

Case method in the digital age: How might new technologies shape experiential learning and real-life story telling?

*The Case Method is a teaching approach popular in business schools that aims to introduce students to a range of real-life scenarios and build decision-making skills. But little evolution has occurred in the style of Case Studies over the years. **Tom Clark** looks at innovation in the format and its delivery to teachers and students. In the age of digital learning, the route to discovery, creation, use and distribution of cases should be far more dynamic – such as rich online search functionality and blended learning.*



The student dilemma when considering business education pivots on value and whether a study choice will deliver expected benefits. After all, how can a student be confident in the pertinence of their learning choice – especially if it is a Business School course carrying a large tuition fee – when there are so many viable alternatives out there?

Therein lies the greatest challenge for all organisations developing knowledge and skills: that established business school brands developed over many years are now in direct competition for student attention with often quite sophisticated consumer-level upstarts, delivering learning online in novel, cheaper, shorter, 24/7 ways. Perhaps students appreciate the diversity of options available to them now? And are well able to distinguish learning ‘appetisers’ (MOOCs and Webinars) from costlier ‘a la carte’ and ‘fixed menu’ providers (Business Schools and Institutes), enjoying the kudos that different learning tools provide?

The half-life of a skill

What’s certainly striking is that the half-life of learned skills is diminishing in the often cited [VUCA world](#), and career learning must keep pace with career and life change, and provide demonstrable value – increasingly through customised or self-led learning.

According to [Denning and Brown](#), ‘The half-life of a learned skill is five years’. This means that much of what you learned 10 years ago is obsolete, and half of what you learned five years ago is irrelevant. Students therefore need to have a real hunger for continuous learning in order to future proof their business education and ensure that it is relevant as it can be in an ever-changing world.



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So, students in 2016 are voting with their feet and/or wallets. Which in turn gives rise to serious debate in Business Schools as to how and who they compete with in the informed learning market – as well as in the wider learning skills market about student attraction/retention.

Awkward as they might seem, the Harvard Mini MBA and Columbia's Essentials of Management are [cases in point](#). This is compounded by a drive in students for a self-service attitude to learning, whereby they take the initiative to ensure they keep ahead of the curve and are continuously developing handy skills and the wherewithal for work.

The Case Method

The Case Method is a particular form of high context, decision-driven story telling that business schools have deployed for sometime ([originally from Harvard](#)) to develop rigorous, experiential learning outcomes for students in class.

Case Studies are written from the perspective of a protagonist – usually in a corporate setting – facing a business dilemma. The students are tasked with envisioning and assessing a response with relatively little direct instruction, so that the student can derive maximum tangible decision-making experience that they can transfer into their future career.

The Case Method enables individual learners to come together to work collectively on business scenarios and to a common aim, which in turn creates benefits for each student as an individual learner – the point being that teamwork and individuals are required to make things happen in business.

The dynamics of Case Method teaching are aligned with the recognised 'on campus' class cohort model. What we have found is that, where business schools have struggled to diversify is the way they design high price, highly analytical, onsite teaching – and yet, meanwhile, there is celebrated value to the immersive impact of Case Study teaching, which enables students to experience challenges than be told they exist.

Remarkably, the way Case Studies are developed, utilised and purchased has not evolved significantly, with search functionality of Case Study repositories being the most noticeable area of change. I would like to posit that the route

to discovery, creation, use and distribution of cases should be far more dynamic – such as rich online functionality and blended learning. The engagement that this brings to digital learning is driving growth and access across the wider professional and higher education markets.

Digital Natives and the demand for adaptive learning

New and emerging technologies and the commercial models that support them are having a profound impact on how we learn. The social bulge of digital ‘Net Generation’ of learners “have different approaches to learning and different ways of using and making sense of information” ([Bullen & Morgan](#)) necessitates investment in learning methods, formats and purchasing behaviours.

The Case Method is not immune to adaptation. Some of the most celebrated are cleverly designed, and provide really immersive scenarios for students to debate. But little evolution has occurred in the style. For example, Case Studies are still written as PDF articles, and the delivery and structure of taught classes – whilst highly collaborative – are by definition instructor-dependent.

Protecting the fundamental and enduring qualities of great pedagogies and instruction is not in question. But recognising the value of student expectation in business teaching – so that the reality of what they are studying through the case study method is responsive in ways that resonate directly with their aspirations or skills plan – is naturally enriching for course owners.

Our approach at Emerald is to facilitate and nurture new case format conversations with key schools to apply digital learning knowledge at the outset of course planning. That way, new Case Studies can be expertly designed – and existing case studies enhanced – by monitoring content interaction via our born digital case platform that is responsive to how students and instructors use Case Studies. Currently, business Case articles and the associated Teaching Note articles (instructor-specific teaching guidance from the author) are discovered and purchased on a per class basis as PDFs via online collections, the largest being [The Case Centre](#).

Data is king

The behaviour of use for all online content is measurable. Unlike articles for research or reading, Case Studies are designed for interaction and evolution (feedback from instructors and students). This represents a big opportunity for data to help inform how a Case is selected, read, enhanced, utilised, repurposed and understood within a pedagogic plan. The most common method to discover and retrieve cases is by logging onto an aggregator and purchasing direct for class. The student and class data is currently not retrievable as copies are often in print form. So, access and use of Case Studies online creates huge benefits to improving course and study design from real data.

Our conversations with educators to date have led us to discover that there is significant interest in a schema that may help modernise Case writing from articles into online-first templates designed to incorporate conversations, digital media, content improvements, associated content, peer commentaries and recommendations. The ability to easily pivot and retrieve content – and for access to be institution-wide via licence – will permit wide appreciation of Case Studies as learning assets that otherwise would be exclusively prescribed. And it is along these lines that we are developing our own new Case Studies solution, CaseClever.

It is a fascinating journey for a publisher: content discovery that develops existing, new and rewarding content via a technology-enabled approach that fundamentally improves a teaching method dating back over 100 years and impacts business teaching efficacy worldwide.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

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