the material to ensure that the case is not just a retelling of a particular scenario. Instead, the answer guide ensures that students understand the relevant theory to different scenarios, and because there is rarely a single theory that can be used, the students are also more likely to visibly see the links that exist between different theoretical frameworks.

The aim of this paper is to outline the benefits that accrue to students in terms of their learning from having them write their own case studies and corresponding answer guides. After discussing these benefits, I then outline how I manage the process including the instructions and the guidance that I provide. Finally, I review the success of the process with an MBA capstone course, including those areas that continue to be problematic for students. Throughout this paper I use examples from my own experiences in using case writing as an assessment tool. As someone who teaches in the field of strategic management, I naturally use strategy-oriented examples and discuss my ideas in terms of writing strategy-focussed cases.

## **WHAT IS A CASE?**

A central defining characteristic of all cases is that they try to “illuminate a decision or set of decisions; why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Schramm, 1971; cited in Yin, 1994: 12). Cases can therefore be used in both research and in teaching. In research they provide the depth of understanding (including the contextual events) that allow researchers to answer both how and why questions. (In comparison, in the management field most quantitative methods based around survey instruments are best placed to answer what, who or where questions.) While this paper is concerned with the use and style of cases that can be used in the teaching arena, it is worth noting that it is the detail of a case that provides its power, both in the research and the teaching context.

Teaching cases can take a variety of forms, but like research oriented cases, they are characterised by a depth of information and are very good at allowing students to analyse why certain decisions or actions were taken and how these can be explained (often from a theoretical perspective). The two dominant forms of cases are historical cases in which a series of events and decisions can be analysed – often to show the application of particular theory; or a case set at a particular point in time which concludes with a decision point requiring students to determine what actions should be taken – and in these cases, historical information is designed to be contextual in nature.

Both forms of teaching cases (historical and decision point-based) involve a complex layering of information, covering situations and the interactions of key players that is developed to illustrate a particular set of concepts, ideas or processes (Peloso, 1998). As such, a systems framework may be useful to understand the nature of a teaching case. Certainly in the strategy field, the systemic nature of many of the concepts ensures that a deep understanding of most strategy-oriented scenarios requires “an eye for the interdependence of seemingly independent phenomena” (De Wit and Meyer, 1998). For example, the external/industry environment, the internal environment (resources and capabilities), the value chain and the existing business strategies all determine the present positioning of the firm and due to path dependencies and even time compression diseconomies, limit what strategies can be undertaken in the short to medium-term. In-line with systems thinking is the fact that it is often the interactions that exist between elements of the system, rather than the actual elements themselves, which is critical. For example, the interactions between a firm with a new product (and the path dependencies this may

create), its various distributors and the customers may be more important than the fact that a firm has a new product to release, that it can access a range of distributors and that it has a reasonable level of customer loyalty.

In this systems-oriented approach, the students' role is to de-layer, sectionalise and dissect the case with an aim to analyse, question and problem solve in a complex world where there are rarely clear and unambiguous interrelationships between key elements of the case. Complexity, incomplete information and complicated interrelationships thus often characterise some of the best cases. As such, problem-solving skills and the ability to take large amounts of information and deconstruct this material to assess what is important and what is largely immaterial, is a desired outcome of most who place the case study method at the core of their teaching approach. Certainly Smith's (1987) review of the empirical research concerning case method teaching shows that there is strong (though not entirely conclusive) support regarding the relationship between the use of case-based teaching and improvements in students' problem-solving capabilities.

Cases (as part of the larger field of problem-based learning) are not just used in the field of business. They are common in teaching medicine, law, public policy and even some of the physical sciences. In the business setting, cases are a written description of an organisation and its activities. For some, this description needs to be factual. "Cases portray real events, which stubbornly resist yielding to one single, neat, factual solution ... [They] portray real people in moments of decision, faced with a need to take action and accept its consequences" (Barnes, Christensen and Hansen, 1994: 287). However, for others, the need for absolute accuracy is not as great. In fact, some massaging of the facts may be appropriate to ensure that the case can focus students on a particular set of issues. The key is that the case does not become unbelievable to the reader. In many cases, the identity of the company and/or the employees is disguised and therefore, some minor changes may actually assist in keeping the identity of the participants in the case from becoming public.

Finally, in terms of length, cases can vary enormously from simple cases that can dip even below the 1,000 word mark, to complex, Harvard Business School style cases that may run to 30 pages in length. Recently cases have also started to include additional features made possible through new multi-media technologies. Therefore some cases come with video clips featuring interviews with key people, pictures of premises, products or other important elements, and footage of actual events. These can generally be viewed over the internet.

## **Why Students Should Write Cases**

As described above, cases tend to be complex, multi-layered, in-depth descriptions of events and decisions within a particular organisation or industry. Nevertheless, every case is still just an abbreviated summary of a multitude or various events and decisions. Due to space limitations, each case writer must make a decision as to what information to include and what information to leave out. As most cases are designed to be used in a limited number of ways, the result is that the case writer makes a conscious decision to restrict the information they place in the case to that which is necessary to (a) understand the case in terms of its history and the context in which it operates, and (b) to engage students in a discussion or debate that is centred around a limited set of issues or frameworks (Hafler, 1991).

Because cases are restricted in their content, they rarely capture the true complexity of real life. Therefore, the first reason as to why students should write cases themselves is that they are introduced to the true complexity of many business scenarios. That is, the student is not already pushed by the case writer along a particular pathway. Rather they have to decide upon the appropriate pathway (ie what to cover and what to leave out) themselves. For example, in the field of strategy, the student has to decide what are the most important factors that are driving the performance of the company (be it good or bad). Thus, is performance driven by certain critical resources which therefore need to form the focal point of the case, or is industry structure more important in determining the profitability of the firm? Maybe it is a case where performance has dropped because of inappropriate acquisitions, or one where performance has lagged because of the inability of the firm to commercialise its technology quickly. To be able to determine which direction needs to be taken for the case requires a detailed knowledge of the entire organisation, its history, competitive environment and its history in terms of key activities and key decisions. An existing case simply requires analysis of an existing set of elements and interrelationships. Writing a case requires a much deeper understanding of the organisation and its environment as the largest challenge is putting together a mental model of what factors drive performance and therefore what needs to be included within the case.

Cases invariably simplify the real world. They purposely leave out important information that potentially has an impact upon what can or cannot be done. Because of this, the relationships that exist between different aspects of the case cannot be investigated. Leaving out important information is necessary as there are space limitations (even for the longest of cases) and also to reduce the complexity of the case. For example, in the

strategy field, many of the cases skim over key issues to do with the management styles of key personnel, their relationships and their inherent biases. In some respects, this is not unexpected as business strategy courses tend to focus upon the more macro issues such as industry structure and key resources and capabilities. Nevertheless, the actual people involved have a significant impact. For example, founders (and owners) of companies rarely like to limit their degree of influence in the company and thus bringing in a series of professional managers may simply be unrealistic. Or, in deciding between multiple expansion moves from different divisions involves a political element in that the same group of people cannot have all of their ideas constantly rejected if the organisation wants them to remain motivated. Often cases expect students to work within a rational framework and thus removing information about key people (and the political dimension that they can bring to the case) is just one way of ensuring that this occurs. However, this sort of information is not the only type of information left out. In reality, a range of issues are purposely ignored in writing up cases, meaning case analysis can take the student only so far in exposing them to the intricacies of business decisions.

In comparison, writing a case ensures that students are exposed to the true complexity of business scenarios. They are rarely neat, nor do they draw upon a very limited number of issues. In researching past decisions and the present state of the organisation, students are able to see just how many factors have impacted upon the 'strategic' direction of the firm at one point in time or another. Only in facing this complexity do they start to appreciate the systems perspective that complements the field of business strategy. That said, it is important to note that while students are exposed to this complexity in the case writing process, like all other cases, their final product will also be a simplified version of reality with important information neglected as part of the process of making the case study accessible and focussed (in relation to certain theoretical frameworks).

Related to this point is the second reason why students should write case studies – the process of writing cases requires a much greater depth of knowledge of how various theoretical concepts might actually work than the knowledge required to simply apply these concepts in a relatively abstract manner to an existing case. I liken the difference in knowledge requirements to the difference between taking a class (as a student) and the amount of knowledge gained, relative to teaching a class in the same subject. When I explain to my MBA classes why the final assignment will be to write a case rather than to simply analyse a case I use the taking a class versus teaching a class analogy. Many of my MBA students have had experiences themselves as teachers in various capacities. A large number of these have commented to me at the end of the course that my analogy



was very true. When they did a case analysis, even a detailed written analysis as one of their earlier assignments, they thought that they understood the material relatively well. However, when they actually came to write a case themselves and had to research an organisation, understand the linkages between different activities of the firm and determine what angle would best allow them to explain what drove performance in this unique organisation, there came an understanding that they simply did not attain from their earlier work.

I think that one of the principal reasons for this is that my course in strategic management (like most MBA strategy courses) tends to teach a variety of frameworks in a way that does not stress the interdependence and interrelationships that often exist. For example, industry analysis (and its sub-fields such as strategies groups) are often taught quite independently of the Resource Based View of the firm (RBV). Hence we teach one or more cases that focus upon industry structure and then we chose another set of cases where we can illustrate the importance of particular resources and capabilities. Certainly these two sets of frameworks do not mesh well together as one set is derived largely from Industrial Organisation economics, whilst the other has significant roots in sociology and organisation theory. Yet, as Wernerfelt (1984) clearly pointed out, these two orientations are really two sides of the same coin. Therefore we tend to forget to teach, or at least practically inform students as to how strategy is a big picture, systems oriented subject, where interactions between what seem to relatively independent elements are in fact often very important. When students come to write their own cases, they quickly come to see how the various frameworks must all be considered and not treated independently as a list to tick off as each one is applied in isolation.

The point above suggests that students should write cases because of the depth of knowledge required. Building upon this is my third reason as to why students should write cases – the learning effects are maximised when students move away from rote learning based tasks/assessments, and engage in deep learning that forms the basis for students developing their own mental models concerning how different constructs interrelate. As I teach MBA students, I am dealing with adult learners who tend to (and should) primarily teach themselves (Armstrong, 1991). As such, they recall material best when they discuss it with others or personally experience the issue (Biggs, 1999). Writing a case study as part of a group therefore meets the criteria for when learning is maximised – personally experiencing the issue by researching the case, and then discussing the issues with their colleagues. And as case studies involve research of real companies (using annual reports, analysts briefings and interviews with key personnel) rather than abstract research for something such as a theory-based assignment, students are able to actively engage

with the material far more easily. This engagement, along with the natural complexity of the multi-dimensional cases ensures that students are able to build their own mental models regarding the operation of different frameworks presented to them during the course of the trimester.

In addition, case writing involves a degree of reflection – a vital element in developing critical thinking. Students firstly need to reflect upon the lectures through the trimester and the various readings as part of the process of categorising the various data acquired in the case writing process. They then need to reflect upon how the different elements of the case can be pulled together to create a story that leads the reader through critical pieces of information that underpin the case. Hence, I believe that case writing is able to encourage open-minded, reflective, critical and active learning.

### **How to write a case**

Before looking at the process of writing a case, it is worthwhile reflecting upon the purpose of cases. As indicated above, there are a number of reasons why students will benefit from writing a case. However, understanding the general purpose of cases (beyond the inherent learning) helps to frame the case writing process. Cases are designed to be vehicles through which a concept or theory can be illustrated in relation to a particular business situation (Patti, 1992). As well as learning about how different theories and concepts can be applied, cases also allow for students to gain a level of familiarity with different types of businesses and industries, and the role that different theories play in varying contexts (Patti, 1992). Barnes, Christensen and Hansen (1994: 292) suggest that “as a case writer, your purpose is to construct a document that will not only involve your readers, but stimulate discussion on a reasonably predictable set of topics”. As such, a case will have an orderly structure so that a reader can move through the material in a logical way. However, because the important parts of the case come in different areas, the case is not a roadmap in itself as to how all the critical issues link together. Rather, there is a complex layering of information, covering important issues and decisions that then must be deconstructed by the reader to appreciate the way that different parts of the case interact.

So how does one write a multi-layered, yet logical case? The bad news is that writing is a craft and as such there are no hard and fast rules that guarantee success. Deviating slightly from the topic, possibly the most commonly proscribed advice regarding writing is that a writer writes. In essence, good writing takes much practice and discipline, and the best way to improve is to simply write and rewrite regularly. However, there is also some good news for case writers – first time case writers can produce excellent cases on their

first attempt as they are more attuned to their readers' than more experienced instructors who often inherently view the case from the instructors rather than the students' perspective (Barnes, Christensen and Hansen, 1994). Nevertheless, with so few rules as to how to approach the task, the writing process must be driven by the students and what works best for each individual.

Beyond the craft of writing, creating a case study generally involves developing a vision of the shape the case will take, gathering organising and culling data to fit an emerging pattern, searching for images that convey the thoughts of the writer and adequately reflect the data and then writing, revising, revising again and continue rewriting until the original (or somewhat altered) vision is achieved (Barnes, Christensen and Hansen, 1994).

When I introduce my students to the case writing exercise, I suggest that they begin the process from one of two starting points. The first option is to take an organisation that they know well and look at what are the key driving forces in relation to its performance. In the case of MBA students, they can often use the organisation that they have worked for (or presently work for). Identifying the drivers of performance, investigating these in detail and writing the case around these drivers is a common approach. An alternative approach is to consider a theory that interests the group and then identify an organisation that may be considered to be a classic example of this theory. The advantage of this approach is that the factors that drive performance are often numerous, difficult to identify and highly interrelated (creating causal ambiguity). For example, in a well-known organisation such as McDonalds, it is not clear exactly what drives performance. There is overcapacity in the industry and a slowing down of growth across the entire fast food industry. McDonalds is often used to illustrate standardisation of processes (at least in terms of food preparation), but it is unlikely that it is these routines in themselves that are the basis of their advantages given that standardised processes are now common across the industry. The result is that a series of factors including brand, physical location, relationships with key suppliers and the whole franchise system (including the standardised processes) all impact upon McDonalds' performance.

This is the reason that many students find it easier to chose the desired theory, select an appropriate case and then add in additional details as necessary. For example, innovation cases involving network externalities can be focussed on various consumer electronics (such as the Apple iPod, DVD, video cassette or other format oriented industries). Strategic groups oriented cases would do well to focus on a heterogeneous industry where strategic groups can be easily identified and where these groups are very distinct and have significantly different performance outcomes (e.g. banks, cosmetics and possibly

players in the oil and gas industry). The case writing process is a difficult one at the best of times and therefore limiting the case to focussing on a single or limited number of theoretical perspectives can certainly help the writers as it keeps the vision for the case clear, which in turn makes it easier to determine what needs to go in the case and what can be left out. Alternatively, when students choose an organisation they know well, they often need to conduct considerable research before they begin to develop a vision as to what the case should look like.

The next step is planning. The key here is to start with a vision of what the final case should look like. As per the above discussion, this vision might be in terms of a series of drivers of performance and how they come together to provide a clear picture of how the firm has developed into the firm it is today. Alternatively the vision may be in terms of a theoretical framework and how the case will provide the various pieces of information required to bring this framework to life. The other component of this vision is to determine up front whether this will be a historically oriented case that demonstrates how a theory may apply to a given business situation, or whether this will be a decision point case where the readers are asked to analyse the materials and develop suggestions for the organisation.

From here, it is advisable to create a time-line to work out when different parts of the case need to be completed by. As part of this process it is prudent to consider what information needs to go into the case (on the basis of the vision). Collecting, collating, analysing and then discarding some of this information (before starting the collection process again) is continual and thus as more and more information is collected it becomes clearer as to what remains to be collected and exactly how all of the different pieces of the puzzle will fit together. Once a reasonably clear outline of what is going to go into the case has been developed (given that initial rounds of data collection is more about working out what the detailed vision will look like), it is then preferable to focus on just a few points at a time (as a way of managing the complexity).

Writing the case is likely to require many drafts. A clear plan of what needs to be done and how it will be achieved probably helps. This may include many of the sources of data. Some cases are written purely on the basis of secondary data sources whereas others involve the company directly. There are a number of factors that influence this decision, but there is certainly no one way to go about getting the data. A case that is critical of the organisation (possibly detailing a problem) is unlikely to receive support from the organisation and thus it may be best to collect data from secondary sources. Certainly this is easier in some industries than others. Personal experience has shown that large

industries that service individual consumers often have extensive secondary data sources (e.g. banking, airlines, computers, supermarkets, wine and motor vehicles). However, the quality of data and the depth of the data is often maximised when the case writers involve the organisation in the process through interviewing key staff members and visiting the organisation's premises.

As each case is so different, there are few rules that apply in all cases. Thus far I have developed just two. First, make sure all of the facts needed to answer the case are actually in it. This sounds obvious, but too many times have I read answer guides that refer to information not in the case (but obviously uncovered in the data collection phase). Such cases tend to feel shallow and incomplete. As a reader I have often thought that I really needed to find out more about particular issues before I even looked at the answer guide to see that this information was missing. The second rule is again somewhat obvious – do not cut and paste large slabs of information (such as historical details). Rather, think carefully about how each paragraph provides important information for the reader and allows them to develop a knowledge of all of the key issues in the case without being burdened with large quantities of information that is irrelevant. With more and more information available through company websites (and other sources) a temptation exists to include a great range of information from company timelines to the background of each key member of staff that only limits the impact of the important material covered in the case.

Generally, the final step is to write the answer guide. However, I often recommend that students write the answer guide before writing up the case. This way there is greater clarity as to what is required for the case and how issues may need to be structured. A plan of the answer guide can fill the same role and I have found that it is rare for students to write the answer guide first. In terms of the actual answer guide, I recommend summarising the key points and then demonstrating how all of the different elements fit together and can help illustrate the way that selected frameworks can be used in this particular business scenario. I also suggest that students provide some questions and work around these as a way of creating greater structure in the answer guide, however, this is certainly not necessary. The answer guide is also a good place to include discussion of various aspects of the case that do not fit nicely within existing frameworks, or to highlight any deficiencies in the various frameworks that exist in relation to the particular context discussed in the case. Finally, the answer guide is an appropriate vehicle for outlining the interrelationships that exist between different frameworks and showing how the case is more complex than simply applying various frameworks

independently of each other. I often propose to my students that they present something akin to a mind-map or systems diagram to illustrate some of the complexity of the case that is not apparent through simply discussed various theoretical approaches.

## **Instructions Provided to Students**

My teaching at the MBA level revolves around case-based teaching. For this reason, most of my students have been exposed to numerous cases (both in my units and others) meaning that they generally understand what a typical case looks like. Nevertheless, I do outline the basic expectations in terms of what a case should include (history, present activities key personnel etc). One issue that I do stress is that they include some data that supports the key issue(s) developed in this case. This data is normally financial results, but it may also be other forms of data such as manufacturing output, number of distribution outlets in different regions or industry related data such as market share controlled by the largest three players to demonstrate concentration. Relevant data can help to bring a case to life and therefore I encourage students to include a number of tables and exhibits.

Most students do not have any problems with regard to understanding what the case study should look like. However, the answer guide is far more problematic as this is something that they have not seen before. I do provide detailed explanations as to what is required in the answer guide such as that shown below.

***The answer guide should include:***

A short summary of the pertinent facts in the case

An analysis of general issues (dependent upon whether business or corporate level strategy)

Identification of the critical issue and what this means for the organisation

Presentation and utilisation of appropriate theoretical material to help suggest possible answers to the various questions posed.

The case allows you to show your research skill and how strategic decision points emerge within an organisation. The answer guide is a demonstration of your theoretical knowledge. Thus the answer guide is very important. To ensure that there are linkages between the case and the answer guide, I recommend that you consider writing the answer guide first and building the case around it.

However, I find that the best way to get students acquainted with what makes for a good answer guide is to provide examples of previous cases completed by students – including the answer guide. I purposefully do not just provide copies of the best assignments, but I show a whole range and indicate which assignments were judged to be very good, and which assignments did not score so well in this assignment. Beyond past student

examples, I also provide examples of some of my own answer guides and those of colleagues.

Beyond clarity of what a good case study and a poor case study look like, as this assignment is different to most others that my students have undertaken, I have found it to be useful to clearly explain what makes for a good assignment. I have reproduced the relevant section from my unit outline below.

▪ **The highest grades will be awarded to students that:**

- Chose a case that is appropriate for appreciating their selected theoretical focus
- Build the case in a way that allows for an in-depth analysis of a particular theoretical issue
- Include data that is integral to understanding the case
- Develop a case that is not 'black and white' in nature where the solution is obvious, but rather show the true nature of organisations (as complex entities with political elements)
- Develop an answer guide that demonstrates a clear appreciation for the theoretical foundations on which the case is built and integrates the theory throughout the answer guide.

I do not set word count limits for the assignment, but I do indicate that most cases will be somewhere between 4,000 and 7,000 words in length, with the answer guide being an additional 2,000 to 4,000 words. I do stress the importance of ensuring that relevant information is included in the case and that large chunks of material are simply dropped into the case for the purposes of padding.

In most of my classes the assignment is done as a group project. The exception to this is where I run the class in an intensive mode over two weeks and students fly in from around the country and from overseas. For these students they have a choice of working individually (with slightly lower expectations) or working in a group of their choosing. For traditional trimester students however, this is a group assignment. As with any group assignment, problems can flare up, and this is actually more likely in an assignment such as this where the task is somewhat ambiguous and lacks the structure that many of their past group assignment have provided. For this reason, I work with any groups that seek my assistance (such as reading drafts of their work). In addition, I use a mechanism to provide different grades to students in the same group for those very few occasions when a group does break down. However, my primary strategy to minimise problems in the first place is to stress to students that they take care in selecting their group members. The

following extract is from my unit outline and details some of the issues that individuals may wish to consider in advance.

*In choosing members of your group you should select wisely so as to balance skills, knowledge, expertise, logistics, availability and nature and extent of experience. One way of selecting group members in the past has been to look for students with similar aims in the unit. For example, some students are interested in just making sure that they pass the unit (given work commitments or for other reasons), whereas other students are aiming for distinction level grades. Conflict has been eliminated in the past when students have been aiming for the same results and therefore there is consistency in the amount of work expected.*

My attitude towards assessment is that it encourages the learning process and that any assessment does not simply take place for the purposes of ranking students (as per Ashcroft and Palacio, 1996). For this reason I make myself available to look at every students' work prior to submission should the student seek my input. The closer the material is provided to the due date, the less detail is provided in the review. Surprisingly only about 25 percent of students avail themselves of this opportunity, though in the case writing assignment does see this number increase significantly. The case study assignment probably needs this level of support due to the complexity of the task and its novelty.

It is also worth noting the major problems that my students have experienced in the past as I often discuss these issues either directly or indirectly with the class. The problems include:

- Students include too many issues in the case. By their very nature, cases are complex. However, a good case writer does need to make decisions as to what will be included and what will be left out from the write-up. Many students are unwilling to make this decision and therefore their cases cover every issue facing the organisation.
- Students try to cover too many theoretical frameworks. By covering so many different issues (as per the above point), students invariably cover numerous frameworks to the extent that sometimes it looks like they have reproduced large parts of the textbook and applied the various frameworks to this particular case.
- Cases are too long. When the above two problems occur, cases can blow out enormously to well over 10,000 words (or more), plus almost the same again for the answer guide.



- Cases are often shallow. Again when students cover a vast range of topics problems arise. One of the most common is that each issue is given only a cursory overview rather than all of the important issues being detailed. For this reason I try to stress every time that limiting the case around a few issues is the best approach.
- Answer guides do not show an appreciation for the relevant theory. There are two main problems here. First, students do not link their discussion with the theory. Rather they provide a summary of the case and suggest a framework that would be useful to better understanding certain issues in the case. The second problem occurs when students are vague as to how a particular framework may operate in this case. For example, they may discuss the resource based view of the firm without identifying key resources in this particular case.
- There is too much missing information. It is often the case that some of the information that you would theoretically like to go into a case is simply not available. However, there comes a point where this lack of information becomes problematic. It is for this reason that I continue to counsel students to writing about organisations that they work for, or organisations in industries that attract considerable attention from business writers, analysts and have industry or government bodies that report of these organisations regularly.

### **The Results of Students Writing Case Studies**

Almost universally the response that I receive from this assignment is extremely positive. It is hard work, very time consuming and certainly challenging, but it also provides an excellent learning vehicle. Students that want to learn and really extend themselves love the task as it has the potential to bring together many of the frameworks that they had previously studied. Most importantly, the students see how these frameworks can or cannot operate and appreciate the complexities of the field of business strategy. For example, I received an email recently with the following comment.

The [case] work with CASA was particularly rewarding as their reaction gave me confidence that I have a marketable asset. All in all, a very rewarding experience – thanks very much.

Approximately 10 of my students' cases have subsequently been published. The majority of these are in the text *Strategic Management: An Integrated Approach* (Hill, Jones and Galvin) – an (Australian) adapted version of the Hill and Jones text published in 2004. As a result of the publication of these cases, my students' work is now being used at approximately 20 different universities in Australia and New Zealand.

## Conclusion

When I first set my students the task of writing their own teaching cases, I had two objectives. Firstly, I wanted to increase the bank of cases I had at my disposal. Working outside of North America, my students were keen for local cases – something that was in relatively short supply. Irrespective of my explanations about the value of a case being determined by its quality and the way we use it in class, my students still sought to move away from what was a unit dominated by cases featuring US-based companies. However, I was also interested in the learning benefits that a colleague of mine had experienced when he experimented with the idea. Since these early attempts at including case writing as an assignment exercise, I have come to value this approach for its ability to provide learning outcomes superior to all of my other items of assessment. It is only now that I have read some more of the education literature and that I have reflected upon five years of using this technique that I have come to appreciate the true benefits of getting students to write their own cases.

For me, I have seen benefits to students in three main areas. The first is the students' ability to witness the true complexity of many business scenarios. Case writing requires a deeper understanding of the various elements of the case and how they link together than can be attained through more traditional case analysis. Second, students are exposed to the interrelationships of various frameworks that may not have been possible in the regular classes. Certainly in a subject such as strategic management where a systems perspective may be useful, the links between frameworks and different concepts only becomes clear when one is truly immersed in an intricate, multi-dimensional real world case. Thirdly, students experience the issues far more personally when they are intimately involved in collecting and analysing data for a case (particularly in relation to the analysis of an existing case study). Such learning experiences have a far more beneficial effect than rote learning based assessment items or situations where students do not actively engage with the material. Certainly writing cases is difficult and therefore challenging. On the positive side however, it is through such activities that students are most effective in developing their own mental models as to how the theoretical ideas that they have been introduced to operate in the real world. To this effect, my students have been very positive about their experiences of writing cases and with the right guidance and support, case writing can be a very valuable addition to the existing repertoire of assessment items.

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