Understanding How Students Evaluate & Apply Information

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Background Info

The SWOT analysis is a core fundamental concept laying the ground work of a marketing plan. The SWOT itself represents the Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats an organization will face in achieving their strategic goals.

SWOT ANALYSIS

	Helpful to achieving the objective	Harmful to achieving the objective
Internal origin	Strengths S	Weaknesses W
External origin	Opportunities O	Threats T

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SWOT_analysis

In a typical semester, students read about the concept of a SWOT analysis and an overview is included in lecture as well. Students are tested on the concept and then apply their learning to create a SWOT in their final marketing plan project.

From an "expert view" the concept and application seem straightforward, however in their final projects, students more often than not do not correctly apply their SWOT learning.

Some of the issues include:
•Irrelevant information
•Confusion over internal vs external dimensions
•Lack of citations
•Using opinions as opposed to facts
•Lack of supporting evidence for findings

Lesson Study Goals

Broad Student Learning Goals
•Demonstrate understanding of the purpose of a SWOT analysis
•Identify what makes a good SWOT analysis
•Successfully develop SWOT analyses

Specific Student Learning Goals
•Critically analyze and evaluate the quality of information/ evidence presented
•Recognize relevant vs non-relevant evidence
•Compare and contrast varying levels of support in existing work
•Utilize findings to complete a SWOT analysis based by relevant data for class project

Pre-Lesson Materials/Learning

The students previously read a chapter with information on a SWOT analysis, reviewed a textbook example, and explored how and why a SWOT analysis is used in the marketing discipline.

An in-class lecture expanded on the material from the textbook, along with a brief impromptu classroom exercise exploring a SWOT analysis for UW-L. The reading was assigned prior to the lecture, and the lesson study was one class period after the lecture.

Lesson Study Instructions

Students were given three SWOT examples selected from previous students' work which represented three different issues that often arise in students' SWOT analyses.

• Example 1 was extremely lengthy with an abundance of irrelevant data
• Example 2 had good data but often failed to include the source of the data.
• Example 3 was very brief, had limited evidence and presented opinions rather than empirical evidence for claims.

Students were given approximately 30 minutes to review the examples. Individually they read through the examples. In groups of 3-4, they assigned a note taker and then discussed what they saw in each example that was good/bad or made the SWOT analysis weak or strong. Finally, groups were asked to come to a general consensus on what made for a good SWOT analysis and the note-taker was to record and turn in findings.

While the groups discussed, observers took notes on the process used by the students to analyze the SWOT examples. Finally, a class discussion occurred which helped the students identify the actual strengths and weaknesses of the various SWOT examples .

General Observations

Students were generally able to identify the example that lacked evidence (example 3) but struggled with the other two. Some believed that example 1 (too much and irrelevant evidence) was good because it had a lot of information, while others noted it had too many quotes and that it seemed like it was copied and pasted.

Students failed to look at the both the quality of the information and its relevancy. Students generally thought the second example (the best of the 3) was the best one although they did not look at the content they "just determined" it was the best of the 3 given.

Most students could recognize that example 3 lacked factual information but there was minimal discussion as to what would have made it a better SWOT.

Results

Task Findings

Students did not reference their book or previous knowledge of the topics when discussing and analyzing the examples. Rather they just appeared to discuss using their opinion and perceived knowledge (of this topic that was new to them). We did not observe a single group pull out a textbook or class notes, which would have provided an example of a strong SWOT by which they could compare the examples.

Similarly, often times the groups were comparing the three examples as opposed to benchmarking them to their prior knowledge or understanding of a SWOT analysis. On only one occasion towards the end of time, one group questions internal versus external control, a core aspect of a SWOT. Another group member responded with "I think the answer to that is in the book". At no time did anyone in the room reference the textbook or previous class notes.

Students focused on superficial details such as commenting on the formatting which was not asked or expected of them. They spent significantly less time focusing on the actual content or the quality of the information that had been included in the SWOT and/or how the information contributes to the purpose of the SWOT.

Overall student were not active readers: they did not underline or take notes; they simply read one example, discussed, read another example discussed. As such, they lost a lot of time to reading, and re-reading, each example.

In line with the previous point, students treated the lesson as a task that needed to be completed, a check the box sort of mentality. They said things like "are we saying anything else or what" and "okay, so let's make this easy". Thus, the motivation for actually *learning* the lesson appeared weak, getting the task done seemed to be the biggest issue.

Group Findings

The note-taker in many of the groups did not actually participate in the discussion, but rather only assumed the role of note taker. Additionally, the quieter team members in some groups did not say anything until we were nearing the end of group time, but when they did they were very great comments/points. If they could be encouraged to speak up earlier the groups may have better (and more accurate) discussion points.

Critical thinking and debate of one another's ideas was weak in the groups. Members of the group did not question one another or discuss their thoughts they simply tried to brainstorm a list of items - the more the better. For example, when developing the criteria, one group just wrote down everything each member said and included it all as criteria. There was no critique or question of the ideas.

Conclusions

The lesson study was very insightful, but it also begs more questions. On one hand, we have a better understanding of how our students examine SWOT analyses (e.g., the process of how they tackled the assignment and their discussion around what makes for strong and weak SWOTs). On the other hand, we still do not know *why* they tackle the assignment the way they do. Do they not identify the "right" problems because they do not know what good criteria are? Why do they not critique one another's ideas? Do they know how to critically analyze the example?

Considerations For The Future

•Assign the examples to be read outside of class. Reading the examples did take up a fair amount of in class time and different students had different reading speeds.

•If assigned as homework, students could prepare their own ideas about each of the examples and bring them to the discussion as a starting point.

•Assign a devil's advocate within the group to stimulate a better discussion.

• Give a better background of the samples, where the came from and what some of the common issues are.