Chapter III
Challenges in Delivering Case–Based Teaching in the Online Asynchronous Learning Environment

Charlie C. Chen  
Appalachian State University, USA

Albert L. Harris  
Appalachian State University, USA

Rong-An Shang  
Soochow University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Case method teaching is prominent in its efficacy at improving the cognitive learning process in face-to-face classes. However, the efficacy of conducting this teaching method in an online asynchronous environment, where learners and instructor do not have real-time interactions, could be problematic. This study assesses and compares the efficacy of case method teaching in face-to-face and online asynchronous learning (OAL) environments. We proposed four hypotheses on the correlation between these two delivery modes of case method teaching and the learning performance of students. This study reports additional findings on the usage behavior of students in an online asynchronous environment. These findings are a useful aggregated surrogate to measure the effect of case teaching method in the online asynchronous environment. The overall findings of this study indicate that an online asynchronous environment can promote students’ participation in certain cases. As most antagonists for the adoption of online asynchronous case method surmised, cognitive learning gains via this learning method do not seem to be as high as in the face-to-face environment. The findings provide ample room for a further exploration of creative online asynchronous methods to continuously improve cognitive gains of learners.
INTRODUCTION

The growing acceptance of e-learning technologies in the business school has promoted the rapid growth of online business degree offerings. Ninety-six online business degrees are available as of January 10, 2007, based on a cursory check of U.S. News E-learning Guide (2007). Some of these programs use a pure online format, while the others use a click-and-mortar format. The online asynchronous delivery of classes is location-free and time-free. As such, this delivery mode is becoming the most attractive learning method to online and part-time business students as opposed to the other learning modes (e.g., F2F and online synchronous modes). A growing number of students are turning to the online learning environment because of its convenience and accessibility.

Case-based teaching is one of most effective methods to help business students acquire business concepts and address complex business problems. However, many antagonists have cast doubts on the efficacy of delivering case method teaching via online asynchronous learning environment. A wide variation of online asynchronous initiatives to improve the efficacy of case teaching method is being adopted. For instance, many universities in Taiwan are incorporating an online asynchronous gaming & simulation environment to improve the quality of their financial engineering programs (Wang, 2006). Active involvement is one important element that contributes to the success of case teaching method. To increase active involvement, the University of Exeter utilizes an online asynchronous learning system to enable leaders of student groups to create logbooks to facilitate the knowledge exchange and sharing process in a leadership class (Witzel, 2005). In recognition of the usefulness of delivering case teaching method via online learning technologies, Harvard Business School began enforcing the policy of having its students take a six-hour tutorial to acquire IT skills and concepts as a prerequisite requirement to take core case-based courses (Bradshaw, 2006).

Integrating online asynchronous learning technology into case teaching method poses many challenges to professors and students. First, online asynchronous learning systems can reach a global audience at anytime and from anywhere. Does this mean that class size is no longer an issue when conducting an online asynchronous case teaching class? It is still prevalent to see a limitation of class size in the face-to-face (F2F) environment when using case-based teaching. Second, the ideal case teaching method is highly contingent upon the arrangement of teaching tools (e.g., sliding blackboards to showcase divergent opinions and motivate and moderate real-time flame discussion) in the traditional environment. These tools are not available in the OAL environment. Alternative online tools (blog, discussion forums and wikis) that can substitute or complement these existing F2F teaching tools are evolving. It is crucial to assess the efficacy of these new online tools. Third, online assessment of learning performance in the case teaching method is another challenge to business faculties. Online asynchronous tools, such as whiteboard and multimedia media, allow students to present their PowerPoint slides and materials virtually. The ability of a faculty member to facilitate the constructive discussion among individuals and teams is another important factor critical to the success of case teaching method.

The efficacy of case method further relies on two pillars of core concepts: (1) active learning, and (2) problem-solving learning. These two core concepts can substantially improve the learning process according to the cognitive learning theory (Alavi, 1994). Active learning is about participation. When students actively involve themselves in the analysis and discussion of cases, they immerse themselves into the role of protagonist. This can result in deepening the understanding of the studied case and increasing the urgency to resolve the case-related problems. In contrast, an
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