

Encouraging Creative Thinking in Strategic Management Courses

Review of C. Wagner Weick (2003) 'Out of Context: Using Metaphor to Encourage Creative Thinking in Strategic Management Courses' *Journal of Management Education*, 27 (3) pp.323-43

The importance of creative thinking in strategy development is already well documented. Mintzberg (1976), for example, calls for business schools to gain a balance between the analytic and the intuitive; Handy (1989) articulates the need for upside-down thinking and De Bono (1984) compares vertical, logical thinking with the need for lateral, creative or generative thinking. De Wit & Meyer (2004:16) describe the tension between logic and creativity in strategic thinking as a paradox, a "both-and" problem where "conflict between the two opposites is accepted, but the strategist will strive to accommodate both factors at the same time". In this article, Wagner Weick suggests that current strategy teaching tools such as case studies primarily educate students in "analytically based problem solving" rather than the ability to think "conceptually and creatively".

To encourage creative thinking and the ability to conceptualise as well as analyse, Wagner Weick proposes the use of a metaphor-based approach to the teaching of strategic management, in addition to traditional methods such as case studies, lectures and computer-based simulations. The academic literature supporting the power of the metaphor in teaching is explored and a number of useful articles and texts cited, such as Sun-Tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles for Business (1996) by Mark McNeilly and Gareth Morgan (1998) Images of Organizations. My personal experience of experiential learning of leadership skills, based on the metaphor of Shakespeare's Henry V, supports the effectiveness of this particular approach as it has remained memorable and relevant long after MBA lecture notes and even case studies have been all but forgotten.

The article identifies specific papers that could be introduced to students based on metaphors from athletics, Eastern philosophy and other examples including Mintzberg's (1987) *Crafting Strategy*, which relates the strategy process to pottery making. Much reference is made to Mintzberg's work with six separate citations in the reference section. He is also co-author of both recommended course texts. These are Mintzberg and Quinn's (1988) *Readings on the Strategy Process* and Mintzberg and Quinn's (1996) *The Strategy Process: Concepts, Context and Cases* (current edition Mintzberg, Lampel, Quinn and Ghosal, 2002). Some may see this as over-reliance but I think it is balanced by the wide range of reading material from other authors that is referred to throughout.

Wagner Weick provides guidance for incorporating metaphor-based articles into courses and includes a valuable set of appendices that provide practical assistance in lesson planning. An example that caught my imagination is the use of Tom Lloyd (1995) A Little Bat Sense to "demonstrate an approach on how to gain competitive advantage in business derived from the behaviour of bats".

The aspect of the article that I found most interesting was Wagner Weick's approach to assessment. Students are required to "invent their own metaphor for business strategy and present it to class" through a 10 minute presentation. Two weeks after the presentation

they must submit a paper “concerning the metaphor and its application to business”. Wagner Weick remarks that this has sparked students’ imaginations and has been successful at undergraduate level. The appeal of this assessment is that it seems to provide an opportunity for creativity and deep, experiential learning. It exposes students to a wide variety of different strategy metaphors based on topics that are interesting and relevant to them such as snowboarding, poker, cooking and music. There is an opportunity for formative feedback from both lecturer and peers before the final paper is submitted. The oral presentation also ensures the authenticity of the students’ work and should support the objective of reducing academic misconduct through the curriculum.

Wagner Weick states that the presentation and paper present 17.5% of the course grade. Unfortunately, there is no information as to how the rest of the marks are awarded. My own proposed use is on a post-graduate course where students have little practical business experience. They require a grounding in strategic theory which includes the history of strategic management thought and rational, analytical models. However, a significant amount of the course has been devoted to creative thinking to increase students’ understanding of this key aspect of strategy development and develop their skills as future managers. Currently, the assessment is an individual paper based on a case study, weighted 50% and a closed-book, case-study based exam, weighted 50%. In light of this article, I am considering replacing the exam with an individual assignment similar to that proposed by Wagner Weick. In addition, I propose to add a short task to the final paper inviting students to consider the paradox of logic and creativity by critically reflecting on their own experience of the different assessments.

There is little reference in the article to the types of students who found the assessment particularly rewarding or challenging. It would be useful to understand how different groups of international students who are not familiar with Western teaching styles might respond. Rayman-Bacchus (2003:32) comments that “students from China and India seem uncomfortable with unstructured or semi-structured working”.

It would be interesting to understand whether there are any discernible cognitive benefits of the metaphor-based approach. Banning (2003) uses a tolerance for ambiguity (TA) test to assess whether students using the case study approach develop a greater tolerance for ambiguity. Teaching through case studies, might, it is suggested improve students’ tolerance for ambiguity and thus better equip them to cope with the high levels of flexibility needed by today’s strategy makers.

Wagner Weick, like others (Banning, 2003; Schneider, 2004) describes Strategic Management as a “capstone” course that enables students to synthesise knowledge from a range of different business management topics. An observation rather than a criticism of her approach is that strategy courses already have multiple objectives and often limited classroom time. There is sufficient material contained in the article to support a whole module and it is difficult to see how courses could incorporate this into an already full schedule. It might be considered as an elective for students who have already studied strategic management or could be taught in conjunction with modules related to Innovation or Creativity. Alternatively it might be applied on an MBA, where there is sometimes more than one teaching block for strategic management. Certainly any

institution that is considering introducing something similar will benefit greatly from Wagner Weick's generosity and openness in sharing her experience and course material.

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