

Case Writing & Teaching Workshop: Comments and Thoughts on the Art of Case Writing

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Introduction

Initially developed at Harvard Business School, the case method is used by numerous business schools, small and large, private and public, nonprofit and for-profit. Furthermore, cases are not limited to classroom use only; they are also used extensively in executive training. Their use continues to grow, and for good reasons. The case method has many attractive features, several of which are noted in the discussion below. Perhaps most attractive is the case method's ability to develop a student's critical thinking skills and bridge the gap between theory and its application in a real-world setting.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a record of the case writing segment presented and discussed during the case workshop. In particular, since many workshops don't quite get to everything they intend to cover due to time constraints, this paper will enable to reader to have whatever information was not conveyed and discussed. This portion of the workshop focuses on five issues: (1) what is a case and the characteristics of a good one, (2) the power of the case method, (3) a basic discussion of the types of cases, (4) the elements of case writing, and (5) some insights from our experiences.

What Is a Case and the Characteristics of a Good Case?

Before discussing the case method, it is important to define what a case is, and then what are some characteristics of a good case. Essentially, a case is “a story,” an account of a

* The author's names are in alphabetical order, as each contributed equally to the writing of the paper.

management or an organizational situation, and usually involves a significant issue, a decision or problem that is narrated from the standpoint of the decision-maker. When you think about it, this is "good news" for us, as Scripture is replete with stories, and some of Jesus' most teachable moments were the parables he told. So we are familiar with the power of it as a teaching tool, at least unconsciously. We know it is designed to give an important lesson in an effective and stimulating manner where the student is invited to step into the shoes of that key actor(s) and, after analysis of the case, offer his or her own solution to the problem. Afterwards, the teacher usually reveals "what actually happened" and gives some idea of what the longer-term consequences of that action or decision has been for the person or organization concerned. Thus, a case may be considered as a piece of history. Did the solution work and if not, why not?

What are the characteristics of good cases? As one person has said, the answer to this question is as varied as there are case teachers and writers. In his article "*What Makes A Good Case And Teaching Note*," veteran case writer, teacher, and case workshop leader David Wylie notes that a good case provides "decision-making calisthenics." When a case captures the richness of the decision-making experience to create an proxy experience for students, thereby stimulating challenging discussion, it becomes a catalyst for developing what we all want to impart to our students: good critical thinking skills. Other characteristics of a good case, which are outlined in Table 1, include being a good story that is well written, resonating with the reader in terms of life experience, perspectives and learning styles, stimulates good debate, argument and learning, and it's not too long. So, whether the case is rich in detail and is like a novel or simply a vehicle to provoke controversy and stretch the mind and imagination of the reader, a good case creates tension and excitement, requires critical thinking skills, and provides a good learning experience for all involved.

Table 1
Characteristics of a Good Case*

- It is a great story, well written
- Develops good critical thinking skills
- Stimulates debate, argument and learning
- Brings a chunk of reality into the classroom
- It resonates with a student's own life experience
- Should resonate with different perspectives and learning styles
- Puts the reader in the shoes of the decision-maker with enough detail & complexity to rise above the obvious

*Sources: Wylie (2003), various other non-referenced documents

The Power of the Case Method

There are many reasons to include the case method in one's pedagogical toolbox to aid in the learning process (see Table 2 for a summary). First, it is an active pedagogical process. It draws students into becoming active in the learning process in general, as well as in their own learning. As such it promotes a type of "learn by doing" rather than the more passive "being told what to do." Second, the case method promotes critical thinking skills, thereby providing a basis for decision-making by separating facts from emotion, feelings or good intentions. This in turn encourages students to develop good evaluative process skills, and not trying to figure out the correct answer.

A third benefit of using cases is they provide an opportunity to connect theory with practice by allowing students to see where theory does work and doesn't, as well as why it might work in one situation but not another. This in turn helps the student to begin to think outside the box, as not every situation is the same, and adjustments to theoretical applications need to be made on a case-by-case basis. A fourth advantage is that case analysis and discussion help provide variety to the classroom pedagogy. It can be used as the sole pedagogical tool, or in

conjunction with lecture and/or group exercises. Since most business classes are not taught using the case methodology, it is a change, sometimes uncomfortable, for many students.

A final reason is the case method adapts itself to different learning styles, as evidenced by the model developed by David Kolb and his associates (Kolb, Osland and Rubin 1995): the converger, diverger, assimilator and accommodator (see Table 3 for a summary). The converger relies on abstract conceptualization, which is an analytical, logical approach, and she likes active experimentation and the practical application of ideas. As previously noted, cases allow the application of theories and concepts to the facts in the case, and require order and meaning to be brought to the situation described. The diverger on the other hand, prefers concrete experience and looks at every situation as unique and is predisposed toward judgments based on personal feelings. Their reflective observation takes an “objective observer” approach, and there usually is a strong imagination ability and to see a situation from many perspectives. As such, he is likely to be intrigued by the multiple details and viewpoints of the case.

The assimilator, like the converger, relies on abstract conceptualization as well as reflective observation like the diverger. She is able to create patterns out of discrete observations or facts and is not likely be interested in the application of theory. What this person sees in the

Table 2
Reasons for the Power of the Case Method

- Aids in the learning process
- Provides a link between theoretical and practical
- Promotes critical thinking skills
- Helps students to think out of the box
- Provides a basis for the decision-making process
- Provides an active pedagogical process
- Teaches students to learn by doing versus being told what to do
- Promotes an evaluative process versus just determining a correct answer
- Adapts well to different learning styles
- Provides variety to the teaching pedagogy

data helps her develop her own hypotheses about the situation and what will happen next.

Finally, the accommodator prefers concrete experience like the diverger and active experimentation like the converger. Specifically he likes to learn by doing and prefers to solve problems by trial and error rather than by logical reasoning. This person appreciates the “real world” aspects of the case method and the opportunity to practice his decision-making skills.

It is important to note that it is not always possible to involve all the learning styles in each case. However, as can be determined from the discussion thus far, more than one style can be engaged and multiple learning objectives can be effectively met through the use of the case method.

In addition to these many reasons for incorporating case studies into the course curriculum, case study learning is particularly applicable to the integration of faith and learning at Christian-based universities. Case studies can be one of the most powerful methods to illustrate how Christian principles are either integrated or not integrated into particular business situations. Students studying at a Christian university have the added benefit of understanding the application of Christian concepts in realistic settings.

Types of Cases

There are a number of ways to classify cases. One is to use look at the central focus of the case. For example, there is the "springboard case" which focuses on a key management problem or central issue which when analyzed, promotes a much wider discussion (hence the "springboard"). Readers may begin by considering the answer to one question and find that this leads them on to the discovery that in reality, much larger issues are at stake. Another is the "what has gone wrong case." This type of case, when analyzed systematically, reveals the many

Table 3
Summary of Learning Style & Case Application

Style	Characteristics	Case Application
Converger	Relies on abstract conceptualization Analytical, logical approach Likes active experimentation, practical application of ideas	Applies theory/concepts Brings order & meaning to case situation
Diverger	Prefers concrete experience Every situation unique Judgments based on feelings Reflective observation/objective observer Strong imagination	Intrigued by multiple details Intrigued by multiple viewpoints
Assimilator	Relies on abstract conceptualization Reflective observation/objective observer Creates patterns from discrete observations Not interested in application	Looks for patterns Develops own hypotheses re what's happened/will happen next
Accommodator	Prefers concrete experience Likes active experimentation Learns by doing, trial & error	Appreciates "real world" application Likes to practice decision- making skills

different problems that might be found in a single organization, whose overall effect is negative, leading to a situation where strong or radical remedies are necessary. Such problems may include outdated management procedures, inappropriate types of organizations, and the most easily mismanaged but critical aspects business such as human resources, communications, managing change, etc. A third type, the "insider case," enables the student to enter right inside a company and to know its history and the personalities involved, and to analyze the strategy that has brought it to its present position. These cases usually end with a general question of "what next?"

Another means of classification that is sometimes used is the "arm chair" versus the field case (actually interacting with the subject company). The "arm chair" case (sometimes called a public case) uses publicly available information from the media or public documents such as annual reports. It is important to be careful to document sources and give credit where credit is due. The field case is written with the cooperation of the case protagonist and the firm at which he or she resides. The field case is usually the richest type of case since the case-writer can better articulate what the protagonist was thinking at the time of the decision, and the case writer will usually have access to better information. With a field case, before it is used, the company should sign-off and be comfortable knowing that there is no information in the case that the firm does not wish to make public. This is a very important point, as academicians do not enjoy the same protections as journalists do in using confidential information.

The last categorization to be discussed is perhaps much more basic, which is the "real" versus "fictional" case. As the term indicates, a "real" case is telling a "real" story about a "real" situation in a "real" firm; it is the telling of a "real" story. A "fictional" case is just the opposite. The "fictional" case, generally, has at its root the desire of the author to fill a gap in topic area that has as yet to have a "real" case, or to provide an example of what might or could happen. For many, a fictional case is often nothing more than a complex problem, and the only aspect that is "real" is the intent to use it in the classroom as a pedagogical tool. Hence, to the purist case writer and user, fictional cases are not considered cases at all. In addition, there are journals that specifically accept cases to publish, the selection process is the same as other academic journals (e.g., double-blind review), and their respective institutions view the publication as applied research. A fictional case would not be accepted for review, much less publication, in any of the case writing journals.

In our minds, several questions arise about the potential use of fictional cases. One is "Why would any one write a fictional case?" another one is, "Are all fictional cases created equally?" and yet another is, "Can fictional cases play a useful role in the classroom?" In our view, the "right" kind of fictional cases can have a significant and useful role in the pedagogical nature of a course. That is, we view there being a continuum of fictional type cases. At one end there are those that are solely the result of the imagination of the case writer, which requires a significant amount of creativity on the part of the writer. At the other end is the fictional case that is a compilation of several "real case" situations, perhaps better perceived as several related vignettes from different companies/situations that are being compiled under the roof of a fictional company. In this scenario, the writer is taking factual stories from a variety of factual sources and weaving them together under the umbrella of a fictional company. Thus, while this case may be defined as fictional from a research perspective, there could still be a considerable amount of factual and realistic information developed in this type of case study.

Interestingly, for some time now the *Harvard Business Review* has published an HBR case in each issue. The first page of the case states that each is hypothetically derived from real experiences of real people, and the names and setting are fictitious. If the highly respected *HBR* can use the word case and hypothetical in the same sentence, much less the same paragraph, then it ought to be possible for others to do so as well.

The Process of Writing Cases

A well-written case will give information about the general industry, the company background, the current situation and a decision point. These components of the case study can be developed with essentially equal believability for both the fictional and real case. The author

needs to tell a story that is compelling and informative and can lead a student through a decision process to a number of feasible conclusions.

Industry data can be easily obtained through various library resources. While an important part of a case write-up, the industry data is generally more supplemental and probably does not have to be reported in as great of detail as the company-related data. Obtaining sufficient critical industry-related information should be virtually equivalent for both a real and a fictional case. If anything, a real case may provide more of a challenge, as the host company may want some input regarding what and how industry information may be used in the case setting.

When it comes to the specifics about the company, writing a fictional case involves basically the same steps as writing a real case. Just like writing a factual versus fictional book, the author has to develop a story that will capture the reader's attention. A term called "the hook" is a critical part of any case write-up. The "hook" is a critical statement or scenario at the beginning of a case that will get the reader interested in the story. Any well-written document has to keep the reader's attention regardless of whether the facts are authentic or make believe. Additionally, the authenticity is sometimes hard to verify and the reader is more interested in the story itself than if the specific facts are true or made up and appear true.

A well-written case has to tell a story. The reader generally wants to become part of the story and relive the situation and circumstances. Both real and fictitious cases can create these situations and, in fact, fictional cases may do a better job of structuring situations consistent with desired course-learning objectives. In a real case, the writer usually has to stay within the guidelines of what actually happened in the company, which can limit the manner whereby the story can be conveyed.

Fictional cases could have a decided advantage in the development of key characters in the business setting. If the author wants to illustrate a people-management principle, appropriate behaviors and subtleties can be incorporated into the personalities of individuals that will help to illustrate important concepts. In a real case, these personalities may not exist or if they are prevalent, the affected individuals may not permit the dissemination of this information. Generally, names can be changed to provide confidentiality in real cases, but often this is not enough of a disguise to gain publication approval.

A fictional case with the latitude to develop critical personalities can easily be a more powerful teaching tool than a real case with constraints on characteristics. At the same time, the author does not want to make the personality situation too obvious. Ideally, information is presented in such a way that students can identify two or more logical ways to address issues. The fictional case from a personality perspective can probably more easily be developed to encourage multiple seemingly correct solutions to problems.

The development of numbers or quantitative schedules can be especially challenging in a fictional case. The numbers have to be believable and realistic. At the same time, the numbers in either type of case can be developed to help illustrate particular concepts or ideas. This includes presenting numbers in such a way so as to facilitate some of the mechanical processes required in a detailed case analysis.

While the actual numbers are available in a real case setting, companies will often require a disguised set of financial and accounting tables to be used. The author of a real case can overcome these concerns by adjusting the numbers by some factor. Real cases allow for these modifications of data just as individual name changes are acceptable. A potential problem with

such adjustments is how that might distort the analysis and possibly makes the real case less realistic or believable.

A fictional case with carefully constructed characterizations and situations and numerical data developed to draw the student into several reasonable courses of action can be a powerful learning instrument. When such a fictional case is compared against a real case, which is limited to existing data but modified to disguise actual individuals and financial performance, it is feasible to conclude that a fictional case may better meet critical course goals and learning objectives.

Secrets to Writing Fictional Cases

In writing nearly 100 fictional cases over the past several years, there are a number of techniques I have developed that seem to make these cases realistic and functional in a course environment. Students have commented that my cases have been challenging and beneficial and seem to reflect actual situations that appear common to the business community.

There are all kinds of ways to learn about companies and various situations they face. Similar to the "arm chair" approach, stories in magazines, in the newspaper, on television, on the Web and in various other forms and media appear constantly regarding company circumstances. Word of mouth, networking and company visits also present opportunities to learn about situations companies are encountering. As an example, suppose a particular company has a cash flow problem. A little bit of investigation can identify several factors that might have caused this particular problem. Familiarity with various financial and non-financial performance measures can lead to the generation of realistic data to support a particular cash flow condition. Once the basic scenario is established, it becomes the exercise of telling a story.

As in the development of a well-written book, the introduction of main characters and a story setting are important to get the reader involved in the case. The dilemma facing the company and individuals can be formulated into a hook to capture the student's attention and introduce the process of decision analysis. All these features of the case need to be constructed in a manner consistent with the overall learning objectives of the case. In the example of the cash flow scenario, if a desired learning objective is how to develop, implement and analyze a cash flow statement in the decision-making process, the story and information can be formulated toward that concept. A good way to peak student interest is to create a story line they can relate to and individuals they might be able to identify with. The latitude of a fictional case expands the story-telling options and also makes it easier to achieve desired objectives.

Incorporating Christian issues can often be easier in a fictional case. In a real case setting, Christian issues or individuals may never become apparent. Also, they may not be part of the decision process. Oftentimes, teachers at a Christian university may add some supplementary questions to a real case to incorporate some Christian principles or ideals into the analysis. Since the original intent of the case did not include these issues, any conclusions regarding the impact of the Christian ideas on the actual solution could be purely subjective. In a fictional case the story can be structured to present the Christian issues. Including these issues, even in a fictional sense, still represents actual dilemmas and can lead to meaningful analysis and discussion.

With a fictional case, it is much easier to develop settings both with individuals, company culture, overall mission and objectives and performance and relate that to particular faith integration issues. A potential problem for either real or fictional cases is forcing the student solutions to an obviously favorable relationship between performance and Christian practices.

Generally, a more objective way to deal with Christian-based issues is to create situations where a pro and con position may be equally feasible. For example, the use of credit terms and credit and collection policies on accounts receivable has been a useful topic to develop in a case study format, which has debatable solutions from a Christian perspective.

To add a personal touch to fictional cases, I incorporate former exceptional students and some interesting facts into the case. These students feel they have arrived when they get featured in a new case. These students get a sneak preview of the case and will often add constructive ideas to strengthen the case. I have sometimes been able to incorporate a somewhat realistic setting into the fictional case thereby giving the case more credibility.

The major drawback of developing these fictional cases is that they will never be published in professional case journals and the possibility for inclusion in case books is limited. However, the challenge of developing a fictional case with a personal touch that appears realistic is still a worthwhile endeavor. Also, the opportunity to create an effective teaching tool that will stretch the students' critical thinking skills and enhance course learning objectives is satisfying. Where real cases may take months to develop and require hours on site along with release forms and legal considerations, fictional cases can be completed in a relatively short time. When activities are needed to help achieve course objectives, there is not always enough time to put them together. It is better to have a fictional case available than to have nothing because a real case sometimes cannot be completed on a timely basis.

However, the great advantage of the fictional case studies is the relative ease of their development along with the ability to specifically orient them toward particular learning objectives. If one's purpose in teaching is to advance the level of knowledge and learning by

encouraging critical thinking and decision-making situations, it is very feasible to construct fictional cases to achieve that goal.

Conclusion

In a manner of speaking, all cases, real or fictional, might be viewed as static simulations. Consequently, the most successful are those which are anchored in real issues, based on real companies, real managers and their problems to which the reader can relate, and on which they can bring their own experience and expertise to bear. More than text books or lectures, case studies bring the reader face to face with real work-life situations and provide an experience to help them be more effective in their jobs. As such case studies are a very important component of classroom study and learning, and they provide an effective transition from the theoretical to the practical application.

We offer some thoughts on the ingredients of a great case and how you can create one. Our hope is to stimulate more case teachers to embark on the case writing adventure. While real cases are considered the best genre of case write-up, there is still room for fictional cases to enhance the learning process. While some in academia prefer to call fictional cases nothing more than complex problems, when properly created they can provide a challenging learning activity. Indeed, a well written and researched fictional case is certainly better than mechanical problems and exercises when it comes to stimulating decision-making exercises and critical thinking skills. Additionally, the ease with which fictional cases can be developed makes them a timely and powerful teaching tool.

The demand for fresh and compelling teaching material is constant, yet the supply of active case writers is not limitless. Our aim in this workshop has been to provide some of the basics about cases, including their power as pedagogical tools, and to offer some thoughts on the

value of writing both real and fictional cases. We hope this is but the beginning of a genuine discussion on the merits of each, and that you will be intrigued enough to begin writing your own cases to be shared by others, real or fictional.

References

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