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Scholarship and decision cases: pedagogy and standards for publication

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Abstract

Case studies represent an important form of scholarly output for educators of agribusiness management. This article defines scholarship with respect to case writing.

First, it explains how case studies are scholarship in the educational process. The pedagogical foundation of the case method is this method's effectiveness in developing the critical thinking skills of students. This in turn enhances learning and advances scholarly understanding.

Second, it examines criteria that are used to assess the quality of cases and their accompanying teaching notes when being considered for journal publication. The standards of the *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* are used to illustrate these criteria. Only by reaching these standards of scholarship will teaching notes and cases be of the quality needed to ensure that their use in the case method will develop the scholarly capabilities expected of graduates in agribusiness management. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Case writing is becoming an increasingly important scholarly activity of agribusiness management scholars. This has been reflected in academic journals that have started publishing cases.¹ It has also been recognized by the inclusion of case writing in promotion and tenure decisions.

The reason for writing cases is that teaching with cases engages students' minds and enhances their learning more than traditional lectures (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Huba &

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Freed, 2000; McKeachie, 1994; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2000). This is especially important when the educator is seeking to develop the higher level skills needed for critical thinking and decision-making. The increasing reliance on case teaching is in line with the educational approaches used in professions such as business, medicine, social work and education.

The scholarly contribution of case writing is supported by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (1987) which sees scholarship extending beyond the creation of new knowledge to include instructional development and the application, transfer and interpretation of knowledge (Diamond & Adams, 1993). This view also fits with the calls for including teaching and integration as scholarship (for examples, see Boyer, 1990; Braskamp & Roy, 1994; and Cross & Steadman, 1996).

As case writing becomes an increasing activity of faculty, standards are needed to evaluate the scholarly merits of cases. The purpose of this article is to define what these standards are. The article starts by describing the scholarly dimensions of decision case studies both in researching and using them in classroom teaching, and the writing of them. It then describes a detailed set of standards used by the editor of *The International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* when selecting cases for publication in this journal.

2. The scholarly dimensions of case teaching

The mission of educational institutions is to have scholars, the faculty, develop scholarship in students. Webster's dictionary has defined scholarship as the systematized knowledge of a learned person, exhibiting accuracy, critical ability, and thoroughness. It is attained by reading and study.

The development of scholarship is complex. The traditional approach to scholarship has been to focus on the discovery of new knowledge with a strong emphasis on theory and quantitative methods, especially since statistics have come to dominate the scientific method. As taught to students, this base of knowledge provides a systematic structure for analyzing situations and helps explain why things are the way they are. Theory provides students with methods for making decisions, but does not give practical experience in applying this knowledge. To be successful, students need to develop the judgment needed to know when to apply their knowledge to real world situations when it is unclear what the appropriate tool or theory is.

Developing scholarship in professionals involves teaching with a blend of the theory of the underlying knowledge along with an appreciation of the full complexity of the world in which they will have to operate. The outcome is that they learn to use an appropriate blend of theory and knowledge in developing effective solutions through critical thinking. This is a unique educational challenge faced by those teaching various professions including law, medicine, social work, and management. The way teachers have chosen to develop scholarship in these areas is to use the case method of study.

The case method involves presenting students with actual situations that professionals have faced. These situations are actively discussed in class under the guidance of the professor. The discussion includes how professionals have addressed them and how students,

if they were to find themselves in a similar situation, would address them. As students think about a situation, they draw on theory to structure their thinking, but this thinking is grounded in dealing with a situation rather than an abstraction. This gives students an opportunity to think critically about the types of situations they will face in their careers and to accumulate specific knowledge about how to deal with such situations.

As a pedagogical tool, cases focuses on higher learning skills. Cases accomplish this learning objective by having the instructor ask questions whose answers require critical thinking. Bloom has shown that questions can be asked at different levels, each of which evokes a different level of thought. He developed a taxonomy of these levels that is arranged in a pyramidal hierarchy resembling Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (Bloom, 1956). Critical thinking occurs at the highest levels of thought and so incorporates all the lower levels of thinking (Beierlein & Wade, 2002). To gain the maximum learning in teaching a case, the instructor should develop questions that require thinking at all levels of Bloom's taxonomy as part of the class case discussion.

Case studies are highly crafted teaching instruments that represent significant scholarly achievement. They must interest the student and at the same time must provide all the data needed to encourage and support a discussion that raises students' learning to higher levels of scholarship. This makes case studies different from traditional academic articles. Traditional articles are expository, describing the problem, the theory relevant to understanding the problem, how data were collected and examined, and the consequences of this examination. The reader is left to judge the appropriateness, thoroughness and accuracy of the writer's work. With a case study, the writer has selected data according to theory and experience, but does not present judgments or conclusions. These are left up to the student reader. It is for this reason that a written teaching note must accompany a teaching case study.

The teaching note provides an effective guide to the case study. The note demonstrates the author's reasoning and analysis of the case study. This shows a potential instructor at least one way of using the case effectively in the classroom. The note demonstrates the scholarship the case supports and the scholarly thinking of the case writer. This split in scholarly work between the case and the teaching note means assessing the scholarship of a case study is a peculiar challenge.

3. Types of cases and evaluation for scholarship

The first thing that needs to be made clear is that the standards used to evaluate a case rest in part on the nature and purpose of the case study being considered. There are several different types of cases and each type needs to be evaluated in its own way. They are exploratory, evaluative and decision cases. It is this last type of case that is the focus of this article.

Exploratory Cases are used much like traditional research to discover new knowledge using the scientific method. Y.K. Yin (1994) explained the use of these cases in as research vehicles in his book *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Case studies provide a method to explore issues or phenomena that cannot be fully studied using traditional

quantitative methods. A recent example of this type of case is a study that looked at possible measures of the performance of supply chains, an area where the basic tenets of supply chain performance are just now being formulated (Beierlein & Miller, 2000). Exploratory cases can be evaluated using the standard academic criteria applied to academic articles, that is, whether they discover new knowledge.²

Evaluative Cases chronicle an event or events, providing a case history in terms of who, what, why, where, when and how. The reader is asked to appreciate what the writer describes. This type of case can illustrate a theory, describe processes, show dynamic interactions, present the human element and present the irrational side of the world. A recent descriptive case study described what Douglas Ivester did when he took over as CEO of Coca-Cola after the death of Roberto Goizueta, and Mr. Ivester's subsequent removal two years later (Morris & Sellers, 2000). This type of case is useful for teaching but is limited because the events have already happened and thus students are not provided with a decision-making opportunity. The scholarship of this type of work is determined by looking at the accuracy of the portrayal of the situation, the completeness of the information, and, when the author provides an evaluation, the soundness and accuracy of the author's judgment.

Decision Cases, the type of case considered below, lay out a situation in which the reader has to take an active role as the principal character in the case and either solve a problem or make a decision. This means that the case has to include the material the reader needs to think about when analyzing a situation, but the thinking is left up to the reader. Sometimes the case writer may provide partially analyzed data so that the reader's analytical burden is reduced, letting the reader concentrate on thinking critically about the situation. The decision case allows the reader to take an active part in the situation by defining the problem, selecting the appropriate techniques and tools to analyze the situation, and making the decision. The scholarship of the case is determined by looking at the teaching note that accompanies it. This note presents the critical thinking of the author that he/she feels must be applied to the material presented in the case. The note is analyzed on its own merits, including its thoroughness, accuracy, and the importance of the material covered. Then the note is compared with the case to see that the case contains all the material needed to support the thinking described in the note.

Decision cases are attractive because they present the reader with an opportunity to learn to think critically about situations and to accumulate specific knowledge of the real world as he/she addresses them. For this reason, decision cases have been the mainstays of the Master of Business Administration programs with the most prolific source of cases being the Harvard Business School.

4. Criteria for evaluating the scholarly value of decision case studies

Now let us look in detail at criteria that can be used to evaluate the scholarship associated with a case supporting decision-making. These criteria were developed from a review of material on the characteristics of a good decision case (for examples, see Harling & Misser, 1998; Naumes & Naumes, 1999; Swinton, 1995; and Sharplin, 1990). A form, which

supports this criteria, is found as an appendix to this paper. What follows are detailed guidelines used by this journal to evaluate the scholarly value of case studies and their accompanying teaching notes.

4.1. Value of the teaching note

The evaluation of a decision case starts with the teaching note. In the note the case writer identifies the concepts found in the case and demonstrates the critical thinking possible using the material found in the case. This allows the case writer to demonstrate the scholarly work reflected in the case and supports the instructor who may wish to use the case in class. A consistent view by all sources on case writing is that the scholarly merits of a case are indeterminate without a teaching note. An overview of how to write a teaching note is provided by Harling and Misser (1998). Specific features of the teaching note are as follow:

1. The audience or students who will use the case are identified. This matters because it affects the level of competence the students have, how much complexity they can handle and what their focus of interest is.
2. A summary of the case is provided to help the reviewer and instructor identify whether a particular case is likely to be of interest to them.
3. Learning objectives or lessons provided by the case are identified. These are meaningful to the intended audience of the case and add to the experiential data that the students have exposure to. The objectives are well defined. Some elaboration of the learning objectives or lessons found in the case help the reviewer better assess the case.
4. Study questions are provided which can be assigned to the students before class. Three to five questions help them prepare the case for discussion. The questions direct students' activities toward appreciating the lessons in the case.
5. A teaching strategy is presented. This describes at least one way the case can be taught to achieve the learning objectives. The description is segmented into the principal components of analysis, each of which may be associated with a particular lesson or conclusion. By presenting material this way, the case writer is demonstrating the higher levels of critical thinking the case supports. Detailed questions the instructor will use in class are left up to each instructor who has his/her own style of teaching and a unique class situation.
6. A follow up to the case describing what actually happened gives the students closure on the case and helps reinforce the lessons of the case.
7. Pertinent literature is referenced. These references can provide conceptual background and further examples of similar situations. The conceptual background references help the reader and user achieve the level of understanding needed to fully appreciate the concepts found in the case. The further examples show that the issues addressed in the case are commonplace and have reoccurred over time.

Assessment of the teaching note is a two-part process. First, the note is assessed for its own completeness and thoroughness. Then the note must be measured against the case to assure that all the note specifies is supported by the material found in the case. For example,

the case must have sufficient content to support the lessons drawn and the suggested teaching plan.

After the note has been assessed, the case needs to be assessed to see that it is relevant, and well written so it can be an effective learning instrument. Specific criteria that are used to assess the case can be broken into three categories: value of the case, ability of the case to stimulate student interest and character of the case. A detailed description of these three categories now follows.

4.2. Value of the case

A case is valuable to instructors when it is used to achieve their educational objectives. The following criteria can be used to help assess the value of the case:

1. The case addresses a topic important to agribusiness managers. The range of topics is very broad because it includes all managerial and economic topics. Ideally the topic addressed is as an issue that is either a problem that has to be solved or a decision that has to be made.
2. Topics that have not been dealt with in existing cases are attractive because our goal is to broaden the topical coverage of agribusiness cases. Cases which deal repeatedly with the same topics keeps cases up to date but does not broaden the case base needed to teach a fully rounded agribusiness management program.
3. A case dealing with a common topic but in a novel way or using a new approach is attractive because it is fresh and extends the boundaries of knowledge.
4. The audience needs to be able to understand the case, both the material in it and the way that material is presented. When it cannot, the case is of no value.
5. The audience also needs to be able to work with the case in a timely manner. A case that is unduly difficult will overwhelm the audience, preventing it from deriving the intended lessons from the case.

4.3. Ability of the case to stimulate student interest

The basis of case teaching is engaging students in the learning process. Students are more engaged when they feel that they are looking at problems and issues they feel are relevant, exciting, and deal with situations they anticipate facing when they go to work. What interests them will, of course, vary widely by individual students and by class.

Some features that are related to the interest that a case will stimulate are:

1. The situation and problem posed in the case are real and reflect the kinds of situations that students are likely to face in their careers. Students are not interested in cases that seem made up, contrived or artificial, or deal with rare events. Using quotations from real world decision-makers can help add to the realism of the case.
2. The problem needs to appear in proper context. This means that the case should reflect the full situation that a competent manager would be interested in. Achieving this state is a test of the case writer's understanding of management.
3. A case interests students when they become more engaged in it. Several factors help

engage them in a case. First and foremost is a case that has job positions and situations that students can identify with. Having characters in the case that students can empathize with and putting these characters together in a well-told story will help.

4. The problem or situation is seen as timely by students. They are not great fans of history. They want something that has just happened or even better, something that is happening at present. The challenge for the case writer is that it takes time to get access to a case situation, write the case and get a release. Often the best a case writer can do is get a case that is several years old though occasionally the writer is able to get a release out while the issue in it is still “hot.”

4.4. Character of the case

Each case has its own character, partly due to the type of situation being dealt with and partly due to the writer’s style. The writer may choose to maintain the complexity of the case or to limit it by reducing the amount of coverage.

1. A case that focuses on problem definition rather than decision making limits the students analysis to situation analysis and problem definition while ignoring the later steps of decision making including identification of, analysis of, comparison of alternatives and recommendation of one.
2. A purpose or rationale for considering the case should be provided early in the case. This includes defining the decision-maker and the overall purpose in their decision-making. This gives the students a point of view so that, as they read the case, they are able to appreciate the significance of the data from the decision maker’s perspective.
3. A well-written case has many features. This is a summative measure of how well written the case is. The writer who scores poorly on this point would likely find it worthwhile to reviewing articles and books on how to write a case, such as those by Harling and Misser (1998) and Naumes and Naumes (1999). That said, common problems found in cases are the lack of an opening section identifying the decision maker and the decision being faced, disorganized content with related material being scattered through the case and lack of a logical flow to it, and descriptions including value laden judgments.
4. The case must contain sufficient data to support the learning objectives of the case. If particular theoretical models are supposed to be used to work with the material, then the case needs to contain the data necessary. Occasionally some necessary data may be missing from the case. When this happens, it needs to be the result of an intentional decision by the case writer who explains the reason for doing so in the teaching note. Occasionally superfluous data might be included to give students experience sorting out what is relevant. When this is done, the case writer needs to explain why.

Once both the teaching note and the case have been reviewed, it is time to produce an overall summative evaluation of the case.

4.5. Summary evaluation

The summary evaluation captures the overall feeling the reviewer has about the case and its accompanying teaching note. The value of a summative evaluation is that it indicates whether the case “works.” A high evaluation shows that, even though it may have some problems that need to be rectified, the case will be worthwhile. Sometimes a case will get a low overall evaluation when it scores well on all component evaluations because it does not captivate the reviewer. The low summative evaluation reflects this and suggests that the case not be published.

5. Conclusions

The increasing use of case studies to teach agribusiness management has important scholarly dimensions. Cases will only be useful instruments for developing scholarship in students if they are scholarly works. This means that the scholarship of cases needs to be defined and examined. The examination involves scrutiny of both the case study and its accompanying teaching note to the defined criteria. In the teaching note, the case writer demonstrates both the scholarly content of the case and how it can be used with students to develop their scholarship. The case is simply an instrument that lays out the information that students work with as they develop their understanding of how to apply theory and critical thinking to managerial situations.

Having a clearly defined set of criteria greatly assists the assessment of the scholarship of a case and its teaching note. The criteria used to review cases for the *International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* were presented and described. Apart from assisting the selection of cases, awareness of these criteria provides a common basis for authors, editors, reviewers, peers and academic administrators to better appreciate what constitutes scholarly work.

Notes

1. This includes journals such as *The International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*, *Review of Agricultural Economics*, *Journal of Food Distribution*, and *The Journal of Agribusiness*.
2. Exploratory cases are often practically referred to as “research” cases, but this is a bit of a misnomer because both teach and exploratory cases require the use of appropriate research methods.

Appendix

Evaluation form for a decision case

Manuscript Number _____

Case Name _____

Topic/Subject Matter Keywords _____

Primary Intended Audience _____

I. Value of the Teaching Note

Disagree Agree

- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1. The intended audience for case is well defined | NA* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 2. The summary of the case is clear and concise | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 3. The learning objectives of the case are well defined | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 4. The study questions provided will prompt students to focus on key issues in the case | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 5. The teaching strategy as described will achieve the learning objectives of the case | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 6. The teaching strategy is accurate and complete | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 7. The follow-up to the case will give students closure on the case | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 8. The references provided allow those interested to develop a meaningful understanding of the issues in the case | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Comments:

II. Value of the Case

Disagree Agree

- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1. The case addresses an important topic | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 2. The topic has not been well covered by prior cases | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 3. The case presents a novel or new approach to the topic | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 4. The intended audience will be able to understand the material in the case | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 5. The difficulty of the case is appropriate given the intended audience. | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

Comments:

* NA means either Not Appropriate or impossible to address this criteria for the given case and note.

III. Ability of the Case to Stimulate Student Interest

		Disagree					Agree				
1. The situation and problem are believable.	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. The problem appears to be in a proper context.	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3. The case will engage student interest.	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4. The case addresses a 'hot' issue(s)	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. The setting and data are less than 5 years old.	NA	YES					NO				

Comments:

IV. Character of the Case

		Disagree					Agree				
1. Problem definition is a key part of the analysis	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. Identifying the purpose or rationale for decisions in the case is difficult.	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3. The case is well written?	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4. The case contains sufficient information to satisfy the learning objectives of the case.	NA	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Comments:

V. Summary Evaluation

		Disagree					Agree				
1. Overall this is an excellent case.		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. Publication recommendation (Circle one):											
___ Publish as is.											
___ Request a revision but this reviewer does not need to see the revision.											
___ Request a revision and this reviewer wants to see the revision.											
___ Reject this case.											
___ Send this case to another journal such as _____											

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