

Moving towards reflexive use of teaching cases within the MBA

Graeme Currie and Sue Tempest, Nottingham University Business School

DOI:10.3794/ijme.71.205

Received: March 2007

Revised: November 2007

Accepted: January 2008

Abstract

Within a broader stakeholder debate about the role of business schools, our study encourages reflexivity from management teachers regarding teaching case utilisation in the classroom. We provide illustrations of how the management teacher might counter criticisms that the teaching case method privileges senior management's views; promotes hard not soft skills; is teacher-centred not student centred. Our study is based upon ethnographic observations of MBA case teaching, combined with interviews with management teachers and students, within four leading UK business schools.

Keywords: teaching cases; stakeholder theory; MBA; business schools; reflexivity

Introduction

Despite its prevalence in business and management programmes, particularly the MBA, the teaching case method has received little empirical attention regarding its instructional foundation and potential biases (Liang and Wang, 2004). The aim of this study is to address this research gap through empirical analysis of teaching case practice in the MBA classroom.

The study encompasses ethnographic observation of MBA case teaching and interviews with management teachers and students, within four leading UK business schools. Drawing upon the empirical material, the aim of the paper is to encourage reflexivity from management teachers regarding teaching case utilisation in the classroom through providing contrasting illustrations of case teaching practice and students' responses to pedagogy.

Reflexivity in management teaching requires "unsettling students' assumptions that may have enduring effects upon agendas and power relationships in particular contexts" (Cunliffe, 2002: 38). In the context of case teaching, this demands that stakeholders other than senior management are considered within organisational problems and solutions presented in teaching cases. Also that management is seen as a political and emotional activity, as much as one informed by rational models of management techniques.

Reflecting this, the critique of teaching cases is informed by the notion of a stakeholder model of business education (Freeman, 1984; 2006; Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Freeman *et al.*, 2004). Important characteristics of a stakeholder or 'business and society' model of MBA pedagogy is that it moves beyond a preoccupation with maximising shareholder value to promote more ethical and socially responsible business and management practice (Brief, 2000; Trank and Rynes, 2003; Starkey *et al.*, 2004; Ghoshal, 2005).

The paper is structured as follows. First, the critique of teaching cases is detailed and this is linked to stakeholder theory to frame our argument that enhanced learning outcomes ensue from more reflexive use of teaching cases within the MBA. Having set out the research design, contrasting empirical illustrations of reflexive and non-reflexive pedagogy around three themes that reflect critique of teaching cases are presented. Within each of these data themes, we outline students' responses to non-reflexive and reflexive pedagogy. Taking account of student responses, some practical suggestions as to how the management teacher might utilise the teaching case in a more reflexive way in the classroom to enhance student learning are offered and finally, future research to further investigate case teaching are identified.

Sue Tempest is Associate Professor in Strategic Management at Nottingham University Business School. Her research interests include organisational learning, new forms of organisation, management education and the impact of demographic ageing on strategic management. She has published in journals such as Organisation Science, Organisation Studies, Journal of Management Studies, and Human Relations.

Graeme Currie is a Professor of Public Services Management at Nottingham University Business School. Currently he leads two research programmes funded by the Department of Health: evaluation of mainstreaming genetics and evaluation of children's services networks. More generally, Graeme researches: leadership of public services organisations; organisational and management learning; HRM in public services organisations. Graeme is also a non-executive director at Nottinghamshire Healthcare Trust.

The critique of teaching cases

Though the teaching case study has gradually become ubiquitous in management education (Dooley and Skinner, 1977; Stewart and Winn, 1996; Yashida *et al.*, 1999; Lund Dean and Fornaciari, 2002), it has also always generated heated debate (Stonham, 1995). In recent years, controversy has revolved around three interrelated issues:

Teaching cases privilege senior management's views

Commonly, teaching cases are developed through data produced in interviews with senior managers (see prescriptions for writing cases within comprehensive handbooks of case writing, such as: Easton, 1982; Heath, 2002). This is unsurprising given that for many management teachers and students the primary purpose of a teaching case is to provide the opportunity to identify with management and to make a managerial decision (Chetkovich and Kirp, 2001; Lundberg *et al.*, 2001; Liang and Wang, 2004).

However, there are two main problems with developing a case through interviews with senior managers. First, senior managers may present themselves in heroic terms, with the role of others relegated to 'bit players' within the case representation. Linked to this, given the case is a negotiated artifact with release dependent upon company approval, the teaching case tends to represent the company as exhibiting 'best practice'. Consequently teaching cases may be orientated towards the perspective of senior management (Contardo and Wensley, 2004; Liang and Wang, 2004).

An obvious retort is that such biases are simply unavoidable. Most case studies deal with crises or turning points, when those at the helm have to deal with challenging circumstances, and so some emphasis on the senior management view is entirely understandable. Further we recognise that students are embarking upon an MBA in the hope they can step into the shoes of senior managers, so might expect the teaching case to reflect this. However, we argue business and managers need to take a wider view and consider the interests of all stakeholders (Brief, 2000; Trank and Rynes, 2003; Freeman *et al.*, 2004; Starkey *et al.*, 2004; Giaocolone and Thompson, 2006). Consistent with this, the representation of the case should include the voices of employees, customers and the wider public.

Recommendation: So, first, we suggest a management teacher considers how he or she counters partial representation of an organisation within a teaching case, so that the voices of stakeholders other than senior management are heard.

Teaching cases promote hard not soft skills

The primary framework of most cases invariably, "convey[s] overly rational, analytic and antiseptic views of organisations" (Lund Dean and Fornaciari, 2002: 587). The equally important and messy process aspects of contemporary organisations such as human aspects (emotions and feelings); political aspects (power and conflict); and symbolic aspects (ceremonies and rituals, identity and meanings, perceptions and values) of cases, are much less developed (Lundberg *et al.*, 2001; Lund Dean and Fornaciari, 2002; Liang and Wang, 2004).

The majority of cases treat organisations as a mere tool for profits, while neglecting their social nature ... [they] depict an organisational environment as 'politics free' (Liang and Wang, 2004: 404 and 408).

Consequently, teaching cases converge strongly with corporate interests in privileging profit making, while de-emphasising other key stakeholders, such as employees, customers and society.

It is unsurprising that business schools emphasise the rational aspects of organisational life, since these are teachable and the business school claims expertise in this realm, which allows them to generate revenue (Liang and Wang, 2004). However, the promotion of 'analysis', allied to the common objective of trying to get classes to reach a clear-cut decision as they proceed through the different stages of the discussion, is said to encourage the already implicit valuing of hard as opposed to soft skills (Crainer and Dearlove, 1998; Mintzberg, 2004). Students come to see decision-making as disembowelled and largely straightforward, rather than contextual and complex. Underlining this point Henry Mintzberg recently asserted that the case study method actually encourages:

[what] may be precisely the problem with so much managing today: the executive office where people sit around discussing words and numbers far removed from the images and feel of the situation under consideration, the verbal in place of the visual and visceral, management as some kind of artifact distant from the situations it so mightily influences (Mintzberg, 2004: 53).

The focus of the teaching case on decision-making and 'hard skills' of management has meant that inadvertently management teachers have forsaken the range of opportunities for learning that a teaching case might offer (Lundberg *et al.*, 2001). Joshi *et al.*, commenting upon teaching case practice in

undergraduate business programmes, argue that, “teaching cases thus remain insufficient in bridging the gap between students’ knowledge, experience and their preparation for the real world” (2005: 676). This also applies to teaching cases within MBA programmes, which ill prepare its graduates to cope with the politics and challenges faced as a middle manager (Mintzberg, 1989; Merritt and Hazelwood, 2003).

Recommendation: So, second, we suggest a management teacher considers how to widen the range of learning opportunities a teaching case offers, so that it reflects the political and emotional reality of an organisation as experienced by employees, including the political and emotional experiences of managers themselves.

Teaching cases are teacher-centred not student-centred

Commonly, teaching notes ‘walk the instructor’ through the purpose of the case and structure discussion in a choreographed way, where the management teacher moderates and mediates the contribution of students. Even in the absence of teaching notes, the teacher may enact a formulaic progression to a pre-determined conclusion. The relationship between teacher and student is a hierarchical one, with student participation heavily circumscribed to produce a pre-determined (by the management teacher) model of management that is deemed transferable to other contexts. Consequently, the learning experience offered through teaching cases may easily become devoid of real challenges for student learning. Further, the model presented through case discussion may be irrelevant to managers’ practice (Argyris, 1980; Turner, 1981; Ewing, 1990). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, some students may be marginalised during classroom discussion, which requires assertive responses in the face of the management teacher’s desire to progress the case analysis towards its pre-determined conclusion. Opportunities to leverage a student’s knowledge for the learning benefit of other students’ learning (and indeed the management teacher’s) may be lost. In particular, gender (Sinclair, 1997; 2000) and cultural (McMillen, Baker and White, 1997; Richards, 1997; Currie and Knights, 2003; Holmes, 2004) characteristics impact upon MBA students’ willingness and ability to participate in the cut and thrust of classroom discussion, and challenge the expertise of the management teachers. Yet those students silenced because of their culture or gender might have been able to throw a critical light upon taken-for-granted notions of management (e.g. that it’s a masculine or Anglo-American conception of management) and so draw out debate about the interaction of business with society.

Recommendation: So, as a third suggestion, a management teacher needs to adopt a less hierarchical position regarding the ‘answer’ to a case, so as to ensure participation of marginalised students in the classroom.

In summary, three criticisms of the teaching case have been identified. We argue the management teacher needs to respond to these in the classroom to engender more reflexive learning.

Following the lead of stakeholder theorists (Freeman, 1984; 2006; Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Freeman, Wicks and Parmar, 2004), business schools have been criticised as focusing on shareholder interests and failing to fulfil their wider obligations to other stakeholders, such as employees and society at large. Focusing upon business school education, commentators have called for MBA pedagogy to move away from its narrow preoccupation with maximising shareholder value towards promoting a wider social responsibility for the outcomes of business and a more ethical value base for managerial practice (Brief, 2000; Trank and Rynes, 2003; Starkey *et al.*, 2004; Ghoshal, 2005; Giacalone, 2005).

To realise this demands a more reflexive use of the teaching case. It requires, “we uncover and think critically about aspects of our tacit knowing and acting as managers and educators” with particular responsibility of management teachers to, “help students create possibilities for change in everyday interaction, and” ... “undermine the structures and practices of domination” (Cunliffe, 2002: 37). Uncovering the voice of marginalised stakeholders within teaching cases; inviting discussion about the political and emotional realities of the case study organisation as experienced by employees; and giving voice to students’ experiences of organisations; engenders the reflexivity necessary to develop more ethical managerial practice amongst MBA graduates, which takes account of the wider responsibility business organisations and their managers have towards society at large.

Research Design

We adopted a comparative case approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; 1991) to examine full time MBA programmes across four ‘leading’ (as defined by their position in the FT Top 100 Global MBA Providers) UK business schools (Southern Business School [SBS], Greenfield Business School [GBS], Industrial Business School [IBS], Redbrick Business School [RBS]) in academic years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006. The selection of cases was not based upon representativeness of the case for the wider population of business schools. Given we were not seeking to statistically generalise, this seemed irrelevant. Rather we selected each in-depth case following exploratory interviews with MBA directors to ascertain that teaching case practice was viewed as a significant feature of learning ie, illustrations of teaching case practice were likely to be abundant. The aim was to provide illustrations of teaching case pedagogy from which other management teachers might learn.

Within each business school we focused upon the same three modules: strategy, organisational behaviour and entrepreneurship. Within strategy, the teaching case has been described as dominant, with a particular focus on making a senior management decision (Joshi *et al.*, 2005). Examining teaching cases within organisational behaviour seemed relevant on the basis we might expect political, emotional and symbolic aspects of organisations are attended to. Examining teaching cases in entrepreneurship modules seemed relevant because it is a particularly applied area of study but one that may be difficult to replicate through a teaching case. As we highlight, almost all cases used in the classroom during our observations were UK or USA based. Typically case studies used were those in the best selling list of cases from the European Case Clearing House (ECCH) 1995-2004, such as the case: 'easyJet. The Web's Favourite Airline' (Kumar and Rogers, 2000).

Through observation we captured rich description of teaching case practice in the classroom across the three modules. Our study included observation of syndicate work, which preceded the use of teaching cases in the classroom (this was a particular feature of the structure in SBS). An observation represented a 'critical incident' in classroom or syndicate learning. Whether an interaction was recorded as a 'critical incident' was informed by our three theme critique of teaching cases. So, a critical incident was recorded as an observation where an interaction (management teacher-student; student-student) reflected or countered the three major criticisms of teaching case practice detailed previously. Over 200 such observations were recorded, capturing interactions that varied from the very brief exchange between management teacher and student to a description of a whole teaching session. Observations were recorded on a proforma that included time, date, module, teacher, number of students, as well as a description of the critical incident and initial coding of the critical incident against one of the three themes. Each author cross-checked the observations of the other, so ensuring reliability of interpretation and enhancing analysis; e.g. if there were differences in coding an incident, the data would be revisited and following discussion, the authors agreed coding. In line with suggestions for validating ethnographic type observations and qualitative fieldwork generally (Silverman, 1993; Watson, 1994), where possible the interpretation was fed back to management teachers and students who participated in our study, following completion of research, to authenticate and develop findings.

In RBS, the average age of students on the full-time MBA program was 31. The average amount of work experience prior to students commencing the course was 7 years. The other cases - SBS, GBS and IBS - recruited very similar profile students. The students under observation might therefore be expected to contribute knowledge in the classroom based upon their substantial work experience.

Following the observations, 67 interviews were conducted, including both management teachers and students in each module (see Table One). Questions were both general (eg. about students' expectations and experiences of the MBA program/management teachers) and specific (eg. what learning students obtained from use of a case study we observed in a teaching session/management teachers' objectives in using the case). All interviews were taped and fully transcribed. Interview data was coded manually through successive iterations of coding and analysis, with a similar approach adopted as described for our analysis of observation. In summary, our intention was to generalise at a theoretical or analytical level from the data set gathered (Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991; Yin 1994).

Business School	Module	Management Teacher	Code used in data presentation	No. of student interviews	Other interviews: management teachers	Number of hours observation
SBS	Entrepreneurship	Jim	SBS-Jim	23	Jim Mike Susan	90
	Strategy	Mike	SBS-Mike			
	Organisation Behaviour	Susan	SBS-Susan			
GBS	Entrepreneurship	Carol	GBS-Carol	19	Carol Rajesh Mark	110
	Strategy	Rajesh	GBS-Rajesh			
	Organisation Behaviour	Mark	GBS-Mark			
IBS	Entrepreneurship	Andrew	IBS-Andrew	12	Andrew Karen Hugh	60
	Strategy	Karen	IBS-Karen			
	Organisation Behaviour	Hugh	IBS-Hugh			
RBS	Entrepreneurship	Lee	RBS-Lee	12	Lee George Trudy	30
	Strategy	George	RBS-George			
	Organisation Behaviour	Trudy	RBS-Trudy			

Table 1: Summary of data gathering sites and techniques

Data: Utilising the Case in the Classroom

The 200 observations recorded that relate to teaching case practice in the classroom were split evenly between those that reflect criticism of the teaching case and observations of teaching case practice that

counter this. Reflecting this heterogeneity, each of the criticisms of the teaching case is taken in turn and illustrations provided of practice that confirms criticism and of practice that counter criticism. Table Two summarises the observations A-G, which are elaborated upon in the following empirical section.

The small sample of 7 out of a total 200 observations was selected on the basis they represented particularly rich observations that related very well to our conceptual themes of teaching case critique, therefore providing illustrations from which we might theoretically provide transferable lessons for management teachers ‘at the chalk face’. Whilst the intention was not to provide such an analysis, as evident in Table Two, there was no discernible pattern amongst the wider group of observations regarding whether a more or less reflexive pedagogical approach was related to module, business school, or profile of the management teacher. There may be scope for research that investigates such relationships.

Observation	Business School	Module	Management teacher profile	Outline description of observation
A	GBS	Strategy	Rajesh: significant practice experience; significant international teaching experience; no PhD	Senior managements' view and profit maximisation privileged
B	SBS	Strategy	Mike: significant practice experience; significant international teaching experience; no PhD	Other stakeholders given 'voice' Management teacher drew on his own and students' experience No 'right' answer proposed
C	IBS	Organisation Behaviour	Hugh: significant practice experience; significant international teaching experience; no PhD	Rational analysis emphasised Progressed towards a 'right' answer Political and emotional aspects of managing ignored
D	GBS	Organisation Behaviour	Mark: no practice experience; significant international teaching experience; PhD	Emphasised case representation was incomplete No 'right' answer proposed
E	IBS	Organisation Behaviour	Hugh: significant practice experience; significant international teaching experience; no PhD	Teacher-centred and exam focused discussion of case
F	RBS	Organisation Behaviour	Trudy: significant practice experience; significant international teaching experience; no PhD	Students developed own cases for presentation and analysis
G	SBS	Strategy	Mike: significant practice experience; significant international teaching experience; no PhD	Students not engaged with theory because they perceive theoretical expertise lies with management teacher

Table 2: Summary of observations A-G

Teaching cases privilege senior management's view

Observation A confirming criticism:

Illustrative of what might be considered common practice by critics of the teaching case, Rajesh (GBS) embraced a model of capitalism in which making money was perceived as the sole concern. In introducing a teaching case session he boldly stated that a firm's mission was to create a need before customers had even thought of it. Also, in discussing business models, he repeated on several occasions that the point was not the elegance or coherence of what was being proposed, but the simple test of whether it produced returns. As he put it, 'the model is not sacred, profit is sacred'.

Observation B countering criticism:

Illustrative of practice that counters criticism, Mike (SBS) expressed frustration about the partial nature of existing teaching cases and developed two of his own cases for use in teaching. He explained to students that his cases were written in such a way that they could be read at several levels with no right answer. When using existing cases, he prompted students to introduce additional information about the case, asking questions such as, 'is there anyone here with a marketing background?' and 'does anyone here know anything about the company?' Wider discussion was invited and contributions supported through the continual reiteration of comments to the class like 'there is no right answer, what do you think?' Further, the management teacher followed this through when, at the end of the discussion, he summarised the alternatives presented by the students without recourse to a pre-prepared model answer. The outcome was

that the rather dry, pithy case material was enriched and contextualised, most obviously when a student who had worked for the company described in the case presented additional material about the company. The management teacher also drew upon his own extensive experience working in companies to sprinkle the discussion with anecdotes illustrating points raised in the case, for example regarding the difficulties of managing organisational culture, which the formal teaching material associated with the case tended to disregard. Further, he encouraged the students to consider other stakeholders' viewpoints. For example, he highlighted that, according to the case, employees only found out about some developments that would transform their lives through the national press, and he asked the students whether they thought that this was right.

Students' response:

Interestingly, in connection with observation A of 'poor' practice, students did not contest the management teacher's assumptions here. As can be seen as the data presentation proceeds, students were often complicit in bolstering partial representation of the organisation within the teaching case by also remaining wedded to senior management's view.

However, we also note students expressed positive views about the 'good' practice exhibited in observation B. One student explained: "I started in a fairly instrumental mode. I wanted the teacher to tell me how to act as a manager. The way the teacher (SBS-Mike) made us think about others' viewpoints in the case has made me much more sensitive to the wider impact managerial decisions have". Continuing in this vein, the student explained how his earlier instrumental desire had been supplanted by intellectual development where the management teacher moved beyond the case material. We suggest the approach adopted by Mike (SBS) may be necessary for the development of a more ethically minded manager, particularly in the wake of scandals such as Enron (Starkey *et al.*, 2004).

Teaching cases promote hard skills not soft skills

Observation C confirming criticism:

In the classroom, representation of the organisation within the teaching case was rendered partial by a focus on decision-making and a process of rational analysis to arrive at a decision. Linked to this, commonly political and emotional aspects of the organisation were overlooked. Hugh (IBS) exemplified this. We might expect political and emotional aspects of organisational life to feature very visibly within an organisational behaviour module. However, within this module, Hugh was keen to reach a 'right answer' and make a learning point through the adoption of a very structured approach to solving the case problem - 'what is the problem in the case?'; 'what change is required to solve the problem?'; 'who are the other actors in the case?'; 'what are their views?'; 'if resistant to change, what is the basis of this resistance?'; 'how do we (senior managers) mediate resistance to achieve our desired change?' So again we see that senior management's view is privileged and while the employee's voice is considered, this is merely as a way of facilitating the implementation of change driven by senior management's interests. All this is wrapped up in a rational approach to decision-making, which downplays political and emotional issues.

Observation D countering criticism:

While we observed frequent incidence of teaching case practice that followed rational analysis towards a 'correct' decision, again we note considerable diversity. For example, Mark (GBS) noted that it was sometimes stated that cases could be 'solved', but argued that in his view this was incorrect. Cases were often vague and incomplete, he insisted, fragments rather than whole stories, because the real world was like this too. In such circumstances, there could be 'no right answer'. Indeed at one point, he even wrote this up on the whiteboard in big capitals. Following this, he utilised the case of an investment company specialising in start-ups. He split students into groups and asked them to consider and rank seven investment proposals. When these were fed back, it was clear that the groups differed in their evaluations, sometimes markedly. Mark then interrogated representatives from each group about their choices, and used this as a springboard to discuss the various criteria that had been used, taking care to underline that several were equally valid. In this situation we see the teacher using the incompleteness of the case as a resource to illustrate real world problems. When students requested more information, Mark advised them, "there's no additional information available. You have to make your decision based on what is there. Managers have to do this".

Students' response:

Responses to the teaching case were again diverse. Regarding Observation C, some students appeared complicit in the representation of organisational life within the case through acceptance of the approach enacted by the management teacher. Following the teaching case session in the organisational behaviour module in IBS, only one student of the five interviewed appeared aware of hidden assumptions that guided the teaching case: "I thought, 'surely it's more complicated than that', but that's the way we do teaching cases so to get a good mark you follow the teacher's model of analysis".

Some (commonly younger and less managerially experienced) MBA students expected a rational process of analysis towards a 'correct' decision made in the interests of senior management. They expected the teacher to impose their expertise in the classroom: "we've given our views. Now we need everyone to know clearly what happened. Who did what etc? We need to know, 'was our course of action correct or not?' ". In the next section, we return to this point about the power relationship between teacher and student, which tends to render teaching cases teacher-centred.

Other students (commonly more managerially experienced) questioned the value of the teaching case for management on the basis of its partial representation of organisational life: "case discussion in the MBA is very superficial ... learning follows a script ... they don't capture complexity". Typically these students described themselves as, 'playing the game', where they followed the case analysis models presented by the teacher to gain praise in the classroom or good marks in assessment, but remarked they did not believe that the teaching case represented some pure distillation of 'the facts'. There was pervasive recognition by this group that case studies were artifacts, which had been constructed for pedagogical purposes:

There's a danger that cases are taken as gospel. You need to scratch the surface, take them with a pinch of salt. They are just a good story constructed to get us going, which is doctored to give the impression of a wonderful result due to an executive decision.

Reflecting this widely held view, another student described the case as, "not a real life situation, but real enough to give us the feel for the experience of managing compared to models presented in a lecture". So, whilst not ideal, students might prefer teaching cases to the disembodied theory they are normally presented with.

Teaching cases are teacher-centred not student-centred

Observation E confirming criticism:

In the case of the organisation behaviour module in IBS, student contribution was particularly hindered because Hugh put up an exam question on the whiteboard. The question was related to the teaching session and case analysis, and would appear in the end of module exam. Additionally, he highlighted that the case analysis would be formally assessed towards the module mark, with students expected to produce a written report after the session. When all written reports had been handed in the teacher would provide a model process of analysis. Unsurprisingly, students focussed on the needs of the assessment, for example by taking copious notes rather than engaging in discussion and 'giving away their knowledge'. During the session, Hugh was economic in time devoted to discussion since he had a large number (thirty) of slides with theoretical points to get through. Consequently, student discussion was wholly directed through specific questions posed by Hugh. Two or three students dominated answers and Hugh would then move on to the next learning point.

Observation F countering criticism:

In contrast to the majority of our observations around power relations in the classroom, Trudy (RBS) moved towards a student-centred approach more successfully. The students were required, in their syndicates, to develop a case that they had intimate knowledge of (i.e. in which one of the students was previously employed). Of particular relevance we highlight that Trudy gave one hour of a three hour session to student presentation, with half of this devoted to questions and discussion by the whole class without teacher intervention.

Students' response:

It must be said that students, in the case of observation E, appeared to support the more structured approach adopted by Hugh (IBS). It appeared to work, although what students learnt is questionable. Students commented favourably on the way that the teacher cut short comments from a vociferous fellow student who they perceived to dominate discussion: "He always has a point to make that is very personal and irrelevant to the rest of us". Some students perceived interventions from the teacher rather differently, although such contrasting views were limited. In IBS, one student complained, "some management teachers regard too many questions as distracting and debate as not necessary in their desire to get through their material. Quite frankly this irritates me because I want to stand and argue the toss in a threat-free environment and learn from this". Like the authors, he perceived students and management teachers complicit in enacting a passive pedagogy. Another student (IBS) suggested: "the lecturer is pompous. He likes the sound of his own voice and to sound off as the expert and recount his extensive work experience and so put our contributions down. Yet some of us have more work experience, if not knowledge". However, such criticism appeared limited.

As evident above, teachers were not solely responsible for reversion to traditional power relations in the classroom, which constrained attempts to render teaching cases more student-centred. Also, and worrying for teachers who wish to encourage participation, was the students' apparent reluctant to engage with theory in discussing cases. In a further observation (G), Mike (SBS) presented some academic research about the link between organisational culture and performance, which was pertinent to explaining an important managerial

issue within a teaching case. One student questioned whether such a relationship could really be measured and argued, “managers should be wary of accepting something that was poorly established”. Mike invited other students to contribute. However, there was little response. When questioned about this later, students felt they lacked the ability to contribute to such a ‘theoretical’ discussion. In their view, expertise in theory lay with the teachers.

In contrast to the expectation that expert input is provided by the teacher, students appeared entirely satisfied that the approach exhibited by Trudy (RBS) was relevant for their learning. For example, when interviewed one student described the experience as, “some of the best learning I have undertaken. I really internalised and reflected upon my previous experience and academic theory”. This positive response goes against the other, dominant preferences expressed for teacher input. We note a number of teacher behaviours that preceded the student-centred approach. As one small example, we highlight the way Trudy valued the incoming cultural characteristics of the MBA student group and thus gave international students confidence that they had something to say. Trudy expressed a desire in her first lecture, “to leverage the knowledge of students, to internationalise the learning”. In subsequent lectures she confirmed this through asking questions regarding practices in countries other than those that literature typically presented (i.e. Anglo-American organisational practices). Trudy suggested that Anglo-American practices could be critiqued on the basis of their cultural specificity. However, she claimed she was ill-equipped to do this and that she was dependent upon a contribution from international students. Such an approach: “gave us the confidence that our experiences [international students] would be valued”. Admittedly this may not be typical, with others reporting that international students are asked to cast aside their incoming values when embarking upon an MBA in the UK (Currie and Knights, 2003). However, it offers hope that student dependence on the teacher can be overcome if the right climate is developed in the classroom.

Conclusion

This study illustrates that a teaching case, when used by a management teacher prepared to facilitate rather than impose their expertise and provide answers, can develop critical and reflective abilities, and independence of thought. Teaching cases can accommodate different perspectives and acknowledge multiple explanations of events. This more constructivist approach encourages multiple readings of teaching cases, with different readers adopting a different perspective and gaining different insights, which ‘fits’ with the needs of a new, more diverse cohort of business students who require “critical thinking as an essential pre-requisite for employment in a knowledge intensive society” (Booth *et al.*, 2001: 105). So, we might claim that criticisms of teaching cases, particularly the partial nature of teaching cases, are somewhat countered by the way they are actually used in the classroom, at least within our study.

However, having noted diversity in the utilisation of teaching cases by teachers, we highlight that students accepted traditional hierarchical relations between teachers and students. In particular, when trying to enact a more student-centred approach to learning from teaching cases, commonly MBA students set boundaries on this. While MBA students appear comfortable with commenting upon empirical case material because it is ‘realistic’, something that resonates with their own experiences, their contribution is often circumscribed. First, they tend to remain wedded to senior management’s viewpoint. Second, they feel much less comfortable when asked to contribute to discussion that aims to theorise from a case. In their view, this is the knowledge province of the teacher. With respect to this second point, we must recognise that MBA students pay for the expertise of the teacher and answers to problems through their MBA fees, and so don’t expect to generate answers, let alone the questions, themselves.

In reviewing our observations of diverse teaching case practice what practical suggestions might we offer as a way forward that our fellow teachers might easily integrate with their existing approaches to the use of teaching cases?

As reflected in illustrations gleaned from our comparative case studies, we argue that ‘best teaching case practice’ from a ‘business and society’ perspective encompasses, first, a balanced discussion of cases to analyse the case from the perspective of stakeholders beyond senior management, as illustrated by the approach of Mike (SBS). Here the employee’s voice was generated by the teacher in a way that may highlight the political dimension of organisational life. Supporting such attempts, Mike developed his own teaching cases, based on research, rather than relying on those produced by teaching case publishers. Second, case studies should not be utilised as a means to impose a ‘right answer’ to an organisational problem. Mark (GBS) best illustrated an approach that eschews the assumption that a ‘correct’ decision can be reached through a rational process of analysis. Accompanying this, the teacher is required to let go of control of the classroom and so allow students to draw upon their own experience to move beyond senior managements’ ‘heroic’ representation in the case, producing a case teaching session that may thus be far less ‘anaemic’ than alleged by Mintzberg (2004). This prescription is likely to prove most difficult in the face of students’ compliance with hierarchical relationships in the classroom, in the face of assessment needs and management teachers’ unwillingness to relinquish control of the classroom (Currie and Knights, 2003).

Responding to the difficulty of fully engaging students in teaching case analysis in a way that counters criticism that teaching cases are teacher-centred, we highlight observation of teachers Mike (SBS) and Trudy (RBS)'s classroom practice. Mike (SBS) utilised teaching cases so that conversation and collaboration were engendered, rather than hierarchy and competition, with students making a greater contribution to case discussion. Notably Mike (SBS) "commented, invited, noted agreement, asked questions, wondered", in a way that was characteristic of an, "expert conversationalist", not simply a director, teacher and content expert (Griffith, 1999: 354). We admit that the confidence and competence required from the management teacher to enact this approach may be in short supply. As a consequence, some management teachers may feel more comfortable with traditional approaches which maintain hierarchy (Currie and Knights, 2003). Some thought needs to be given to the development of teachers who can act as coaches and facilitators, if not a greater emphasis on teaching skills in the recruitment of academic staff.

Meanwhile Trudy (RBS) followed the model that students should write cases so that the student has intimate and current knowledge about the organisation featured in the teaching case (Greenawalt, 1994), since it is familiarity with empirical material that students appear most confident. Where case studies are provided by the teacher, it appears that students expect the teacher to drive the process of analysis and ultimately to give answers to the problem within the teaching case.

In considering transfer of our empirical illustrations and prescriptions to other contexts, we acknowledge that the UK may be distinctive, particularly given that full-time MBA programmes there are one year long, rather than two years as in the USA. The brevity and intensity of MBA study in the UK may mean a rather more directive approach from the management teacher is practiced when utilising teaching cases for learning. Given our focus on only four leading business schools and 12 modules across three disciplines, we cannot claim findings are representative of all MBA programmes within the UK given the diversity of provision (Legge *et al.*, 2005), let alone internationally representative. For example, the work experience of the students on a UK MBA appears to differ from their US equivalents (who appear much younger and less experienced), so our suggestions for leveraging student's knowledge may hold less in the USA. There is scope for research with a more international focus, particularly focusing upon case teaching in the USA. This might usefully extend analysis by Liang and Wang (2004), which was mainly focused upon teaching case content. There appears to be considerable diversity in management education models within the USA, for example between Carnegie Mellon or Stanford MBA models, and that at Harvard. It may be that teaching case pedagogy is as diverse in the USA and other countries, as we observed in the UK. Our exploratory research identifies themes that might usefully guide surveys or in-depth work to assess the prevalence and effect of different approaches to case teaching, and further develop examples of case teaching practice aligned with the business and society model for MBA pedagogy.

References

- Argyris, C. (1980) Some limitations of the case method: experiences in a management development programme. *Academy of Management Review*, 5, 291-98.
- Booth, C., Bowie, S., Jordan, J. and Rippin, A. (2001) *The Use of the Case Method in Large and Diverse Undergraduate Business Programmes: Problems and Issues*. Cranfield UK: European Case Clearing House.
- Brief, A. P. (2000) Still servants of power. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 9(4), 342-351.
- Chetkovich, C. and Kirp, D. L. (2001) Cases and controversies: How noritiates are trained to be masters of the public policy universe. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 20(2), 283-314.
- Contardo, I. and Wensley, R. (2004) The Harvard Business School story: Avoiding knowledge by being relevant. *Organization*, 11(2), 211-31.
- Crainger, S. and Dearlove, D. (1998) *Gravy training*. Oxford: Capstone Publishing.
- Cunliffe, A. (2002) Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning. *Management Learning*, 33(1), 35-61.
- Currie, G. and Knights, D. (2003) Reflecting on a critical pedagogy in MBA education. *Management Learning*, 34, 27-49.
- Donaldson, T. and Preston, L.E. (1995) The stakeholder theory of the corporation: concepts, evidence and implications. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(1), 65-91.
- Dooley, A.R. and Skinner, W. (1977) Casing casemethod methods. *Academy of Management Review*, 2, 277-289.
- Easton, G. (1982) *Learning from Case Studies*. London: Prentice Hall International.
- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989) Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14, 532-550.
- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1991) Better stories and better constructs: The case for rigor and comparative logic. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 620-627.
- Ewing, D. W. (1990) *Inside the Harvard Business School: Strategies and Lessons of America's Leading School of Business*. New York: Times Books.
- Freeman, R.E. (1984) *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston: Pitman.
- Freeman, R.E. (2006) The Wal-Mart effect and business, ethics and society. *The Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20(3), 38-40.
- Freeman, R.E., Wicks, A.C., and Parmar, B. (2004) Stakeholder theory and the "corporate objective re-visited". *Organization Science*, 15(3), 364-69.
- Ghoshal, S. (2005) Bad management theories are destroying good management practices. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(1), 75-91.
- Giocalone, R.A. and Thompson, K.R. (2006) Business ethics and social responsibility education: shifting the worldview. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 5(3), 266-277.

- Greenawalt, M. (1994) Student written case studies: The benefits to the internal audit curriculum. *Managerial Auditing Journal*, 9, 3-7.
- Griffith, W. (1999) The reflecting team as an alternative case teaching model: A narrative, conversational approach. *Management Learning*, 30(3), 343-62.
- Holmes, P. (2004) Negotiating differences in learning and intercultural communications. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 67, 294-307.
- Kumar, N. and Rogers, B. (2000) *easyJet. The Web's Favourite Airline*. International Institute for Management Development. Lausanne: ECCH IMD-3-0873-T
- Joshi, M. P., Davis, E. B., Kathuria, R. and Weidner, C. K. (2005) Experiential learning process: Teaching and learning of strategic management framework through the winter survival exercise. *Journal of Management Education*, 29(5), 672-695.
- Legge, K., Sullivan-Taylor, B. and Wilson, D. (2005) Management learning and the MBA: The beast that morphed into a chameleon. *4th Critical Management Studies Conference*, Cambridge UK, 4-6 July.
- Liang, N. and Wang, J. (2004) Implicit mental models in teaching cases: An Empirical Study of Popular MBA Cases in The United States and China. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 3, 397-413.
- Lund Dean, K. and Fornaciari, C. J. (2002) How to create and use experiential case-based exercises in the classroom. *Journal of Management Education*, 26(5), 586-603.
- Lundberg, C. C., Rainsford, P., Shay, J. P. and Young, C. A. (2001) Case writing reconsidered. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(4), 450-463.
- McMillen, M. C., Baker, A. C., and White, J. (1997) Cultural analysis, 'good conversation', and the creation of a multicultural learning organization. *Management Learning*, 28(2), 197-215.
- McNair, M.P. (1954) *The Case Method at the Harvard Business School*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Merritt, J and Hazelwood, K. (2003) What's an MBA really worth? *Business Week*, September 22, 90-96.
- Mintzberg, H. (1989) *Mintzberg on Management*. New York: Free Press.
- Mintzberg, H. (2004) *Managers not MBAs*. London: Pearson Education.
- Richards, D. (1997) Developing cross-cultural management skills: Experiential learning in an international MBA programme. *Management Learning*, 28, 387-407.
- Silverman, D. (1993) *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text, and interaction*. London: Sage.
- Sinclair, A. (1997) The MBA through women's eyes: Learning and pedagogy in management education. *Management Learning*, 28, 313-330.
- Sinclair, A (2000) Teaching managers about masculinities. *Management Learning*, 31, 83-101.
- Starkey, K., Hatchuel, A. and Tempest, S. (2004) Rethinking the business school. *Journal of Management Studies*, 41(8), 1521-1531.
- Stewart, K. A. and Winn, J. (1996) A new approach to case teaching. *Journal of Management Education*, 20(1), 48-59.
- Stonham, P. (1995) For and against the case method. *European Management Journal*, 13, 230-32.
- Towl, A. (1999) *The Evolution of the Case Method*. Available online from: www.ecch.ac.uk
- Trank, C. Q. and Rynes, S. L. (2003) Who moved our cheese? Reclaiming professionalism in business education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 2(2): 189-205.
- Turner, A. (1981) The case discussion method revisited (a). *Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal*, 6(3), 6-8.
- Watson, T.J. (1994) *In Search of Management: Culture, Chaos and Control in Managerial Work*. London: Routledge.
- Yashida, Y., Banning, K. C., and Cross, T. C. (1999) Use of the case method in management education. *Konodai Keizai Kenkyu*, 10(1), 19-33.
- Yin, R. (1994) *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.