**Learning Through Mini Cases; An Effective and More Affordable Option to HBP Cases**

**Abstract**

The benefits of the case method have been highlighted in management education literature for decades. In my proposed activity/exercise session, I introduce an effective and more affordable way to apply the case method through *Fast Company Magazine* articles in undergraduate and graduate courses in a variety of management class contexts. Specifically, I elaborate on the pedagogical benefits of using articles as “mini cases” and walk attendees through an example exercise. Participants will be provided with instructions on how to facilitate the exercise, a list of potential benefits, and a link to a discounted student subscription to the magazine.

**Keywords:** Cases, Affordability, Engagement

**Introduction**

In this proposal, I introduce an exercise that uses *Fast Company* magazine articles as mini cases to illustrate the application of management theories and concepts in the context of real life and business. *Fast Company* is a business magazine that focuses on “innovation in technology, leadership, world changing ideas, creativity, and design.” The magazine was founded by two former Harvard Business Review editors with the premise that the world is rapidly changing business and business is changing the world. The content chronicles how companies change, create, and compete, emphasizes the importance of leadership, and showcases teams and individuals who are reinventing business.

The exercise requires every student in the class to select an article of their choice related to a particular topic that the instructor provides (e.g. DEI, Leadership, Sustainability). Students then are tasked with writing a brief summary of the article, how it links to class concepts, and develop two questions to pose to the class. The instructor then selects several of the student selected articles for the entire class to read and come to class prepared to discuss for approximately 10-15 minutes each.

There are many pedagogical benefits to the exercise. First, the student subscription cost is $5 and, over the course of a semester, the assignment takes the place of approximately 5 Harvard Business Publishing cases (a savings of about $15 per student per semester). Second, the exercise allows for topic flexibility and variety that enables the instructor to link class theories and concepts to a wide variety of timely and pertinent real-world topics (e.g. DEI, sustainability, etc.). Additional benefits include greater student motivation (they get to select the articles), iterative learning (Hunt & Smith, 2018), empirical enquiry (Yin, 2003), and an opportunity for students to improve their question-asking skills, which is an important skill for managers (Mackay & Weinstein, 1998).

During the session, I will provide participants with detailed instructions on how to facilitate the exercise, review and discuss its various benefits, and let participants experience the exercise from a student’s perspective. I will provide a sample article and ask them to summarize it, identify key issues related to management topics, and develop good questions to pose to other session participants.

I use the exercise in my undergraduate and MBA capstone strategy classes, but it should be equally effective within a leadership class or entrepreneurship class.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Over the past few decades, there has been a movement towards pedagogical approaches that enhance student engagement and performance outcomes. In this respect, the use of cases, which allows students to investigate and link a phenomenon with a real-life context (Yin, 2003), has remained an important element of teaching the practice of management. However, a criticism of traditional Harvard Business Publishing cases is that they can be expensive, especially if they are used every week, and are often quickly outdated. The use of *Fast Company* business articles as “mini cases” addresses these issues as they can be obtained relatively inexpensively ($5 for an annual subscription) and the exercise allows students to select articles that contain much more relevant and up to date data, stories, and examples. Cases are experiential in nature as they allow students to associate theory and concepts with action through the context of an actual business situation (Boehrer, 1995).

The use of a wider variety of mini cases allows professors to shed light on the details of important and current topics and processes within the context of a real business situation (Tripathy, 2008). It also allows the professor to reinforce key issues, theories, and concepts across multiple contexts and situations, improving student learning through iteration (Hunt & Smith, 2018). In addition, the exercise I am proposing allows for more autonomy on the student’s part, as they are required to identify key issues within the article and develop relevant and effective questions to engage the class in discussion. This allows students to learn lessons from themselves and experience a broader range of learning objectives within Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). In addition, the question development and asking process allows professors to evaluate student cognitive processes and critical thinking skills (Alsan, 2022) and “the ability to ask one’s own questions is a foundational skill, essential for thinking, learning, and taking effective action” (Santana, 2015, p. 27). Thus, the exercise embodies several elements that improve learning and allow an instructor to better engage students and evaluate student understanding of class material.

**Learning Objectives**

In my experience, the mini case exercise improves student understanding of business concepts, links theory to practice in a variety of contexts, and improves student ability to ask effective questions.

***Objectives related to the acquisition of knowledge:***

1. To reinforce the importance of management concepts, such as competitive advantage, leadership, and organizational culture.
2. To apply business concepts, theories, and frameworks to real life businesses.
3. To apply business concepts, theories, and frameworks to a wide variety of businesses in a wide variety of contexts.
4. To apply busines concepts, theories, and frameworks to current events, trends, and business innovations.

***Objectives related to the development of student facilitation skills:***

1. To understand the impact of asking open vs closed questions
2. To listen to group feedback and facilitate an effective discussion.

**Exercise Overview**

A copy of the assignment is provided in Appendix A. The assignment steps are as follows:

1. Certain weeks are designated as “*Fast Company* Assignment” weeks (I alternate them with HBP case weeks, so I generally have 5 *Fast Company* Assignment weeks).
2. I provide an on-line Google sign-up sheet that:
   1. Lists the topics for each week that is designated as a Fast Company Assignment week (e.g. Week 3 articles should be about “leadership,” Week 5 should be about DEI or Sustainability, etc.).
   2. Allows students to select which week they want to do the assignment. The available sign-up slots are dependent on the size of the class. For example, if it is a class of 40 students and there are 5 weeks designated as *Fast Company* Assignment weeks, then 8 students can sign up for each week.
3. During a Fast Company Assignment week, the students who signed up for it send me a link to their chosen article a few days in advance of class.
4. I review the articles for appropriateness (length, duplication, and topic) and confirm acceptance via reply email.
5. From the range of article picked by students, I select 5 articles for the class to discuss and post the links so all students in the class can access them, read them, and be prepared to discuss them. The number of articles chosen depends on the number of students in the class and the available time for discussion, which takes about 15 minutes per article (e.g. 5 cases in a 75 minute class).
6. All students who signed up for the assignment on a given week turn in their written paper by the start of class. This includes students whose article was not chosen for class discussion.
7. During class, if a student’s article was chosen for discussion, the student provides a one to two-minute overview of the article and asks one of the questions they developed. The student facilitates the discussion with my assistance and input. I provide immediate feedback about the question in terms of its effectiveness at stimulating a valuable discussion. Sometimes I will ask a follow-up question if I feel there is an additional learning opportunity available.
8. I grade the written assignments of all students with a focus on providing feedback about the questions they developed. For example: Are the questions open or closed? Do they address concepts, theories, or frameworks discussed in class? Are they designed to make their fellow students think about an important issue? Do they ask for opinions or facts and if they are asking about opinions, does the question include a “why?”

**Session Description**

In a 60-minute session, I plan to do the following:

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| **Timing** | **Action** | **Outcome** |
| 0-15 | Introduction of the exercise as well as its benefits. | Participants learn how to conduct the exercise and hear about some of the benefits I have experienced. |
| 15-30 | I provide participants with the assignment and a pre-selected *Fast Company* article. I ask them to read the article, think about how it applies to class concepts (any class), and what questions they might ask to the class about the article. | Participants experience the exercise from the perspective of a student. |
| 30-50 | I facilitate a discussion about the article. I will ask for a volunteer to provide a brief summary of the article and then ask participants to share how the article links to concepts they teach and what questions they came up with. | Participants develop a sound level of understanding about how the exercise is facilitated in practice and (hopefully) be able to experience the proposed benefits. |
| 50-60 | Exercise debrief and Q&A | Any unanswered questions are resolved and potential improvements to the assignment are shared and recorded. |

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**Appendix A**

***Fast Company* Assignment Guidelines (XX points)**

This assignment requires you to search articles in Fast Company magazine that relate to topics covered in class, write a one-page review of the article, and lead a discussion of the article in class. The review must include the following elements:

1. The name of the article and **a web link to the article**. The article should be of medium length and have enough content to be interesting and relevant to the class (generally “3-6 minute reads” work the best). Unless you find something super interesting, try to avoid the long, several-page articles.
2. A brief summary of key points from the article (1 short paragraph)
3. How the article relates to topic assigned for the week you chose. For example, in week 3, the topic is “New Business Ideas” (1 paragraph).
4. Describe the strategic implications of the article. What are the key success factors? (bullet points).
5. Provide two questions that you will ask the class about this article. Your questions should link the content of the article to strategy.\*\*

* **You need to send me a link to the article you have chosen by the Friday night on the week prior to when the assignment is due. I will then post the articles on iCollege on Saturday morning so the class can read them and be prepared to discuss.**
* Your one-page summary should be submitted through iCollege before the start of class (we will normally discuss the articles during Wednesday classes).

**NOTE: Do NOT select “FASTCO WORKS” articles because they are sponsored articles that are pseudo advertisements. Also, if two students select the same article I may ask one of you to select something different.**

**\*\* Asking good questions is a critical leadership skill. Your questions should be open-ended (not yes/no in format), invite your audience to think about key issues (“why” or “how” questions work well), and relate to the content of the class and the topic of the week.**