

**“Tips for Teaching Executives and MBAs in Extended Time Length Sessions”
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Abstract:

We address some of the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching extended time length sessions (e.g. more than 3 hours in length). Extended time length class sessions are commonly used in executive development and executive MBA courses and are increasingly being utilized in full and part-time MBA programs. However, shifting typical course materials, formats, and pedagogy from traditional 50 or 80-minute class sessions to extended length sessions can be a challenge for instructors. Our panelists include seasoned professors with experience in extended time length teaching. We will facilitate discussion with session participants to explore key challenges of the format, tips for handling these sessions, and how they vary across degree and non-degree programs.

Summary and Reference Materials

Business schools have long used extended length sessions for executive development and executive/ weekend MBA courses and are increasingly adopting once-a-week classes for full and part-time MBA programs. In the sections that follow, we outline the considerable challenges associated with these extended length formats (e.g. 3 hours or more), and then reframe these challenges as opportunities to show how instructors and students can actually benefit when course material is specifically designed for the longer-session formats.

The Challenges of Teaching Extended Sessions

Without a doubt, there are very practical challenges facing developers and leaders (and students) of extended session strategy courses – these challenges are both physical and structural. For instance, attention spans wane when participants are in a classroom for several hours, making this a difficult environment in which to teach and learn. For executives and students who also hold full-time employment, instructors struggle not only to keep students engaged but also to do so when many participants have critical issues to deal with outside the classroom. The opportunity cost of students' time, whether for work, studying for other classes, or personal life becomes highly salient when the better part of a day is spent in the classroom. Simple tasks like effective listening and contributing to class discussions are much more difficult to sustain over several hours.

One structural challenge results from the fact that many novice instructors to extended class sessions assume they can “fit” what was normally taught in multiple 1 or 1 ½ hour sessions into the extended block without recognizing the difficulties associated with preparation expectations, attention span, and engagement. For example, if a typical shortened class period required reading a text chapter and preparing a case for class discussion, some instructors will assign three chapters and three cases to prepare for an extended class period equal to three times the length of a normal class. The mistaken assumption is that one can somehow “divide” the extended time into smaller portions of time resembling “normal” class periods. The expectation that students will be able to prepare this volume of material as effectively as if it were spread out over a week can lead instructors down a path where students are overworked in advance of class and expectations of how much will be “covered” in class are disappointed.

Not only are scheduling issues important structural challenges in terms of expectations for student preparation and how much material can be covered in extended length class formats, but longer time blocks often require fundamentally different pedagogical styles than shorter class sessions. Lecturing for multiple hours, for example, will not be very effective or enjoyable for either students or professors. Moreover, when a course is converted from shorter to longer sessions, this “compression” makes it difficult to compartmentalize and cover the same number of topics as were delivered in the shorter session program. For example, a typical semester course (16 weeks with two 90-minute sessions per week) has 32 blocks in which 32 concepts can be covered. By analogy, when this semester course is converted to 16 three-hour blocks, then typically only half as many concepts can be developed with the same focus and preparation.

Framing Extended Learning Sessions as an Opportunity

While extended time-length classes do present significant physical and structural challenges for both professors and students, they also provide an opportunity to provide a richer learning environment than that allowed in short-session formats. Specifically, extended-session classes afford instructors more time for interactive learning – for instance, multi-part cases, live cases, group and individual discussion learning tools, multimedia presentations, team teaching, and other experiential hands-on experiences which are critical for learning are also more effectively implemented in extended session courses. These opportunity areas are developed further below:

Multi-Part Cases: Multipart cases are those that involve short follow up cases to the primary case assigned prior to class and simulate the dynamic nature of strategy. Typically each subsequent case provides insight into how the firm resolved the dilemma presented in the previous case and how the scenario changed as a result. Extended class periods allow for multipart cases to be used while discussion is fresh, a key advantage over teaching an “A” case on a Monday, for example, and a “B” case two days later on a Wednesday as in a shorter class. The benefits of a longer duration class for this type of interaction are numerous. In shorter session classes, a snapshot view of a firm at a given time is the focus of the case. As a result, cases fail to represent the dynamic and changing nature of strategy and competition. Solving a problem given a set of conditions is a valuable skill, but anticipating subsequent round effects and reformulating and responding to the strategy of others more accurately reflects real-world strategy making. Thus, multipart cases enable the students to experience industry dynamics and changing conditions in a way single-part cases do not and extended class sessions are the ideal setting for such.

Examples:

- **Cat Fight in the Pet Food Industry:** The multi-part case can also be used as a script for assigning student teams to manage the strategies of competing firms. For example, a popular multi-part Harvard case study “Cat Fight in the Pet Food Industry” can be turned into a dynamic, interactive case experience by assigning each student team to a specific firm in the industry. After discussing the “A” case prepared by the students in advance, teams are asked to discuss the strategy for “their” firm at the end of the case and what specific actions they would undertake to compete in the industry. Teams then make mini-presentations of this analysis and a brief discussion takes place comparing and contrasting strategic plans across the industry. Students are then given the “B” case to read. In it, two firms in the industry merge. The two former class groups are now one and the process begins again. After discussing the implications of the “B” case, the firms once again are asked to revise their strategy and outline specific courses of action. Teams make mini-presentations of their decisions and so on through a series of four cases. (Cat Fight A-D, HBS case #9-391-189, 9-391-195, 9-391-196, 9-391-197, www.hbsp.harvard.edu)

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- China’s Beer Wars: Thanks to Dr. Eugene Salorio for this suggestion. This INSEAD case series can be used to develop an idea of an industry then have teams of students take on roles as top team members of competing firms. We spend from one to two hours breaking down the industry structure, then in the remaining time I assign students one of the mini B cases on a particular player in the industry. Since there are 10 B cases there is an ample number for larger classes. I give each team 30 minutes to come up with a strategy for their firm given what they know about it and the Chinese beer industry. Use whatever strategy framework you like – I use the Hambrick & Fredrickson five diamonds – Salorio asks students to address ownership strategy (JV, etc.), production strategy, branding strategy, distribution strategy, distribution outlets, location strategy, and business strategy. Obviously there is much leeway in how you approach the second part, which makes it easily adaptable to many courses. (China’s Beer Wars A-C, published by Euro-Asia group at INSEAD, distributed by ECCH www.ecchatbabson.org.)
- Merck & Co., Inc: Addressing Third World Needs A-D: Merck, Inc. is an interesting multi-part case series because it includes strong elements of social responsibility and ethics. This case, published by the Business Enterprise Trust, focuses on the “accidental” uncovering of a potential cure for river blindness while pursuing a drug for animal care. The A case focuses on whether Merck should allow their scientists to pursue this potential treatment further given that it is uncertain of the outcome and river blindness only afflicts people unable to pay for pharmaceutical treatment. The B, C and D cases go further along the decision path of R&D, production, delivery and treatment with each step taking Merck further and further from revenue generation. The case thus evokes strong debates over “what is the right thing to do” and who are the key stakeholders and value creators within a company (e.g. the scientists who are motivated by alleviating human suffering, governments upon which Merck relies for drug approval, patent protection, etc.). This case has consistently been rated as one of the best learning experiences in our classes because of the emotion involved, especially given the video that shows how horrible the affliction is. (Merck & Co., Inc. A-D, published by the Business Enterprise Trust, distributed by Ivey Publishing case numbers 991021, 991022, 991023, 991024, www.ivey.ca/cases)
- Honda/Rover/BMW. This four part case series focuses on a potential acquisition of the last remaining British car company, Rover, by BMW. In the A case, Rover and Honda had been in a successful partnership for years with Honda all but taking control of the firm despite a fairly minor equity stake. Rover’s owners, a large conglomerate without automobile competencies are losing money year after year and want out, despite strong cultural and governmental pressures to keep Rover as a British company. The case allows for a rich discussion of alliances and cooperation in general as well as cultural issues. The B case describes the decision to sell to BMW and sets the issue of how to deal with Honda’s backlash and subsequent social protest of the sale within the UK whereas the C case gets to implementing the acquisition and integration of the two firms once Honda has withdrawn completely and the D case discusses

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the longer-term problems related to the acquisition and decline of BMW. A great case for not only cooperative strategies but for cultural/international business issues. (Honda-Rover A-D, HBS cases 9-899-223, 9-899-224, 9-899-225, 9-899-226, www.hbsp.harvard.edu).

- Nestlé-Rowntree (A, B, & C). This three part case by IMD focuses on the dynamics of a possible merger in the chocolate industry. Case A both describes the major industry participants, segments, and products and sets the stage for a possible hostile takeover of Rowntree by Jacobs Suchard. Rowntree management maintains a rather firm position desiring independence. Nestlé’s corporate philosophy of growth through internal development and friendly acquisitions is detailed. Case A ends with Nestlé being a possible white knight for Rowntree. Case B begins with Nestlé, very reluctantly, making a bid for Rowntree without the prior approval of Rowntree directors. During early negotiations conflicts arise over how Rowntree will be integrated within Nestlé. The case is suspended in the middle of a critical negotiation when Nestlé executives call a break to consult and cool down after reaching an impasse. The case provides ample opportunity to discuss various aspects of acquisitions, including anticipating integration problems. During the B case, teams are paired up to roll play the resumption of the critical negotiation. During the wrap up session, teams review their success or failure at reaching a compromise position. Teams that were successful at reaching a solution give debriefs of the solution. Afterward, a video is presented in which executives for Nestlé and Rowntree discuss their positions during the negotiation as well as how they navigated the tricky issue of integration. Parts A&B can easily fill an entire three hour block. Case C is a detailed implementation and integration case for merging the two companies that allows you to delve into structure, culture, and the importance of integration. (Nestle-Rowntree A, GM 423, published by IMD and distributed to ECCH www.ecchatbabson.org)

Live Cases: Another opportunity for extended time length sessions is the incorporation of live cases into the syllabus. In a “live case” students are assigned to develop a corporate strategy for an existing company based on its current situation. Rather than relying on previously gathered and sifted information presented in a written case, students experienced a “live” presentation by the top management team of a real company on their current strategic issues. Rather than basing analyses and recommendations on what a case writer has deemed relevant, live cases enable students to more accurately “solve” cases by doing their own research. Teams are typically given multiple weeks to perform research on the firm, industry, competitors and relevant environmental factors and to conduct their analysis and form recommendations for the firm. These team-based projects are then presented to members of the top management groups of the firms in the final class sessions. Such an integration of case and book learning with the live setting would not have been possible in a short-session program.

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- The sky is the limit with this format but it is usually best to pick a company for which financial data are readily available – private firms will work if you are willing to have your students sign a non-disclosure agreement. Even public firms will ask your students to sign something, which may or may not be an acceptable constraint. As a successful example, this last semester I used a bicycle distributor and linked it to the coursework through cases specific to that industry. My biggest failure here was the use of a huge non-US multinational that gave us great access to the TMT, but no access to meaningful financial data which left the students frustrated about their ability to develop meaningful recommendations.

Group and Individual Discussion Learning Tools: We have learned that successful extended session classes provide regular small-group break-outs or individual and group role-plays around focal questions or mini-cases with the aim of bringing the class together around a larger problem or very complex issue. For example, current articles from business periodicals can serve as ready mini-cases to discuss in groups and to emphasize the dynamic, current business environment. Students can use these short depictions as the foundation for group discussion then reported back to the class. We will provide examples of mini-case scenarios and the use of breakouts simulations for this purpose. We also outline some useful general principles and tools for generating break-out topics and managing break-outs effectively. Games and other structured learning tools are also presented. Board games such as “Acquire” that simulate mergers and acquisitions where target firms create large payoffs for their shareholders, etc. can bring textbook lessons into the classroom in a fun and engaging environment. Lastly, extended-session classes are a perfect fit with strategy and behavioral simulations or other learning-through-immersion type exercises. Projects, for example, where teams are asked to create identical products given constrained resources across geographic locations with minimal communication (e.g. one cell phone per team) is an effective way to learn about global strategy implementation. Further examples include:

- **Acquire:** I usually run two of these games in a three-hour session to first show the serendipity involved in strategy, and then determine the degree to which players learned from their first round. You can also run this at the beginning of your session, then follow with an M&A case where the structure of industry and competitive behaviors are uncertain. Up to six players can play with each set (meaning you will need at least that many boxesXstudents), but I find that four is an optimal number and odd numbers are consistently dysfunctional. The remaining time is devoted to debriefing the class on what they learned and tying it to what I wanted them to get out of the exercise.
(See <http://www.avalonhill.com/default.asp?x=games/acquire>)
- **PVC global integration project:** Thanks to Brian Boyd at ASU for developing this fascinating game to simulate international coordination within an MNC. Each team is asked for one person in charge of communication with a cell phone, provided the phone numbers of the other teams, and sent out to a remote location on campus to accomplish a simple task: build a product using every piece in a set given to them of parts that is a closed loop design and is exactly the same as the other groups’ product within an hour using only the cell phone

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communication. The part sets are made up of PVC pipe and couplings with over 60 pieces total, with lengths differing by as little as 1/8”. Each set has the same parts. Students are given instructions quickly and sent off before they have time to plan which makes for a great learning tool- not only will they need to coordinate to build the same product across all the locations but they will also need a design and communication plan to achieve the task in the time allotted. This exercise requires 75 minutes followed by a 20-30 minute debrief and is great at conveying team coordination and MNC strategy implementation. (For detailed information on building a set or the exercise, please contact Amy Hillman at amy.hillman@asu.edu)

- LEGOs. There are a variety of things you can do with LEGO building blocks and parts. One exercise is to convey the ideas behind the resource-based view where student teams are given heterogeneous LEGO parts and asked to build a product with fairly ambiguous specifications (e.g. attractive, tall). After a competition winners are declared and teams can trade in old parts for new ones and compete again. The debrief focuses on the role of differential parts (resources) and attributions made about what it was that made the winners in the first round. Reinvestment and dynamic generation of resources is also a key part of the exercise and learning.
- Group analytic assignment breakouts. A number of popular cases provide an opportunity in extended sessions to use breakout team work to address a case issue in a more rigorous analytic approach than usual. For instance, strategy cases on Southwest Airlines often lead students to suggest that one element of their low cost strategy deals with Southwest’s ability to accomplish faster turnarounds at the gate. However, when pressed, students are rarely able to provide analytic support for this intuition. When time permits, such as in extended session programs, it is possible to take a break and have teams attempt to calculate the magnitude of savings. Experience suggests that teams will approach this problem from a variety of ways and that some teams will struggle. After reviewing a few teams solutions, the instructor can walk through a relatively simple calculation of the savings associated with the greater utilization of aircraft (i.e., the reduction in fleet size) associated with fast turnarounds. Similar opportunities exist with other popular cases. For instance, estimating the barriers to entry in the soft drink industry. Also, estimating the economies of scope necessary to justify an acquisition premium from the viewpoint of the buyer. These exercises quickly become much more than simple calculation exercises as students have to translate abstract concepts into actionable decision support analysis.

Multimedia Presentations: Extended session classes also provide time to view and integrate video, sound, and even actors to add depth to topics suggested in a case or related readings. In this part of the workshop we will provide examples of ways in which multimedia can be effectively woven into a particular sessions, as well as ways in which internet and other advanced information technology can be leveraged inside and outside of the session to create a richer learning environment. For example, assigning students to

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roles within a case and asking them to “act out” how they would handle a case situation can not only allow the class to explore the case issues, but to also explore what happens during a negotiation. Visiting websites of the focal firm and its competitor as a class can also help provide more detail on competitive positioning. A written case on Harley-Davidson, for example, doesn’t provide the rich understanding of their hallmark look and sound that visiting the website, showing a video, or playing the patented sound of a Harley motorbike in class will. Finally, we will also discuss the opportunities present to have outsiders play a role in class discussions. For example, having a colleague pose as a financial representative who demands a new strategic plan or will call in company loans can introduce energy, excitement and new assignment opportunities facilitated by extended time sessions.

- Westmills Carpet. This is an example from University of Western Ontario. The case is about a carpet company near bankruptcy. During the case discussion, a colleague is asked to “dress like a banker” and interrupt the class by asking for the CEO at Westmills. The instructor chooses one student and says this is the person the intruder is looking for. The intruder then identifies him/herself as the banker for the company and that they are going to have to call in the loans in 48 hours unless he/she is satisfied the company has a solid turn-around plan. Student teams are then given 48 hours (or whatever the time typically between class meetings) to prepare a plan to save the firm. Teams come back in the next class and face a panel, including our original banker, who grill them on their plans. This exercise brings a lot of excitement (and anxiety since it is not disclosed up front) into the class and creates a real feeling of responsibility. (www.ivey.ca)
- Nestle case (see above)

Team Teaching. Extended sessions also allow for team teaching, where multiple faculty members from different departments or courses come together to teach a content session or multiple sessions. The extra time available in extended sessions is ideal for such experiences because it allows for multiple perspectives to be shared and examined in the class. For example, students may be assigned a case with relevance to both strategy and finance such as a merger or acquisition case involving valuation of the target firm. General class discussion can be lead by both strategy and finance faculty, each bringing their unique perspective on the discussion and relevant case questions. Teams may be broken out to discuss how much they would offer for the target firm, if an acquisition were justified. Here again, finance and strategy faculty members can walk the room, discussing their perspectives on the valuation discussion. The finance faculty may stress the importance of net present value and opportunity cost, while strategy faculty may emphasize the value of synergies based upon intangible, difficult to measure resources. We will discuss other examples of how the extra time available can lead to a more holistic understanding of a case or experiential learning exercise when team teaching.

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Combining Multiple Learning Formats. Finally, extended class sessions allow for the opportunity to mix the above formats to create an active learning environment. One technique that can be particularly effective in extended time length classes is to link cases and multi-part cases in particular to multiple formats to convey the same learning objective. To teach cooperative strategies, for example, a four hour class may include a negotiation between teams to reach a cooperative agreement followed by debrief, a brief mini-lecture or individual assignment, and a multipart case (where students discuss the “A” case, read a follow-up case “B”, discuss it, read another case “C” and discuss it). Or, a class on mergers and acquisitions might include an auction to demonstrate the “bidder’s curse,” a game played within teams such as “Acquire,” a mini-lecture, and a case discussion.

- **Lincoln Electric.** Here is an example of combining multiple learning formats. Lincoln Electric is a wonderful case to discuss implementation and the underlying organizational architecture that supports (or doesn’t support a strategy). Set in the mid 1970s this focuses on issues affecting Lincoln in the coming decades. Can the company continue with the same strategy and implementation efforts that have served them well over the past six decades? I use small and larger group discussions to get at what features of their organization have been critical in their past successes and will these same features serve them well in the future. Much of the discussion centers on rewards and controls as well as communication within the company. Most think the reward system will not work in the future. Then we show a video of about 15 minutes in length from “60 Minutes” that brings the company up to the mid 1990s and highlights they continued remarkable success. The next step involves using an HBR article written in 1999 (reprint 99305) by the Lincoln CEO describing the ventures into foreign markets that virtually bankrupt the company in the late 1990s. The article is divided into an introductory section describing all the problems they encountered going international and a concluding section that details how they solved their problems. We give each student the first half of the article to read on their own. This takes about 20-30 minutes. Then in small groups they develop possible solutions to Lincoln’s problems. We come back into the large group to discuss these and then they are given the second half of the article and I summarize what the company did. We end by again asking if the company continue as they have and some still say no. We close by checking their stock price at the end of business yesterday. (Lincoln Electric, HBS Case 376-028, www.hbsp.harvard.edu).

Responding to Other Challenges: Other challenges of extended time length sessions include creating courses and choosing learning materials for extended time length sessions, grading contribution to discussions and exercises, and balancing the variety of formats across a course, we discuss these challenges both as they relate to degree-seeking students (i.e. MBAs) and non-degree students (i.e. executive development). In the case of non-degree programs, building in adequate preparation time for participants will be of key concern. For both types of programs developing an atmosphere conducive to sharing experience among the students will be a key objective.

APPENDIX – Examples and Resources

- I. ECCH Teaching note, Industry Analysis, Spring 2002.
- II. JSME (2003) article by Coff & Hatfield – nice example of a debrief strategy.