

Letter from the Editor

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Unprepared Students = Missed Learning Opportunities

Have you ever initiated a case discussion only to face a classroom full of blank stares? Are your students relying upon their personal experience with case companies rather than arriving at an in-depth understanding of case issues? Does it seem to you that fewer students arrive in class prepared to discuss and analyze cases? As case writers, this should give us great concern.

Research confirms our experience – students are not reading assigned materials. In one study, more than 70 percent of students had not read assigned readings before coming to class (Baier *et al.*, 2011). Less than half of the students in another study (Aagaard *et al.*, 2014) had read the assigned readings. Many students do not even buy the assigned textbook for their courses, often seeing little need when instructors post PowerPoints or class notes online (Quora, 2014). Other students note that textbooks are not searchable and are an inefficient way to locate information needed to complete a problem set or assignment (Quora, 2014). Students report that textbooks are boring and lack clarity, preferring Google and Wikipedia as more efficient alternatives (Quora, 2014). From the student's perspective, doing assigned readings is often not worth the effort as they are able to achieve an acceptable grade without ever "cracking open" a book.

How should professors encourage students to read assigned materials? The literature suggests the following approaches:

- make sure that reading assignments are short and functional (Baier *et al.*, 2011) (Aagaard *et al.*, 2014);
- demonstrate the necessity of the reading assignment to students (Gooblar, 2014);
- assign graded study guides to complete while reading (Aagaard *et al.*, 2014); and
- give in-class quizzes over text material (Aagaard *et al.*, 2014; Baier *et al.*, 2011; Gooblar, 2014).

Students must feel that their success in the course is dependent upon their reading of assigned materials before they will prioritize their efforts to adequately prepare for class.

Case pedagogy

How can we use these findings to improve case pedagogy? By more carefully selecting cases that fit well with course topics, professors can assist students in seeing linkages between theory and application. Professors should also make these connections more explicit when facilitating case discussion and summarizing learning achieved through the case. The value of reading cases might also improve for students if faculty link cases to future assessments and exams. Many cases provide questions for written assignments that could be used as study guides to prompt student reading and preparation for case discussions. Grading and providing extensive feedback on case assignments should produce a drastic improvement in student participation in reading assignments (Ryan, 2006). In-class quizzes over cases may provide the motivation for students to come to class prepared for case discussion. Although Gooblar (2014) found such quizzes to be punitive, other researchers (Aagaard *et al.*, 2014; Baier *et al.*, 2011) found that students were more likely to complete the assigned reading if an in-class quiz was expected. It seems that it is no longer enough for professors to assign readings and hope students will do them – we must make reading assigned cases and texts a higher priority and necessity for students by linking reading explicitly to assessments and grades.



Case writing

Finally, how should research findings about student reading habits impact case writing? How can we write more engaging cases?

- Write shorter cases: TCJ launched Compact Cases with the goal “to make cases accessible and readable by the students in class to encourage better learning and stronger learning outcomes” (Vega, 2015). Compact Cases are limited to 1,000 words or about two pages. My students respond strongly to the Compact Cases I have used in my classes and seem better prepared than when I assign a much longer case. Case discussion is lively, more students are engaged and thinking critically about the case situation.
- Write more relevant cases: if students can identify with the protagonist and case problems, students are more likely to read and prepare the case. As case writers, we choose companies, industries and situations to write about. We may need to remember that we are much more “nerdy” than the typical college student and what is interesting to us may be boring for them. Choosing to write about more current issues, newer industries and companies and providing a stronger sense of the protagonist’s personality in our cases may make our work more appealing to students. Students seem to object most to the historical background sections of longer cases. Do we really need to know that beer was brewed in ancient Egypt to understand the issues faced by a modern micro-brewery? Limit background material to those facts that are relevant to the learning objectives of the case. Avoid using clichés when writing about the protagonists – do people really look out the window and rub their chins when trying to make a decision? Reality is much more interesting and will draw the reader into your case because they care about the people and what happens to them.
- Write more functional cases: students want to see connections between assigned readings and course topics. Writing cases for specific courses that address important course topics will enable stronger connections to be made. Often case writers attempt to write cases that can be utilized in multiple (and sometimes unrelated) courses, mistakenly thinking this will increase case adoptions. Cases that are more narrowly focused, address topics central to a specific course and perhaps provide a unique or even contradictory example are often more effective learning tools.
- Write quizzes and assignment questions in the instructor’s manual: if students will not read cases unless motivated by quizzes or homework assignments, incorporate these items into your instructor’s manual. A short quiz (five questions or less) that could be given to assess student preparation for case discussion could be included in the Teaching Strategy section. Assignment questions for a written or online assignment or templates for the application of relevant analytical models can likewise be included in the Teaching Strategy section. Be sure to provide answers to either the quiz or assignment in the IM. Many case writers include a “typical” student response to assignment questions or analysis – thus, demonstrating that the assignment itself has been classroom tested.

Research findings and anecdotal evidence suggest that today’s students are increasingly reading less and less. As case writers, we are compelled to address these issues to improve student learning and learning outcomes. We need to find ways to increase case preparation by students. I have attempted to outline some possible solutions and welcome your comments and suggestions. E-mail your ideas to me at TCJEditor@gmail.com.

In this issue

Not surprisingly, the recurring theme through this issue is one of change. We have decision makers in for-profit and not-for-profit firms of all sizes challenged to determine the best solution for declining revenues, competitive incursions, growing internationally, remaining innovative or successfully managing growth. Change is one of the most important challenges for managers in the twenty-first century. We hope these cases will provide a rich learning experience for your students.

- Communications solutions: cashing in the chips (Susan White): Communication Solutions, a woman-owned business, provides consulting services, primarily to government agencies. After sales peaked at \$10.5 million in 2012, revenues declined subsequently due to cutbacks in government spending and the founder’s detachment from the business. Even though it may

not be an ideal time to sell, the owners are tired of running the business and want to sell now, as long as they can pay off their debts.

- **Milky Moo: spreading the milk mantra** (Subhalaxmi Mohapatra and Subhadip Roy): Milk Mantra, a milk producing and selling company in the state of Odisha, India, had diversified into milk-based products such as yogurt and cottage cheese and spread into neighboring states in the four years since its founding. In 2014, the company had to overcome a challenging macro environment as well as think of a marketing and communication strategy to gain competitive advantage.
- **Cosac Naify: a small Brazilian publishing house goes abroad** (Henrique Pacheco, Angela da Rocha and Jorge da Silva): the case describes the efforts of a small Brazilian publishing house to export its products to foreign markets. In fact, after several years of losses, the firm has undergone substantial restructuring and hired a new CEO, reaching modest profitability. The challenge faced by the new management team includes, in addition to keeping the firm financially healthy, to develop an international orientation, to mobilize the resources and to develop a new strategy to go international.
- **The March of Dimes: branding in the not-for-profit sector** (Nita Paden, David Albritton, Jennie Mitchell and Doug Staples): this case involves the March of Dimes Foundation (MOD), “the leading nonprofit organization for pregnancy and baby health.” MOD’s mission was to support medical research, organize volunteer workers and provide community services and education to save babies’ lives. The strategic issue in the case involves creating awareness of both the mission and services of March of Dimes and the critical issue driving that mission – premature births. The organization must create a desire for various target markets to take action in response to the problem. The main protagonist is Doug Staples, Senior Vice-president for marketing and communications.
- **Maipu Communications Technology Co. Ltd: challenges in innovation** (Zheng He and Leida Chen): Maipu Communications Technology Company, a Chinese high-tech company, had adjusted its innovation models to remain compatible with corporate strategies, resources and external environments over its 20-year history. However, as the company grew bigger, it was finding it more and more difficult to meet its innovation goals. The key questions raised by this case are whether Maipu’s current innovation model is suitable at this stage and how the model should be adjusted to propel new innovation and growth opportunities for Maipu in an increasingly competitive market.

Compact case

- **Roseda’s growth decision** (Karyl Leggio and Marilyn Taylor): Roseda is a family-operated business that had its beginnings in a farm that Ed and his wife purchased before his retirement in 1994. The company’s current business strategy emphasizes producing high-quality natural Black Angus beef without using hormones, chemical additives or antibiotics in cattle feeding and dry aging the carcasses for enhanced flavor. This case focuses on the alternative growth strategies that Ed Burchell confronts for Roseda in early 2015.

References

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