ONLINE RESOURCE #5: NOTES FOR STUDENTS

(The following is a note to students new to a case course. It is based on similar notes sent out to students before the course starts. Feel free to use this text if you want to – and if you have suggestions on how to make it better, please send them to self@espen.com or wschiano@bentley.edu.)

To: Students of [course name]
Date: [date]
From: Your teachers
Subject: Surviving and prospering in a case class

The semester is approaching, and we are very much looking forward to meeting you for the course [course name]. This course is taught using cases – and we have found that many students have limited experience with case teaching and might feel a little bit apprehensive about what is going to happen. This note contains some advice on how to prepare for a case class (as a student) and how to conduct yourself during the classroom discussion.

Case teaching
Case teaching differs from regular lectures in that the bulk of the speaking is done by the students, who discuss a case (a written description of a business problem) bringing their individual experience and their understanding of the relevant literature as presented in the course. The teaching method is used in business studies, but also in law and medicine – disciplines where students after graduation will be faced with problems that require understanding a complicated situation, applying relevant theory and common sense to it, and formulating and testing a solution. Much like in real life, cases are written so that there is no correct solution – you will find that you and your classmates may have radically different ideas about the nature of the described situation and the best way to resolve it. That’s fun, and that is where the learning is.

We use case teaching because it allows us to make teaching relevant, lets the students apply theory and judgment to real problems, and enables students to learn from each other and not just from the teacher. (For a great article on the history of the case method by a great case teacher, see David Garvin’s "Making the case: Professional education for the world of practice." Harvard Magazine 106(1): 56ff. To see why understanding theory is important in terms of practice, we recommend the Clayton M. Christensen and Michael E. Raynor’s "Why Hard-nosed Executives Should Care about Management Theory." Harvard Business Review September 2003): 67-74.)

Preparation
Case teaching is based on discussion, and if you are going to discuss a case, you will have to come prepared. A typical case has 10-20 pages plus exhibits, so set aside at least three hours per case. Some good resources on how to do case analysis are

- Bill Ellet’s The Case Study Handbook: How to Read, Discuss, and Write Persuasively About Cases (HBS Press, 2007)
- Case Analysis Coach (cb.hbsp.harvard.edu/cb/product/4380-HTM-ENG), an online resource developed by Robert D. Austin and Robert L. Kelley.
- Cases: How to prepare for them and learn from them, a five-episode video by Espen Andersen and Hanno Roberts of the Norwegian Business School, available at appliedabstractions.com/2010/05/01/cases-how-to-prepare-for-and-learn-from-them/.

A good procedure to prepare a case is the following:

- First, read the case quickly by yourself, to get an overview and understand the company, industry and exhibits.
Next, read the case carefully, answering the study questions that come with the case. These questions are designed to highlight salient portions of the case and make you do needed analysis.

Make a sheet of notes with your suggested solution (or alternative solutions) to refer to if you are asked to open the case discussion.

Before class, meet with your study group (we recommend forming study groups of 3-8 students for this purpose) and discuss the case with them. Chances are, you will find that your preferred solution is but one of many – and that it might require some adjustment.

Come to class – and now you are prepared!

(If, for some reason such as illness, you have not been able to prepare the case, but still want to come to class, you must tell us before class starts. We expect to be able to call on any student during the class discussion, and an unprepared student breaks the flow and reduces the quality of the discussion.)

In the classroom
Many students worry about the discussion in the classroom and how to do it. We will discuss and demonstrate how case discussions are conducted in class. The most important thing to remember when in class is that a case discussion is not a competition in who can say the most – rather, it is a collaborative undertaking to bring as much insight as possible towards a problem. To do this, some rules of conduct will have to be observed.

A normal case class may proceed like this:
- A student is asked to open the discussion, giving an overview of the company, the problem to be analyzed, and perhaps his or her solution to the problem.
- When the first student is done, the floor is open for comments and alternative solutions, from as many people as possible.
- You may speak only when given the floor. You ask for the floor by holding your hand up, but as soon as someone is given the floor, you should take your hand down and keep it down until the speaker is finished.
- The teacher will take notes on the board and guide the discussion, but ideally almost all the talking should be done by the students.

Grading
A portion of your grade will be based on participation, i.e., your contributions in the classroom. Many students worry about having enough “air time” – but remember, we are looking for quality, not quantity. Others would prefer not to speak in class at all – and to them, well, you are studying to be a manager, which means having to communicate your opinions to others, frequently in a group.

When we set grades, here is what we are looking for:
- students that are well prepared and have developed good analysis
- students that can generate alternative solutions to problems and argue for them
- students that can take theory and apply it to a problem
- students that can listen to other students’ contributions and constructively critique or support them

It is very important to understand that a case discussion is cumulative – that you should build your comments on other students’ comments, observe common courtesy, and, not least, have fun.

We look forward to seeing you in the classroom – and by the way, the first class will require preparation, too. See you then!

Sincerely,

Your teachers