The Devil's Advocate in the Classroom: Empirically Grounded Advice on Improving Student Analysis of Business Policy Cases

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Abstract

The improvement of student case analysis is an important concern of most business policy instructors. Research on two ill-structured decision-making aids, the Devil's Advocate and Dialectical Inquiry, provides the basis for specific suggestions which should lead to improvements in this skill.
Introduction

Despite the continuing debate on the usefulness of the case method of instruction (Charan, 1976; Dooley & Skinner, 1977), case analysis remains an integral part of most business policy courses. Advocates of this method maintain that case analysis is the best way to expose students to the types of ill-structured problems they will face throughout their careers (Lawrence, 1953; Ronstadt, 1980) and to develop the skills and attitudes required for managerial decision-making (Charan, 1976; Gragg, 1954; Snow, 1976).

Each business policy instructor may choose his or her own objectives for case analysis. However, there is some agreement on which objectives are best served through this method. Hegarty (1976), in a survey of 130 policy instructors, listed the following as frequently mentioned objectives: The development of overall management skills, the development of decision-making skills, and the development of strategy making/planning skills.

When the case method is used, instructors often use the quality of student case analyses as a measure of the achievement of course objectives. High quality case analyses are evidence that students have learned to deal with often ambiguous case data and to solve the ill-structured problems presented in the cases. Therefore, the improvement of case analyses remains a central concern for most business policy instructors.
In addition to mastery of decision-making skills, good case analysis also requires **effort** on the part of students. Students' motivation to expend this effort will be increased if they enjoy the process of case analysis. Therefore, any technique which improves the quality of student case analyses and increases their enjoyment of case analysis will aid in the accomplishment of whatever objectives the instructor has chosen.

The Devil's Advocate (DA) and Dialectical Inquiry (DI) are two techniques for programming conflict into ill-structured decision-making which have been widely recommended as aids to strategy formulation. Research on these techniques offers an empirical basis for suggestions on improving the quality of student case analysis and increasing their satisfaction with the task.

Teaching recommendations based on research of this type provide a useful complement to advice based on the personal experience of competent instructors of business policy. Since much of this research used business students as subjects it has direct implications for teaching.

**The DA and DI**

Mason (1969), elaborating on the work of C. West Churchman, first proposed the DI as an aid to strategic planning and contrasted it with the DA approach. Both the DI and DA are intended as improvements on the Expert (E) approach in which strategic decisions are made with the aid of preliminary analyses and proposals by staff "experts". According to Mason, these proposals contain unstated assumptions and
biases which remain unquestioned and may adversely affect the quality of a strategic decision.

The DI and DA are techniques for helping managers question the assumptions in staff proposals. The DI involves examination of the assumptions underlying an expert's proposal, the negation of these assumptions, and the development of a counterproposal based on the negated assumptions. The proposal and counterproposal are then presented to decision-makers through a structured debate. The DA, on the other hand, involves the identification of assumptions and the development of a critique of these assumptions rather than a specific counterproposal. The proposal and critique are then presented to decision-makers in a debate format.

Mason (1969, pp. B407 - B408) maintains that the DI should be more helpful in strategic planning than the DA because it involves the development of a constructive alternative to the expert's proposal while the DA critique merely criticizes the proposal.

Researchers have applied the DI to strategy formulation problems in a variety of organizations (Emshoff & Finnel, 1973; Mason, 1969; Mason & Mitroff, 1978; Mitroff, Barabba, & Kilmann, 1977; Mitroff, Emshoff, & Kilmann, 1979). In these studies, the DI was typically introduced after a preliminary strategy had been developed through the traditional E approach. The preliminary strategy statement served as the basis for the development of the DI counterproposal. The results of these studies showed that corporate decision-makers value the DI and report that its use leads to better strategy formulation.
There have also been a number of laboratory studies in which the DA was compared to the DI using a financial prediction task with undergraduate and graduate business students as subjects (Cosier, 1978; Cosier, 1980 a & b; Cosier, Ruble, & Aplin, 1978; Schwenk & Cosier, 1980). These studies have generally shown the DA to be superior to the DI at improving students' ability to deal with ambiguous cues from the environment in making financial predictions. The studies have also provided weak support for the superiority of the DI over the E approach.

Finally, two studies have examined the effects of the DA and DI on analyses of cases. Schwenk (1980) had upper division undergraduate business students analyze a case describing a fictitious company in the soft-drink industry. The students were randomly assigned to either the E, DA, DI or C (control) conditions. Each student in the E, DA, and DI conditions received an "expert" report recommending a particular course of action for the company. Those in the DA condition received, in addition to the expert report, a critique which questioned the assumptions of the report but offered no alternative recommendation. Students in the DI condition received, in addition to the expert report, a counterproposal which recommended an alternative course of action. The DA was found to be more effective than the DI at reducing the impact of the first expert report on students' choice of recommendations. Also, students given the DA and DI reported significantly more enjoyment of the task and satisfaction with their performance than did students given the E treatment. Cosier & Aplin (1980) found that United Way planners given the DA produced planning reports judged to be
superior to those produced by planners given the DI on seven evaluative dimensions, though this difference was significant for only one of the dimensions.

It seems from the comparative research that both the DA and DI improve students' satisfaction with the process of case analysis. However, the DA seems to be more effective than the DI at improving students' ability to deal with ambiguous data and at improving the quality of case analyses.

It may be that the DA is more intuitively appealing to students than the DI. Students may have difficulty trying to resolve the two diametrically opposed recommendations found in the DI. They might ask how two "experts" could reach opposite conclusions from the same data. This would reduce the DI's value for them.

The Devil's Advocate in the Classroom

Research on the DA and DI has shown that the explicit attempt to identify and question assumptions improves ill-structured decision-making in general and case analysis in particular. Thus, it provides empirical support for the "common sense" assertion that students should be encouraged to recognize the importance of assumptions in business policy case analysis. Further, it provides the basis for several specific suggestions for introducing assumption questioning into business policy courses.

First, this research should affect the role assumed by the instructor in a business policy course, particularly in case discussions. Though many policy instructors admit the value of conflict during in-class
case analysis and may sometimes play the role of Devil's Advocate, this research suggests some cautions when playing this role. The instructor should not simply offer alternative interpretations and recommendations to those developed by students. Rather, the instructor should offer critiques of students' analyses and recommendations and should help students identify the assumptions which underlie particular analyses. Direct criticism of student suggestions within class discussion may be considered undesirable by many instructors who believe it will reduce student participation. However, criticism which focuses on the student's analyses and assumptions rather than the student need not have this effect. Further, this critiquing activity is the essential element of the DA which has been found to be more effective than the DI.

As students discuss cases in class, should the instructor encourage argument between diverse alternatives or solutions to case problems? This approach is characteristic of many case discussions. The research on the DA and DI suggests that simple argument is not likely to be as effective as the constant attempt to encourage students to question assumptions. In each case discussion, the instructor should call attention to the assumptions underlying students' divergent analyses and recommendations. This may involve a slightly more active and directive role in case analysis than some instructors would wish to play. However, this sort of direction should deepen students' understanding of the case and increase the value of case discussion to them.

Second, the principles underlying the DA and DI can be used to improve in-class group presentations of case analyses. As the instructor assigns students to groups to prepare case analyses, he or
she should also appoint a student or group to play the role of Devil's Advocate and prepare a critique. The Devil's Advocate should be given an outline of the group's analysis and recommendations before the group makes its presentation. This outline could then be used to prepare a critique of the group's report. Those playing the role of Devil's Advocate should, of course, do more than simply criticize the group's recommendations. They should be encouraged to explicitly identify and question the group's assumptions. The research indicates that this should lead to a more comprehensive analysis of the case.

Third, the results of the research on the DA and DI lead to suggestions to students for dealing with statements of key individuals in cases. Many policy cases contain statements by such individuals regarding their perceptions of the company's environment and its strengths and weaknesses as well as recommendations for actions the company should take. Students tend to place too much credence in these statements, assuming that because they were made by key people in the company, they reflect reality. This tendency can be reduced by encouraging students to question the assumptions underlying these statements and to search for case data which will confirm or disconfirm these assumptions.

Finally, the process of assumption questioning can be used by students to strengthen their own strategic recommendations for the companies described in cases. In written case analyses for example, students should be encouraged to develop preliminary recommendations after they have completed their analysis of case data. Students should then scrutinize these preliminary recommendations to identify their underlying assumptions. This assumption identification should be a formal
step in the process and might involve writing out a list of underlying assumptions. Next, the assumptions should be questioned and case data bearing on the assumptions should be re-examined. If the data do not seem to support a particular assumption, it should be revised. The final recommendations could then be prepared based on these revised assumptions.

Policy cases generally represent at least some of the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in strategic decision-making. Students in policy courses often resent the lack of certainty and structure in policy cases initially. However, by emphasizing the role of assumptions in such decision-making, and by using the principles embodied in the DA technique to deal with these assumptions, policy instructors can enhance students' enjoyment of and performance at case analysis.
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