

Meeting the Challenge of Teaching Emerging and Complex Concepts: Video Cases as a Robust Instructional Tool

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There have been repeated appeals in recent years to improve the relevance and effectiveness of management education. Included among the stated concerns is the need to improve the transmission of challenging concepts and to develop the practical skills required by students who plan to enter an increasingly demanding management profession.

While it may be relatively easy for students to discuss many critical concepts in management, students continue to find it more difficult to learn and internalize these concepts sufficiently for effective application in the “real world.” For example, many general and abstract strategic management concepts apply to a great number of situations, allowing a broad range of individuals to use the associated terms to signal to others that they may belong to an informed social group. Yet, concepts and terms too often are used as buzz words, providing little deep meaning or insight. Re-engineering, industry analysis, stakeholder analysis, downsizing, empowerment, value chains, ecological analysis of environments, and core competence represent several examples of captivating concepts for many students, but the mere use of the words does not mean users have deep understandings of concepts to which these terms refer. For instance, reading any one of a number of different books on re-engineering leaves most readers intrigued with the concept, but without detailed directions about how to apply the concepts to organizations’ operations. In the end, as noted by the AACSB, textbook learning is just not enough; theory and relevance must be integrated.

Real understanding of complex management concepts escapes most minds because the concepts are not understood experientially, in application. As Mies Van der Rohe said, “God is in the details.” To truly understand how to apply any of a number of complex concepts in a management discipline such as strategic management, students and managers must grapple with the details. In order to learn complex concepts, what is really needed are experiences which are intimate and fraught with contextually rich detail. What is needed is experiential knowledge, a knowledge that is tacit as well as explicit, felt as much as it is thought, subjective as much as objective. This knowledge has great relevance within the domain of management and the challenges that managers frequently face.

This paper offers an alternative means by which instructors can make complex management concepts come alive for students. The instructional application of this pedagogical approach -- video case studies -- is highlighted using the example of a concept from strategic management, namely, the value chain. In the paper, we briefly discuss the concept of a value chain, its uses and benefits, and the challenges of adequately conveying this concept via traditional lecture-based methods. We then present

an experiential method of teaching what a value chain is through the supplemental use of video case studies prepared by an instructor from videotaped company tours and interviews. We have found that the method explained here represents a stimulating, relatively easy, and very instructive mode of delivery for both students and faculty, and we argue that this method can be applied to a range of concepts and tools within management and other disciplines.

WHY VIDEO CASES: DON'T CURRENT TEACHING METHODS WORK SUFFICIENTLY?

It has been argued that case teaching offers just such experiences for intimate and subtle learning of complex concepts like those found in strategy. Written cases are messy, rich with textual detail, and immediate to students' experiences. Written cases also keenly challenge students' perceptions, analyses, and decisions as they are discussed in classroom settings (Christensen, 1987). From one point of view, written cases represent pre-digested characterizations prepared by expert observers. They are written by case writers who have theoretical perspectives and pedagogical objectives, to which ends case writers construct their cases. Case writers select, order, and articulate their observations into stories for students' analysis and decision making.

The old maxim that "a picture is worth a thousand words" has great instructional relevance. Written cases often exclude salient information, such as visual images and personal mannerisms, which cannot be readily captured in text. This can contribute to an incomplete, and perhaps less intrinsically compelling, treatment of the concepts which are being taught. In addition, the lead time necessary for preparing a written case study and getting it into the hands of students tends to be quite long, hindering their use for highlighting leading-edge concepts. By the time the written case is used in a classroom, data are often several years old.

This characterization of case writers' products is not meant to be pejoratively critical. Rather, the argument is simply that written cases alone, without direct student contact with or intimate knowledge of the organization involved, may not suffice. Students will best learn those things which are most useful to them, most understood by them, and most done by them. Students may benefit from fieldwork-based activities which provide them with opportunities to make their own observations, to initiate their own questions, to generate their own data, to categorize the data they find, and to order and integrate data in the ways they think best amid the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of reality. The iterative and intimate grappling associated with collecting, labeling, ordering, and interpreting data, a trait of fieldwork-based approaches, leads students to their best learning of complex concepts. If instructors want their students to truly understand and begin to master complex concepts, they should consider getting the students out into the world, directly or through other relevant experiential exercises, to apply these concepts for themselves. As with other complex management concepts, there remains a need for appropriate fieldwork-based instructional tools and techniques which can assist in effectively conveying, and developing, essential concepts and needed competencies.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM: VIDEO CASES AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

The method proposed here for teaching a complex concept such as organizational value chains revolves around supplementing or replacing more traditional instructional approaches (e.g., lecture and discussion and/or written case studies). Our method involves a videotaped interview conducted by the instructor with the general manager of a single-business company, along with a videotaped, GM-led tour of the organization's operations. The raw footage of this videotaped interview-and-tour material is edited into a focused video case study which can, in a relatively quick and inexpensive manner, be tailored for the specific pedagogical objectives of a particular course. In our example, lectures on the value chain precede a showing of the edited video case, and classroom analysis of the video case follows this

showing. Our instruction on this concept concludes with an optional series of fieldwork assignments directing students to find their own companies in which to conduct their own value chain analyses.

The following sections of the paper describe, in greater depth, the process of developing a video case and then using the video case as an instructional tool. The range of issues discussed include identifying and contacting a host organization for interview and videotaping; field visits and taping; editing the video and obtaining a release for classroom use; using video cases as an instructional tool; and potential pedagogical extensions, including student-based fieldwork applications. The paper concludes by addressing six key pedagogical outcomes associated with the use of field-based video case studies, as well as five potential pedagogical limitations associated with these instructional tools.