

Guidelines for Using Case Studies in the Teaching-Learning Process

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Abstract

In this paper, the author expresses concerns regarding the extensive use of case studies in the college classroom and advises college and university faculties to be more careful in their selection and use of case studies as an effective-based method of teaching. The author communicates the important role that case studies play in teaching and learning, viewing the case study method as adding innovation and reinforcing concepts and ideas learned, and creating simulation for real world practical application. Several challenges in using case studies are identified and the author recommends several principles and characteristics of effective case studies as a guide for college and university faculty. A student-centered approach to selecting and using case studies is encouraged. This, according to the author, will help to create active learners who are motivated. The author encourages focusing on factors or characteristics such as relevance, content-specificity, concurrency, and practicality when deciding to use case studies in the classroom or instruction. Finally, the author discusses several considerations, guidelines, and recommendations in using case studies, and summarizes the overall implication for instructional philosophy.

Keywords: Application, Applied knowledge, Case method, Case study, Case teaching, HBS case, Instructional philosophy, Relevance, Socratic Method, Student-Centered approach.

Introduction

The use of case studies in college classrooms has been treated as an effective-based method for bridging the gap between the practical and the theoretical, and as such, has been emphasized by many as a “best practice” in the teaching and learning process. This makes case studies extremely popular as part of an integrated approach used by college faculty to enhance what is seen as perceived quality of teaching tied to the development of applied knowledge based on analytical and critical thinking skills. While case studies are pervasively used across disciplines and schools in today’s college and university classrooms, business schools and colleges appear to predominantly use case studies more than any other, especially the highly revered Harvard case studies which from both teaching and learning experience seem to be some of the most voluminous that both faculty and students can encounter. While using and integrating case studies is lauded as evidence of effective classroom teaching practice, based on over a decade of teaching experience at all degree levels and prior experience as a student, it is worthwhile noting that a majority of students often do not seem too fond of this method, especially when it involves using those extremely long case studies taken from Harvard Business School or other perceived credible academic sources. The observation based on students’ complaints and reactions is that students prefer short case studies that are extremely relevant and whose contents and substance directly reflect concepts being reinforced in highly practical and often more explicit than implicit ways. College and university faculties must therefore consider more carefully how and what types of case studies they select for teaching concepts and ideas, as well as the length, depth, and other characteristics of such case studies as far as learning and understanding are concerned. Most importantly, relevance must be a key criterion in the selection of case studies in the classroom.

The Place of Case Studies in the College Classroom

Case studies are purported as instrumental in adding innovation to the teaching-learning process, and have been used by college and university faculties to encourage and enhance dialogue, reinforce understanding, bridge the gap between theory and practice, teach and develop analytical and critical thinking skills, and to motivate students to learn more while acquiring appreciation for problems, challenges, ideas, or other subjects under study or investigation. According to the Boston University (BU) Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching (2015), case studies have long been used in business schools, law schools, medical schools and the social sciences, and are used in any discipline when instructors want students to explore how what they have learned applies to real world situations. The rationale provided for the use of case studies in classroom instruction underlies the belief that many students tend to use inductive rather than deductive reasoning, implying that they learn better from examples than from logical development starting with basic principles (BU Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching, 2015). Thus, the use of case studies

is thought to be an effective classroom technique based on this argument.

There is no doubt that case studies can help reinforce concepts and understanding, develop critical and analytical skills, foster team efforts in developing solutions to problems and challenges simulating real world situations, and make classroom lessons more interactive and memorable. In fact, case studies “often require students to answer an open-ended question or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with multiple potential solutions” (BU Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching, 2015, p. 1), or even to develop innovative plans and proposals that can go well beyond the classroom. Case studies sometimes create discovery that students can turn into entrepreneurial activities or apply in further research or learning and job settings. Four particular sets of skills are identified as key advantages of using case studies in the college and university classroom: (1) problem solving, (2) ability to use and apply analytical tools, quantitative and/or qualitative analysis and methods, (3) development of skills in decision making in complex situations, and (4) the ability or skill to cope with ambiguities (BU Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching, 2015). One of the most recent and growing applications of the case-study approach is in the area of teaching and learning ethics. Furthermore, case studies can be used to develop students interpersonal skills as they engage in role play, see issues and problems from case-characters’ perspectives, engage in simulated meetings and planning scenarios, and act as consultants investigating, analyzing, and making recommendations, as well as building programs and identifying processes to solve organizational issues and problems, or to capture opportunities. This can be of significant value to students as they enter the workforce. Thus, the use of case studies in the classroom is encouraged for these reasons.

According to Andersen and Schiano (2014), the case method of teaching immerses students in realistic situations such as dealing with incomplete information, time constraints, and conflicting goals. Furthermore, they argue that the class discussion that naturally emerges in case teaching stimulates the development of students’ critical thinking skill. Montpetit and Kajiura (2012) argue that “Case-based teaching and learning strategies can offer instructors effective pedagogical tools to scaffold student learning through activities designed to fulfill teaching objectives and desired student learning outcomes” (p. 80). Dunne and Brooks (2004) concur, as they view case studies as stories with educational messages that instructors must use to effectively achieve classroom goals and objectives. Vaugeois (2005) argues that case studies are conduits between theory and practice. Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall (1999) believe that case studies provide complex examples which provide insights into the context of a problem as well as illustrate the main points that underscore a lesson or presentation.

Challenges in Using Case Studies in the Classroom

Andersen and Schiano (2014) argue that using case study method can be challenging and even scary at times, and it certainly is more work than regular lectures for faculty, and thus, there is a need to develop effective guidelines for using case studies. Case studies are predominantly used in business schools today, and Andersen and Schiano (2014) believe that most business schools are not set up with the classrooms, culture, and course structure for case teaching as the preferred or even common way of teaching. This is debatable, as this author sees no special requirements apart from the typical classroom technology and setting required to teach any other subject or concept or foster any other method of teaching and learning. Regarding culture and course structure, it is perceived that those factors are more important in Andersen and Schiano’s argument since some business schools in fact do not have a culture of teaching and learning where the case-method approach is emphasized, and hence, courses do not typically include a case study, and this becomes the sole choice or decision of the course instructor or facilitator.

Harvard Business School (HBS) is a pioneer of the case study method and its culture, philosophy, and pedagogy of using case studies has led to the increase use of case studies by other imitators. Often, these followers tend to use HBS cases rather than developing their own. Having been a student and graduate of six graduate business schools and programs, the author of this essay can vividly remember students’ negative reactions to using HBS case studies as summarized in the following manner: “long, boring, and irrelevant.” Students simply do not appreciate or like long case studies and using case studies that are excessively long will be a challenge for any faculty, especially those case studies that go on for pages and pages. Other business schools that tend to use case studies extensively include Darden, Haas, Tuck, Stanford, and Wharton, among a few others (Bryne, 2012).

Andersen and Schiano (2014) state that some business schools tend to use case studies or the case teaching method only occasionally. Anderson and Schiano (2014) see the importance of more frequent use of the case teaching approach in business schools. However, this author, having taught extensively across the business disciplines including international business, marketing, business ethics, leadership, management and organizational behavior, disagrees with this, as the frequent use of case studies

constitutes a monotonous learning approach which negatively affects students' motivation and interest in learning. Classroom instructions should be diverse with infrequent use of any specific method – rather, it is best to diversify one's teaching approach by combining and integrating different methods. Overreliance on case studies alone can make learning boring and uninteresting and may limit the learning of relevant theoretical concepts and ideas. Thus, one of the great challenges remains on how best to incorporate case based teaching and learning strategies in the classroom (Dunne & Brooks, 2004; Guo & Jamal, 2007).

There are many other challenges that instructors face in using case studies in the classroom. Time constraint is a big challenge, especially when case studies are lengthy and create excessive dialogue. This can actually get in the way of teaching and learning. Getting students motivated about case studies is not an easy task, and instructors can often find themselves confronted with resistance to learning, especially when they assign students what are perceived to be “long and boring” case studies with little relationship or connection to the concepts, subject, or issues being discussed or examined. Thus, making case studies relevant is a challenge as many instructors sometimes simply choose a case study because of its title, publisher, or some other factor or criterion not important to students' learning and understanding. A typical example of lack of consideration in choosing and assigning case studies to students is where instructors simply choose a case because it is a Harvard Business School case, a case study about a famous CEO or management guru or practitioner, because the case study is written by notable practitioners in the field, or simply because they do not wish to expend enough time in reading through and properly selecting case studies from among several.

In my view, there are seven major errors that college instructors make in the use of case studies in the classroom: (1) faculty or instructors often forget students' learning intention and motivation in selecting case studies, (2) faculty or instructors often fail to understand that students are generally not formally prepared or trained in case study analysis in previous levels of schooling or formal education, (3) faculty or instructors often select case studies without ensuring that they are subject or theme-specific, (4) faculty or instructors sometimes choose case studies that lack examples that align with lessons being taught, and which are sometimes devoid of the relevant concepts being reinforced, (5) faculty or instructors sometimes select the “long and boring” case studies that become a drag to students' motivation and interests, and (6) instructors or faculty often forget that case studies are not substitutes for teaching, and (7) instructors or college faculty too often use and see case studies as a passive approach rather than an active approach where dialogue and creativity emerge and are engaged.

Guidelines for Using Case Studies

According to Andersen and Schiano (2014), a wide range of teachers seek help in teaching cases. This may stem from three factors: (1) lack of training and understanding concerning the place of case studies in the teaching-learning process, (2) inability to effectively select relevant and appropriate case studies that align with instructions, and (3) inability to motivate students whom in majority seem to be less fond of case studies than faculty perceive or believe. Certainly, the latter factor seems to be especially difficult to overcome when instructors are bent on following what has become a tradition of using cases from one particular source and of a particular perceived quality rather than making relevance a key selection criterion. Mustoe and Croft (1999), and Raju and Sanker (1999), support the idea of the relevance criterion being instrumental in case study selection and use, and argue that personal relevance and significance to the lives of students must be considered in order to engage their interest in case studies.

College faculty must become more student-centered in their thinking when it comes to using case studies as part of their teaching or instructional sessions. According to Grant (1997), case studies help in shifting the emphasis in the classroom environment from a teacher-centered to student-centered activity. Furthermore, instructors must consider how well the case study or case teaching approach communicates or conveys the ideas and lessons they are trying to impart and must seek characteristics of relevance, content-specificity, concurrency, and practicality when they decide to use case studies in the classroom or instruction. One of the important factors to consider in the selection and use of case studies in classroom instruction is chronology. The faculty or instructor must decide which cases might be outdated for contemporary use and perspectives, and which might contain historically relevant lessons for students.

According to the BU Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching (2015), it is important that case studies that are used in the classroom provide an appropriate or viable framework for analysis. This means the “statement of the case provides enough information for the students to figure out solutions and then to identify how to apply those solutions in other similar situations” (p. 1). Too often students are presented with case studies that seem to have no relationship or frame of reference to the lessons, concepts, theories and ideas they are learning. Some faculty have used case studies as “fillers” in their course and others simply use them because it is

perceived to be reflective of integrating practical or hands-on activities into the classroom or course. However, following a trend should not be a determining factor as to the appropriateness and use of case studies. Case studies should be used because they are relevant to teaching and learning and help to reinforce concepts and practice. Another important guideline is that instructors themselves should be versed in case analysis and should provide students with a systematic outline or approach to analyzing case studies. Too often instructors give students a case for analysis without providing them any instructions on the best approach to dissecting and understanding or contextualizing the case. Davis (2009) has recommended three steps that instructors can use in the case teaching method: (1) preparing the case by giving students advice and providing them with structure, and preparing a series of questions that will structure the case and highlight its key points; (2) conducting the case by situating the case in context of the course, introducing the case, starting a discussion, adopting a facilitator role and having a group of students guide the discussion; and (3) concluding the case by summarizing key points, revealing real-life ideas, having students write short essays, and asking students to evaluate discussions.

Considerations and Recommendations

When it comes to case studies, college instructors tend to use a wide variety. For example, case study types might range from fictional to non-fictional, financial to non-financial, theoretical to practical, and any combination of the above. Dunne and Brooks (2004) categorize case studies based on the following four objectives: (1) application, (2) identification of the problem, (3) decision making, and (4) assessing the scope of the decision. This is a good description of what cases achieve overall when effectively used in the college classroom. One of the most common and important methods used in teaching or analyzing case studies is the Socratic Method. According to Fakhouri (2012), the Socratic Method is based on listening and empathy, removing risk, the use of open questions, and the ability to question and challenge.

What is common to all case studies is that they are used to enhance the learning and understanding of concepts by linking them to the real world through modeling, symbolic or realistic representation, or imagining scenarios and situations. Given the errors that college instructors make in using case studies as part of their teaching regiment, it is important to consider these characteristics when choosing a case study:

relevant: meaning the case study chosen must reinforce learning and the key concepts, ideas, theories, or skills being taught,

practical: meaning the case contains elements for practical application such as real world examples or scenarios,

dialogical: meaning the case must include elements to foster team work, brainstorming, participation, cooperation, and discussion,

interesting: meaning the case must be rich in content as case studies can be time-consuming and must therefore have considerable value and teachable opportunities, and

appropriate: meaning the case study must include enough content and be of a suitable length to facilitate interest and achieve objectives within given time constraints.

Dunne and Brooks (2004) have identified ten (10) characteristics of a “good” case study:

has pedagogic utility,

represents a general issue beyond the case itself,

tells an engaging story,

focuses on an interest-arousing, controversial issue,

poses a problem that has no obvious right answer,

creates empathy with the central characters,

requires the reader to use the information in the case to address the problem,
requires the reader to think critically and analytically to address the problem,
brevity—has just enough information for a good analysis, and
is relevant to students (p. 45).

These are important characteristics that faculty must consider in using case studies.

It is recommended that instructors do not choose case studies that are overly lengthy, overly abstract and that might be far above students' abilities or present levels of analytical skills. This is a big problem as sometimes instructors choose case studies with abstract formulas, complex equations, and sometimes extensive series of tables, statistics, and financial tables that they themselves are not able to understand, explain, and interpret. Instructors should know when to increase the depth and breadth of cases. That is, only as students gain more experience in case analysis should they be given more complex and difficult case studies to analyze. It is recommended that the case study or case teaching approach become more teacher-student interactive. This means making case studies stimulate discussion and dialogue and promote participative and active learning in the classroom. Finally, it is highly recommended that, where possible, instructors should write and develop their own case studies so that they are more aligned with current modes of instruction, concepts, ideas, and theories or lessons being taught.

Implications

Case studies should not serve as an isolated or stand-alone learning method or technique, but should be seen for what they are: assistive learning tools whose major purpose is to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical, essentially serving as an element of the applied method of inquiry, learning, research, teaching, and instruction. Case studies should therefore reinforce concepts and theories by applying them to real and hypothetical situations as they model reality and potential reality with a major aim of fostering application. The rationale for case studies should best translate into applied knowledge and theory.

Given the above understanding, college and university instructors must consider how well case studies create opportunities for learning and reinforcing ideas, concepts, and the values that they teach. Where case studies are not ideal or the best method for achieving these, then instructors must wisely choose other best practices or appropriate methods to best meet the learning needs and modes of their students. Thus, understanding when and how to use case studies is important in the teaching learning process. The selection criteria discussed above under "Considerations and Recommendations" can help instructors in the college classroom to use the case study method more effectively. Instructors should understand how the type and quality of the case study they choose affects instruction and learning, and must be more considerate toward factors such as relevance of the case study, length, richness of text as far as content, concepts, and examples are concerned, as well as costs, since sometimes students are directed by some faculty members to obtain case studies that must sometimes be purchased. Case studies should not be burdensome or boring, but exciting and create an atmosphere for exercise of students' creativity in developing and using their analytical and critical thinking skills to model real world individual, organizational, and management challenges.

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