Sorry Harvard, but I don't like the Case Method

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The Harvard website (http://www.hbs.edu/teaching/inside-hbs/) has the following to say on the Case Method:
"To create leaders, Harvard Business School creates the context in which leaders are formed: real-life challenges, wrapped in complicated and sometimes insufficient information. Each challenge confronts our students with a rich web of consequences- and a demand for a prompt, responsible plan of action.

These challenges are our cases. Through the case method, every Harvard Business School classroom becomes a crucible for participant-centred learning. A crucible in which students not only assume responsibility for their education, but exercise the fundamentals of leadership that they will practice the rest of their lives.

The case method is rooted in Harvard Business School's original vision. Edwin Gay, first Dean of HBS, called it the "problem method" and foresaw its value in creating leaders able to adjust as necessary to ever-changing business climates. From its inception a century ago, the School established two important pedagogical principles. First, it would use cases as teaching vehicles and not rely on lectures and readings. Second, it would engage the students in the learning process by getting them to teach themselves and each other. Today, although we also make use of lectures, simulations, fieldwork, and other forms of teaching as appropriate, more than 80 percent of HBS classes are built on the case method."

Harvard's innovation is now implemented in thousands of business schools across the globe and the Case Method of teaching has become the standard of effective pedagogy. As a relative academic "outsider", however, I have some contrary views on this subject - as can be inferred from the subject of this article.

I am a "Second Career Academic". I have 25 years of corporate experience in major multinational companies in India in the domains of FMCG, Tobacco, Food & Beverages, Footwear, OTC & Rx Pharmaceuticals. My functional responsibilities progressed from Sales & Marketing to General Management in India; and to Business Development in other parts of Asia. I forayed into academia in 2011, and am currently a fulltime faculty in the Marketing area at a leading business school in India.

When I began my teaching career, I was given a month's time to develop and offer a course in the Marketing area, and to my protestations that this was too short a time, especially for someone coming from the corporate world, the Dean proffered some advice which I recall vividly to this day. The gist of his input was that I should not be apprehensive because preparing a course was a fairly straightforward task – all I needed to do was to access an outline for a similar course and familiarize myself with the cases associated with each session. Since over 80% of the sessions were based on cases, the only expertise I needed was how to effectively conduct cases in a classroom, and for that he suggested I attend a few sessions conducted by faculty who were renowned practitioners of the Case Method pedagogy.

So my first impression of the Case Method was that it was a great boon to faculty as it made the preparation and delivery of courses a breeze. As my teaching career progressed, I realized that the vast majority of courses in a B-school were based on the Case Method and that in fact this was the recommended pedagogy. Even more intriguing was the discovery that the same case could be used across multiple functional areas – marketing, finance, manufacturing, human resources – and all the faculty needed to do was to pick up the aspects which pertained to one's area of expertise.

My actual experience of working with cases as a teaching method was however disappointing and after my first course, I drastically reduced the number of case-based sessions in my subsequent offerings. I am today a sceptic of the Case Method, both as an instrument for imparting learning (i.e. as a ***pedagogy***) as well as the ***process*** recommended (by Harvard) to employ the method. In this article, I hope to offer some rationale for my skepticism in both these areas. While most of my teaching experience is with students in a B-school in India, I believe some of the learning's would be of interest to faculty across the globe.

In July 2016, I conducted a survey of 74 MBA students who graduated from the Goa Institute of Management, India during 2012-2016 and some of my observations below are based on the findings of this research, a summary of which is available in the Appendix.

The Case Method Pedagogy

Essentially, the Case Method is an approach to teaching based on the Socratic Method wherein real world examples are presented to students, after which learning is facilitated through discussion and skilful questioning of participants. The origin of the Case Method can be traced back to 1870 when it was first introduced in Harvard Law School, according to Professor David Garvin (David Garvin, Harvard Magazine, 2003, p. 56):

A newly appointed dean began to teach with cases in 1870, reversing a long history of lecture and drill. He viewed Law as a science and appellate court decisions as the "specimens" from which general principles should be induced, and he assembled a representative set of court decisions to create the first legal casebook. To ensure that the class time was used productively, he introduced the question-and-answer format now called the Socratic method.

One can argue that such a method as outline above is appropriate to a subject like Law which relies on past precedents, and may not prove suitable in a business environment which is dynamic and changing. However, the Case Method soon established itself as an effective pedagogy in the context of a B-school. The premise was that the Case Method would familiarize students with real workplace situations and issues as compared to a "theoretical" textbook-based method of imparting learning.

However, in practice, there are several challenges inherent in this method of teaching:

1. The real world examples are frequently out of date, typically by 5 years or more, and in an era of rapid technological change, the case may not reflect contemporary issues being faced by business managers.

2. Most cases do not lend themselves to easy application of theoretical principles and tools which may have been taught in formal classroom sessions or described in chapters of a textbook. So, if one of the purposes of a case study is to see how theory can be applied in a real world context, this seldom happens. By its very nature, a case is a document which provides data on a business organization at a particular time period – financial statements, organization structure, research studies, key personnel, etc. – and is not specifically designed to make it amenable to the application of theoretical principles. Of course, many of the cases published by Harvard and Ivey do link theoretical concepts to case situations in the Teaching Notes, but the vast majority of cases published in recent years merely tell a "story" of an organization at a particular period in time, and are sufficiently "general" in their approach so that they can be used by faculty in multiple functional areas.

   One of the questions asked in my survey of MBA students referenced above was: *"What proportion of the cases you studied provided learning on the application of theory, concepts and tools to real-life work situations?"* The majority response was: *"Between 25% to 50%"*. So less than half the cases studied had clear linkages between theory and practice.

3. Assuming that some amount of theory and conceptual knowledge should be an integral part of any academic course, the Case Method poses further challenges. If the Case Method becomes the sole and exclusive method of teaching – and I know that many courses take this approach – then it is possible that at the end of the course, students may well have learned nothing about concepts, principles or tools but merely acquired an in-depth knowledge of several business organizations at some time period in the past. While this would make the task of designing and delivering a course relatively easy for faculty, it is uncertain whether students would have learnt anything meaningful about the subject matter of the course. The theoretical sessions in a course are based on years of research of real world problems and it is not clear to me how the concepts, principles and tools which have emerged from this research can be imparted to the students in a course designed *exclusivel*y on the Case Method.

4. Most teaching faculty in B-schools have limited (often none) prior working experience in industry and the Case Method is often touted as a great innovation which enables them to impart practical learning to students. I would submit, however, that the outcome is somewhat different – precisely because the faculty have limited industry experience, their ability (and credibility) to translate the case facts into student learning is also limited. In fact, in my opinion, prior industry experience is highly desirable for a faculty employing the Case Method pedagogy in a B-school.

   This is borne out by the response to another question in my survey of MBA students: *"Do you think that the faculty employing the Case Method of instruction should have had prior work experience in industry?"* A large proportion (81%) of the respondents said: *"Yes"* with a further 15% saying they were *"Unsure"*.

5. Typically, cases are 10 to 12 pages in length with several annexures containing reams of data. This tends to discourage students to undertake a pre-class analysis of the case content - remember that there are multiple subjects for which the students need to prepare for, and invariably, most of them require pre-class study and analysis of fairly lengthy cases. Also there are accompanying readings to each case which also need to be perused as part of class preparation. After the initial couple of terms at a B-school, "case fatigue" sets in among the students. What appeared at first to be a novel method of imparting instruction, especially as compared to the pedagogy they had experienced during their undergraduate studies, increasingly becomes an unwelcome chore. The result is that a majority of students turn up to class without having even read the case – and this is disastrous both for the instructor and the Case Method.

As can been seen from the above, in order for the Case Method to become an effective pedagogical tool in a B-school, the following necessary conditions should be met:

1. Cases should be carefully chosen (and constructed) so that they are amenable to the application of theoretical tools and principles learnt elsewhere i.e. from textbooks or "theory" classroom sessions; and/or should generate some pointers to the development of some general concepts or "solutions" which could be applied in different organizations and situations. In other words, cases should either be amenable to the application of general principles or should generate some concepts themselves. While the early cases were designed this way, in recent years, writing a case has become a mandatory requirement for most faculty, and the sheer volume of cases published has exploded. Many of these cases are based on interviews with some key personnel in an organization and are seldom constructed to glean conceptual insights; several are written in a story-telling fashion and focus on making the case an interesting read.

2. Faculty employing the Case Method should have some industry experience, or should be encouraged to acquire such experience through planned exposure to organizations similar to those covered in the cases they are teaching.

3. The course design should strike for a balance between the number of sessions devoted to the Case Method and those assigned to "theory" classes, so that students acquire a holistic knowledge of the course content.

The Case Method Process

Let us now turn our attention away from *pedagogy* to *process.* Even if cases meet the standards outlined above, the process by which the Case Method is employed in a classroom leaves much to be desired.

I recently had an opportunity to attend one of the standard workshops conducted by Harvard Business Publishing (HBS) across the globe, appropriately titled "Case Method Teaching Seminar", to train B-school faculty in using the Case Method in their courses. Conducted by senior faculty, renowned for their skill in handling classroom sessions based on the Case Method, the seminar imparted tips on how to use the Case Method as an effective pedagogy.

Such tips revolved around how to structure a session utilizing the Case Method in terms of framing the opening question, discussion pastures and blackboard (or whiteboard) management; getting into the shoes of the protagonist in the case; identifying the roles being played by different students; and how faculty should enter, manage and exit a case discussion.

Of the many pieces of advice given by the instructors at this seminar, the one which I found most striking was an assertion that the case discussion did not have to end in a solution. In other words, the Case Method relies on identifying the issues or questions in a case, fosters an animated discussion of the pros and cons of various options, but does not need to arrive at the "right" answer or solution. I was horrified – what then was the purpose of the Case Method as a learning tool? Surely, the purpose of studying a real life situation faced by a real company was to apply one's knowledge, skills and common sense to arrive at the "best" course of action. How would student learning take place if there was no understanding of the best course of action in a problem situation? When faced with a similar situation at the workplace, how would the freshly recruited manager proceed?

Furthermore, it would be useful to have a follow-up of the case in question – what did the organization actually do to fix the issues and challenges it was facing and whether those decisions resulted in a successful outcome? This would lend credibility to any solution or course of action which had emerged during the case discussions and would be another source of learning for the students. Again such a follow-up was neither recommended nor available in most cases.

In response to my survey question: *"What proportion of the cases you studied provided for a "follow-up" discussion on what actions the organization actually took and their outcome subsequent to when the case was written?"*, 61% responded that less than a quarter of the cases they studied had such a provision.

I am still getting my head around this process of conducting a classroom session based on the Case Method. By definition, a case describes a situation in the past – surely there must be data available on the decisions the organization took *after* the case was written. And in many cases, the outcome of those decisions would also be public knowledge. Such an analysis would greatly contribute to the students' learning from the case – for one it would enable them to compare their recommendations with the course of action actually taken by the organization.

The impression I got from the seminar is that the key to running a successful classroom session based on the Case Method was to employ a theatrical approach to foster student involvement. So the students are all actors in a drama playing their respective roles and the faculty is the director orchestrating the whole exercise. While it is possible for the students to get involved and thoroughly enjoy a case discussion, the actual learning which takes place is suspect. If there is no discussion of concepts to be applied in a case, a consensus on the right solutions, and the outcome of decisions the organization actually took, then, in the words of Shakespeare, the session was "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing".

It is worth quoting here from the abstract of an article written by Steven M. Shugan from the University of Florida (Marketing Science, Vol. 25, No. 2, March-April 2006, pp. 109-115):
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.

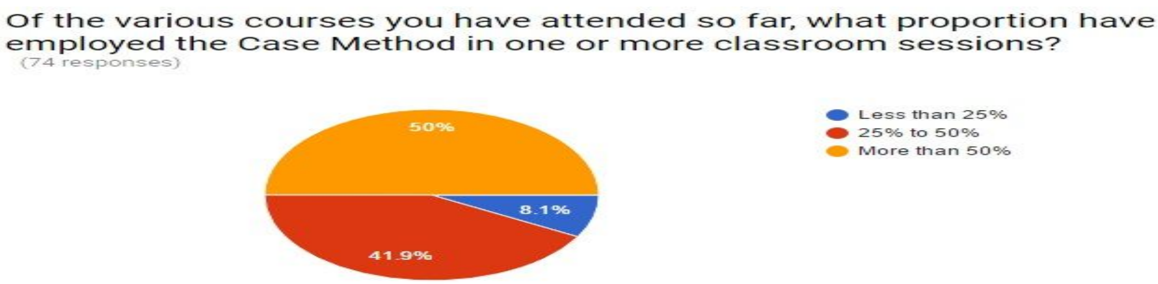
I am not too sure whether these deficiencies in the process of conducting a classroom discussion based on the Case Method are by accident or design. Perhaps faculty simply do not have the expertise and industry experience to arrive at the "right" solution, or are reluctant to do so lest they are proved wrong. Maybe they are unwilling to put in the extra effort to research what decisions were actually taken by the organization in the period after the case was written, and what the consequences were. After all, if a 20-session course is based around 15 case studies, this would involve an enormous expenditure of effort!

I simply cannot buy the Case Method purist's assertion that a case discussion can end without a satisfactory conclusion or at least a recommended solution, and because of this, I rarely use cases in my courses. However, whenever I do run a course, I attempt to follow it through. So, for example, I run a course called Marketing Execution in the B-school I am currently employed, and that has only one case study about a healthcare brand which faced some positioning issues a few years back. As soon as the case discussions are over, I invite the Brand Manager who actually handled the brand when the case was "live" to come and talk to the students and tell them about the actions the company took and what the outcomes were. I believe that this leads to more integrated learning based on the case discussions.

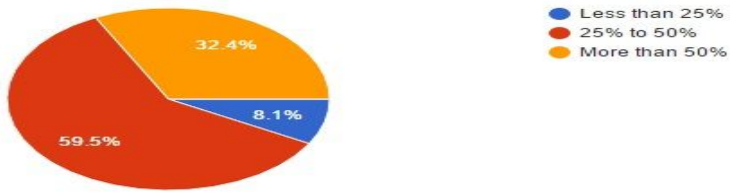
Sorry Harvard, but I don't like the Case Method (as currently practised).

APPENDIX

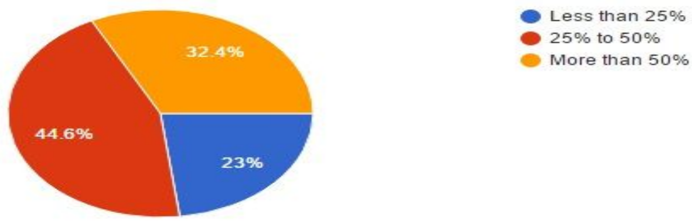
A summary of the responses of MBA students who graduated during 2012-2016 from the Goa Institute of Management, India, conducted in July 2016.



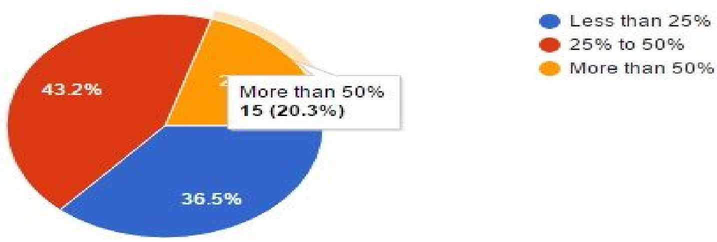
Within the courses which used the Case Method, what proportion of the classroom sessions were devoted to case discussions?
(74 responses)



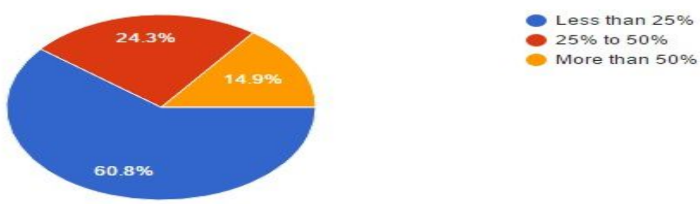
What proportion of the cases you studied provided learning on the application of theory, concepts and tools to real-life work situations?
(74 responses)



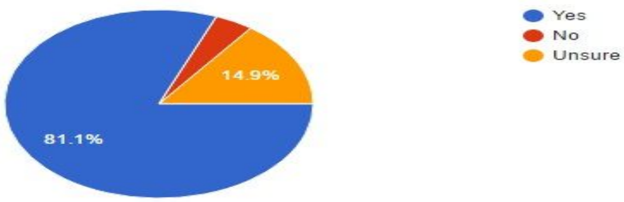
What proportion of the cases you studied provided a clear conclusion on the "right" course of action for "solving" the issues raised in the case?
(74 responses)



What proportion of the cases you studied provided for a "follow-up" discussion on what actions the organization actually took and their outcome subsequent to when the case was written?
(74 responses)



Do you think that the faculty employing the Case Method of instruction should have had prior work experience in industry?
(74 responses)



Do you think that the Case Method, as currently practiced, is a useful learning tool?
(74 responses)

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