

How Useful Are Case Studies?

By COLIN ARMISTEAD

The use of case studies has become widespread as a teaching vehicle. The method was instituted at Harvard Business School in the 1950s as the primary method of teaching. Since then, cases have been used in different forms, either as part of a course of study or as the main focus of the course to which other teaching material is added. One of the consequences of the widespread use of case studies is that the term has come to have a wide range of meanings.

Simmons has identified the following categories of case studies:

■ *The exercise case study* provides an opportunity for the student to practice the

application of specific procedures.

■ *The situation case study* is the type most generally associated with the term case study. The student is asked to analyze information in the case.

■ *The complex case study* is an extension of the situation case study. The student is required to handle a large amount of data and information, some of which is irrelevant.

■ *The decision case study* requires the student to go a step further than in the previous categories and present plans for solving a problem.

■ *The in-basket case study* is a particular type of decision case study. The student is presented with a collection of

documents and background information and is expected to record the actions he or she would take relating to each document, some of which will be interrelated.

■ *The critical incident case study* provides the student with a certain amount of information and withholds other information until it is requested by the student.

■ *The action maze case study* presents a large case in a series of smaller units. The student is required at each stage to predict what will happen next.

■ *The role play case study* requires the students and perhaps the case leader to assume roles in the case.¹

P. Lawrence, a Harvard Business School case writer, describes the case study this way:

*A good case is the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in the real life speculation. It is a record of sometimes complex situations which must be pulled apart and put together again before the situation can be understood.*²

The important factor in this description is that the case is based on real events and not created by the case writer. All

Differing Evaluations of Case Studies

Views expressed about the use of case studies vary widely. The following are some claims and counterclaims collected by D.D. Simmons in the course of work carried out for the Case Clearing House.

A case study...

- ...provides vicarious experience of management.
 - is not realistic and may be misleading.
- ...embodies the multiple issues inherent in management.
 - embodies issues which are far from clearly stated.
- ...reflects the uncertainty of management situations.
 - is frustrating because there is no correct answer.
- ...is flexible in relation to learning objectives.
 - is too flexible and may become a mere time-filler.
- ...holds the interest of students.
 - is too entertaining.
- ...encourages student participation.
 - encourages "the blind to lead the blind."
- ...provides intellectual exercise.
 - is an inefficient means for transmitting data.
- ...develops interpersonal skills.
 - may develop skills which are not relevant to an educational situation.
- ...changes attitude via group pressure.
 - may lead to stressful and embarrassing discussion.
- ...challenges the students.
 - enables the students easily to opt out.
- ...encourages students to work.
 - provides a soft option for the lazy teacher.
- ...encourages creative thinking.
 - encourages unproductive chit-chat.
- ...gives students experience of working under pressure.
 - involves more work for the teacher.
- ...seems to work.
 - is a waste of time.

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cases contain an element of fiction, if only through the writer's interpretation of the events being described. A purely fictional approach, however, results in a case that is simply a restatement of a theoretical textbook position. While this may satisfy the requirements for being a vehicle that reinforces learning of a particular principle, it lacks elements of the unexpected which bring the case to life for the student.

The claims and counterclaims for the value of case study teaching are varied, as illustrated by the list prepared by Donald Simmons when he was at the Case Clearing House (see box). Anyone who has had experience with case studies, either as a student or as a case leader, knows that a successful session is rewarding for the participants and a poor session is frustrating. Successful use of case studies involves the coordination of three main factors: the case material, the preparation by the students and the capabilities of the case leader. The result of the case session should be a synergy of these constituent parts.

It is important when preparing cases to have a clear understanding of the nature of the case, the teaching aims and the desired learning objectives. This is only the start of the process. It is often found in practice that the value of the case is only realized after it has been used with students. Consequently, the case writer must be prepared to alter some of the original aims and objectives after the case has been used with several groups of students.

The use of cases may be viewed in the context of skill development as a means of fostering the learning propositions suggested by Nathaniel Cantor and Carl Rogers.^{3,4} Rogers states, "The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience and the incorporation into oneself of the process of change." In case studies, a trainer can allow the learner to participate and to assume responsibility for the learning process.

An area of concern for many using case studies is the reluctance of learners to break away from the view that there is always a right answer. Perry has classified learners into three types ranging from those who expect correct answers from

the instructor to those who perceive there may be a series of answers to a particular problem.⁵ Perry also identifies eight phases of development, from a state of perceiving the world in absolute terms to realizing a number of possibilities. The student has a tendency to retreat and seek refuge in the acceptance of the teacher as authority when threatened by the process of intellectual growth. This can be interpreted as a loss of interest on the part of the learner.⁶

Where might case studies fit into these learning dynamics? The presentation of the material and the mode of operating a case study session can promote the ideas of Perry and Rogers but will depend on the willingness of students to take responsibility for participating and on the efforts of the case leader to prevent retreat into safer positions.

Learning objectives

The learning objectives for the use of case studies have been proposed by several authors⁷⁻⁹ and suggest that learners will develop analytical skills, application skills, creative skills, social skills and self-analytical skills. If all of these objectives were achieved in practice, it would seem that the case study method should be the answer to many teaching/learning challenges. While research evaluating the case study as a teaching technique is limited, it is apparent that when cases are the sole teaching method, they are no more successful than traditional lectures and tutorial sessions. Students at Harvard University attending courses based solely on case studies perform no better in terms of acquisition of knowledge than their counterparts in multi-method classes.

The case method requires a large investment of resources, and in many instances it may be difficult to evaluate results as compared to other methods. To a large extent, the instructor's decision to use case studies is an act of faith, perhaps based on previous experience as a learner.

Writing case studies

I chose to write case studies which focused on people in middle management or supervisory positions in their organization. I gathered information from real organizations as a basis for writing the cases. It was difficult to gain access to lower management, especially in organizations where I had no contacts.

The usual reaction of supervisors was surprise that I should be interested in

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them. The interviews were unstructured, and I used a tape recorder to eliminate the need to take detailed notes. Most interviewees offered whatever information and documentation they could. When transcribing the tapes, I sometimes needed to go back to supervisors for clarification. At this point, possible cases began to take form.

Case studies are more likely to be successful for students and teachers if learning objectives are established first and additional teaching information accompanies each case. One must avoid manipulating the information in such a way that facts are distorted, and it is wise to change names and locations.

Conclusion

The use of case studies can be worthwhile for instructor and learner. It should not be taken for granted that case studies are as good as or better than other teaching/learning methods, but they can encourage student-centered learning. Instructors must match their aims with the type of case study they use.



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