The case method in the spotlight

History of the case method

'History is a set of lies agreed upon.' – Napoleon Bonaparte

It is widely believed that the case method was 'invented' at Harvard Business School, specifically in the early 1920s when Wallace Brett Donham was the school's second dean (he took office in 1919).

Well, Socrates and Aristotle and other famous instructors from history, if they were still alive, might have something to say about that! The description and discussion of a particular constellation, challenge or situation as an educational vehicle has long been part of philosophical research and instruction.

However, there's no denying that Harvard Business School's pioneering adoption and early use of the case method in management education continues to be hugely influential in many business schools across the world, as well as other professional education institutions.

Some background

So, let's unpick the history a little: It was in 1870 that the new dean of Harvard Law School, Christopher Columbus Langdell, began to teach law with cases and introduced the Socratic method of questions and answers in classes. Half a century later, this inspired Donham, a graduate of the law school, to introduce the case method at Harvard Business School. The school had been founded only in 1908, long after the foundation of the law school, which dated back to 1817.

Following a request by Donham, the marketing professor Melvin Thomas Copeland created a collection of real-life business problems that was published in 1920 (*Marketing Problems*). In parallel, Donham redirected the efforts of the 'Bureau of Business Research' to create case studies for use in class. In the early 1920s, the Bureau created a wide range of cases, with the first case, 'The General Shoe Company,' dating back to 1921. Having completed this founding work, the Bureau was later disbanded as Donham believed all faculty should begin to write their own cases.

Continuing inspiration

Throughout the 20th century, Harvard Business School was instrumental in inspiring other business schools (and institutions beyond business/economics) worldwide to adopt the case method. It remains a cornerstone of management education in the 21st century and, despite the sweeping cultural, historical, and technological revolutions that have taken place since Donham's day, it continues to thrive and develop.

There are certainly other ways of teaching professional disciplines such as business, but we firmly believe that the case method, by enabling participants to anticipate decisions and deal with challenges that they might face in their future careers, is one of the most powerful, effective, and inspiring, and will remain so into the future.

What is a case study?

'I don't pretend we have all the answers. But the questions are certainly worth thinking about.'
– Arthur C. Clarke

So, what is a case study?

This is a short question but a big one. First, let's look at a few definitions:

A business case imitates or simulates a real situation. Cases are verbal representations of reality that put the reader in the role of a participant in the situation. (Ellet 2007)

A case is a description of an actual situation, commonly involving a decision, a challenge, an opportunity, a problem or an issue faced by a person (or persons) in an organisation. A case allows you to step figuratively into the position of a particular decision maker. (Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, & Leenders 2005)

Beginning with the very simplest definition, a case is a story. This story describes a factual series of events that occurred in the past … the reader is expected to do one of two things: (1) make a decision or recommendation to the protagonist for a course of action to pursue, or (2) perform an analysis of the action that has already taken place. The key words in this description are story, factual, past, decision, and analysis. (Vega 2013)

A case is a vehicle for learning. It can be briefly defined as: An account or description of a situation, or sequence of events, which raises issues or problems for analysis and solution. (Heath 2015)

We do not want to add another definition and we are rather undogmatic about case studies and the case teaching method. We will therefore just consider anything to be a case study that is the recounting or description of a development or situation (real or fictional, old or recent), that – when reflected upon by participants – will allow them to learn and develop.

The metaphor of the 'patient in the room'

Next to philosophy and law, medicine has also long relied on something like case-based instruction for the development of future medical doctors. After getting acquainted with the basics (anatomy, biochemistry, etc.), medical students will learn much of their trade by dealing with real patients. They will get exposed to real patients with real issues and will then be asked what they would do now. This typically requires the combination of a diagnosis (analytical view: what is the

issue?) with the proposal (or execution) of a treatment (action phase: what to do now?) – just as medical doctors will usually need to do after leaving medical school and starting their medical practice. Every day they will be exposed to new cases and will need to deal with them; especially in general practice, they might need to deal with a broken arm, a case of asthma, a patient with depression, indications of cancer, etc. And they will need to develop routines to quickly assess the situation and propose treatments.

Professionals in business also constantly need to deal with challenging constellations: Which candidate should they pick for a job? Should the company expand into a different country? What is the best way to increase factory productivity? How can they account for physical property (e.g., land) that could be sold at much higher price than the current value as recorded in the balance sheet? How do they become more innovative as an organization? And dealing with such questions also requires the combination of analysis with a recommendation/action. So why shouldn't the educational process also be a bit like medical education?

Medical schools have the advantage that they typically operate hospitals and therefore have access to many such 'cases' in reality. And, while business schools can (and sometimes do) operate businesses as laboratories for learning, it is mostly through case studies that many institutions and educators from around the globe try to bring reality to the classroom and develop the students'/ participants' ability to deal with such complex constellations.

As with any metaphor, there are limits as to how comparable classical case studies for business schools are relative to patients in the medical school. But, to illustrate a few aspects, we will occasionally come back to this metaphor at various places in this book, but next we will first use it to differentiate between teaching cases and other types of case, most notably research cases.

Teaching cases versus research cases

This entire book is only about cases used for teaching, and all the types of case listed below are teaching cases. However, you may also have heard of research cases. These differ in several ways and, although a detailed explanation of their focus and purpose is beyond the limits of this book, the main differences are set out below.
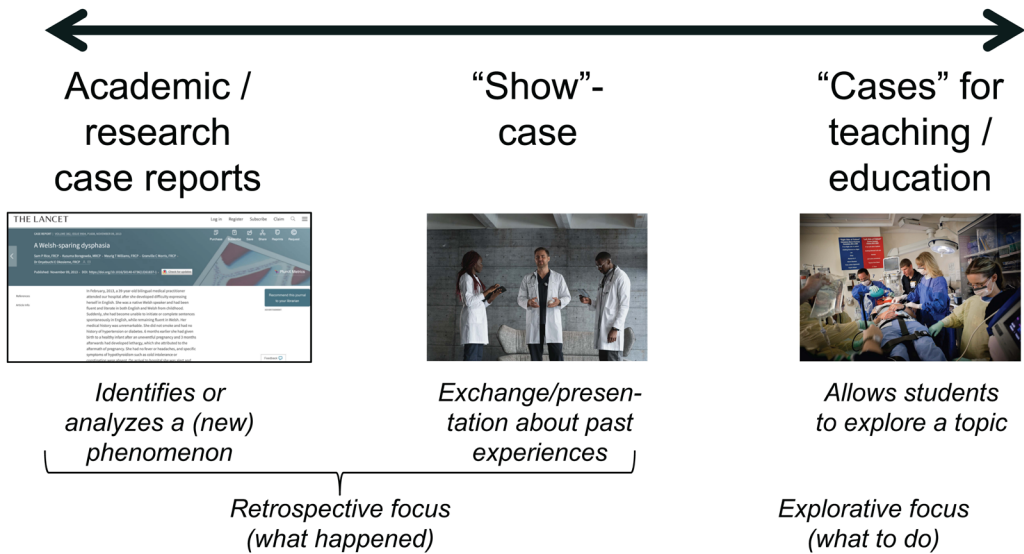
A research case (usually published in an academic journal) provides a descriptive analysis of a real-life situation from a theoretical viewpoint. This means there is no protagonist or unfolding 'story,' as is usually found in teaching cases. The purpose of the analysis is to test out hypotheses and explain the 'why' and 'how' of an event or series of events. Research cases can be used, for example, to identify economic and social trends, patterns, and behaviors.
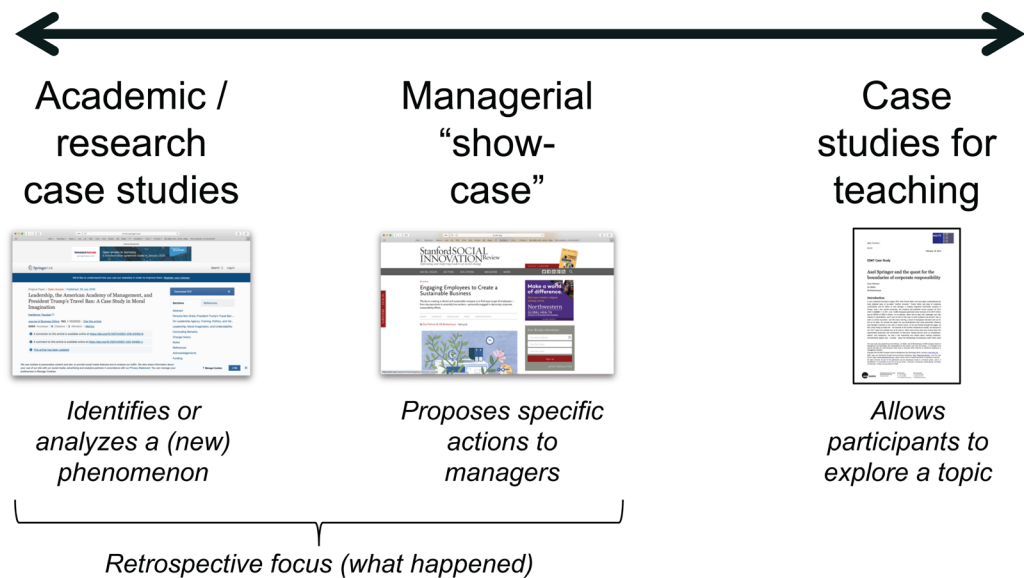
Research cases may also include the 'solutions' to any problems or challenges that are presented. What the organization did after the initial complication and how this turned out afterwards are typically the key points of research cases. This is very different to teaching cases, where participants are expected to make decisions and come up with answers as if they were the protagonist depicted in the case – usually without knowing what the organization or protagonist finally did.

We can use the metaphor of the patient in the room to exemplify this point: In the medical domain there are also multiple different types of 'cases.' Essentially, to a doctor, every patient is a case. Cases can be described in proper academic journals (research cases). Cases can be shared from doctor to doctor in hindsight. And we have the patient in the room for the medical students. All of these can be 'a case' – but they are very different purposes (see Figure 1: Types of case in the medical domain,' below): Research cases and cases that are shared between doctors (e.g., at conferences in nonscientific publications) share a retrospective focus. They describe what happened, how a situation was solved/dealt with, and what the outcome was. The patient in the room for the medical students has a very different purpose: the focus is to look forward at what should be done with this specific patient.
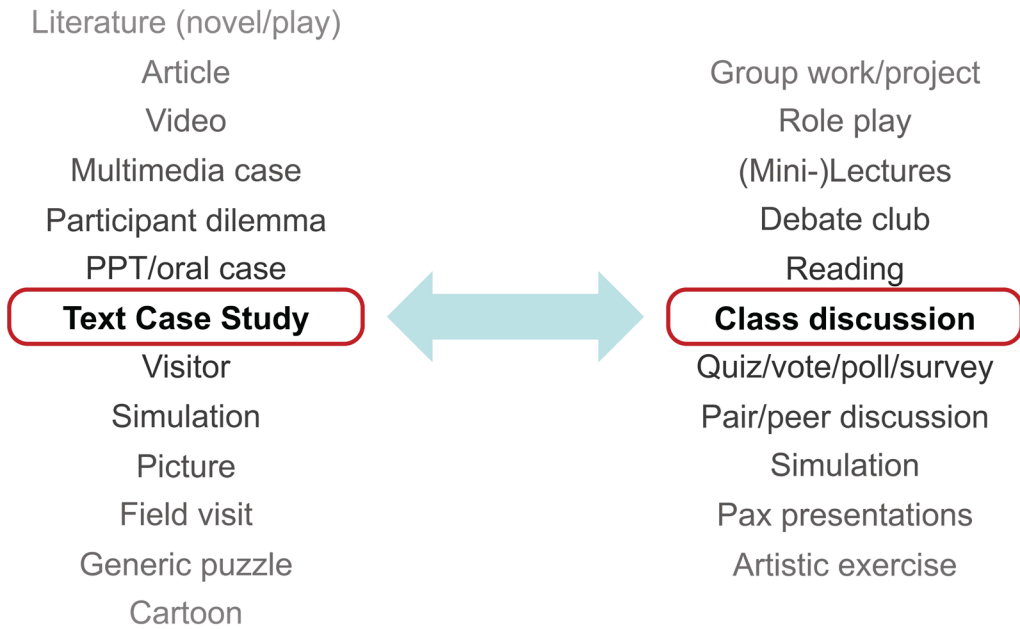
Figure 1: Types of case in the medical domain. Sources: middle: Pexels (https://www.pexels.com/de-de/foto/mann-menschen-frau-suche-5452189); right: Aspirus Health (https://www.aspirus.org/uploads/public/images/services/awh-trauma-center.jpg).

Figure 2: Types of case in business/management.

Similarly, in the domain of business and management there is an equal plurality of cases (see Figure 2: Types of case in business/management,' below): the problems professionals really need to solve, research cases for academic journals, experiences that are being shared as best practices, and case studies for educational purposes. The remainder of this book will focus entirely on cases for teaching purposes. But it will be important to keep this differentiation in mind – and to share it with your students and with potential case protagonists if you are thinking about writing a case for teaching purposes about them.

Literature (novel/play)
Article
Video
Multimedia case
Participant dilemma
PPT/oral case
Text Case Study ⟷ **Class discussion**
Visitor
Simulation
Picture
Field visit
Generic puzzle
Cartoon

Group work/project
Role play
(Mini-)Lectures
Debate club
Reading
Quiz/vote/poll/survey
Pair/peer discussion
Simulation
Pax presentations
Artistic exercise

Figure 3: Case material and methods.

Plurality and diversity

We are rather undogmatic about case studies and the use of case studies for education. We believe in instructional plurality, the diversity of methods and materials. And we would also argue that it is impossible to understand the true potential of case-based instruction until you have observed or been part of a few successful case teaching sessions. This is because a classical (Harvard-style) text case study does not truly become a case until it is used in the classroom – and, even then, it becomes something slightly different each time it is taught, drawing out different responses, different opinions, different reactions. Yet, despite this unpredictability (which we would argue is itself exciting and stimulating for both participants and facilitators), a well-orchestrated session will lead to the desired and preplanned learning outcomes as intended by the case author or the facilitator.

In the figure below (see Figure 3: Case material and methods') we have visualized our undogmatic philosophy: We strongly believe that facilitators can choose from a wide range of materials that they want to use in class, like literature, articles, videos, multimedia cases, or a real manager in the room. All of this can be the 'patient in the room.' Additionally, educators can choose from a wide range of teaching formats like letting participants research something in class, running group works, orchestrating a role-play, and so on. In our opinion, skilled facilitators mix and match materials and formats according to the educational objective but also to increase engagement through the plurality and diversity of materials and methods. The traditional text case study used in a full-class case discussion is only one of many combinations possible. We think that this is important to keep in mind.

Much of our description will (seemingly) focus particularly on the use of text-based case studies in a class discussion, but we will continuously highlight how you can broaden your didactical inventory and how to use and develop exciting and relevant material for highly interactive class sessions.

Deep learning

Ultimately, a case is what it becomes in the classroom. A great case session is electric and transformative, challenging and changing perceptions, inspiring fresh ideas, and new ways of doing things, and resulting in the type of deep and lasting learning that is rarely achieved in any other way.

So, yes, a case is all those things set out in the definitions quoted above. But it is so much more than that, and only you can discover this for yourself.

Why use case studies?

'Not having heard something is not as good as having heard it; having heard it is not as good as having seen it; having seen it is not as good as knowing it; knowing it is not as good as putting it into practice.' – Xunzi

Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of teaching and can be traced back worldwide over thousands of years. Fables, folklore, literature, myths, and fairy tales have been used for centuries to instruct, guide, encourage critical thinking, and impart wisdom and knowledge.

Why is this? Why are stories so powerful? Why do they work so well as teaching tools? More specifically, why do case studies work so well?

Stories are compelling and engaging at many levels. They are vivid and real to the reader or listener. They trigger multiple associations, memories, and emotions. They allow us to relate new information to existing knowledge. We are drawn into previously unexplored territory, encouraged to embrace new ideas, understand from different perspectives, develop empathy, and think in fresh ways. We can be jolted out of old ways of doing things, encouraged to discard stale and tired attitudes, and be inspired to do more and be more.

The functions of a teaching case

The beauty of cases as a vehicle for learning is that they are – just like any other stories – multifunctional. They are used to:

- make content relevant for participants by infusing reality into the classroom;
- enable participants to apply and use concepts, theories and frameworks to a given situation, allowing them to relate new information to existing knowledge;
- provoke controversy and debate to increase emotional engagement and the reconfiguration of knowledge by shaking up existing preconceptions;
- excite participants by stimulating their curiosity and interest;
- improve participants' ability to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity;
- make participants aware of different possible perspectives and angles for almost any given situation (and thus develop their ability of critical thinking and creativity);
- allow participants to fail in a safe environment, receive constructive criticism and learn from the failures of other participants;
- allow a constant change in the role of learner and teacher – case discussions continuously enable participants to instruct each other;
- enable an intense social interaction with other participants leading to a significant improvement in communication and discussion skills;
- increase retention and memory, by linking academic content to an interesting and intriguing story.

The benefits of case studies for online education

When Clinton P. Biddle wrote 'The General Shoe Company' in 1921, he intended the case to be used in a physical classroom – and this is how cases continued to be used for almost an entire century. But, with the rise of online education, cases did not lose their appeal. Quite the contrary, we would argue that they even provide extra benefits when used for online teaching. Why is that? Because we all know the vicious circle of online teaching and learning: participants feeling boredom, remaining silent, switching off mentally, giving in to off- and online distractions and temptations, and their feeling of being invisible (which they often are when they shut off their cameras in live online sessions) – and, because live online teaching often slows things down, we have seen many educators moving to lecturing in online settings, which then in turn reduces students' engagement and the circle starts all over again.

So how can cases be of help in such contexts? When used well, cases will drastically enhance interaction, excitement, and participation. The use of breakout sessions and collaborative or interactive tools (more on this later in the chapter on case teaching) can help to make online sessions just as enjoyable and interactive as a classroom case discussion.

Broadening the horizon of participants

Finally, we'd like to share this great quote with you that offers an inspiring answer to the question we started with: 'why use case studies?'

> *A good case is not just a well-written document and a teaching tool, or even simply an engaging story about a compelling management issue. It is an opportunity to embark on a personal journey of discovery, for the case writer, for the teacher, for the participant, and sometimes for the company. It opens horizons instead of closing them; it raises new questions instead of merely answering them, and it provides a rich forum for personal development and growth. That's what a good case is all about. (Kassarjian & Kashani 2005: p. 105)*

From theory to practice with Martin

I frequently meet with alumni of programs I have taught on. One question that I love to ask alumni is about their most vivid memory of their time at university or school. Very often the answer centers around a specific case study. Alumni answer things like 'I especially remember the case of Steinways when they were attacked by Yamaha and had to decide whether they should retreat to the premium market segment or try to attack back' or 'I will never forget the story of Damien Hirst and how he was able to find a new who, a new what, and a new how.' Cases just have the capacity to stick!

Broadening the horizon of facilitators

But not only participants benefit from the case method. The facilitator also benefits in various ways from applying the case method. For example, test-teaching early versions of your case material might benefit the further development of the material if you want to write your own case. Sometimes you can even look for stories and cases that support early versions of research papers and by discussing this with students or executives the facilitator gains additional insights and new perspectives on this material and the kind of questions he should ask in her research.

From theory to practice with Urs

For more than five years I have been teaching case teaching and writing workshops for the Case Centre. I always try to run these workshops participant-centered, with lots of discussions around the teaching experience of the participants. This has always been very revealing for me. While I have a background in executive education teaching, I have profited hugely from the experience in undergraduate and master's teaching of my participants. And it is due to the exchange of experiences and knowledge around challenging teaching situations (for me these are 'cases'!) that I had the chance to learn a lot from my participants. This book benefited strongly from this.

Criticism of the case method

> *'With no positivity, there is no hope; with no negativity, there is no improvement.'*
> *– Criss Jami*

We are strong advocates of the case method in an undogmatic understanding. We teach with cases, we write cases, we love cases. But we have to acknowledge at some point: not everyone is a fan. And we are not just talking about students who complain about having to read and prepare (often dreadfully long and boring) case studies. Relevant criticism continues to be made of the case method by educators, MBA alumni, and others who put forward reasoned arguments against its use.

Instead of simply dismissing these viewpoints as not worthy of attention, we think it is more productive to think through these negative critiques, decide if they have any validity for us, and use them to continually refine and improve our approach to teaching with cases.

Here are a few of the main criticisms commonly made against the case method (as condensed from, e.g., Hühn 2013, Khurana & Nohria 2008, and Nohria 2012, or discussions with colleagues and participants in our case method workshops):

- The case method is theory-free – we just know certain things; so why always start a case discussion from scratch?
- They just train the use of tools – they neither truly invite reflection nor do they provide education.
- Cases focus too much on business practice and not enough on key ideas, theories, and frameworks.
- Cases are presented as requiring a 'solution' but, in reality, many situations are insoluble.
- Cases claim to bring a 'slice of life' into the classroom, but in reality they can only simulate real-life situations.
- Too many cases are about success stories, which is not truly representative of the business world.
- The situations depicted in cases are being assessed with the benefit of hindsight – again, this does not reflect life in the real world.
- Because cases are taught in a safe classroom environment, they encourage a false sense of security.
- The main challenge to be addressed is immediately obvious from the case – there is no requirement to identify the problem as there would be in real life.

Of course, we have to admit that all these criticisms contain an element of truth. However, our advice is to take the criticism on board and use it positively to enrich and enhance your case

teaching and writing. These objections demonstrate the importance of carefully thinking through your approach to using cases in the classroom.

⚠ Some criticism of the case method can be rebutted or dealt with through respective use/production of case studies. A good example is the criticism that students have 'a false sense of security' (Hühn 2013) in the case method classroom. In our opinion, this is a strength, not a weakness.

The safe environment offered by the case method classroom is vital to the success of a case teaching session. It is the perfect arena to test ideas, challenge opposing theories and opinions, explore potential solutions, practice persuasive and effective public speaking, and build self-confidence and develop numerous other skills that will be invaluable in the world of business.

Another criticism leveled at the case method – that students are presented with an obvious problem to solve – can also be safely rebutted. It is true that most cases will present an immediate issue (problem or challenge), very often highlighted in the opening paragraph. However, a well-written and effective case will also include an underlying issue that will only become apparent with close analysis. There is a requirement to 'dig deeper' and uncover these underlying issues; this can be a tricky and demanding process – and a world away from being 'presented with an obvious problem to solve.' See page 21 for more on immediate and underlying issues.

Two powerful objections against the case method that we have heard many times concern (1) the danger of false generalizations from cases and (2) the fact that cases tend to be success stories with positive 'solutions.' Next we give some examples of how these two objections have informed our approach to case teaching (and writing) and what you can do about them.

The potential danger of wrong syllogisms

Empirical evidence that is based on one single case is usually not reliable or relevant. It is very dangerous to conclude any general rules (or advice for success) from an individual case study. And we truly believe that this is not the overall idea of good case teaching. Quite the contrary: a good case study should be able to demonstrate or exemplify theory and research results. Cases are examples of what happened in one specific company/organization in a specific situation. The reflection on whether this observation is generalizable should be informed by research, which clearly goes beyond the case and should be based on empirical evidence or existing theory.

Keeping this criticism in mind when preparing your teaching will hopefully keep you from falling into this trap. There are many ways to prevent this from happening. You can, for example, teach several cases on one topic. When teaching the subject of pricing you could use a case on a B2B and a B2C company and additionally cases from a small and a large company or from companies in different industries (high- versus low-fixed-cost businesses) of different regions. This variety will help the students to develop a broader sense of the topic and will allow you as educators to make elaborate links to proper research. Additionally, you might want to add some (short) lectures on important research results and, last but not least, you will make available pre- and postcourse readings that embed the individual case in the larger theoretical context. The discussion of the individual case is an important element of the learning but it is far from the only component. The case discussion should instead be accompanied by many other elements, like textbook readings, journal articles, and potentially additional insights from other disciplines, to avoid wrong syllogisms.

The potential danger of wrong syllogisms applies even more when you write your own case study. We will get back to this in the chapter on case writing, but we often have come across case authors who got overly obsessed with their own cases. They heard about an interesting decision or action of a company and then wrote a case that centers on this decision or action. And on the surface such cases sometimes almost seem to be convincing. Just as a fictitious example, a case author might try to write about Uber along the following argumentation:

A. Uber is successful
B. Uber did these five things
   1. Uber eliminated the middlemen/intermediaries
   2. Uber is innovative
   3. Uber's business model is disruptive
   4. Uber's business model makes use of network effects
   5. Uber was connected to startup networks (Techstars)
C. Ergo: if companies do these five things they are/will be successful

As convincing as this might sound upon superficial reading, this is a nonsensical argument – that would result in a case study with unsubstantiated lessons learned for the participants. That the syllogism above is wrong is very quickly evident if we just replace the things that Uber did:

A. Uber is successful
B. Uber did these five things
   1. Uber has a company name beginning with U
   2. Uber was founded in the USA
   3. Uber is active in the transport industry
   4. Uber quickly expanded into other countries
   5. Uber developed an app for all cellphone OSs
C. Ergo: if companies do these five things they are/will be successful

Good luck to your students if they learned in your class that they had to do these five things to be successful. And such wrong syllogisms often get amplified by hindsight bias.

Cases are unrealistic because they all have 'solutions' and usually deal with success stories

Another relevant and often legitimate criticism is related to the previous point: Most published case studies somehow deal with successes, protagonists or organizations overcoming initial challenges or obstacles, seemingly providing a blueprint for how the participants should act in the future. And, because when discussing cases we usually look back in time, participants and educators are at risk of allowing later successes to bias the discussion.

However, it is important to realize that not all cases are about success stories – and they should not be! Choose the case studies that you plan to teach and write carefully and include cases that cover failures. This can be particularly effective if the case itself is seemingly about a success story, but the company or protagonists have run into trouble because of what they did as a response to the constellation described in the case.

This is a good way to highlight that real life outside the classroom is complex, messy, ambiguous, and often frustrating: we must face facts and acknowledge that failure (although not necessarily a dead end) and dilemmas without 'good' solutions are ever-present in the world of business.

From theory to practice with Urs

I teach business ethics – and, to do a proper job as educator, I need to prepare participants for difficult ethical choices, i.e., for constellations in which none of the possible courses of action could legitimately be labeled as a success. But even in my domain most existing case studies describe cases of successes – e.g., how a company overcame an issue such as corruption or child labor. This is clearly important but doesn't help my participants to fully grasp my domain. And, because few organizations want to openly discuss ethical missteps and challenges, I occasionally resort to additional, alternative material for case style discussions, such as literature, history, movies, documentaries, anonymized stories from alumni etc.

So what can you do to overcome the positivity bias of case studies? Here are a few ideas:

- Make sure to include at least a few cases of failures into your syllabus.
- If an organization or protagonist later runs into problems or falls out of favor, intentionally keep the case in your curriculum – but make this a point in the session (see e.g., Yemen & Clawson 2014).
- Focus your debriefing on when/why the protagonist's course of action could have failed or under what circumstances we could label the action as not good/not optimal.
- Contrast the case with other examples of individuals or organizations that showed similar behavior but failed.

In essence, we believe that much of the criticism of case studies has a bit of truth, but that the criticisms usually relate instead to the way in which case studies are being used or written – and that all of them can be overcome through a reflective use of the method.

Dealing with criticism of the case method when teaching with or writing case studies

- Don't ignore the criticism; use it to improve your teaching and writing.
- Ask key questions and review your approach to case teaching.
- Take positive steps to counter criticisms.
- Avoid wrong generalizations (wrong syllogisms) by clearly linking your educational objective (for case teaching) or underlying issues (for case writing) to science and existing literature.
- If exploring an entirely new domain without existing literature: highlight what is generally accepted business knowledge and what is speculation or what might be limited in validity to a specific context.
- Be robust in your defense of the case method: if you don't believe in it, neither will your students.
- Check what your students learned from the cases (beyond cognitive download): if their learning is biased, change your didactics or the case study.

What makes a good case study?

'The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.' – Mark Van Doren

We'll start with some great observations made by J.B. Kassarjian and Kamran Kashani that appeared in a 2005 book chapter they wrote entitled 'Writing an Effective Case for Executive Programmes':

> A 'good case' is not just a well-written document and a teaching tool, or even simply an engaging story about a compelling management issue. It is an opportunity to embark on a personal journey of discovery, for the case writer, for the teacher, for the participant, and sometimes for the company. It opens horizons instead of closing them; it raises new questions instead of merely answering them, and it provides a rich forum for personal development and growth.
>
> That's what a good case is all about.

Although these observations were made in relation to cases used in executive education, we believe they apply equally well to cases used with any level of participants, from undergraduate upwards.

Let's drill down a little more and look at some of these issues in more detail with the help of Derek Abell, who listed 10 points to look out for in a good case (IMD Technical Note 1997/2003). These should prove useful both when writing a case and when selecting one to teach:

1. Make sure it's a case and not just a story.
2. Make sure that the case tackles a relevant, important issue.
3. Make sure that the case provides a voyage of discovery – and even some interesting surprises.
4. Make sure that the case is controversial.
5. Make sure the case contains contrasts and comparisons.
6. Make sure the case provides 'currently useful generalizations.'
7. Make sure the case has the data required to tackle the problem – not too much, and not too little.
8. Make sure the case has a personal touch.
9. Make sure the case is well structured and easy to read.
10. Make sure that the case is short.

Below, we look at each of these points in a little more detail.

Make sure it's a case and not just a story

This is an interesting distinction and one we agree with. First, we believe that a good case also should be a story. Or perhaps, more accurately, an unfinished story – one that requires input from class participants until a resolution or 'ending' can be reached. It is the need for this crucial contribution that means a case becomes more than 'just' a story: learners are not passive readers; they become active participants, usually by 'stepping into the shoes' of the protagonist to make the decisions that will drive the story forward. Abell here rightly points to the fact that the text of a case study in itself is comparably irrelevant. Or, as Heath (n.d.) puts it, '[a] teaching case has little or no merit in isolation. It is simply one component within a teaching or learning situation. Its purpose is to connect with other components in the situation, to establish linkages and trigger

activity within and between students and facilitator.' What is key is to provide the material for a relevant exploration, discussion, or exercise in the class – and for that a good story might just not be good enough.

As Abell notes, '[s]orting out the wheat from the chaff, getting to the essential issues, and learning to ask the right questions, are key objectives in case teaching.' (Abell 2003, p. 2)

Make sure that the case tackles a relevant, important issue

Writing or teaching a case that is irrelevant for the intended audience is a waste of time. Participants will neither engage with the subject matter nor learn anything of importance from it. The issue or issues covered in the case must have substance and address a problem, challenge, or situation that is of direct relevance and significance to your participants.

Think back to the metaphor of the patient in the room: If you train future medical doctors in north Finland, they might have less/little use from investigating malaria patients, and future dentists might not need to deal with broken ankles. Along this line of thought, just make sure to provide your participants with case constellations that they are likely to experience in a similar shape or form in their professional futures. And, if that is not the case, only pick cases that you as an expert in your domain truly believe to be important for your participants to know.

Make sure that the case provides a voyage of discovery – and even some interesting surprises

We like Derek Abell's take on this: 'Good cases are like onions – the more you peel away the outer layers, the more you discover inside' (p. 3). We could not put it any better ourselves. It is important for a case to have both an immediate issue and an underlying issue. The immediate issue is the 'hook' that will kick-start the classroom discussion. This will then lead to the discovery of more fundamental underlying issues as the 'outer layers are peeled away.' (For more on the differentiation between immediate and underlying issues see the section 'The Issue of Issues,' page 21.)

To illustrate this peeling process, let's use the famous Harvard case study 'Rob Parson at Morgan Stanley' by Diane Burton (1998). The case (and usually also the case discussion) opens with the question (or vote) of whether Paul Nasr should propose Rob Parson for fast-track promotion to managing director or not – the immediate issue. This is really an intriguing and compelling issue because Rob Parson is so incredibly successful in his task of selling and building a business. But at the same time his colleagues dislike him strongly and he has a history of breaking rules and of being perceived as uncooperative. When discussing the case students will quickly realize that the decision for or against the promotion depends on many deeper level issues (the underlying issues) such as organizational culture, strategy, and the role of HR processes and systems. And, to discuss the case, they will almost inevitably peel the onion layer by layer.

Make sure that the case is controversial

In line with our earlier discussion of the (sometimes legitimate but addressable) criticisms of the case method, a case should not have easy answers or 'solutions.' There are usually no easy answers in the real world of business, so they have no place in a case. (And, if there are really easy answers, we do not need to discuss them in class and do not need cases for them…) The best cases provoke intense discussion, disagreement, and debate, leading to deep and lasting learning. It is helpful if there are multiple, possibly legitimate responses to the immediate issue; only in this way will

participants develop their ability to see alternative options and will grow the habit of creative thinking. In addition, by taking part in such passionate discussion, participants also learn a wide range of key skills such as the ability to argue cogently for or against a point of view, as well as expertise in listening, responding, communicating, and persuading.

Make sure the case contains contrasts and comparisons

There is no single recipe for success in business. That is why the best cases use contrasts and comparisons to demonstrate how different ideas, approaches, cultures, and personal styles can all lead to positive (or negative) outcomes. A family business can be as successful as a publicly listed firm. A self-made entrepreneur with humble family roots might be just as successful as a PhD in engineering with an MBA from a top school. Class participants can gain greater wisdom and perspective from such contrasting examples and find positive role models for their own approach to management and business.

   And if an individual case study does not provide such comparisons and contrasts, educators should aim to achieve the same effect and learning by using contrasting case studies over the span of an entire course.

Make sure the case provides 'currently useful generalizations'

As mentioned above, a case should be relevant to the intended audience. However, the best cases also offer the opportunity to draw wider lessons from the specifics of the case. For example, can the lessons learned and conclusions drawn also be applied in a different country, culture, company, or marketplace? Often this cannot be achieved by the case alone (see also above the justified criticism of the case method) but with the help of pre- or postreadings, with small lectures during class, or with the use of additional and complementary cases in other sessions. It is your task to ensure that students reflect upon and understand the extent to which the generalized business knowledge that you explored with a specific case can or cannot be translated to other situations.

Make sure the case has the data required to tackle the problem – not too much and not too little

The amount of data contained in a case should match your educational objective – this is true for cases that you pick from others but even more so for cases that you might want to write yourself. You will probably have experienced this already when you used a case in class: how much of the information contained in the case did you or your participants explicitly refer to during the case discussion? Quite often we ask our participants to invest an hour in reading a case, without then ever really utilizing the data. Sometimes you might have the opposite experience where the case in itself does not provide all the information that is necessary to have a deep conversation. If either of the two is true for you, search for cases in which the data is more in line with what you actually need in class.

   Abell notes that there are three types of data that a good case should always include:

1. Enough information to enable a meaningful debate in the classroom. This may include details about the industry itself, the company, where it is in place and time, and the historical context. These descriptions should be jargon-free and easy to follow and understand.
2. Exhibits at the end of the case, for example financial statements, growth rates, and key company announcements.

3. Biographical and background information about key players in the case to help participants understand their values, approach, and temperament. An individual's strengths and weaknesses can often have a decisive influence on the outcome of a case.

And, if you are writing a case, it is vital to include not only all the data that the students will need to discuss the case. Also think about other case teachers and all the information that they would need to successfully use your case (and include such data either in the case or in the teaching note). This will give your case wider appeal as no specialist or 'insider' knowledge will be required to teach it. At the same time, you should resist the temptation to overload your case with data. Always keep your learning objectives in mind and take out any unnecessary material.

Make sure the case has a personal touch

Cases usually center on problems (often a decision that needs to be taken). But all problems are someone's problems. Problems do not exist without a perspective – and the perspective matters to how professionals in practice can or should respond to them. Accordingly, this perspective needs to be visible in the case – and for that the protagonist is key (again both for your case selection as well as for your own case writing). A protagonist who participants can easily identify with is one of the key components of a successful case. A set of facts, figures, and events without mention of any key personnel or their reactions to the unfolding situation would be very dull indeed in the classroom.

Cases with video supplements of the case protagonists or, even better, a guest appearance by the protagonist or an expert from the industry or company in the classroom will also help the case to come alive for participants.

Make sure the case is well structured and easy to read

A potentially great case can be ruined if it is badly written and poorly structured. We offer some in-depth advice on writing cases later in this book (see page 244), but when it comes to selecting cases written by others there is a simple rule: if you do not find the reading to be enjoyable or at least acceptable, your participants will be unlikely to join your class with excitement about the upcoming case discussion.

Make sure that the case is short

We agree with Abell that cases should be as short as possible, while not leaving out key details. This is one of the fundamental attributes of a good case. When picking a case, ensure that the expected reading time is somewhat fitting to the educational objective and the time spent for the case in class. Make sure to consider different reading speeds (especially when you have participants for whom the case language is not their native language) but also different time budgets for case reading for different types of participants. We also have to remember that today's generation of learners are more used to scanning the web and dipping in and out of various websites, often within seconds of landing; they take in information differently and are often resistant to long pages of text. We have to adapt our approach rather than bemoaning theirs.

And also, when writing a case, always keep your audience in mind. For example, executives will often have little time to plow through a 20- or 30-page case, experts (or more advanced students) in a domain might need less background, etc.

⦂☰ What makes a good case?

Make sure that the case you pick for teaching or writing:

–is a case and not just a story,
–tackles a relevant and important issue,
–provides a voyage of discovery,
–is controversial,
–contains contrasts and comparisons,
–provides 'currently useful generalizations,'
–includes the data required to tackle the problem,
–has a personal touch,
–is well structured and easy to read,
–is short.

Source: Derek Abell, IMD Technical Note (1997/2003).

Variety of cases

> *'Variety's the very spice of life that gives it all its flavour.' – William Cowper*

Following our undogmatic approach, we will gladly consider many different types of educational material to be at least case-like. So, feel free to call various things a 'case study.' But at the same time it is important to clarify what we are talking about. In this section, we will propose a few differentiations and logical separations between different types of material that can be used for teaching purposes.

Case dimensions

In the heads of many facilitators, there is something like a 'classical' case study for teaching purposes. This is what many have in their minds whenever they talk, think, or write about case studies. This will typically be a 'Harvard-style' case, i.e., a rather extensive description of a real managerial challenge from the (recent) past, with lots of data and information and a decision to be taken. And cases of this type remain to be very influential and important for management education. (If you think back to the metaphor of the patient in the room, this is rightfully so. Such rich and long cases try to get close to the constellation and information that the protagonist faced in reality.)

However, case-based teaching can be done on the basis of a very broad range of different case types. We identified seven dimensions along which case material can be systematically differentiated. We think that this is important to keep in mind, as this information will not only help you to find the right case for your specific teaching objective but also to increase the variety of your teaching material and therefore ultimately engagement. (And, if you intend to write a case, make deliberate choices along all of these seven dimensions. The choices should not happen by accident but after careful reflection.)

Prospective (decision) vs. retrospective (nondecision)

Retrospective cases invite participants to engage in a discussion about events that are – even from the time of the case – looking backward. They will usually have no or at least less of a decision/action focus. The discussion will typically focus more on how the company/person got to where she is at the time of the case than discussing how she should move forward. Typical examples for this kind of case study are 'Benihana of Tokyo' (Sasser & Klug 1978) or 'Madonna: Strategy in action' (Anderson & Kupp 2006). In both cases the teaching objective is to untangle the ingredients of the success by analyzing the history/past from the very early beginnings to the time that the case is set.

Prospective cases typically call for an action, decision, plan, etc. that is – from the point of time of the case – forward-looking. Most of the time prospective cases will have a decision focus. And, while prospective cases will still mostly be situated in the past, the discussion will typically focus more on how the company/person could or should move forward from the time that the case is positioned. A typical example for this kind of case study is the classic case 'Rob Parson at Morgan Stanley' (Burton 1998). While the case provides a lot of detail on the past performance of Rob Parson, the discussion focuses on the difficult decision of whether to promote Parson to managing director that his manager, Paul Nasr, faces – therefore it is forward-looking.

Many cases will contain both perspectives: Retrospective cases still implicitly include the question of how the person or organization should go forward and if the success can be sustained or not. Prospective cases, on the other hand, also usually need historical data because the past of an individual or firm will limit the options that are available for the future. We still believe this to be an important differentiation, as the educational objectives will have different emphases: Retrospective cases are usually great to improve analytical skills and to exercise certain tools. In comparison, prospective cases focus more on the development of decision-making skills.

Real vs. fictional

This dimension is not really a dichotomy but rather a gradation. What we mean by this is that there are for various reasons grades of fictionality of cases. There are, for example, completely fictional cases. A good example would be the 'Who's Responsible for the Drawbridge Drama?' (Müller & Schäfer 2010). The moral dilemma of this case is completely made up (with the first known publication in Katz 1978). Other cases are real but might be rather old, in some cases even historical. A famous INSEAD case study centers around Napoleon Bonaparte (Kim et al. 2008) and there are multiple cases about the race to the South Pole (e.g., Fischer, Crawford, & Boynton 2003). While these cases are based on real stories, they are historical and desk-based. Then there are more recent and up-to-date cases that for whatever reason had to be either sanitized, anonymized, or disguised. While you could argue that these cases are real as they are based on real stories and often involve field research, from a participants' point of view these cases nevertheless feel less real as they do not know the real names of the people involved and/or the real company name, location and the like. For us the next level up in terms of 'realness' is desk-based cases, e.g., cases on real people and companies purely based on secondary sources. While these cases are of course real and often contemporary, they frequently lack details and insights about the involved people. In these types of case, it is very

likely that direct quotes from the protagonist or their specific point of view are missing or are less elaborated. Finally, there are real and contemporary cases based on field research and with company release. These cases are typically rich in information on the protagonist and all relevant people and specific insights into the company that would be hard to find in secondary sources.

Single text vs. several texts

There are different overall structures for case studies. Most cases are single case studies with an accompanying teaching note. But you can also decide to use a case series with an A, B, and potentially C or D case (sometimes also called 'multipart' cases, e.g., Vega 2013). Usually, the first case will be the longest part of the series, giving all the necessary background on the company, industry, protagonist, etc. It has a specific cutoff date and is often prospective with a clear decision to take going forward. Case B is then often a kind of update on what the protagonist or company decided to do after the constellation described in case A plus a new challenge. The B case is often only one to two pages long. This can then go on. Some cases have been published as a single case initially but have added a B and/or C case over time; some cases were immediately designed as a case series.

   Besides a single case or case series, you can also choose to use several independent but related cases, for example cases on different companies facing the same kind of challenge or separate cases about the same organization, but looking at different topics (e.g., you can probably find accounting, strategy, change management, and operations cases about Nike). And, finally, you can decide to use an industry background note and combine this with a case study (or a case series).

Long vs. short

One of the most frequent questions we get during our case teaching or writing workshops is about the optimal length of a case. We will discuss the pros and cons of long cases in more detail in the case teaching and case writing sections. Here we just want to highlight the fact that the length of a case might matter, and that you should think about it. Most cases have somewhere between 15 and 35 pages but there are extremes in both directions. The catalogue of the Case Centre comprises more than 1,200 cases with only one page, e.g., the IMD case study 'MJ Basket' (Schmenner 2002). On the other end of the spectrum, the case 'The Mortgage for Pacific Tower' by Lynne Sagalyn and Jennifer Morgan (CCW141703) from 2014 has a length of 148 pages as it includes the full set of documents for a real estate mortgage deal. The average length of cases listed at the Case Centre is 12 pages; the average length of best-selling cases is 18 pages. When instructors search for cases, the most frequent search interval that they use is '< 10 pages.'

Complex vs. easy

The complexity of cases can vary considerably. Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, and Leenders (2005) proposed three main factors that influence the perceived complexity of a case study (see also Lima & Fabiani 2014). First and foremost, there is the *analytical complexity* of the case study, which is mainly about the visibility of the problem that the case protagonist (and thus the students/participants) are facing. Some cases are very outspoken about the underlying issues and also the potential choices or alternatives, while others try to hide important facts and even try to lead the reader in the wrong direction. The second dimension of the case complexity (*conceptual complexity*) refers to the underlying concepts, tools, or techniques that the case study covers. These can be rather simple heuristics, checklist, or 2×2 matrices or rather complex theoretical constructs. And finally, there is the *presentation complexity*: the presentation of the case itself in terms of its volume and clarity (structure, writing style, visual presentation, etc.) will influence the perceived overall complexity of the case study for the readers.
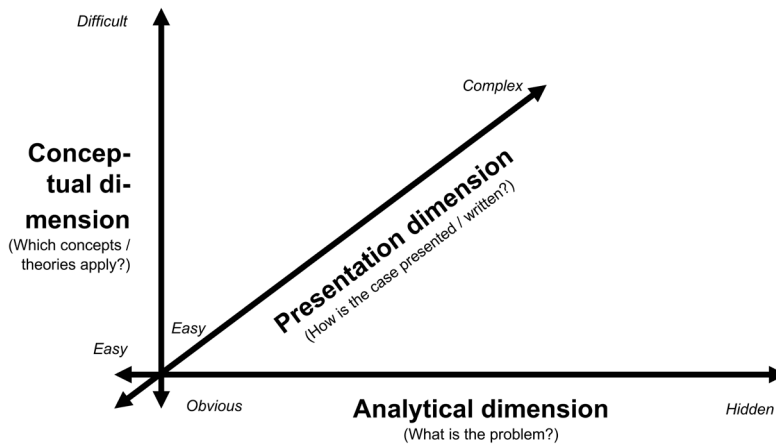
Figure 4: Dimensions of case complexity. Source: Adapted from: Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, Leenders (2005). Learning with Cases. P.12.

Whether a case should be complex or easy along any of these three dimensions of case complexity should depend upon the intended learning outcomes – and we will come back to this aspect in the case teaching and case writing chapters.

Failure vs. success

We already touched on this topic when briefly looking at key criticism of the case method: most case studies describe situations of success (already in the case or as an update after the discussion). We believe that there are two main reasons for this. First of all, companies and also the case protagonist prefer to share their success stories and are sometimes even unwilling to talk about, let alone publish, their failures. Additionally, it is probably also driven by the fact that case studies for research frequently look at success cases. While learning from failures can be particularly powerful, there will be many fewer cases to select from.

Text-based vs. other formats and materials

The text-based case study is what most people have in mind, when thinking and talking about 'case studies' for use in classrooms. However, there are many other forms of material/content that can equally well be used to apply case-based learning methods. You might want to think about using cases from textbooks, mini-cases, live cases from your participants, video cases, multimedia cases, newspaper articles that you can enrich with more context or specific questions, literature, company or site visits, and many more.

An interesting point of view is that you can use different formats on the same underlying case idea over time. In that sense the different formats might represent different stages of adoption of the content. For example, you read an interesting newspaper article and decide to use it in class. You get positive feedback and decide to dig deeper into the story by adding more content; you might find some videos on the company. After using this material, you start to write your own short mini-case based on secondary material. Then, you might be ready to reach out to the company and conduct interviews, enriching your existing material with quotes and additional material. And, finally, you turn this into a video or multimedia case in close collaboration with the case protagonist.

Prototypical case types

While above we describe seven general dimensions to look at when thinking about, choosing, or even writing a case study, we now want to introduce some prototypical case types as proposed by Heath (2015). While each of these types is a specific combination of the seven dimensions above, we want to describe seven prototypical case types as this terminology is often used when instructors refer to their teaching material. We therefore think that it is helpful to give some background.

Situation case

Many cases fall into this category. The idea of a situation case is that participants are asked to analyze the information presented in the case, assess the data, and perhaps diagnose what went wrong or how things should have been done differently. Finally, participants are expected to make their recommendations for future action. Situation cases typically involve a clear case protagonist and some background information on other relevant people. They tend to be ambivalent between prospective and retrospective considerations, but during the case discussion a lot of emphasis will be on the retrospective analysis of the situation.

Decision case

A decision case is a situation case with a very clear decision (or immediate issue) to take (or solve) – i.e., the focus clearly shifts toward the prospective dimension (both in the case itself and in the class discussion). These cases put participants on the spot. They are expected to make a decision and come up with an action plan to implement their decision. To add to the difficulty, a number of different decisions and related action plans can appear equally reasonable and feasible.

Incident case

Incident cases are very short cases (often no longer than a paragraph or a page) that describe a single incident or event. They can be used to introduce, discuss, or illustrate a theory or concept, or to raise a particular point for further discussion. Incident cases are useful in a number of ways.
    For case teachers: Incident cases can be a good option for new case teachers who want to 'dip their toes in the water' and get a feel for case teaching. They are also a useful option when introducing inexperienced students to the case method, especially as they rarely require preclass preparation.
    For case authors: Incident cases often do not require an enormous amount of research and are therefore good possible starting points for first-time case authors. Because they are so targeted and focused they will also help to write cases that are perfectly suited for a very specific educational need.

Background case

A background case provides broader context and background about a specific function, industry, country, activity, etc. – but are dressed as a case. Instead of just providing facts, they adopt the narrative logic of other types of case. Background cases offer a more interesting and compelling way to provide necessary information and data than more conventional handouts (such as industry or technical notes) or reading material which students can find boring and off-putting. Background cases can be used in combination with more traditional situation cases as part of a wider course of study.

Exercise case

Exercise cases are often used when students are required to carry out quantitative analysis (e.g., for accounting, finance, statistics, or operations courses). Working with numerical data within the

context of a case is more interesting for students than simply being presented with a set of statistics to manipulate as an abstract exercise. Exercise cases can be fictitious and often have no or only very little detail about the involved people.

Complex case

This is a more challenging version of the situation case. The complex case deliberately includes a lot of potentially distracting information that may look important at first sight but is in fact superficial and irrelevant. In the logic of the three dimensions of case complexity, they tend to drastically elevate complexity in the analytical and presentation dimensions. With such cases, participants face a double challenge: they need to use their powers of discrimination to distinguish what is relevant and significant before then going on to recommend a solution or course of action.

Best practice case

This is something that we do not really like, but what many outsiders to the case method often have in mind. Best practice cases tell a company success story, offering an example of best practice or a benchmark to aim for. Protagonists and firms like to be presented as such best practice cases and they can also work well from a mnemotechnical perspective: students easily remember creative approaches that made organizations successful. But beware: next to the legitimate criticism of success-focused cases (as discussed above), best practice cases will either tend to become victim to the hindsight bias or alienate students who think that the organization or protagonist should have done something else.

The issue of issues

'Leadership is the day-to-day communications about the real issues.' – Chris Argyris

Whether you are writing or teaching a case, you must be clear about the issues to be explored. This is an important aspect of the case method, and we will return to it later. But we believe that much of the success of the case method derives from the integration of multi-layered issues in a case. And for that there is an established terminological differentiation. Cases should include clearly defined:

- immediate issue(s), and
- underlying issue(s).

Immediate issues are those issues (it might well also be just one issue) that are directly visible to the reader of the case study. They are usually presented early in the case study, frequently in the opening paragraph, and typically present the question, dilemma, decision that the case protagonist faces (you can find more on immediate issues, opening paragraph, and protagonist in the case writing chapter).

Underlying issues are usually not explicitly mentioned as issues in the case but subject areas that will need to be addressed in order to properly respond to the immediate issues in the case. They are like the bottom of the iceberg: they are not visible but are the much bigger part of the overall learning objective. (In Abell's terminology, they are the inner part of the onion that only get visible after peeling off the outer parts.) They are usually closely linked to the educational content needs that you already identified earlier.

The immediate issue in the case, also known as the 'hook,' will generally be used to get the classroom discussion going. This often works well when the immediate issue is introduced in the opening paragraph in the form of a key question facing the protagonist. This helps participants to quickly 'step into the shoes' of the protagonist and debate possible solutions. The immediate issue should ideally be controversial, offering a range of potential responses that may appear equally viable. This provides excellent material for a lively discussion at the start of the case session.

This initial debate should then lead to the realization that there are more fundamental problems affecting the immediate issue (think back to Abell's metaphor of peeling the onion). These are the underlying issues to be addressed. Underlying issues are usually difficult and challenging to deal with, often having no clear-cut answer or single solution. This, of course, reflects the reality of life in the real world of business.

From theory to practice with Urs

In my 'Vodafone in Egypt: National Crises and Their Implications for Multinational Corporations' case (cowritten with Shirish Pandit), Hatem Dowidar, CEO of Vodafone Egypt, is faced with an immediate issue: the government has ordered Vodafone in early 2011 to suspend communication services in certain areas, including Tahrir Square, the center of protests against the 30-year rule of President Hosni Mubarak.

Should Dowidar follow this instruction? This is an immediate issue, or hook, that will get the classroom discussion going (there are also other potential immediate issues in this particular case).

The debate about this immediate issue faced by the protagonist will then lead to a more in-depth discussion of the complex underlying issues in this case. These involve fundamental and often intractable questions about, for example, law versus ethics, conflicts of interest, personal responsibility, and possible limitations to international expansion for multinational firms.

Good and exciting case discussions usually benefit significantly if the immediate and underlying issue are not too closely related to one another (this is what Abell called the 'voyage of discovery'). Sometimes you will come across a case study where immediate and underlying issues are almost identical. Just as an example, think about a possible case study with the underlying issue of the development of a sustainability strategy. The case opens with the protagonist sitting at a desk thinking about a sustainability strategy. But we would contest that you should rather select (or write) a case in which the protagonist faces a difficult choice that is then gradually leading to the underlying issue. In the example of the sustainability strategy, the protagonist might need to decide whether to use the recycled material A, which will require the application of more chemicals, or material B, which not only requires fewer chemicals but is also cheaper. But when participants then discuss this choice they will need to go back to the current state of the overall sustainability strategy and what might need to be done additionally.

> ### ⊟ The issue of issues
>
> – Clearly defined immediate and underlying issues are vital for great cases.
> – When teaching a case: pick a case in which the immediate and underlying issues are not too closely related so that there is enough space for the 'voyage of discovery' (Abell).
> – Use the immediate and underlying issues to orchestrate class discussion when teaching a case.
> – When writing a case: include both and make sure that they are separate from one another, but in a way that responding to the immediate issue will require touching on the underlying issues.

The organizational context

'Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context – a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan.' – Eliel Saarinen

Your institution or department may already fully embrace the case method, faculty and teaching staff might be actively encouraged to teach and write cases, and students/participants might be completely used to the case method as key educational mode in all programs. If not, we hope you will develop the confidence to introduce or increase use of the case method at your organization. We are passionate advocates of the case method and hope we can persuade you to become one too.

From our own experience, but also from feedback that we get during case method workshops, we believe that an organization must think through a couple of elements to be able to really embrace the case method. We will briefly discuss three of them: student preparation, HR policies, and support to faculty and teaching staff.

Familiarizing students with case method

The extent to which students in degree programs and participants in executive education will be used to the case method will vary significantly across institutions. If multiple teachers in the same program use cases, we strongly recommend that the respective schools prepare participants for the case method. Here are a few things that schools can do:

> ### ⊟ Familiarizing students with case method
>
> • Inform your students about the use of case studies – and about the expected benefits of the method.
> • Provide guidelines about expected behaviors from participants in case discussions.
> • Start the course with rather easy and controversial cases so that students immediately debate and start to appreciate the value of the case method.
> • Make your students familiar with the 'The short cycle case study screening' (see below).

The short cycle case study screening

Participants who are not used to the case method are often surprised by the amount of preparation necessary for a case-based session. In programs with many cases this can quickly lead to a feeling of being overwhelmed. According to our experience this is often because they use inefficient techniques to read a case – most notably, they start to read a case very carefully from the very top to the very bottom of the text. However, this is not only inefficient in itself; it also fails to achieve a legitimate and important learning objective, namely the students' ability to digest large amounts of text/data in short periods of time – a requirement that they will very likely face in their professional futures.

Raymond Corey (1976/1996) suggested starting case preparation by glancing over the entire text very rapidly. Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, and Leenders (2005) came up with a more structured approach that we believe all educators, but also all participants, should know: the 'short cycle case study screening': They recommend the use of the following process to all participants – including the guideline that this process should not take more than about five minutes:

The short cycle case screening (adapted from Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, & Leenders 2005):

1. Read the assignment questions (if any).
2. (Quickly) read the title and opening paragraph of the case.
3. Read all the chapter titles. Possibly skim parts of the text while looking for the titles – but only rapidly!
4. Read the closing paragraph.
5. Check all the exhibits.

(Up to this point this should not have taken more than three to five minutes.)

6. Reflect on the type of case study, summarize your understanding (who, when, what, why, how?) and reflect on the assignment question(s) (do you have an immediate reaction/ recommendation?). Summarize mentally or write it down as aide-memoire for the case discussion itself (especially when preparing well in advance!).
7. Only then read the full text of the case – when you already know what it is all about. As you now know what the case is all about: try to read as fast as possible.
8. If other prereading (textbook chapters, articles, etc.) is assigned together with the case, read the prereading first and only then the case!

With this process you will make the lives of your participants much easier. But it can help also you: when screening cases for your own use in class, the process is equally helpful. And, when you write a case, present your case in a way that the short cycle case screening works well for other educators and for the students.

Recruitment and promotion

Over and over, we have asked participants in our workshops on case writing and teaching how the case method is taken into consideration when recruiting and promoting faculty. And often we get the answer that it is not. We truly believe that this should change and that this might have the biggest single impact on how a school will be able to accelerate their efforts regarding the support and integration of the case method. (You get what you measure and incentivize.)

But we have also had exceptions to the rule and there are several schools that look out for the usage and production of case studies in their recruitment and promotion processes. Quite often this was described to us as organizational campaigns in which the case method was adopted at the institution in reaction to accreditation or benchmarking efforts. Such schools would check and discuss with job candidates their teaching methods and they will have a set of questions around how to engage participants, typical material used, and of course also teaching evaluations.

When promoting faculty, it was the same. These schools had a set of criteria around teaching that included specific questions on the case method.

If a school just does not really focus on the case method as a didactical approach, if it does not select or reward people for mastery of cases, you can still keep doing it. You might have to do a bit more to convince your students that cases are relevant and helpful. But you will probably need to focus on other performance metrics (usually academic publications) instead of putting a lot of effort into writing and publishing your own cases – at least until you reach tenure. However, even if the school does not institutionalize the case method, you can still – e.g., during job talks, when being part of the hiring/selection committee – use your case method mindset and give such candidates a bit of a push.

Organizational support

A third key element is organizational support for using the case method. We think that a couple of elements should be in place. When looking at teaching with cases, we strongly encourage schools to set up teaching mentors, buddies, or small teaching support groups. These groups should meet regularly to discuss teaching methodology and even more importantly they should sit in each other's classes at least once per semester, or, better, twice. Peer feedback is extremely valuable not only to improve but to reflect in general and to get additional inspiration about, for example, great cases, good opening questions, and the like. The same goes with writing cases. Here we found that the best schools have a small unit that offers dedicated support for case writers, through copyright checking, professional editing, and formatting up to support for desk research and writing. All of this will lower the entry barrier for faculty to get started with case writing – and that might be different things in different schools.

There are a few persuasive arguments to be made in favor of encouraging case teaching and writing in an organization. The benefits of the case method for students are numerous, as explained above. To summarize, cases are extremely powerful teaching tools. They make for exciting and memorable teaching sessions, offering participants the opportunity to take on board new ideas, learn new skills, become familiar with management theory and concepts, and develop expertise in areas that are vital for a successful business career, for example listening, speaking, defending a point of a view, evaluating various options, and decision-making.

And there are also numerous benefits for the organization, starting with the fact that cases are seen as positive in both ranking and accreditation. A clear profile and strong organizational support might also attract strong candidates to the school. Finally, the case method is widely used in executive education programs and typically receives high evaluations from participants. If your school wants to grow its executive education portfolio it therefore pays off to institutionalize the efforts, mainly by being very conscious in the two areas described above: recruiting/promotions and organizational support.

≔ Managing the organizational context for the case method

– Introduce participants to the case method at the beginning of a course/program.
– Make participants familiar with the short cycle case screening process (and adopt it for yourself).
– Gain a clear picture of where your organization currently stands in relation to the case method.
– Specifically look at the recruiting and promoting processes and whether they consider case teaching and writing.
– Support faculty and teaching staff in their effort to use or even write case studies.

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