

Book review

De Wit, B. and Meyer, R., *Strategy Synthesis: Resolving Strategy Paradoxes to Create Competitive Advantage. Text and Readings*, 2nd edn, Thomson, 2005, ISBN-13: 978-1-86152-965-7, 469 pp.

Why review a strategy teaching textbook, one might well ask, when so many are similar in content and structure? The reason is this one is different. In place of the usual attempts to link topics into a strategic planning framework, the authors present each topic as a debate, or tension, between perspectives. They reinforce this debate with a selection of readings that presents summaries of original papers representing each perspective. It was these features, along with a 'reflective practitioner' tone, that persuaded me to adopt this text for a fourth-year paper in strategic management. This course serves both as an entry to research master's degrees and as preparation for business careers.

The text integrates business cases into its dialectic structure. Each chapter presents cases that illustrate the two adopted perspectives and invites a synthesis of the two poles based on a longer integrative case. This version of the text does not include full-length cases after the theory section (other editions are available that do), but instead incorporates a selection of summarized readings on each major topic. For students emerging from undergraduate study and usually not anticipating an academic future, the readings are an excellent resource as they present original debate in a digestible form. There are trade-offs, however, relative to using full journal papers, particularly that the summarized form does little to expose students to research debates or methods. In addition, because the choice of papers is constrained by the adopted dialectic, not all papers are the most influential in the topic area. As well as the dialectic approach, another distinctive feature of the book is its extensive use of quotations from poets and philosophers. These add color to the narrative, and I suspect will help students remember the alternative viewpoints.

The introductory chapter introduces the philosophy of presenting topics in dialectical form, promoting a thesis and antithesis before inviting a synthesis. The authors take care to explain that a synthesis is not a single-point solution, a choice of adopted perspective or even trade-off between them. Instead, they invite innovative reconciliations that attempt to combine the

best of both perspectives. When it comes to analyzing cases, therefore, the text gives students the creative stimulus of the dialectic and one can challenge them to come up with a creative synthesis.

Following the introduction, a strategy process section looks at strategic thinking, strategy formation and strategic change. The strategic thinking chapter focuses on the cognitive aspects of strategizing, juxtaposing logic and rationality with creative thinking. This is a useful topic to start a course, since students can relate it to their own personal styles. However, the opportunity exists to extend coverage to include the cognitive biases that can affect strategic decision-making. It would also be nice to see some of the material emerging from strategy-practice research on carrying out specific strategy activities.

The strategy formation chapter discusses the paradox of deliberate and emergent strategy. The dialectic works well as a way of sharpening the discussion, although this was one of a number of occasions when students felt the topic somewhat overlapping with others, as the planning perspective draws on rational logic and the incrementalist approach is aligned with creative thinking. As can easily happen, the main Airbus case that invites synthesis of the perspectives loses some of its value because the company's recent, reactive strategic moves are in marked contrast to the synopsis given in the text. In theory terms, too, a future edition could usefully incorporate recent material that seeks to move beyond the debate between planning and not planning, such as Robert Grant's 2003 *Strategic Management Journal* paper. The process section concludes with a strategic change chapter that makes a good presentation of the debate between the continuous and discontinuous renewal perspectives represented by kaizen and re-engineering.

Three strategy content chapters follow, covering business, corporate and network levels. The business-level strategy chapter nicely summarizes the traditional perspectives and frameworks in this area and brings them together in the debate between inside out (resource driven) and outside-in (environment driven) approaches. This, however, is one area where the dialectic approach has left no room to cover additional perspectives, as the chapter excludes dynamic approaches to competitive analysis such as dynamic ca-

pabilities, hypercompetition or Red Queen competition. The readings work well in supporting the chapter, though it seems odd that the authors have eschewed widely cited papers in the resource-based view for a less well-established rendering.

The corporate level strategy chapter brings together the main issues in the form of a debate between portfolio and integrated organization (or portfolio of business versus portfolio of core competences). Arguably, the corporate parenting perspective would make a useful third pole for this topic. The next theme of network level strategy is an interesting departure from the usual textbook structure. This presents a dialectic between a collaborate-to-compete perspective and one that emphasizes symbiosis. The cases and readings here work well except for the Handspring case, which (like the Palm case in the next chapter) seems dated in terms of the industry's evolution. In presenting the topic to students, it is worth pointing out that both poles of the dialectic refer to collaborative alliances – simply with a different emphasis.

Three chapters look in turn at the industry, organizational and international contexts. The industry context chapter gives a good overview of techniques before focusing on a firm's choice between compliance with industry rules and attempting to gain from industry leadership. The organizational context chapter is really about leadership styles – leaving the text with vir-

tually no coverage of strategy implementation topics such as organization design or strategic control. The material on the international context focuses on the debate between the convergence and diversity views. Following this, the main theory section concludes with a chapter on governance and organizational purpose.

Overall, the dialectical approach taken in *Strategy Synthesis* succeeds in stimulating thoughtful application of the theory. The book follows this approach consistently throughout, and although this is logical it does bring out some limitations. Because the book substantially reduces each topic to two poles, it implicitly closes off potential third or fourth dimensions. Useful complementary works that take a multilectic approach include *Strategy Safari* (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel) and *Images of Strategy* (Cummings and Wilson). *Strategy Synthesis*, however, fits more easily with a mainstream strategy syllabus. Strategy teaching will benefit if courses widely adopt its reflective approach and if the authors continue to update the book with new editions.

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