

AN APPETITE FOR CASES



GINA VEGA

— Organizational Ergonomics Windham, NH, USA

RESUMEN

El uso de estudios de casos en las escuelas de negocio fue introducido originalmente por la Universidad de Harvard. El estilo de enseñanza ha cambiado desde un enfoque en el profesor, hacia un enfoque en el estudiante, como lo refuerza la metodología denominada "clase invertida". Se presentan las características del desempeño docente en clase. El análisis de los estudios de caso está principalmente en inglés y esto puede generar dificultades en su aprendizaje, sobre todo si en los países de Latinoamérica el nivel de inglés no está lo suficientemente desarrollado. El International Journal of Instructional Cases es una publicación que entrega estudios de casos con suficiente información de análisis para permitir un adecuado aprendizaje de la situación planteada

Palabras clave: Metodología de casos, efectividad en la enseñanza, aprendizaje de inglés.

ABSTRACT

Case usage in business schools was originally introduced by Harvard University. Teaching style has changed, from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one, as indicated by "flipped classroom" methodology. This essay presents the characteristics of professor's performance in classroom. Cases study analysis is mainly established in the English language, a fact which can generate difficulties in its learning, especially if in the Latin-American countries there is a poor level of English as a second language. The International Journal of Instructional Cases is a publication that presents case studies with enough information for due analysis and the learning adequacy.

Keywords: Case methodology, learning effectiveness, English learning.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF CASE USAGE

Cases have been in use for nearly a century in business school programs. They were originally introduced by Harvard University, early in the 20th century, in business education. Of course, cases have been in use much longer than that in the study and practice of law and medicine, where they have always been a staple of good learning. But, when Harvard designed the MBA program, it instituted what was then a novel method of teaching—the case method (Norman, 2017). Through the examination and analysis of experiences previously unavailable to students who had not had a broad business background, the case study method became a viable and engaging means of examining the challenges students would face in the workplace.

Since that time, cases have become widely used in business school graduate programs, in executive education, and, most currently, in undergraduate programs of business education. In fact, any program that does not use cases at all would be in a distinct minority.

LEARNING AND ACCESSIBILITY— THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The world has changed considerably over the past fifty years, and the way students learn today is very different from the way they learned in the last century.

Students used to be most familiar with an instructor who stood in the front of the classroom and lectured, rarely deviating from a set script except to answer direct questions. Students sat at their desks, many of them avoiding eye contact with the instructor lest he or she be called on in class. Students either were prepared or unprepared, but no opportunity existed for the unprepared students to catch up and join a discussion. Student-led discussions were rare, and the instructor was the "keeper of the knowledge."

Today, a classroom like the one just described would be anathema to most university settings. Today, the instructor often cedes his or her position as unique holder of knowledge and encourages students to learn through discovery. Such active learning has been shown to have more power to “stick” and encourage learning and critical thinking throughout one’s life.

One method that generates such sticky learning is the “Inverted” or “Flipped Classroom”. The process of flipping the classroom results in a design that puts learning in the hands of the students, rather than in the hands of the instructor. Lecture continues to play a role in information transfer and elucidation of complex theoretical positions, but most of the valuable classroom time is invested in active learning pursuits by the students. The University of Washington, for example, has done extensive work in explaining and encouraging the process of flipping a classroom; and they provide numerous resources on their website (“flipping a classroom”, n.d.). A study at Miami University (Ohio), indicated that students averaged 21% better on exams after the classroom was inverted and they were able to do the heaviest intellectual lifting in class, with the instructor present, rather than outside of class, alone with their homework (Talbert, 2012). Perhaps the best news is that this classroom methodology has its roots in the case study method.

TEACHING AND EFFECTIVENESS— THE FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

The Stanford University Teaching Commons provides a series of short readings on teaching effectiveness—what makes a “good” teacher and what marks a poor one (“Characteristics of effective teachers”, n.d.). Effective teachers explain clearly, have a thorough command of the field, give the students a sense of continuity of topics and concepts, are energetic and self-confident, stimulate interaction among students, encourage independent thinking, know whether the class is following the material, and is concerned about the quality of his or her teaching.

A less effective teacher often makes a series of mistakes including cold calling on students, failing to provide variety in instructional methods, teaching without clear learning objectives, and getting stuck in a rut. This last issue affects all of us. It is far too easy to do the same things the way we have always done them, without considering new options or alternative methodologies.

Yes, it takes time to redesign your teaching method, and it is a risky business to do so. After all, you might fail to engage your class. You might look foolish in front of your students. Your students might not like your trial and error method of teaching; students frequently are even more set in their ways than instructors!

But, if you are going to teach with cases, you will want to expand your teaching repertoire to include methods that require you to be more a facilitator and less the keeper of knowledge. The traditional method of teaching with cases is to have students read the case and have the instructor guide the case analysis, taking notes on the board to help monitor the discussion and make visual the connections between content, context, characters, and theory in order to arrive at a final recommendation. Many variations of this model are commonly used, and sometimes they work very well.

However, sometimes they do not. Some of the reasons this model might fail include lack of sufficient student preparation; poor student communication skills; and general intimidation created through this often highly competitive model. Language and communication play a key role in the success of the case analysis process; if students have difficulty understanding fully the material because of limited language or communication abilities, poor learning is the result.

ENGLISH AS INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The vast majority of cases available to universities are written in English. Of the more than 61,000 cases distributed through The Case Centre (www.thecasecentre.org), the largest non-profit distributor of cases internationally, only a tiny percentage are available in other languages, and even fewer have available teaching materials in languages other than English.

English is the language of business today. More than 1.75 billion people worldwide (about 25% of the world’s population), speak English at a useful level according to the *Harvard Business Review*, (Neeley, 2012). If you want to sell internationally, you must have a common means of communication. If you want results in your organization, you need the very best people and these must all speak a common language. If you want to maintain some sense of nuance when conducting mergers or when creating workgroups cross-nationally, there must be a mutually agreed-upon language for contracts and discussions.

As a result, it makes sense to be teaching MBA programs in English, preparing students to enter the business world using the language of commerce. It seems apparent that the acquisition of English language skills is critically important for success in the world of business. However, it is less apparent that learning in a language other than one’s native language has positive outcomes. There are major differences inherent in learning a language and in learning in a language.

MOTHER TONGUE AS LEARNING FACILITATOR

Learning is easiest in one's native language. No matter how comfortable we all may be in English, nonetheless when we are in our closest relationships, we tend to select our native language for clearest communication.

A study published in September 2017 about English language acquisition in South America indicated clearly that English proficiency in the region is very low. (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). In Peru in particular, there are limited teaching supports, no proficiency assessment of student achievement or of teacher qualifications; and English language learning is not mandatory by law. Only 27% of Peru's secondary English teachers are licensed to teach the subject, and the results are obvious. This is despite the initiatives described below.

In 2016, Peru established a foreign language requirement for undergraduate programs that includes a preference for English. The country's national English policy also promotes the use of English among university students (Ministerio de Educación del Perú, 2016b). (as cited in Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Peru's goal regarding English language acquisition is that, at the secondary level, students will achieve a level of B1 on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), a standard measuring device adopted internationally for language acquisition. The B1 level of attainment comprises the following:

Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while traveling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017, p.33)

This level does not provide for understanding complex ideas or abstractions or for explaining viewpoints and providing advantages and disadvantages of each. These communication skills are absolutely critical for learning at the university level and for acquiring the skills of application to practice of concepts and theories.

In addition, considerable research with younger children has shown that learning exclusively in English creates communication problems in relationship-building and maintenance of existing relationships. (Anderson, 2015). Learning in a language not one's own can result in a significant disconnect between language and a sense of personal reality.

Dual language education can also generate challenges for educators themselves. It is difficult to find instructors who are equally comfortable and confident in more than one language, and it may not be reasonable to require faculty to teach in English when their own native language allows

them far more ability to explain, generate discussion, respond to questions, and help students to strengthen their own critical thinking skills. Forcing them to teach only in English does not give students a fair chance to experience deep learning. Finally, finding appropriate teaching and learning materials can be a challenge.

Accessibility is the key to effective teaching and enduring learning. If students can read and understand materials easily, they are more likely to be able to apply their learning to real life situations. Practice using cases provides some exposure to students, but if they are unable to decode the nuance because of limited language ability, the main purpose of cases is defeated.

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INSTRUCTIONAL CASES: A UNIQUE CROSSOVER OPPORTUNITY

A new journal has been launched that speaks directly to the needs of native Spanish-speaking learners and instructors. The International Journal of Instructional Cases publishes only short cases, four pages or fewer, coupled with extensive teaching notes that provide real assistance in the learning process. All materials available through the International Journal of Instructional Cases (www.ijicases.com) are in both English and Spanish for ease of instruction and development of critical thinking skills.

This journal reaches across the gap created by the limitations of English-language-only writing to meet the demand for instructional assistance. It crosses from theory to practice, and from content to pedagogical skill development by providing action-based activities that drive home the message of the case and offer an opportunity for students to apply the theories they have learned in class. It also offers instructors the advantage of being able to focus on the content rather than worry about language usage or teaching methodologies with which they may be less familiar. In particular, instructors drawn from the pool of skilled practitioners may find themselves frustrated and leery of adapting alternate methodologies. The instructional materials in IJIC provide an accessible entrée for them into the world of more advanced teaching skills.

A COMMITMENT TO LEARNING AND TEACHING

Our role as instructors demands that we keep current not only with changes in our specific disciplines, but also with ways to share that information with our students. When we put learning in their hands by providing them with understandable and accessible tools rather than our hoarding the knowledge and doling it out piecemeal to students, students accept the challenge and are more likely to succeed. As students succeed, we, too, can attain our goal of facilitating student learning.

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