Chapter 2
The Pedagogic Possibilities of Student-Generated Case Studies:
Moving through the Looking Glass

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ABSTRACT

In management and other business-related studies, case studies have become popular and ubiquitous. Case studies certainly provide significant opportunities for learners and instructors; however, the possibilities of case studies are often not fully utilized. Under-utilization of the case study becomes particularly apparent when students generate their own cases, which are often narrowly focused and constrained by a logic that understands the case as simply an exemplification of existing theory. This chapter advocates that undergraduate exposure to case work should be more expansive, incorporate greater complexity, and explore the possibilities of critically challenging old theories and of generating new ones. It is argued that this teaching approach gives learners a richer appreciation of the case study, introduces them to the challenges and methodology of case construction, and provides them with greater competency in using and in generating case studies in their learning and professional lives.

INTRODUCTION

During their undergraduate years, especially in American higher education, most business administration students are exposed to a large number of case studies. They encounter cases in almost every functional area of their studies – in management, marketing, human resource management, and in international business. The reason is simple: the case study has become an exceptionally popular pedagogic approach. It has been widely and often enthusiastically adopted by business faculty; indeed, many faculty members believe that case studies are an essential part of their teaching and a required aspect of their instructional

presentations (Burke, Carter, & Hughey, 2013; Gundala, Singh, & Baldwin, 2014; Kennedy, Lawton, & Walker, 2001; Vissak, 2010). Of course, the instructor-initiated case study approach is not restricted to business administration; it has been adopted with equal enthusiasm in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines and in the social sciences (Butler, Lee, & Tippins, 2006; Kunselman & Johnson, 2004).

With such a persistent exposure to the case study it might be expected that students are familiar with its merits and possibilities, but is this really true? It might be of interest, for example, to see how students themselves go about producing and developing their own case studies. It might be of interest to see how their efforts are shaped and determined by their prior exposure to the professionally produced cases that they have encountered in their studies. Equally, it might be of value to understand how students make sense of cases and attempt incorporate sense-making into the cases studies that they construct.

This chapter grew out of the present author's experiences with *student-generated* case studies in the Czech Republic. The author supervises the capstone projects of business administration undergraduates, who are enrolled in the international program of an American college. Most of the students attending this program are Czech nationals; however, many have migrated from other Central and Eastern European countries (including Russia), or from the Asiatic states of the former USSR. In short, the students in this American program are essentially transnational learners, dealing with cross-cultural educational challenges and learning opportunities inherent in such programs (British Council, 2013; Kosmützky & Putty, 2015).

In order to graduate, our students in Prague students must complete a year-long capstone project that takes the form of a dissertation written on some business-related topic (Boyer Commission, 1998, 2001; Starr-Glass, 2010). In designing their capstone projects, it is exceedingly rare for students to consider a single comprehensive case study, or to use case study methodology. However, students frequently include a short case study to – as they say – "complete" their dissertations. Their language choice is significant. The included case study is an afterthought; a crowning "real-world" demonstration of the theoretical perspectives discussed in the dissertation. Unfortunately, these "crowning" case studies usually lack luster and fail to sparkle. They are often poorly conceived, conceptually impoverished, artificially contrived, and generally do little to enhance the dissertation with which they are associated.

This is surprising. These students have read, explored, and discussed hundreds of case studies in their undergraduate course work. Instructors have consistently presented case studies in their courses and have extolled the merits of a case-orientated perspective. In adopting a case-based pedagogy, instructors often contend that "students are presented with authentic scenarios developed with a story-telling quality, interesting characters, controversial topics, and dilemmas to engage students and stimulate conversations about multiple issues and various stakeholder perspectives" (Tomey, 2003, p. 35). However, there is little evidence of this when students write their own case studies. The scenarios selected lack authenticity and are often formulaic and stereotypic. Issues addressed are narrow and show little appreciation of complexity or context. The student-generated case study is often characterized by a myopic focus on a one dominant character, or a single group of stakeholders. Whatever the intentions and vision of their instructors, the insights and benefits of the case study have neither been successfully transmitted to, nor subsequently replicated by, their students.

Why is there a difference between the aspirations of the instructors who introduce case studies into their classrooms and the efforts of the learners who generate their own case studies?

The contention of this chapter is that, all too often, undergraduates come to understand the case study as a real-world vignette that is conveniently bounded by the expectation and ramifications of what has

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