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Frauke Hachtmann

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, fhachtmann1@unl.edu

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A case for case studies: The effective use of case studies in the college classroom

Frauke Hachtmann

is a professor and associate dean in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She holds a PhD in educational studies, an MBA with an emphasis in international business, and MA in journalism and a BJ in advertising. She is a member of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, the American Academy of Advertising, and Public Relations Society of America. Frauke is an editorial board member of the *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising Education* and the *Asian Communication Journal*.

Frauke Hachtmann

Abstract

Instructors often use case studies to bridge the gap between theory and practice while also bringing research into the learning environment. Case studies allow students to participate actively in the learning process by helping them learn how to think, plan and reason by studying the actions, thoughts and decision-making processes of real people and companies. Educators also often choose case studies in their learning environment because they can accommodate different learning styles, including inductive learners, who learn from examples as opposed to logical development (linear learning). Case studies from this journal are well suited for use in the college classroom because they are generally written by practitioners for practitioners. This paper includes a list of practical insights when teaching students about digital and social media using case studies from this journal or others like it.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching with case studies is not an emerging pedagogical trend. Indeed, case studies have been used as a teaching tool in medicine, psychology, sociology and law since the 1800s. In the early 1900s, the Harvard Business School adopted case studies as a way to help students study decisions in all functional areas of a business based on field research. In the 21st century, case studies have evolved beyond being a mere teaching tool. Instructors often use case studies to bridge the gap between theory and practice while also bringing research into the learning environment.[1]

BENEFITS OF CASE STUDIES

Common elements of case studies typically include one or more decision–makers who are dealing with a real–world problem, a thorough description of the context in which the problem must be solved, as well as relevant supporting data.[2] Case studies allow students to participate actively in

Frauke Hachtmann
College of Journalism and
Mass Communications,
University of
Nebraska-Lincoln,
130 Andersen Hall,
Lincoln,
NE 68588-0443,
USA

Tel: +1 402 472 9848;
E-mail: fhachtmann@unl.edu

the learning process. They help students learn how to think, plan and reason by studying the actions, thoughts and decision-making processes of real people and companies, who are faced with real problems in real settings. This is particularly beneficial in today's college classroom, which has become increasingly student-centred. The learning process flows freely from students to teacher and often student to student in a dynamic, seamless learning environment. Instructors are no longer considered the 'sage on the stage' who owns and delivers information, but rather the 'guide on the side', who facilitates learning.

THE PROCESS OF USING CASE STUDIES

The primary purpose of a case study is generally to elicit analysis and discussion of a particular situation. Instructors often scaffold the learning experience by first asking students to evaluate a situation in one case or by identifying a variety of problems in different settings by using multiple case studies at once. When using multiple case studies simultaneously, students have an opportunity to discover the nuances of similar but different situations and how to adjust their decisions based on those nuances. After analysing the issues presented in one or more case studies, students can then make predictions about future events by applying theories and conceptual frameworks learned in class. It is helpful when case studies provide the basis for analysis under a variety of conditions so that students can refine their ability to select criteria by which alternative solutions can be measured before developing the actual solution. Finally, case studies can be used to help students understand the implications of the decision-making

process from start to finish. Case studies push students out of their comfort zones. Today's learners are often uncomfortable with the lack of a single 'right' answer. By challenging them to engage with the facts presented in a case study — even ambiguous ones — students learn how to evaluate a situation to make a decision. Therefore, the process of working through a case, including thinking, analysis, problem solving and evaluation, often becomes more important than the actual decision made at the end.

LEARNING STYLES

Educators also often choose case studies in their learning environment because they can accommodate different learning styles. For example, visual learners prefer the use of images, charts and graphs to learn new information, while reading/writing students learn best through words. Auditory learners, on the other hand, prefer listening and speaking in learning situations such as lectures and discussions, while kinaesthetic learners best understand information through tactile representation of information.[3] Case studies provide educators with the opportunity to appeal to all four types of learners, in particular inductive learners — those who learn from examples as opposed to logical development (linear learning).[4] Today's 'digital natives', tend to fall into the experimental learning category.

A recent case study in this journal, 'Integrating social media at Sky Deutschland' by Selena Gabat,[5] is an example that educators can use to tailor a particular learning experience to different learning styles. The case describes how to build a social media team from the ground up and how to involve the entire company. The rich

narrative written by Sky Deutschland's Director of Social Media appeals directly to reading/writing students. The case study also includes numerous charts and graphs that add clarity and depth to the case by organising pertinent information visually. Visual learners will pay special attention to this portion of the case. An educator may decide to present the facts of the case verbally in class or ask smaller groups of auditory learners to do so, which is likely to result in meaningful small group discussions. Finally, the detailed information presented in the case might help kinaesthetic learners if paired with additional information about the same case or by asking students to find and analyse similar case studies to tease out the nuanced differences between them. The detailed description of real-life scenarios involving the case will result in engaged student discussion and decision-making.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

When developing case studies for use in the classroom, it is helpful to keep in mind how students learn. One of the most cited models in the field is Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.[6] The hierarchical nature of the model assumes that each category of educational objectives includes behaviours that are more complex and internalised than the previous one. The two hierarchies include a cognitive domain (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) and an affective domain (receiving, responding, valuing, organising and internalising). When using case studies, educators should ensure that students are competent in knowledge and comprehension. In the application phase, students work with the basic facts

of the case and apply models or theories to new situations, guided by questions posed at the end of the case. Students then determine which models or concepts to apply based on their own analysis, followed by an action plan (synthesis). In this phase, students often use quantitative and qualitative data to synthesise information and determine a course of action. In addition, students learn how to evaluate their action plan.[7] Bloom's affective domain, when using case studies, is equally important as students gradually develop their own internal value system by dealing with and working through complex situations that often have multiple, equally valid solutions to problems.

USING CASE STUDIES FROM THE *JOURNAL OF DIGITAL & SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING*

Case studies from this journal are well suited for use in the college classroom because they are generally written by practitioners for practitioners. One of the primary 'rules' of case studies is that they use examples from real experiences in the field, using factual descriptions of events that happened in the not-too-distant past. As the case studies that appear in the Journal are research case studies aimed at practitioners, they usually do not include teaching aids such as an instructor manual or case note or discussion questions. However, such items can easily be added by an instructor. What follows is a short list of practical insights when teaching students about digital and social media using case studies from this journal or others like it:

1. When reading case studies, determine the academic purpose they might serve. This could be a specific theory, conceptual

framework or model students are expected to learn.

2. Determine how to incorporate the case study in your class. For example:[8]
   — during a lecture as an example of a resolved case for non-graded discussion;
   — as a graded group project as part of a single class meeting (with all background information provided by the instructor);
   — as a role-playing activity in a single class meeting (students will need to understand the perspectives of the case characters and demonstrate empathy);
   — as a graded, open-ended case study for which students need to gather additional information; or
   — in a course that is specifically designed for case studies.

3. Find a case that has a captivating topic to engage students. (Most of the case studies in this journal work well because students naturally identify with digital and social media).

4. Find a case that is similar to situations that students might encounter in your specific field of teaching.

5. The case should be current. (This is especially important when learning about digital marketing).

6. After reading the case, develop one or more clear educational objective(s) using either Bloom's taxonomy or a different taxonomy of learning.

7. Extract key issues that require students to make one or multiple decisions.

8. Depending on the learning objectives, consider using multiple case studies that focus on a similar problem or concept that requires different decision-making. Different case studies could be assigned to different groups. Also consider providing supplemental information, especially if the case is ongoing.

9. Develop a set of questions that help students move through Bloom's taxonomy of learning (cognitive domain from knowledge through evaluation). For advanced or graduate-level courses, consider adding questions that fall into the affective domain.

10. Develop a set of responses that might be shared with the students after the initial discussion of the case or as starting points for the discussion.

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