
Student Perceptions of Alternative Approaches to Facilitating Group Case Discussions in Strategic Management Classes

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Abstract: This study surveyed 173 senior undergraduate Business students enrolled in Strategic Management classes in order to gauge their perceptions of different methods used by instructors to facilitate in-class discussions of Business cases. The instructor methods considered were calling on volunteers when they raised their hands, calling on students at random, and having students work in groups and then report out as groups. Student perceptions included comfort level, potential to learn, attentiveness in class, extra effort in preparing for class, and an overall assessment of the case facilitation methods. The results of this study can improve case facilitation in the classroom, improve student learning, and be a catalyst for further research in this area.

Key words: strategic management; case analysis; case facilitation; student perceptions

JEL codes: M10, M19

1. Introduction

Strategic Management is standard course in most Business programs. This course is frequently a capstone course where students integrate and apply the knowledge they have gained in their prior coursework in order to solve complex Business problems. Case analysis is emphasized in Strategic Management. Popular textbooks such as Hill, Jones, and Schilling, 2015 include both concepts and cases and a range of cases are available from vendors such as the Harvard Business School. Case analysis has long been acknowledged to be excellent in the development of problem solving and critical thinking skills (Reynolds, 1978) and exemplifies a problem-based approach to learning (Armandi, Sherman, & Vega, 2004). Despite the emphasis on case analysis in Strategic Management and the need to effectively facilitate in-class case discussions, there is dearth of applied, pragmatic research on facilitating these case discussions. Recent research has focused more on areas such as teaching on-line (Halvorson, Crittenden, & Pitt, 2011; Rollag, 2010), assessment (Whitesell & Helms, 2013; Smith, Clement, Olsen, 2010), or the use of cases in MBA Programs (Garvin, 2007; Greiner, Bhambri, & Cummings, 2003).

Therefore, this study will assess student perceptions of some common methods used by instructors to facilitate in-class case discussions in order to improve the quality of case analysis, teaching effectiveness, and student learning outcomes. With respect to the structure of this article, research methodology will be reviewed,

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study limitations will be acknowledged, and then the results will be presented and discussed. Concluding remarks and suggestions for future research will also be provided.

2. Methodology

The study was conducted in a medium sized state university with a total enrollment of about 6000 students and a Business school enrollment of about 1300. A total of 173 responses were obtained from seven sections of undergraduate Strategic Management classes over the course of two semesters. The Strategic Management class was the capstone course in the Business program with a prerequisite of senior standing. The maximum enrollment of each class was 25 and each class was fully enrolled. The students in these classes were Senior Business students with a range of majors across the Business School. All surveys were completed in class and were done anonymously. A popular 5 point scale of agreement was used (Gable, 1986). Responses were as follows: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, strongly disagree.

The following student perceptions and methods of case facilitation were combined to yield a total of 15 items.

Table 1 Study Variables

Instructor Methodologies (3)	Student Perceptions (5)
Call on students volunteering with raised hand	Comfort level
Call on students at random	Potential to learn
Students work in groups then report out as a group	Attentiveness in class
	Extra effort in preparing for class
	Overall assessment of instructor method

Responses were tallied for each item. In reviewing the data, if 70% of respondents responded “strongly agree” or “agree” to an item then the student perceptions were considered to be in agreement. Conversely, if 70% of respondents “strongly disagreed” or “disagreed” then the responses were considered to be in disagreement. If the 70% threshold was not achieved then there was no agreement or disagreement. The 70% threshold is fairly high and strongly suggests general agreement or general disagreement and is therefore an appropriate benchmark for this study.

3. Study Limitations

Before reviewing the results, it is appropriate to acknowledge some study limitations. First, this study only reports descriptive statistics and did not attempt formal hypothesis testing or address issues of statistical significance. Second, the study measured student perceptions. No links were made between these measures and objective student learning outcomes. Third, the present research did not entail a quasi-experimental design. For example, students were not systematically exposed to specific instructor methodologies and then surveyed on those experiences. This study simply collected student perceptions on these instructor methodologies based on their collective class work as Senior-level Business students enrolled in the capstone course of the Business program. Lastly, the sample was largely one of convenience because it was collected at a single university.

4. Results

The survey results are presented in Table 2. All numbers are reported as percentages. These figures are highlighted if there was considered to be “agreement” or “disagreement” on the item as defined above. Also, the percentages in the results table have been rounded to a whole percentage so a few items will add up to 99 or 101.

Table 2 Survey Results

Item	Note: Agreement is reported as a percentage and is highlighted if strongly agree and agree total 70% or if strongly disagree and disagree total 70%.	SA	A	U	D	SD
Calling on Volunteers with Raised Hands						
1	I would be comfortable if the instructor called on students when they volunteered by raising their hands.	54	40	2	3	1
2	I would learn a lot if the instructor called on students when they volunteered by raising their hands.	22	48	25	5	0
3	I would put extra effort into being prepared for class if I knew the instructor would be calling on students when they volunteered by raising their hands.	15	46	24	12	3
4	I would be attentive in class if the instructor called on students when they volunteered by raising their hands.	18	57	14	10	1
5	Overall, I think the best method for an instructor to facilitate class is to call on students when they volunteer by raising their hands.	29	49	11	11	0
Calling on Students at Random						
6	I would be comfortable if the instructor called on students at random, not when they volunteered by raising their hands.	9	28	23	28	12
7	I would learn a lot if the instructor called on students at random, not when they volunteered by raising their hands.	8	17	30	32	13
8	I would put extra effort into being prepared for class if I knew the instructor would be calling on students at random, not when they volunteered by raising their hands.	34	36	18	11	1
9	I would be attentive in class if the instructor called on students at random, not when they volunteered by raising their hands.	38	34	14	14	1
10	Overall, I think the best method for an instructor to facilitate class is to call on students at random, not when they volunteer by raising their hands.	10	19	26	32	12
Students Work in Groups and Report Out as Groups						
11	I would be comfortable working in groups and then reporting out as a group.	43	46	5	6	1
12	I would learn a lot working in groups and then reporting out as a group.	34	49	7	9	1
13	I would put extra effort into being prepared for class if I knew the instructor would have us working in groups and then reporting out as a group.	26	51	15	9	1
14	I would be attentive in class working in groups and then reporting out as a group.	31	54	8	8	0
15	Overall, I think the best method for an instructor to facilitate class is to have students work in groups and then report out as a group.	26	48	13	11	2

In considering the instructor methodology of calling on students when they volunteered by raising their hands, students were most comfortable with this method, agreed that they would be attentive, agreed they would learn a lot, and viewed this as the best method to facilitate class discussion. There was no agreement or disagreement about putting in extra effort to be prepared for class. The results here were not surprising and may be a result of this instructor method being the most common across the curriculum resulting in the high comfort levels and overall positive perceptions of students. It was a bit surprising that this was perceived to be a better method than working in groups and reporting out as groups. This could accurately suggest that this is the method preferred by students or that improvement might be needed with the specific ways that students work together and report out in class.

A review of the items on instructors calling on students at random, not when they volunteered by raising their hands yielded no agreement or disagreement on being comfortable, learning a lot, or being the best method to

facilitate class discussion. There was agreement, however, on putting extra effort in being prepared for class and being attentive in class. Thus, it did not seem that there is a benefit from the student perspective but from an instructor's perspective it does seem like a catalyst for increasing students' preparation for class and ensuring that students are attentive. Given these results, calling on students at random, not when they volunteer by raising their hands, might also be useful in ensuring that all students actively participate in case discussions and prepare for class. This method also gives instructors a way to hear from students who never volunteer to participate and also provides a mechanism to gauge the preparation level of students who never speak-up. When used for this purpose, underperforming students who are called upon by the instructor are less likely to feel like they are being singled out because the instructor's treatment of everyone in the class is the same. It was surprising that students did not report more agreement on being attentive in class but this might reflect a student tendency to relax in class once they have already been called on so instructors may need to guard against overly predictable patterns of calling on students.

Lastly, students agreed that they would be comfortable, would learn a lot, put extra effort into being prepared for class, and would be attentive when working in groups and reporting out as groups. Interestingly, the data revealed that there was the most agreement on this method with respect to learning a lot and to being attentive in class. The strong agreement on being attentive while working as a group was heartening because it suggests minimal social loafing and free riding behavior. The agreement about putting extra effort into class preparation if a group methodology was used was also seen as an endorsement of how seriously students take group work in class. One could have expected to see the opposite given the potential to engage in free riding behavior in the group scenario. Overall, having students work in groups and report out seems like an effective way of working with cases in class. Instructors should not view it as an inferior alternative to more directive forms of facilitating class discussion and it can be used for a change of pace in class and can also set the stage for successful group projects in the class.

5. Concluding Remarks and Future Research

This study assessed student perceptions of three common methods that instructors use to facilitate in-class case discussions in Strategic Management. Gaining some insights into these student perceptions can help instructors improve their facilitation skills, select an appropriate mix of case facilitation methods, and might ultimately enhance student learning outcomes. The results of this study are not just applicable to Strategic Management classes, but are relevant when considering any case oriented class. This study can also serve as a point of departure for more research. Future research can explore the impact of different case facilitation methods on specific learning outcomes and additional student perceptions. The impact of other case facilitation methods like real-time electronic polling of student opinions, debate style presentations between different student groups, or variations of nominal group techniques could also be investigated.

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