

Reply to ELMAR Request – Effective Methods with Cases: On Grading

ELMAR Contribution by J. Scott Armstrong

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The first thing to understand is that grading inhibits learning. Extrinsic rewards increase production but decrease learning according to reviews by Condry (1977) and Levine and Fasnacht (1974). With rewards, learners are more “answer oriented” and less “process oriented”; they seek easier tasks, become less logical, and are less creative. Also, extrinsic rewards lessen the learner’s subsequent interest in the topic (Lepper, Greene and Nisbett 1973). “If I am no longer being graded on this behavior, what’s the point of doing it?”

If learning is the primary goal, I suggest that you do not grade the case discussions in class. (I personally do not grade anything in class sessions.) Instead, ask students to write case summaries where they individually describe *in detail* what techniques and concepts they have been able to apply to the case and what they learned from these applications.

It takes less effort to grade learning summaries than to grade cases. You will find enormous differences in learning. Unfortunately, most students will be unable to write anything sensible and will just spout jargon. Learning reports are hard to fake. However, some reviews will dazzle you, and you will not think you are wasting your time as you read them. The students’ reviews will also help you to understand where they have trouble with applications.

By distributing a learning review form along with the case, you can help students to apply concepts and techniques. I describe my views on learning exercises more fully in Armstrong 1977.

As for objectivity, one idea is to exchange the evaluation task with another professor. That is, you grade her class and she grades yours. This aligns your goals with that of your students; you would like to see that your students are favorably evaluated. Your role becomes one of a coach, rather than a judge. This recommendation is only feasible for multiple sections of a course where the sections are of roughly equal size.

My recommendations run counter to the Harvard case method. As an MBA, I attended classes conducted by Harvard-trained case masters, and I also taught at a Harvard-like school in Europe. In each case, I was mystified by the learning goals of the cases. No techniques were made available to me as a student. In my role as an instructor, I was informed that I should not provide techniques to students, and, in fact, was reprimanded when I did. As a result, people solved cases using what they already knew and ended up learning nothing. Is this an opinion? Yes, and I keep challenging people to provide evidence that it is wrong. I am still waiting for their replies.

References

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Original posting

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Subject: TEACHING: Effective Methods with Cases

I am seeking ideas on effective methods for teaching cases in marketing. Any insights (or references) on teaching with cases would be helpful, but I would particularly like suggestions on how to grade students in a case-based teaching environment. Given class sections of about 50 MBA students each, how do you grade based on cases without incurring student complaints about subjectivity and without becoming swamped in paperwork?

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