

# Editorial: Save Research—Abandon the Case Method of Teaching

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The case method of teaching and the corresponding Socratic Method predate the discovery of the scientific method for advancing knowledge and problem solving. The case method applies known principles (e.g., laws) to specific situations while the scientific method focuses on discovering principles. Although the case method might be effective at teaching leadership and persuasion skills, it can lack the spirit of inquiry and the worship of the truth associated with the scientific method. Moreover, unlike legal cases, business cases lack precedent (i.e., *stare decisis*), the foundation of written law, and rigorous adjudication. More importantly, the traditional case method of teaching often ignores important research findings. Consequently, it helps destroy the link between academic research and classroom learning. Students lose the benefit of important research findings while leaving the classroom with false confidence about what they know. Researchers lose an incentive to do research relevant to their students. Eventually, there is less research worth teaching, and fewer students value the knowledge learned through painstaking research. Although we might covet the skill of persuasion, time might gradually elevate previously less persuasive managers who have better skills with analysis and collecting relevant information. Great teaching requires great content, in addition to active learning.

*Key words:* case method; teaching business; learning; M.B.A. education; scholarly research

## 1. What Is the Case Method?

Although virtually every business school faculty member can confidently define the ubiquitous case method of teaching, individual definitions do vary. Argyris (1980, p. 291) found that not only did definitions vary by individual, “but the same individual varied in different situations. For example, when basic concepts...had to be taught, many instructors lectured...some used role playing.... Simulations, films, and straight long lectures...faculty members interviewed believed that all these teaching modes represented the case method...” Of course, the case method of teaching differs from simply using written cases (Gragg 1940).

Let us define the case method by focusing on its major differences from other types of instruction (lectures, class discussion, simulation games, etc.). The case method often involves giving students a real historic business situation consisting of a detailed factual description of an issue faced by an organization together with the surrounding facts, circumstances, events, and management opinions (Lundberg et al. 2001). Students analyze and discuss the case with the objective of determining an appropriate action (Gragg 1940). Rather than directly communicating concepts and knowledge, the instructor uses the Socratic Dialogue—usually by asking challenging pertinent questions but sometimes by

demeaning students (Garner 2000). The instructor, supposedly a skilled discussion leader, asks provocative questions, pits one student against another, and goads the class into reaching the correct conclusions (Bonoma 1989). Ideally, supposedly empowered and engaged students now actively discover hidden concepts and precious knowledge for themselves.

## 2. A Short History of the Case Method

In 1870 at Harvard University, Professor Christopher Columbus Langdell decided that law students learn more from analyzing cases than from reading textbooks (Shulman 1986, LaPiana 1987). Although textbooks allowed students to memorize laws, Langdell wanted students to learn to apply the law in different situations (Shulman 1986). Langdell combined cases with Socratic Dialogue (e.g., challenging questions) to teach legal reasoning, in contrast to written law. Langdell's admirable belief was that properly trained law students should acquire the skill of generalizing from singular cases to other analogous legal applications. Most law schools now employ his case method of teaching. In 1919, the new business school dean at Harvard, Wallace P. Donham, was a lawyer and a graduate of Harvard Law School. Given his extensive experience with the case method, Donham promoted the case method at the Harvard Business School.

### 3. Business Is Not Case Law

Unlike business cases, legal cases have real authority well beyond their educational value. The legal principle of *stare decisis* implies that legal case decisions are often precedents to guide subsequent legal cases (e.g., see Lee 1999). Although some controversy exists concerning whether courts should always adhere to past decisions (Peters 1996), past legal cases remain precedents to follow when possible. Proponents of *stare decisis* use efficiency, equal justice, consistency, certainty, predictability, and stability to justify it. *Stare decisis* puts at great disadvantage any party whose arguments are inconsistent with old precedent. *Stare decisis* often determines Supreme Court decisions (Segal and Howard 2001).

Also, unlike business cases, legal cases and the corresponding legislation are written and publicly available. The scientific method (focused on finding the truth) is unnecessary for discovering legislative edicts and applying them. The traditional case method emphasizes working within the confines of the facts of the case. In contrast, understanding the functions of economic markets and the influence of managerial decisions on those markets requires scientific investigation. The scientific method focuses on gathering new (usually disconfirming) information. Scientific inquiry supposedly seeks to build knowledge by applying tests to disprove extant beliefs while the case method often encourages students to find evidence to support their beliefs. Unlike business students, law students learn their duty is the zealous representation of their client (regardless of their side) rather than finding the truth (Martinez 1998). We often evaluate attorneys based on the number of arguments won. In contrast, we evaluate managers based on the percentage of correct past recommendations.

Harris (2003) finds still another difference between business and legal cases. Harris (2003, p. 71) states that “unlike the law-school cases, which draw on the filings in an already public, adjudicated and externally scrutinized trial, business cases often rest on information garnered through close relationships between the companies being studied and the professors doing the research.” Harris (2003, p. 72) provides an example of an academic case that promoted the Enron Company. “It was the story that [Enron] wanted out... says of then-CEO Kenneth Lay, president Jeffrey Skilling, and CFO Andrew Fastow, all of whom participated in 15 hours of videotaped interviews... Last year, with Enron bankrupt and in disgrace... executives indicted,” the old case was replaced.

Finally, resolution of legal cases ideally focuses on isolating the exogenous facts of the case, while business strategy ideally focuses on being creative and searching for pivotal information. For example, effective tactical business decisions require the

quantitative prediction of competitive response and buyer reactions.

### 4. Case Method Objectives vs. Ford Foundation Objectives

Proponents of the case method traditionally tout multiple goals. These goals are often extremely praiseworthy and worthwhile. One goal is greater learning with active student involvement. A second goal is increased coursework relevancy and applicability (Orlansky 1986). A third goal is exposing students to “a chunk of reality” (Lundberg et al. 2001).

The late 1950s revolution in business education caused by the Ford Foundation (and, to a lesser extent, the Carnegie Foundation) altered the goals for the case method. Prior to intervention by these foundations, business education lacked theory, was primarily vocational, often had low standards, focused on entry-level skills, and lacked academic scholarship. Many universities questioned whether trade school-like business programs were a legitimate part of an institution of higher learning and research (Starkey and Tempest 2005, Gordon and Howell 1959). Pierson (1959) and others argued that business education required grounding in the core disciplines of economics, statistics, psychology, and sociology. The Ford Foundation provided substantial funding and encouragement for building a strong scientific foundation for business and greater independence from the business community. Some authors now believe business education has become too independent (e.g., Pfeffer and Fong 2002). In remarkable contrast, other authors (e.g., Cheit 1985, Ghoshal 2005) argue that academic business research has been too influential on practice, resulting in catastrophe for many firms.

With encouragement by the Ford Foundation, business education began to follow a scientific model with increased emphasis on quantitative analysis. This encouragement brought several now well-known marketing academics into the business school (Wilkie 2002, Wilkie and Moore 2003). These researchers are responsible for a great deal of extant prescriptive marketing theory (see Morrison and Raju 2004, Morrison 2001 for additional history).

The Ford Foundation initially believed that the case method could be a useful tool for making business schools more research-oriented because the teaching with the case method required little prior training in business and helped acquaint new faculty members with business institutions. The Foundation thought that the case method would help facilitate the assimilation of faculty members from the arts and sciences. Schlossman et al. (1998, p. 12) state that “the case method would help to reshape the way economics was taught by offering more realistic content” and make theory from scientific disciplines appear more

realistic to business students. Many business school deans also believed that the case method would allow a new well-trained business faculty to generate fruitful hypotheses for research and create a foundation for future research in business (Schlossman et al. 1998). Unfortunately, the case method failed in this area. It proved onerous to both elevate research standards and encourage research topics relevant to the business community (Cheit 1985). Ironically, the case method might encourage less relevant research as faculty divorced research from teaching. In the mid-1980s, the regrettable *Business Week* M.B.A. rankings began undoing Ford Foundation efforts (e.g., see Shugan 2004a).

Unfortunately, after a theoretical foundation was established and the marketing literature prospered, new business cases often ignored that literature. New faculty, for example, from economics and psychology, often taught marketing courses oblivious to the marketing literature. Consequently, rather than assimilating into the discipline, new well-trained marketing faculty often fragmented and identified with other supposedly more prestigious disciplines, perhaps perceived as their pedigree. The Web pages of relatively new marketing faculty reveal a surprising number that fail to identify research interests related to the needs of marketing students. Teaching, aided by traditional textbooks or research articles, would expose both students and new faculty to the marketing literature and facilitate clinical applications.

## 5. Is the Case Method Better?

Given the considerable hype about the case method, we expect myriad research studies documenting superior learning. Nevertheless, published research is mixed.

Van Eynde and Spencer (1988) find that the case method yields better retention of learned material. Orlansky (1986) finds Darden graduates generally satisfied with the case method. Graduates believed the case method encouraged them to express and substantiate their opinions. However, they expressed concerns about insufficient coverage of quantitative analysis.

Mumford (2005) argues that most claims about the case method are anecdotal and are based on unsubstantiated claims about learning. Parkinson and Ekachai (2002) compare student perceptions of learning using a traditional lecture format and the case method. Although students experiencing the case method reported more opportunities to practice critical thinking ability and problem solving, there were no significant differences on student ability to retain information, student confidence about their knowledge and skills, and course satisfaction.

Leone (1989, p. 704) reports that “five non-case exercises designed to achieve goals often accomplished by cases” are “more efficient” at achieving those goals than cases. Carter (1995) uses a controlled experiment to study the effectiveness of case-based teaching and finds no support for “anecdotal claims that the case method of teaching is more effective than the traditional lecture method of teaching.” Powell (1994, p. 5) finds “that case method is a complex form of instruction. . . . The instructor develops students with higher level thinking abilities but will not be able to cover as much content as with traditional lecture methods. It requires that the instructor be effectively trained in the method.” In fact, we might wonder whether training in marketing or training in case teaching is more important for teaching a marketing course with the case method. Timmons (1995) compared the ability of teachers (exposed and not exposed to the case method) to respond to hypothetical classroom situations in five professional teaching areas. Timmons (1995) found no significant differences.

## 6. The Case for Cases

Cases do emphasize the big picture, which technical approaches often ignore. For example, Shugan (2005) argues that optimizing an auction to maximize the selling price sometimes fails because (in the big picture) the auction becomes unattractive to potential bidders while failing to provide the seller with other benefits (e.g., liquidity, anonymity, lower advertising costs, etc.). Students must understand the bigger picture.

The Harvard Business School (HBS) website claims that the case method differs from lectures by allowing students to exercise “leadership and teamwork in the face of real problems” and “to persuade and inspire others who think differently.” The website also finds that the success of HBS graduates is the “best measure” of the effectiveness of the case method.

Beyond teaching leadership and teamwork, many proponents of cases argue that cases teach critical management skills. Cases teach critical thinking. Cases teach problem-solving skills. Cases teach students to accept ambiguity. Cases teach students to sift through the irrelevant details and distill the relevant facts—as limited as those may be. Cases teach confidence. Most importantly, cases teach students to argue that their positions are correct and to convince others (i.e., leadership?).

Unfortunately, these so-called benefits are sometimes detrimental. Suppose a manager convinces everyone to take the wrong action. Although the skill of persuasion is admirable, time might work against persuasive managers and gradually elevate previously less persuasive managers who have better skills with analysis and collecting relevant information.

## 7. Suppose Cases Work: So What?

For argument's sake, assume that the case method achieves all claims. It remains unclear whether the case method is appropriate for teaching functional areas (e.g., marketing, accounting, finance, information systems).

Certainly, colleges must agonize over freshmen with inadequate reading and writing skills. Similarly, graduate business schools must agonize over new admissions who lack problem-solving, critical-thinking, and debate skills. Those skills are requisite and, therefore, necessarily more important than knowledge of the literature in functional disciplines. However, it seems inefficient and inappropriate for functional courses to deviate from their difficult mission to compensate for deficiencies in student background or courses missing from the curriculum. If some students lack confidence, critical reasoning skills, the skill to debate, and the skill to lead, it is unclear whether taking marketing courses is the best remedy. Besides trying to teach distant topics well beyond our area of expertise and training, attempts to teach leadership skills come at a cost—less concrete content. Analogously, we hope that courses in heart surgery for medical students devote more effort to teaching surgery than teaching missing prerequisites for inadequately prepared students. Although students and faculty might find personal skills (e.g., leadership, communication) more important than functional knowledge (Hyman and Hu 2005), we must wonder who should teach these skills (if they can be taught) and how to measure learning. As Dr. Clark Kerr stated in an address to business school deans (Cheit 1985), “if the world is to be saved, it will not be saved by the schools of business.” Of course, marketing courses could teach techniques and knowledge that facilitate innovation, leadership, cognition, and entrepreneurial spirit.

## 8. Not Everything Is Worth Learning

Empirical research finds that most new products fail. Of course, new product development remains critical. Without innovation, firms often die the slow death of obsolescence. Innovation, new product development, and new marketing strategies remain essential requisites for both firm profitability and firm survival (e.g., Urban and Hauser 1980).

Expecting no less of academic research, we expect discovery of new relationships, better methods, superior approaches and unique insights to aid decision makers. We also expect that most academic research will fail to produce a significant impact. Fortunately, only a very small fraction needs to be successful to produce a sufficient absolute quantity of research to fill every available minute in every business class in every classroom in every university. It would be an arduous, if not wasteful and futile, task for prac-

tioners to search peer-reviewed academic journals with the diminutive hope of discovering facile solutions to pressing problems. However, faculty with an extensive knowledge of the literature could sift through the vast quantity of published research to reveal those findings worth teaching.

## 9. Some Academic Research Is Worth Learning

Most peer-reviewed journals require published research to be rigorous, precise, employ the scientific method, and reveal new findings. These journals review all submissions with both multiple experts in the subject area of the submission and with an editor (two for each manuscript at *Marketing Science*). Peer review is far from perfect and often fails to produce startling or prescriptive findings (e.g., see Shugan 2004b). However, many well-executed research projects, usually conducted over months (if not years) by well-trained researchers and subjected to a review process for months (if not years), produce outcomes usually vastly superior to anything even diligent students could produce in a weekend of intensive case discussion. Adopting teaching methods incompatible with teaching research findings deprives students of the newest and least obvious knowledge that we have to teach. Students suffer.

For example, Besanko et al. (2005) use a reduced-form estimation that focuses directly on equilibrium prices as a function of exogenous supply-and-demand shifting variables, a procedure beyond most business students. Besanko et al. (2005), however, produces easily taught findings. For instance, own-brand pass-through rates are, on average, more than 60% for 9 of 11 categories, a finding that refutes manufacturer claims. Moreover, brands with larger market shares or greater retailer profit margins receive higher pass-through. For another example, consider Ainslie et al. (2005). This research combines a sliding-window logit model and a gamma diffusion pattern in a hierarchical Bayes framework. This research incorporates seasonality by using an outside good whose demand follows an autoregressive model that weights demand in the last 3 years for the same corresponding week. It is unlikely that business students could replicate this analysis. However, both the analysis and the conclusions are instructive. For example, Ainslie et al. (2005) finds that, unlike popular opinion, movie studios can accurately anticipate new movie demand and adjust marketing support accordingly. Moreover, movie studios should consider that simultaneously releasing same-Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)-rated movies has a short-term adverse impact on box office mitigated by significant long-run displacement. Finally, consider Golder and Tellis (2004), who empirically demonstrate that firms should be patient because

most new products take a predictable time before take-off occurs. Although these findings might be less important than confidence, leadership, and personal appearance, these findings belong in marketing classes and could be taught in a decision context.

Some people could argue that students lose little from ignoring academic literature. Of course, arguing that point requires knowledge of the literature. *Marketing Science* contains demonstrations that academic research can aid decision making (for example, see Lilien 2005 for several examples; see Bialogorsky and Gerstner 2004 for applications of contingent pricing).

## 10. Seven Reasons to Avoid the Case Method

Restricting the classroom experience to the domain of topics teachable through the case method creates insidious difficulties. Here are seven reasons to avoid the case method.

First, the Socratic case method is extraordinarily effective for teaching many skills (e.g., applying written law); however, it is ancient and inferior to the scientific method. Socrates apparently used the interactive questioning approach in 5th century BC Greece. Socrates taught well before the development of the scientific method in the 16th and 17th centuries AD. The scientific method had an extraordinary impact in the 19th century. Teaching the scientific method, with an emphasis on disconfirmation and objective inquiry, could improve the classroom environment where debate skills seem to dominate erudition. Although intuition and leadership are critical, they should not supplant careful scientific analysis. Vision is more than hunch and politics—leaders must lead in the correct direction.

Second, the case method weakens the link between research and classroom, removing critical incentives for relevant research. Research and teaching face a chicken-and-the egg paradox. Business schools should covet researchers who do normative research with a demonstrated impact on external audiences (e.g., funding agencies, employers, decision makers) and internal audiences (e.g., students). This situation creates the proper incentives (funding, employment, promotions, and other “carrots”). A reinforcing teaching-research link ensures research with meaningful implications.

Third, surrendering teaching to those with little knowledge of the vast marketing literature cuts the quality of marketing education. In fact, ignoring that literature might be a hidden intent of the case method. C. Roland Christensen, a renowned case method expert, states that the case method “was started as a protest. Its founders thought that applied economics was not a very useful way to prepare people for leadership in business. Nor did they believe

that the then-current academic values would ever permit the emergence of a practice-oriented professional school. Therefore, they refused to hire traditional academics. . . . It is easy to forget that the case method educates faculty as well as students” (Schmotter 2000, p. 48). Also instructive is Christensen’s comment that “discussion teaching has flowered in the qualitative fields of liberal arts and the social sciences, and in professional schools where wisdom and judgment and the ability to deal with specific problems are the hoped-for educational outcomes. If a field has proven theory and exact quantitative answers, I think the lecture method would be the most useful” (Schmotter 2000, p. 46).

Fourth, the case method can teach false confidence. Certainly, confidence and leadership skills remain important, but beyond projecting an aura of confidence, leaders should approach danger with eyes wide open, vigilant of warning signs and alert to updated information. Overconfident students might fail to recognize deficiencies in their education. By building student confidence, by making students more tolerant of ambiguity, by convincing students that they possess latent wisdom, emphasizing debate skills over analysis and equating marketing with common sense, we are complicit in misleading students. For example, Banning (2003) finds that the case method increases student tolerance for ambiguity. There are situations when that tolerance might help. For example, tolerance for ambiguity might increase student confidence and the ability to negotiate and might increase risk-taking behavior. In contrast, tolerance for ambiguity could clash with scientific reasoning. Perhaps a lack of tolerance encourages doing analysis (i.e., your homework), gathering relevant data, disconfirming your current beliefs, and accepting contrary beliefs. Perhaps the best way to adapt effectively to change is to understand change rather than merely accept it. Perhaps tolerance for ambiguity leads to ambiguous thinking.

Fifth, we could lose our best students. Better students, who have already acquired analytical thinking skills and confidence, might seek more scientific content and technical training. These students might avoid case method courses and, consequently, marketing courses. Similar arguments suggest a loss of potential faculty members who believe in relevant research and want synergy between their research and teaching lives.

Sixth, some great research might never reach the classroom because translating it into the case-method format is too challenging. For example, Krider et al. (2005) find that demand leads distribution for most motion pictures, so studios should focus more attention on movie design and advertising over exhibitor incentives and owning theaters. Borle et al. (2005) find that reduction in retail assortment causes declines in

shopping frequency (particularly in categories with infrequent purchases) and, to a lesser extent, a reduction in purchase quantities. Mittal et al. (2005) show that dual-goal strategies (with both revenue expansion and cost-reduction goals) outperform single-goal strategies on long-term financial performance but not short-term performance. Syam et al. (2005) provides conditions when firms customizing products should focus on attributes with smaller heterogeneity in consumers' preferences. Amaldoss and Rapoport (2005) find, in alliances jointly developing product and market, forcing alliance partners to compete individually might not attenuate the underinvestment problem associated with new-product alliances. Gourville and Soman (2005) find that when increasing assortment, variation should be "alignable" (i.e., vary on a single, compensatory dimension). Pauwels (2004) finds empirical evidence that firm inertia can hide the true effect of marketing actions such as postpromotional sales dips. Desai and Purohit (2004) find that we might observe price haggling in markets when most consumers prefer fixed prices. Obviously, students must learn both research findings and how to apply them.

Seventh, the case method rarely exposes students to the latest tools for making better decisions. Although teaching some tools in the classroom (given the prior training of our students) seems hopeless, students can still learn the advantages and disadvantages of different tools in the classroom rather than from consultants who promote their own tools. For example, Jank and Kannan (2005) illustrate the usefulness of spatial modeling for using geographic differences to predict online consumer choice. Li (2005) illustrates the usefulness of concepts such as cheap talk and information blockage in a marketing channels setting. Hauser and Toubia (2005) illustrate the use of modern conjoint analysis for new-product design while presenting practical new findings (e.g., adaptive utility-balanced choice questions appear unbiased and capable of accurate predictions).

## 11. Using Cases Without the Case Method

Now having beat up the case method, let us conclude by rehabilitating cases. As noted earlier, using cases is not necessarily using the case method. We can use business cases to facilitate lectures rather than to substitute for lectures (Phillips and Vaidyanathan 2004).

Cases themselves can be valuable. Cases can be word problems. After the learning of techniques or concepts, cases can allow students to apply those concepts. Carlson (1999), for example, instructs students to use prespecified tools to analyze prespecified case data. Of course, we must teach algebra before assigning word problems that apply algebra.

Cases can illustrate management mistakes and fallibility. Post-case history allows scrutiny of ex ante and ex post decisions, how collecting information (i.e., from research) benefits ex ante decisions. Certainly, military science teaches battle strategy by examining past battle mistakes with the benefit of hindsight. As General George S. Patton, Jr. wrote in a letter on the morning of the allied invasion of Normandy, "to be a successful soldier, you must know history" (Dietrich 1989).

Cases can also motivate students by emphasizing the need for analytical skills, greater understanding, and more training. Rather than instilling false confidence, cases can inspire subsequent lectures. Although this approach contradicts the Socratic case method, it can motivate learning. Rees and Porter (2002, p. 7), for example, found it best to discuss a case before explaining the relevant theory because "case studies can demonstrate the relevance of theory and motivate students to learn and understand it."

## 12. Conclusions

The Socratic Dialogue, used with the case method, occurred well before the discovery of the scientific method for advancing knowledge and problem solving. Although the case method might be effective at teaching leadership skills and the skill of persuasion, it often lacks the spirit of inquiry and the worship of the truth associated with the scientific method. Moreover, business cases lack the precedent, foundation of written law, and rigorous adjudication of legal cases. More importantly, virtually all applications of the traditional case method of teaching ignore important research findings. Consequently, the case method helps destroy the link between academic research and classroom learning. Students lose because they lose the benefit of important research findings while leaving the classroom with a false confidence about what they know. Researchers lose because they lose an incentive to do research relevant to their students. Hence, as time progresses, less research is worth teaching and fewer students value research findings. Great teaching requires great content, in addition to active learning.

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