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GRANDON GILL

EMBA 2002 (A)

Dr. Grandon Gill, Associate Professor of Information Systems & Decision Sciences at the University of South Florida, was very concerned. Within three days of his first class meeting in a course being given to the university's Executive MBA program, the director of the program had forwarded to him two email messages from students that complained about virtually every aspect of the course (see Exhibit 1). In addition, he had become involved in an e-mail exchange with another student that appeared to suggest similar dissatisfaction (see Exhibit 2). Since the class consisted of only 20 students, even three e-mail messages represented a significant percentage of the class. Furthermore, Dr. Gill felt it was unlikely that these individuals had acted alone. Thus, in single morning of lectures, it appeared that he had angered a large minority, if not the majority, of the class.

Gill felt he had a number of options available to him for dealing with the situation. First, of course, was to act as if nothing had happened. The most likely result of doing so would be poor course evaluations at the end of the semester. Since Gill was tenured, however, the main practical import of such evaluations would likely be that he would not be invited back to teach the EMBA again—which hardly seemed like a “worst case” scenario, given the present happenings. At the other extreme, he could completely redesign the course: relying on more in-class case studies, drastically reducing the outside workload, and changing the curve to reflect the “norm” of EMBA grading practices, which appeared to be giving mainly, if not entirely, A grades. Gill felt sure that this would mollify the students and, given his extensive past experience using the case method, might even lead to a high level of group satisfaction.

Two important factors complicated the decision. First, the course being taught consisted of only seven 4-hour sessions that met weekly. That meant that any delay in deciding could lead to nearly a third of the course being completed prior to its redesign being finalized. Second, the primary pedagogical tool being

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used in the course was the case method. For such a method to be successful, considerable “buy in” among participants was required. Without such “buy in”, what was supposed to be active learning degenerated into “lecturing via the case method”—negating nearly all the benefits the method was presumed to offer.

As he stared into his computer screen at the two e-mail messages, Gill muttered: “Why did they ask me to teach in this program, anyway?”

Grandon Gill

Grandon Gill had a varied background that strongly impacted his teaching styles and pedagogy. He had completed the requirements for his undergraduate degree from Harvard College at the age of 19 in Applied Mathematics and Economics in 1975. He then joined the U.S. Navy, where he served as a nuclear trained submarine officer. With the eighteen hour days and two-and-a-half month patrols, he unequivocally stated that the experience was, by far, the toughest job he ever had. He also conceded that he was, at best, mediocre in that particular career. The nature of the job, emphasizing strict adherence to complex procedures—creativity is bad when you're trying to keep a nuclear reactor running (and safe)—simply did not suit his temperament.

When he enrolled at Harvard Business School's (HBS) MBA program in 1980, Gill was determined to have a bit of fun, to make up for the previous five years. As a result, he set modest academic goals for himself, targeting the middle of his class—roughly the same as his standing as an undergraduate. This was a decided contrast to nearly all his classmates, who were either worried about passing or were envisioning themselves at the top of the class, in about a 50-50 split.

During his first week of the program, Gill quickly discovered that he had a special kinship with the case method, as employed at HBS. The first day of class, each student was assigned to one of ten 80-person cohorts, referred to as a section. For the remainder of the first year, each student took all of his or her classes with that section. Whereas many of his classmates dreaded the need to speak up in front of the section, Gill found he relished the opportunity. Indeed, by the end of the first week, all concerns about whether he could make pass the program had vanished. Instead, he felt completely comfortable tossing in irreverent comments, taking sides of arguments that were diametrically opposed to his actual views, and, generally having the time of his life with the process.

Largely as a consequence his total lack of anxiety about anything he said in class, Gill's performance in the MBA program that far exceeded his goals. The HBS program was graded on a very strict curve, with 10-15% getting E (excellent), 70-80% getting S (satisfactory), and 10-15% getting LP (low pass). Variations from this curve for an individual first year course were not allowed, except through a vote of the full faculty. Naturally, this meant that such variations never happened. By the end of his two years in the program, Gill had amassed 21 credits of E and 6 credits of S, placing him within the top 2% of his class and leading him to be named a "Baker Scholar", after the individual who provided the donation that founded the school.

Upon leaving the school, Gill pursued a number of entrepreneurial ambitions and also served as the senior vice president of an agribusiness consulting firm that had been founded by one of his professors. While in this capacity, between (and during) his consulting assignments, he was asked by that professor to write some cases for use at HBS. Gill enjoyed the case-writing process and found his cases to be well received. In fact, one of his first cases (Cape Cod Potato Chips) was used as the lead-off case for the Agribusiness courses offered at HBS and at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government for nearly 20 years. Despite his success in the consulting arena, and a strong entrepreneurial bent, Gill found that he missed the type of interaction he had experienced back in the MBA program. He also found that he had a growing interest in computer modeling, but lacked even rudimentary programming skills. As a consequence, he decided to change directions in his career, and entered the HBS doctoral program in information systems. While working on his doctorate, Gill soon realized that business research was entirely different from case-writing and, even at HBS, such activities were not viewed as serious research. Indeed, much of the case

writing at HBS was left to doctoral students—which turned out to be the part of the program he most enjoyed. Moreover, even those schools that did reward case writing, such as HBS, were starting to de-emphasize it, perhaps in order to achieve the more mainstream academic recognition that came with refereed journal articles. Thus, when it came time for him to decide where he was to go, he ignored strongly stated counsel of his advisor that he join a research-focused institution and, instead, considered only those schools that met three main criteria: a balance in assignments that favored teaching over research, the opportunity to teach both technical (e.g., programming) and managerial (e.g., case study) courses, and a location that his family could be happy with. Using those criteria, in 1991 he selected Florida Atlantic University, in Boca Raton, as his first academic posting.

The Case Method: “HBS Style”

The case method, as a pedagogical device, made its debut in the early twentieth century. HBS was almost entirely responsible for tailoring it to the purpose of educating managers and, as practiced there, remains a mixture of formula and art. The typical HBS teaching case has a body of 7-15 pages of single-spaced, 11 point text. It will also have a number of exhibits, on separate pages, at the end of the case. It is normally organized into sections, the first being an introductory section outlining the problem to be addressed, followed by a series of sections providing necessary background (e.g., industry, product, company) and, finally, concludes with a section that explores the problem to be addressed in greater detail. Although not every case follows this formula, the best tend to—because the purpose of a teaching case is to stimulate active discussion, not to serve as a vehicle for lecturing about some particular organization's achievement or failure. Indeed, the front page of nearly every HBS case includes a footnote stating: “[this case was prepared] as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate the effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation”.

A case discussion, performed according to the HBS protocol, typically proceeds in 4 stages:

1. Preparation: Students preparing a case for discussion typically spend 2-3 hours in the process of analyzing and dissecting the key elements of the case. The active process of preparing a case is very different from reading a case. One of the advantages of HBS cases is that their length allows many extraneous facts to be included with those most relevant to the situation, which is much more realistic than the paragraph-long cases that often appear in management texts. The distinction between relevant and irrelevant is nearly always lost in a casual reading. Only through detailed study of the text, analysis of the exhibits (including “running the numbers”) and careful thought can a case be truly understood. Some professors provide study questions to guide the students in this analysis, while others don't. Normally, a student's goal in preparing the case is to come up with a plan of action and an outline organizing their thoughts in the event they are called upon to give the “dreaded” opening. Frequently, after individual preparation, students get together in small study groups to share their observations and analysis.

2. Opening: In a normal HBS class, e.g., in the MBA or in a graded executive program, the classroom case discussion begins with a “cold call”, whereby a student is asked—without prior notice—to present his or her analysis of the case. During this presentation, the instructor stands at the chalk board and writes down key points, attempting to keep them organized.

The length and content of student openings vary considerably, as does the instructor's reaction to them. Some students attempt to present every case fact—relevant or irrelevant—as part of the opening. Seeing

this, instructors will often cross-examine students to see if there is “a point”. Alternatively, some students will simply make recommendations without supporting them. In such situations, the instructor may prod the student for more details, effectively administering a public oral examination on the case. Occasionally, a student is called upon who is totally unprepared to open. Such students may choose to “pass”, typically earning them a sharp glance from the instructor, who will then move on, or the student may attempt to open anyway. Upon encountering a student trying to open without preparation, the instructor may choose to call for volunteers to “help him/her out” or may choose to grill the student without apparent mercy. The choice tends to depend on both the instructor and on the student involved. For example, most instructors tend to reserve the “grilling” approach for their best students (who, experience tells us, are every bit as likely to come in unprepared as weaker students), which accomplishes the primary goal of such intimidation (ensuring everybody comes to subsequent classes well prepared) without producing lasting anxiety in the hapless “victim”.

3. Discussion: Once the opening is complete, the class continues to discuss the case, normally for about an hour. During this period, the instructor may either allow the class to follow its own path or may direct the discussion to specific topics. The best case instructors appear to do both, letting the class do nearly all of the talking, yet making sure that the most interesting aspects of the case are covered. Inexperienced instructors will sometimes take complete control of the discussion, calling on students one-by-one to answer specific questions about the case. Such an approach is disdainfully referred to as “lecturing via the case method” by case aficionados—who liken it to the way that case “discussions” are conducted at law schools, a serious insult indeed for the typical manager.

From the instructor’s point of view, there are a number of challenges associated with teaching HBS-style courses. First, it is nearly impossible to surface all the issues associated with a given class during a single class period. Instructors feeling obligated to do so tend to begin lecturing early in the class, at which point active discussion quickly transforms to passive learning. Second, if the majority of the students in the class have not seriously prepared” the case—contrasted with merely reading it—discussion quickly fades into a series of “I agree with..” statements that add little to anyone’s understanding. Finally, the instructor has to orchestrate the discussion while keeping mental note of who says what for the purposes of grading (inasmuch as jotting down notes while students are talking tends to make them very nervous).

4. Summary: At the end of each case discussion, the instructor typically takes 5-10 minutes to summarize the highlights of the case, reinforcing the lessons learned.

It is nearly impossible for an instructor to conduct a good case discussion without a detailed plan. Such a plan would typically include “must cover” points, “nice to see” points and “move on” points (e.g., topics that are likely to lead to nowhere). The plan also normally includes an expected discussion flow and, in some cases, an expected organization for the writings on the board. At HBS, instructors teaching the same course typically meet for 2-3 hours to discuss the case they are about to teach, in order to come up with a uniform plan across all sections.

Every instructor teaching a case class adopts, either implicitly or explicitly, a persona that they will use for the class. The persona reflects the “personality” that is to be used by the instructor in conducting the case. How he or she will make assertions about the case, question students, deal with bad openings, and so forth. Establishing such a persona makes it easier for students to decide how to react to instructor comments, when it makes sense to challenge the instructor, and determine what is important. Although many instructors adopt a persona similar to their natural personality, others may behave quite differently in a case class than in other situations.

Gill affectionately referred to his particularly theatrical persona for conducting case discussions as the “blowhard”, modeled after that used by some of his favorite instructors at HBS. At first contact with his class he would assert his mastery of the case method, act as if he was the final word in academia, and threaten extraordinarily dire consequences for anyone who came in unprepared to open. During the conduct of each class, he would rush around the room, rant and rave when statements were not to his liking (and, as often as not, when they were to his liking, as well), and generally appear as if he was about to go over the edge.

Among the advantages Gill found in adopting this persona were: 1) virtually every case he could remember from his own MBA program had been discussed in a class where some version of that persona was used, 2) it ensured high levels of preparation in the critical early classes, where class norms were being established, and 3) over time, the class usually discovered that the best way to deal with a blowhard is to challenge him (when successfully challenged, Gill would quickly start to cringe and appear to become entirely deflated). Towards the end of a semester taught in blowhard fashion, there were few things that he could say that weren't subject to immediate scrutiny by the class. To Gill's way of thinking, this represented the essence of active learning.

Although it had proved relatively successful for Gill, earning him two “Most Outstanding Professor of the Program” awards in FAU's EMBA program, employing the “blowhard” persona was not entirely without risks. If students came to believe that it was his actual personality, as opposed to being in a constant state of guessing regarding how much of it was an act, some of the behaviors exhibited while acting in the persona could be viewed as highly non-professional. Gill always tried to offer humorous hints that all might not be as it seemed. But, sometimes, one or more students did not pick up on these. Gill suspected that this might be part of the problem in his current situation.

Executive MBA Programs

The goal of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree was to teach students the fundamentals of managing a business through a series of courses normally divided into business functions (e.g., finance, management, marketing, information systems) and special topic areas (e.g., international business, e-commerce). The requirements of the degree varied dramatically between graduate schools, from 2-year full time programs at institutions such as Harvard, Stanford and MIT to unaccredited degrees offered over the Internet. In most universities, an MBA consisted of a program requiring between 30 and 40 credits of coursework, once prerequisites had been met. Since many MBA students also worked, most regular MBA programs tended to be non-resident, with many courses offered at night.

Executive MBA programs differed from traditional Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs in a number of ways. First, they tended to be much more selective, particularly with respect to work experience, so that students who were enrolled came in with much more business experience with their regular counterparts. Second, they tended to be organized so that students went through the entire program as a group, typically over a 15-18 month period with classes on weekends, and had a designated program director who tried to isolate them from the administrative aspects of being a student (e.g., registering for classes) as much as possible. Third, nearly everyone in an executive program tended to be employed full time.

The combination of the three factors tended to make teaching EMBA programs both more challenging and, potentially, more rewarding than regular courses. As a result of the selectivity, it was not uncommon for EMBA students to feel that they were entering the program with more business knowledge than many regular MBA students possessed upon graduation—a feeling that was often justified. Similarly, between work and family, the outside demands on their time were sufficiently great that the students resented any assignments or coursework that they did not feel offered immediate value. Also, because they became quite organized over the duration of their program, they tended to be quite comfortable voicing their complaints to the director of the program when they felt something did not suit them.

Gill's previous experience teaching EMBA programs had been extensive, and generally quite positive. He began teaching during the second year of FAU's newly created EMBA program. The professor who had taught the previous class, using a curriculum very similar to the one he had used for his undergraduate business students, had been so thoroughly roasted by the class that he had vowed never again to teach in the program. Gill's case method approach, however, seemed to resonate with the class, and the following year the class gave him the "Most Outstanding Professor of the Program" award at their graduation dinner. The class that followed gave him a similar award, "The Most Memorable Professor of the Program Award"—remembered particularly affectionately by Gill because the student who handed him the award (the top in the class) had been given the pounding of his life (by Gill) upon trying to open a case unprepared. A fact the student ruefully—and appreciatively—noted as he presented Gill with the award.

Although subsequent classes stopped singling out a single professor for an award, his rapport with the EMBA students continued. While he was teaching his third group, he launched an FAU case series and developed three case studies on local companies, all of which were then picked up for publication by Prentice Hall. Eventually, he either developed or supervised the development of ten such cases.

Gill's experience with his fourth EMBA class proved to be very different from the first three. The class itself differed from his previous classes in a number of respects. First, as a result of an accreditation requirement (brought to the attention of the accrediting agency by the director of a competing EMBA program in FAU's service area), they had been required to do more coursework than previous classes—a fact discovered while they were in the middle of their program. Citing the unfairness of this change, the students had been able to negotiate reduced workload from most of their other professors. Second, they were nearing the end of their two-year program, whereas all of Gill's previous courses had occurred early in the program, before students became quite as vocal and organized.

On the first day of the class in question, the leader of the EMBA section had raised her hand and stated:

"We've seen the requirements in the syllabus. Now what are the real course requirements?"

Not being aware that other instructors had been making concessions, and honestly believing it to be a joke, Gill had replied:

"They are what they are. Is there something I don't understand?"

What followed was ten-minute discussion of work requirements that Gill had finally cut off, abruptly. Given that he had already pared down the work considerably from what he required in his regular MBA class, he felt the discussion was becoming wasteful of class time.

The class had proceeded uneventfully for the next five weeks, albeit with an undercurrent Gill did not entirely understand, until a Saturday class day when he called on a particular student (a PhD in psychology) who was completely unprepared to open. Because, based on Gill's earlier experience, the individual was not one who would react well to a "roasting", he simply said "let's try someone else", and called on another individual, who did a decent job finishing up.

The following Monday, Gill had received a call from his department chair that the EMBA was up in arms, and some had appointed themselves to visit the director and demand that something "be done" about him. (Threats of a lawsuit to compensate for the embarrassment experienced by the unprepared student were also mentioned.) Given his past reputation in the program, the Director left the matter totally in Gill's hands.

The solution that Gill proposed, which was based on intuition rather than common sense, was to offer each student the following choice:

They could "opt out" of the remainder of the course participation requirement and be given an "average" participation grade. They would also be exempted from doing the remaining outside programming assignments, meaning their final grade would be determined by a final project or written case analysis. They could "opt in" to the participation requirement, be required to do all programming assignments, get no extra credit and, as he put it, in his best blowhard form, "face the prospect of being harassed unmercifully by me during case discussions if you come in unprepared"

Both the program director and the department chair had advised the strategy was too high risk to pursue—since students who chose to "opt out" would have a workload substantially lower than that for those choosing to "opt in". But Gill felt he needed "buy in" if the case class was to be effective. The results were that 2 students (the PhD and the section leader) chose the "opt out" option, while the remaining two dozen in the class chose to "opt in", much to the pleasure of Gill (and to the surprise of his superiors). The remainder of the course went smoothly and Gill's anonymous course evaluations were very good—even though weighted down by 2 unknown students who marked him in the lowest category.

After his experience with the last EMBA section he taught, Gill chose not to do any more teaching in the university's standard EMBA program. Instead, he chose to focus on the university's newly created Environmental MBA program, also an executive program, where distance learning was featured. In deciding to leave the EMBA program, he joined a large group of other senior faculty members—the original advocates of the program—who felt that they were being forced to compromise their standards in order to meet the demands of the students. Pressure to reduce workload to levels far below the normal requirements for regular MBAs, and to offer a grading curve far higher than that typically given to regular MBA students were the most common complaints. The time taken up responding to complaints was also sometimes cited, in their private conversations with Gill (who was the head of the college's Executive Education council). As a result, the FAU program was already starting to see a trend where, in many disciplines, junior faculty and instructors were being brought in as a substitute for senior faculty to teach the executive courses.

USF EMBA 2002: The First Week

In the summer of 2001, right before he joined the faculty at USF, Gill's department chair had called him to ask if he was willing to teach in the EMBA (instead of in the Master's in MIS program, where he had been originally slotted). The department chair gave three reasons for believing it was a good opportunity:

- Highly motivated students
- 7 class meetings instead of the usual 15
- A modest stipend added to his regular salary

Given his past experience teaching EMBA classes, Gill had jumped at the chance, although he did wonder why he was getting such a plum assignment, given that he hadn't thought to ask for it as part of the job negotiations.

Gill had jumped into preparing the course with considerable relish. Because of the limited number of class meetings, it seemed unrealistic to offer a pure case course; Gill had found that one MIS case per day was sufficient to drain the energy reserves of most classes. He therefore decided to offer a hybrid course, with online case discussions (using a protocol he had originally developed for the FAU Environmental MBA program) supplementing the in-class discussions.

He also envisioned creating a business plan exercise, in which the entire class created a business plan for a technology-related IT product—and was held accountable for results (through adjustments to the grading curve). The notion was that he would supply the class with a technology product, in its infancy, and get them to figure out how to make a business out of it. As he was trying to figure out how to make this happen, Gill also became involved in a software testing research program. It occurred to him that he could create an application, a GIS (geographic information system), that could serve double duty. First, it could become a test bed for software research (with the ability to inject errors at will), so the way in which individual characteristics impacted the software testing process could be studied. Second, it could serve as the “prototype” version of the application for which the EMBA students would create a business plan for, since the GIS market was ripe with opportunities.

To complete his course design, Gill also developed six hours of entirely new classroom lecture content, dealing with architectures, software development and the make-or-buy decision that he hoped would help thing think about their plan. He also decided to include a database assignment that he had used for years (in both executive and regular MBA programs) that had always been well received and would provide them with insights on how GIS technology could be enhanced. The previous summer, he had developed a series of narrated video clips that could be played on the computer for FAU's Virtual MBA program, conducted entirely on-line. That meant that the normal 4-5 hours of classroom lectures on database topics could be shifted out of the classroom, and the executives could do the assignment at their own pace.

In designing the course, Gill chose what he believed to be an appropriate workload, targeting in the range of 8 to 10 hours per week. Since the last day of class was eight weeks after the first, this meant that he needed to keep the total outside workload less than 80 hours. Based on his estimates (See Exhibit 3), he computed the outside course load as roughly 60 outside hours, or 7.5 hours per week, using the minimums for each assignment.

Prior to finalizing the syllabus, he ran it by the director of the program, who returned an email saying “lovely”. Gill knew he was ready to go.

Saturday: The First Class

Gill arrived early to his first class, on Saturday 9 February, in order to get all his equipment set up. He began his first lecture, an overview of the course, in his finest “blowhard” style—setting up the class for the next week’s first in-class case study. The class was extremely lively, and seemed to be going well. Indeed, a proctor from the LSAT exam, being administered in the room below, had to come up to ask Gill to quiet down—much to the class’s amusement. As he went over the course requirements, a few eyes seemed to widen but he considered that hardly surprising. He joked how his main goal was to steal time away from the “Business Problem Solving” professor—who was teaching the class that ran in parallel with Gill’s—and the expected laugh came, although a little weaker than he had anticipated. Also, he observed that quite a few private conversations started when he mentioned his typical EMBA grade distribution (50% A, 50% B) and added that the curve would be adjusted based on the entire class’s performance on the business plan assignment. He assumed that the conversations resulted from the fact that the assignment was: a) a novel concept, and b) a really sweet deal—provided the class pulled together.

After the first break, when he began lecturing on actual course content, the class seemed a bit more subdued. But, since he didn’t really consider lecturing his forte, once again he was not too concerned.

During the second break, two things that struck him as a bit odd occurred. First, when one of the students was kind enough to show him the way to the program office in the maze that was the USF College of Business, she kept emphasizing she wasn’t doing it to “brown nose” him. On the one hand, it was amusing. On the other, he asked himself, why would an EMBA even feel the slightest need to worry that common courtesy could be construed as an attempt to curry the instructor’s favor? On the way back, a couple of students approached him and, more or less, directly stated that the 18 hour/week requirement of the course was way over the top. They also explained to him—as if he had never taught an executive program before—that they all had professional lives that needed to be maintained. Since Gill had already had an unpleasant experience in an EMBA relating to workload issues, he responded cautiously—pointing out that the length of the program (7 weeks) would require a correspondingly higher workload than a typical 14 week course. But, in his mind, he vowed he’d check his syllabus as soon as he got home. He had no idea where the 18 hour figure came from.

Finally, he found himself feeling a bit uncomfortable when joining the group for lunch—which he had been strongly urged to do by the program director. Despite the fact that he was their “guest”, he found himself awkwardly inviting himself to sit at a table with some students. Nor was he absolutely certain they were that eager for his presence. But he also noted that the two other faculty members in the room were more or less sitting alone. Perhaps that was the norm.

Monday

By Monday morning, 11 February 2002, Gill was becoming genuinely alarmed. Although he had not received any communications indicating that there was a problem, he had noticed an extraordinary sluggishness in his online discussion of the class's first case: *HE Butt Grocery Company: The New Digital Strategy*. Indeed, only a couple of postings from students discussing the case had appeared. This was totally inconsistent with his experience in prior courses, where postings had appeared almost immediately. The hairs on the back of his neck started to give him the same sensation he'd had with his last EMBA group, back at FAU.

He went into the office early that morning, and called the director of the program—indicating his concern that something was very wrong. The director reassured him, and they traded war stories about experiences in the programs. Gill also mentioned his grading curve, figuring it was pretty standard for the program. Here, the director paused, and emphasized that it was really up to the discretion of the instructor. Some chose to give all A's, while others chose to award a mixture of grades.

By 7 PM on Monday night, three out of the four openings that had been assigned for the HE Butt online case had appeared. The fourth was missing. Gill was quite surprised to have a missed opening, something he had *never* seen in any of the six courses he had taught using his online discussion protocol. Then he received an e-mail from the student who had missed the deadline (see Exhibit 2 for entire e-mail exchange). Although the student's reason seemed justified, Gill recalled that he had sent out the message to the student assigning the opening on Saturday. Gill felt that the student—anticipating such an important deal—could have, at least, informed him, so he could have reassigned the opening. Rescheduling, in an orderly fashion, didn't bother Gill. In fact, he had already moved the owner of a chain of flower shops out of the opening slot, unbeknownst to anyone, because of the proximity of Valentine's Day.

These factors, combined with the fact that the online discussion continued to proceed very slowly (exacerbated by the fact that one of the openings was missing) led Gill to take a hard line, responding with his own message. A few hours later, the student came back with one last message, complaining about the course, this time directed to the program director rather than Gill (who was copied). Gill, in a mixture of exasperation and amusement, sent back one more message, calling into question some of the mathematics involved.

Tuesday

On Tuesday morning, Gill called the director of the program again to talk about his interchange. The director opened the conversation with words to the effect of “well, you've certainly got their attention”. But he didn't seem quite as buoyant as he had the day before. Later, Gill understood why. The first of the two e-mails contained in Exhibit 1 had already been received.

Later that day, Gill received an e-mail from the director containing both the first and second emails he had received from students that called the design of the course, as well as Gill's qualifications, into question.

The Dilemma

Gill now felt he was facing a very serious dilemma. In a class like this, always together as a group, three dissatisfied emails probably indicated at least ten dissatisfied students. At least half the class, he guessed. This was not good. This was not what he got into teaching for.

Furthermore, none of his alternatives seemed very palatable. On the one hand, he could truly adopt the “blowhard” persona, this time for real, and choose the “make the bastards pay” approach. No changes. No concessions. Make the course a punishment (for both the class and for himself). And, of course, never teach in the EMBA program again.

On the other hand, he could very easily comply with all the requests in the email. Toss in a few lectures that addressed the requests in the e-mail, so as to would appear responsive. Get rid of the database assignment. Throw out the online cases. Kill the business plan assignment. Knock down the outside hours to 2 hours a week, explaining he hadn’t realized how demanding their jobs were (an untruth, to be sure, but one he suspected that they might be ready to accept). Maybe even hint, along the way, that all A’s would be forthcoming, in recognition of their brilliant discussion—an outcome that would also make the course much easier for Gill, who wouldn’t have to pay attention to a single thing that his students said or wrote if he already knew what their grade was going to be. And, or course, never teach in the EMBA program again.

The problem was, Gill liked the challenge that teaching EMBA students brought to the table. Since both the options on the table ensured that he would never teach in the program again, there had to be better alternatives. But what were they?

“Why *did* they ask me to teach in this program, anyway?”, he asked aloud, to no one in particular.

Exhibit 1: Email Sent to the Director

On Tuesday, 2/12/02, the Director of the Program forwarded the following e-mail excerpts to Dr. Gill, identifying the authors only as "excellent students"

E-mail #1:

...Although Dr. Gill does seem to have a much better grasp of information technology basics than did [a previous professor], his approach to ensuring that we capture the content of the course is not conducive to our executive schedules and other course expectations in the final weeks of the program.

It is clear to me that this is Dr. Gill's first experience teaching an executive program at USF. Unfortunately, instead of showing the same professional flexibility we have come to expect of the EMBA program, Dr. Gill appears to be myopically focused on teaching this course as he did at other universities' regular MBA programs.

Additionally, Dr. Gill is unusually concerned with performing some of our assignments on-line as he did with one of his courses that was conducted in its entirety over the Internet. Although one would imagine that this would provide the exact type of flexibility we yearn for in a course, it in fact has proven to do the exact opposite. For example, if a student does not post an opening to an on-line case discussion by a certain due date and time, Dr. Gill will purportedly deduct points from that individual's grade. As well, Dr. Gill's expectation for time spent on this single task is 4-5 hours per week (keep in mind that this is just one of the tasks that must be completed for his course.)

Further, Dr. Gill has focused one section of the course (and our grade) on a database project. I cannot agree more that database skills are very important for the modern executive to master - however - Dr. Gill is requiring that students learn Microsoft Access to complete this section of the course. This requirement is not fulfilled by Dr. Gill reviewing the program with us, but instead by requiring that students watch an exhaustive 5+ hours of self-made (Gill Software Inc. ??) computer based training with a voice-over by Dr. Gill himself. I can tell you that this is not the way to teach a computer application. Even the best professionally made computer based training programs (that use real multimedia including video, application simulation, and feedback) require some classroom instruction to be 100% effective. As well, the professionals in the EMBA program are at a point in their careers where they should be more interested in knowing the skill sets to look for when hiring a database professional than learning how to create complex queries on their own.

In closing, I am sure that Dr. Gill earnestly wants to teach an effective MIS course. Within this, most of Dr. Gill's course objectives are relevant, however, the manner by which he is expecting to provide us with MIS enlightenment is off target:

1. The case studies are a great tool. I've already read ahead on quite a few of them. Our class is a mature group of executives and will conduct meaningful discussions on the subjects at hand without having Dr. Gill "surprise" one of us by having to present a 10 minute opening on the case "Harvard style."
2. The on-line case studies are a nice idea, however imposing time requirements and stringent due dates and times for posted openings (again by "surprising" one of us with this task) is not conducive to our schedules.
3. Studying databases is on target - but it's what we study about them that matters. How to create a query will be forgotten before you hand us our diplomas. What the capabilities of a database are, and how to hire a database professional would be useful to the members of the class. As well, as I've mentioned before some content on ERP and CRM is sorely needed in the program - this is where the IT focus is for the modern executive!
4. Dr. Gill's final project of creating a business plan for his software program sounds interesting, but he could easily scale this project down (or give us all an equity stake in his software company). We have already completed almost identical coursework in our Marketing and International Business course.

Email #2

I don't think I've ever felt the need to send you a note regarding any of our classes, but feel compelled to do so regarding Dr. Gill's class.

While I think the case approach to teaching that Dr. Gill is using is quite educational, he seems driven by, and even stated, the fact that he wanted us to have so much work to do for him that our other concurrent professor would complain. This seems immature to me. As you are well aware, we are executives who know how to manage time. Dr. Gill is giving us assignments due between class meetings, which must be accomplished by specific times (assignments given on Saturday night due Monday night and given Wednesday night due Thursday night) in addition to our preparation for class (when he will 'surprise' us with assignments). This seems arbitrary and burdensome. Furthermore, he seems inflexible to any deviation from his process, and will deduct points even for justified delays.

I could, however, accept this if it was the entirety of his expectations for us. What I find unacceptable is that he's given us this work, along with 2 projects (1 database, another Capstone). The Capstone project he's assigning seems to serve only a personal objective for him – to get free MBA labor on a project he's working on for himself. I believe we've already met the requirements for writing business plans in our Marketing, International Business, and Business Problems Analysis classes.

While we may in fact get something out of it, we're not going to have much time to a good job at anything he's assigned, due to the sheer volume of work in this class (not to mention that we're also preparing weekly presentations for [Business Problem Solving professor's name] course). As an aside, I also believe his style is somewhat offensive to myself and others, and would not foresee him getting good marks on the "respect for students" category. He's put himself on a pedestal, which does not add to an educational experience for Executives.

I understand that Dr. Gill hasn't taught in the EMBA program before. If there's any way you could express to him that this sounds like overkill, and he should pare back the assignments, I'd certainly appreciate that. I've really enjoyed my EMBA experience, and don't want to leave with this bad taste in my mouth. (nor do I want to blow my GPA by not meeting unreasonable expectations).

Exhibit 2: Email Exchange with Student

Received by Grandon, Monday 2/11/02, 6:58 PM

Grandon,

I will work on the Butt Grocery Company case tonight, I just arrived home from work and it is 6:54 PM so needless to say I do not have the time to get it done by 7:00 PM. I was out of town yesterday and only received your e-mail this morning before going to work.

Sorry, but I am a Business Development Director so demands at work keep me extremely busy. I had a 5:30 conference call on a \$2 million acquisition I am doing in North Florida.

(Kind of like Graduate School in real life!)

Thanks,

[Name omitted]

Grandon replies, Monday 2/11/02, 7:36 PM

{Student First Name}:

I am sure that were I in your position I would have made the same decision: to put off course responsibilities in order to meet job responsibilities. For you to do otherwise would be a failure to meet your obligations as a manager.

I am equally sure that you understand that the late points that are deducted any time an assignment is late must be deducted consistently--whether or not the reason was a \$2 million deal, or the desire to attend a child's soccer practice. For me to do otherwise would be a failure to meet my obligations as an instructor.

Regards,

Grandon

Received by Grandon, Monday 2/11/02, 8:23 PM, as a copy on an e-mail to the director of the program

[Director of the Program's First Name],

I believe I will have a problem with this class's requirement on my time. Looking at Grandon's syllabus, I compute an 18 hour per week studying requirement, never mind the CD learning, and

class time required. I spoke to Grandon about this issue and his response was to the effect that this is equivalent to a regular MBA class if it were condensed into a 16 week timeframe. This is obviously not geared toward the E's in the EMBA program.

DR Gill needs to do what he needs to do but I will tell you right now; this is too much work for the EMBA curriculum. Unless of course you wish to joint venture with Harvard, in which case you need to change my diploma to read as such.

There is not enough time in a week to reach DR Gill's expectations. Can we address this? Although I did not broadcast this to my classmates, I know they feel like I do, feel free to poll them to validate or invalidate their positions.

Thanks,

[Student Full Name]

DR Gill,

Deduct the points on my opening as you see fit. Although I understand your position, I fail to agree with it. I also did not understand, nor was your presentation clear (from what I heard) that openings were time sensitive. I understood closings to be limited to 250 words and due on a timeframe.

Sent by Grandon, Monday 2/11/02, 9:04 PM, with a copy to the director of the program

[Student First Name]:

A couple of things:

1st, the "18 hour" computation was so self-serving I assumed it was purely done as a matter of negotiation. It never occurred to me that anyone would actually believe it. First, it required taking the maximum number of hours for each activity (totaling 105), second, it required double counting the class time allocated to working on assignments (10 hours), third, it involved dividing by 6 weeks for a 7 session class--leading to 17.5. I would argue, since my numbers were based on my experience with typical--rather than executive--MBAs, a fairer calculation would have been to:

- a) total the minimums in each range, given that--as executives--you should be more efficient (70 hours)
- b) subtract off the 10 hours associated with the final project that are in-class hours (as clearly noted on the syllabus), and
- c) divide the resultant 60 hours by the 8 weeks over which they will take place--since two weeks have no class (and, by the way, I didn't make you come into the first class having done an assignment).

The resultant value is around 7.5 hours per week. Naturally, the CD learning was included in the time allocated for the database assignment.

2nd, with respect to your comment "I also did not understand, nor was your presentation clear (from what I heard) that openings were time sensitive.", all I can do is quote from the e-mail message that I sent to you personally on Saturday, which stated:

"By Monday, 2/11/02 at 7PM I'd like each of you to post an opening to the H.E. Butt discussion group, opening a new thread."

My question is this: what could I have possibly said that would have made it more clear that I expected the openings by 7PM on Monday? Indeed, to quote from the e-mail you sent me at 6:58 PM, on Monday, which stated "I will work on the Butt Grocery Company case tonight, I just arrived home from work and it is 6:54 PM so needless to say I do not have the time to get it done by 7:00 PM.", I more-or-less assumed you had acknowledged your posting would be late. Was I incorrect in this assumption?

You will also be relieved to know, I am sure, that I was quite concerned when I heard rumblings about the class workload on Saturday. For that reason, I contacted [EMBA Director] early Monday morning to discuss the situation. As a result, your e-mail to him should come as no surprise.

If you feel that I have been unreasonable in my analysis of the above, I hope you will feel free to broadcast this message to your classmates, in its entirety.

Regards,

Grandon

Exhibit 3: Excerpts from Course Syllabus

ISM-6305: Managing the Information Systems Function
Executive MBA
Spring 2002
Dr. T. Grandon Gill

Objectives:

1. To acquaint students with different ways in which IT can be employed in business, considered across a wide variety of functions
 2. To develop insights into how use of IT can impact the organization in which it is deployed
 3. To identify situations where the interpersonal, cultural (e.g., international) and ethical climate within the organization can affect IT and its usage
-

Materials:

Course Lecture Notes
MIS Case Studies and articles.

Course Requirements:

Assignment Type	Description:	Time to Prepare:	Total Weight:
In-Class Case Studies	Grade based upon class participation in 5 in-class case studies	2-4 hours per case	25%
Online Case Studies	Grade based upon participation in 5 on-line case studies.	4-5 Hours per case	25%
Database Proficiency	Assignment in performing database queries	10-20 Hours	20%
IT Project Proposal	Grade based upon presentations created for Mapper class project	30-40 Hours (~10 in class)	30%

Calendar and Assignments:

Saturday, February 9th, 8:30 AM -12:30 PM

Part 1: Lecture: Introduction and Course Details

Part 2: Lecture: History of MIS

Part 3: Lecture: Strategic Systems

Prepare for next in-class discussion:

1. Frontier Airlines (Case #: 9-189-074)

On-line discussion:

2. HE Butt Grocery Company: The New Digital Strategy (Case #:9-300-106)

(see *Blackboard.avi* file for help getting started)

Reading:

Note on Airlines Reservation Systems - Part 1 (Note #: 9-189-098)

Read *XPoint Technologies* case (*XPoint.pdf* on course CD), focusing primarily on its discussion of architectures and TCO. We will not be discussing the case itself.

*Note: I plan to hold my first optional office hours using PalTalk on Monday, 2/11/02, from 7:30 to 8:30 PM. See **PalTalk.avi** files for a brief overview of the technology and how to get started. Realistically, plan on 30-45 minutes of setup. Also, you'll need a microphone (built in mikes are okay, but inferior to \$7.00 mikes you can pick up at Radio Shack) and, optionally, a web cam.*

Friday, February 15th, 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Part 1: Case discussion: *Frontier Airlines*

Part 2: Lecture: System Architectures

Part 3: Q&A: Overview of Database Assignment (see *Database.pdf*)

*Note: the Database assignment is designed to accompany the .avi files in the database folders (topic numbers refer to accompanying notes in **Access.pdf**).*

Prepare for next in-class discussion:

3. AUCNET: TV Auction Network System (Case #: 9-190-001)

On-line discussion:

4. Sun Microsystems and the N-Tier Architecture (Case #: 9-399-037)

Reading:

“Your Next IS Strategy”, by John Hagel III and John Seely Brown, *Harvard Business Review*, October 2001 (Reprint #: R0109G)

Saturday, February 23rd, 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Part 1: Case discussion: *Aucnet*

Part 2: Lecture: Application Architectures

Part 3: Q&A: Overview of Mapper Class Project

Prepare for next in-class discussion:

5. Concordia Casting Co. (Case #: 192-151)

On-line discussion:

6. AFN (A) & (B) (on class CD, *afn.pdf*)

Reading:

“Portfolio Approach to Information Systems” by Warren McFarlan,
Harvard Business Review, September-October 1981, (Reprint# 81510)

Friday, March 1st, 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Part 1: Case discussion: *Concordia Casting*

Part 2: Lecture: IT Project Management

Part 3: Lab: Mapper Testing

Prepare for next in-class discussion:

7. Xerox: Outsourcing Global IT Resources (Case #: 9-195-158)

On-line discussion:

8. Gillette Co: Evolution of EDI Strategy (Case #: 9-191-010)
Note on Electronic Data Interchange (Note #: 9-190-022)

Reading:

Make-or-Buy Checklist (*makeorbuy.pdf* on course CD)

Saturday, March 9th, 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Part 1: Case discussion: *Xerox*

Part 2: Lecture: The “Make or Buy (or Bag It)” Decision

Part 3: Mapper Group Meetings

Prepare for next in-class discussion:

7. Mrs. Field's Cookies (Case #: 9-189-056)

On-line discussion:

8. OfficeTech (on class CD, *officetech.pdf*)

Friday, March 22nd, 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Part 1: Case discussion: *Mrs. Fields' Cookies*

Part 2: Lecture: Dark Side of the Force

Part 3: Mapper Group Meetings

Due: Database Assignment (see Database.pdf)

Friday, April 5th, 8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Mapper Presentations

Biography



Grandon Gill is an Associate Professor in the Information Systems and Decision Sciences department at the University of South Florida. He holds a doctorate in Management Information Systems from Harvard Business School, where he also received his M.B.A. His principal research focus is in the area of IS education, and he has published many articles describing how technologies and innovative pedagogies can be combined to increase the effectiveness of teaching across a broad range of IS topics. Currently, he teaches programming, database and managerial courses to both undergraduate and graduate students.