

**Using Case Studies with Undergraduates in Management Education –
Future Challenges**

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Abstract

This paper provides a preliminary exploration of trends and attitudes towards the evolving use of the case method as a participant centred learning approach to inform, challenge, and add value to current undergraduate management educational practices in Europe. Whilst case study approaches to learning have been in usage for almost 100 years, it is widely appreciated that such methodologies - their uses and applications - have significantly adapted to suit a broadening cross section of different types of undergraduate learners spanning wide cultural divides.

Nonetheless, research supports an ‘act global, think local’ approach when considering appropriate actions and implementations of such participant centred learner practices; and more recent research supports the view that there are significant cultural challenges to the acceptance and effective implementation of such methods in local undergraduate management education contexts.

This paper explores the rationale for an increasingly diverse approach to the application of case learning methods, and more specifically examines four proposed challenges facing the future implementation of the case study approach in European contexts.

The Case for the Undergraduate Case Study

For almost 100 years there has been a growth in the adoption of case study methodologies as constructivist oriented pedagogic tools employed in management education to promote students' active participation so they could form their own learning (Heath, 2015; Saleewong et al., 2012; Sudzina, 1997). Given the changing nature of management education and the geographic spread of the adoption of the case method, which has subsequently led to the adaptation of differing approaches to case teaching and learning, there are more recent developmental approaches to a wider understanding of the use of the case method, including its extensive use as an online learning tool (Lee et al., 2009; Montiel, 2013; Saleewong et al., 2012), for managing risk and uncertainty in business (Petit, 2016), and for use in-class management problem solving (Choi and Lee, 2008).

The case method has evolved from a US-centric approach to participant centred learning adopted for executive education and postgraduate learners, to being adapted and adopted for use with undergraduates both in the classroom (Velenchik, 1995; Kennedy et al., 2001), and in work-based learning contexts (Raelin, 1997) across the world. Its adaptability as a tool for participant centred learning has significant value for learners because, as Hammond points out, as “case studies cut across a range of organizations and situations, they provide you with an exposure far greater than you are likely to experience in your day-to-day routine,” (2002; p. 1) and as Heath notes, the case study provides a slice of reality from within an organisational situation that enables students to experience “a willing suspension of disbelief” (2015; p. 70) as they immerse themselves into the narrative of the story, and the issues raised by the case, and in doing so they can meet many sides of themselves that they can take back to their own worlds once the playing is over (Clark, 1996).

It is without doubt that the case study has evolved as a champion of pedagogical tools for participant centred learning (Gragg, 1940), which has subsequently adapted for extensive use

across a range of different pedagogic genres, making it a logical starting point for the present research. Since its inception in the 1920s, the case method has been widely adopted by management centres and business schools as a globally acknowledged tool for communicating good practice (O Cinneide, 1986; Heath, 2015). The case has more recently been widely exploited as a research tool for qualitative research in management education (Yin, 2009; Bryman, 1989; Bryman, 2004). The case method is heuristic in that it is a self-guided learning opportunity that employs analysis to help draw conclusion about situations. Data can be extracted from a selection of cases to provide opportunities for comparisons and contrasts. These can then be evaluated to promote opinion forming. Different readers will adopt different opinions according to how they choose to treat the case (for example, see Ellett, 2007, p23; Heath, 2006, pp21-31).

Case studies are not only useful tools for classroom based and/or discussion-oriented 'discovery' learning contexts but are also useful tools for qualitative research in complex organisations as they are concerned with the complexity and particular nature of a situation or organisation (Stake, 1995). There are many examples of case studies that have been constructed to explore a single organisation (Bryman, 2004; Burawoy, 1979; Pollert, 1981; Cavendish, 1982; Pettigrew, 1985), as well as cases for a single community, a single school and a single event. Cases often ensure that significant attention is drawn to the setting of the organisation or, to place this in management terms, the 'non-controllable environments' that surround the organisation (Kotler and Keller, 2008; Johnson and Scholes, 1993).

Bryman argues that a case is an object of interest in its own right and the role of the researcher is to provide an in-depth elucidation of it and in particular to identify and focus on the unique features of the case - a process referred to as the idiographic approach. Stake argues that the object of a social enquiry is seldom an individual enterprise as such one single case study in isolation 'is seen to be a poor basis for generalisation' (Stake, 2000, p23). However, when

unique features are expressed in different ways in a number of different organisations or ‘cases’, then different observations can be made by comparing one case with another.

Therefore, in summary it is reasonable to argue that the case study has evolved from a management tool for classroom group discussion to become a term associated with a broad range of different concepts to investigate, analyse, showcase or profile organisational situations.

A Changing Landscape for Undergraduate Learning

In more recent years, since its adoption into undergraduate programmes of study, the case method has had to adapt to a broader range of learning contexts too. Undergraduate classroom size is typically larger than that of the post-experience or postgraduate learning environment and student programmes are also diversifying into part-time, work based, degree apprenticeship, blended learning, online, and distance learning contexts.

Each of these provides different types of challenges for the adaptation of the case method, not to mention the cultural challenges of using cases in a broader range of global contexts. Recent integration of the case method into undergraduate teaching in countries such as China, Indonesia, Turkey and South Africa have led to challenges of interpretation of approaches to learning which recognises the cultural distinctiveness of each classroom. Put another way, if the same case is taught the same way in the US, Spain, Turkey and China, it is likely that it will yield different responses in terms of learning effectiveness. It is therefore argued that it would be more preferable to adopt a different teaching plan for each context, which has been adapted to the unique cultural in-class challenges facing each educational context. At the same time cross-cultural awareness requires further enhancement to maximise learning opportunities by customizing the case study approach to the local business context.

Future Challenges

This paper proposes four new challenges which it is argued represent key significant factors likely to be influencing undergraduate case study provision over the forthcoming years:

1. Remote Delivery or Distance Learning using Online Resources

The Open University based in the UK has been a pioneer of distance and blended learning programmes for undergraduates across Europe. With low barriers to entry for such a conceptual model, more and more universities have subsequently diversified their programmes to support similar approaches to distance learning, with greater utilisation of online resources and less actual in-class time. The case method has its origins in the classroom group discussion, (Ragan, 1996)

However, with the further proliferation of social media and online communication concepts, the undergraduate learner has evolved and adapted to a more remote concept of 'presence' for learning, making it far easier to contemplate a delivery method which encourages remote discussion and interaction through social media platforms, in place of the in-class face-to-face discussion. (Heckman and Annabi, 2005). The consequence may lead to a far more protracted learning approach, rather than an individual 60-minute classroom event, but it could be argued that such an approach, whilst provide new complexities for managing debate and discussion, does nonetheless promote more space for reflection and the subsequent learning that can be captured from reflective practice (Betts, 2004).

2. Work-Based and Apprenticeship Learning

One of the most significant contributions of higher education to economic development and innovation has been the development of work-based learning and research (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs. 2010). In the context of knowledge economies, the role of knowledge based on a binary distinction between creator and users has become blurred. The antecedents of the current push towards curricula that reflect employer, employee, and skills needs are in the idea of ‘mode 2’ knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994) which is produced and valued outside the university and is not discipline based, and in the idea of experiential learning in which the learner is understood as ‘skillful’, that is, with tacit knowledge and skill that can be theorised and applied through work based projects (Elliott, 1999). Such projects require the cooperation and collaboration of three key participants: the university, the employer, and the employee (Gibbs and Garnett, 2007). Each is seen to contribute a distinctive perspective, each is necessary to ensure up to date, work-relevant, and innovative outcomes that are practical and useful for the individual (by enhancing knowledge, skill and qualifications), the organisation (by contributing to a highly skilled workforce) and the academy (by satisfying the demands of the knowledge economy and remaining competitive) (Boud and Soloman 2001). In the UK, a more recent development has been implemented in response to the Government’s 2015 manifesto pledge to bring three million individuals into apprenticeships. The subsequent evolution of higher and degree apprenticeship has provided new demands for level 5, 6 and 7 learning, that have enabled universities to play their part in delivering work-based learning/apprenticeship opportunities (Kirby, 2015). Into contexts such as these, the case method provides a clear opportunity for participant centred learning, but such cases need to be crafted around the localised challenges of the workplace, in order to be perceived as tools that provide the value

required by the employer, who is often the driving force for the learning opportunity. This creates opportunities for localised case writers to produce new undergraduate resources that can adapt to local workplace contexts.

3. A Growth in Entrepreneurial Education

Evidence from certain parts of Europe and its neighbours, points to a growth in entrepreneurial education, which mirrors a rise in new and small business development. (Kyro, 2015; Mwasalwiba, 2010). BA Entrepreneurship programmes have grown in popularity in recent years and are likely to increase. New concepts in approaches to provision of undergraduate entrepreneurial education have emerged which place the learner at the heart of the learning experience, and often encourages a practitioner-oriented approach and mindset to promote business development alongside the taught elements of their programme. In many contexts such programmes are further supported by the alignment of university departments to local *Technoparks*, which enable entrepreneurs operating in *hubs* or *incubators* to develop their ideas (Lenger, 2008). Further integration of the case approach to learning in these contexts lends itself to the development of live cases that showcase the real-time challenges facing the entrepreneur.

4. A demand for shorter, low content learning tools

The growth in use of social media platforms by undergraduate learners has already been highlighted. The use of short or limited-text communication tools, such as Snapchat and Twitter, has changed the way that young people have adapted to online communication and is subsequently influencing undergraduate learning (Mollet *et al*, 2011). As such, the evolution of shorter cases, with less text and a greater use of video

imagery, that can be adapted for use on social media platforms will present new opportunities for engagement and learning in undergraduate management contexts.

None of these future challenges are presented as obstacles to the use of the case method, but rather they point to the need for further innovation and adaptive approaches to the case method which reflect the everchanging landscape for undergraduate education. Current trends in the level of adoption of the case method demonstrates that there is no shortage of demand for case resources to meet the growing needs of undergraduate education, which in turn suggests that as the case method fast approaches its 100th anniversary, there is still plenty of scope for a strong future for the case method in undergraduate education.

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